### Still I Rise

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**Still I Rise**

by shewhotalkstohyacinths

**Summary**

In which Juice is given an 'out' by Tully that isn't death and might just offer him some kind of future with the MC (and eventually Chibs).

This was written because I wanted Juice to live, to be taken care of and to no longer be neglected and abused.

This isn't a "Jax is God" story, I must warn. It's kind of a role reversal, in fact.
The first time Juice meets Tully he isn’t quite broken, yet

He's been in the cell for 13 hours, 1,380 minutes, 82,800 seconds filled with passing thoughts that crawl through his body like bacteria. He’s counted every brick in the wall, every gap in the bars that hold him, every speck of dirt on the floor that niggle his obsessive compulsion and grate on his every nerve.

For ten minutes he scrubs at that floor with his t-shirt using water from the tiny toilet bowl in the corner of his cage but the dirt only ends up spreading around.

He wonders if he’ll ever feel clean again.

For a short while he manages to fall into a fitful rest, though not one which will nourish his mind or calm his raging thoughts. There are no dreams, and that’s something small to be thankful for, but there is the blaring cruelty of confusion when he first awakens not knowing where he is, not remembering all that had gone before. For one split second (one amongst thousands of split seconds) he is still Juice, soldier of Samcro, surrogate son to one and adopted brother to many.

Then, he's not.

The memory of all he has lost is almost as painful as losing it the first time.

After 16 hours he starts to hear that blade sing out to him, a siren’s song in the midst of the suffocating solitude. He wonders how he'll last months or years if he can't last hours and he curses his own vulnerability.

(There's no place for it in this world, baby...)

He hears Gemma's voice clear as day and he knows, now, that she is the cause of all of this. She is Mayhem in human form. His breath catches in his throat, an ectopic fear that dies before it's born, and his latest suicidal inkling is held back by the phantom hands of Chibs throwing him down on the ground and telling him "brothers don't kill themselves."

He whispers his name aloud because it doesn't seem real in his head and he feels he's forgotten how it sounds.

"Ah, Chibs, brother..."

Brother.

Father.

He knows he's not a brother any more. Not now. (Not yet...) That’s why he was told to put a gun in his mouth and blow himself away.

"I'm so sorry."

The pain of his second father's abandonment is a physical ache in his belly. It's a wrenching, dragging agony he doubts he'll ever be rid of and when he digs his nails into his wrists it's with him in mind, a man he disenchanted, another father he lost for his own failures and disappointments.

He’s caught up in that excruciating thought when that cell door opens, letting in light that hurts his
eyes and noise that panicks him. Alarms. Buzzers indicating locks that hold him when he hates to be held. Voices of men who can't mean well for him.

Frantic eyes look up, though he modifies them at the last minute, tries to look tough, tries to look hard though he knows he's not. He doesn't know what to expect.

Ron Tully isn’t it. Not here. Not yet.

He'd forgotten about Tully...

“Get up, Juan Carlos,”

(That's not me)

"On your feet."

(That hasn't been me since I was sixteen years old)

"R-right."

Juice stands to attention like the good soldier he always was, feet apart, back straight, jaw set. It’s how he’s been taught. It’s what he’s learned because Juice was never a man in control. He was never a man in a place to give command. He was infantry.

Now he’s just collateral damage, a trigger that needs to be pulled.

When Tully tells him “at ease, soldier” it’s a relief because he knows his place and that’s all he’s ever wanted. To know his place. To know what’s expected of him. He doesn’t know how this is going to go down but he knows what Jax wants.

At least, he *thought* he knew what Jax wanted.

When his eyes move down to the hand that approaches him, he feels a little more of himself die inside. The swastika on Tully’s hand burns his neck like a crucifix to a vampire. It’s stark and black against his pale white skin and Juice wonders, what fresh Hell is this, to be accosted by a man who would spit on him if he saw inside of him?

"You look about twelve," Tully says. "A real brown baby boy."

"What?"

"Shhh. No talking. Just listen."

Words pass. Juice doesn’t hear most of them but catches a few, a trilogy of P’s.

Price.

Payment.

Protection.

"You haven’t got much to offer me, kid, but I’m sure we can work something out.”

Juice knows he has but one currency in this place. The club had tried to use it before after all. He’d known going in for that subsequent stretch that he’s just what lifers are looking for: big eyes and a pretty mouth. He’d spent fourteen month inside and Clay hadn't let another man touch him.
Clay isn't here.

There's nobody to stand in the way, now.

Juice's cell is six seven feet by four feet. There is barely room to move, move to breathe. There are walls and there are bars and there is grey and there nothing, nothing else.

But, then, there is white, and then there is him.

“You’re not pure. But…you’re not black either.”

His fists clench, jaw tight, eyes as hard as he can make them. They’re emptier than they’ve ever been, will not not tear themselves from the cell floor.

(He will not cry. He will not cry. He will not cry).

"I'll keep you close, Juan Carlos. I'll get you in position so that you can do your job, but...nothing comes free in this place. I'm sure you understand."

(I'll keep you close...)

"I'm not getting out any time soon."

He presses a hand to the small of Juice's back and it pains him so much already.

"What do you say, hmm?"

“This is wrong.” Juice whispers to nothing, to nobody, because nobody listens when he talks and he could scream his pleas from the rooftops and nobody would hear them. Nobody ever ears them.

(I'm not having a breakdown, Jax...)

"This is all wrong."

"No it's not, sweetheart. It's survival for you. And, it's companionship for me."

When Tully grasps his jaw and tilts his head like a dog breeder assessing a stud, Juice's first instinct is to fight like he did when he was a kid, when the man tasked to care for him thought it 'companionship' too. He broke the fucker's nose and never looked back.

His hands push out against Tully trying to put distance between them.

"No!"

It's an exercise in futility because there's just not that much fight left in him.

(*)

It hurts.

It hurts so badly that Juice loses consciousness, his eyes open but his mind retreating so far within itself that there’s nothing of him left. He is absent. He has checked out.

He has locked himself away and the only words that reach him are “this gets done, this gets done, this gets done…”

They are his mantra. His salvation.
They are his way back.

The weight against him is harsh and heavy and the warmth of breath on his back offers no comfort but the knowledge that he is not alone. There is no real need for the cuffs on his wrists, an addition which left Juice in no doubt as to who payrolls the guards in this intricate level of Hell. They just burn. They were just for control.

They were just to let him know he has no power here and that nobody can help him.

Tully fucks him in silence and for some disturbing, devastating reason, that jars Juice more than any of it. More than the rape. More than the humiliation. More than the obvious play of dominance as Tully unnecessarily hurts him.

Perhaps this is designed to throw him in at the deep end, the quintessential ‘breaking in’ of a colt, riding it hard and with force so that it knows its place and doesn’t bolt or buck again. There is no crude lubricant to soften the blow, no blow to soften the humiliation of losing the one last bit of dignity that’s hanging on by the thread he sewed his Judas patch on with.

Perhaps it’s just powerplay, a ploy for supremacy but, as Juice lies helpless and restrained, he can’t help but think that this is some sick cosmic joke. With every movement, every thrust, every agonising blow, he wonders what demon is being driven out of him – and what evil is being put in its place?

He can’t help but choke at how unfair it feels.

Afterwards, when he hurts so badly he feels he’s been turned inside of himself, Tully holds up that stark white powder as a ‘reward’ for his good behaviour.

"It'll help. It won't take the pain but it'll make it so that you don't care."

He almost, almost thanks him for it.

The AB giveth pain.

They also taketh pain away.

(*)

Ron tells Juice that Jax has given his blessing for all of this.

"Said you could use it."

It hurts more than the assaults themselves.

(*)

He only comes at night, the veritable boogeyman, and during the day Juice is left alone with his thoughts.

It's the harshest sentence possible for a man who cannot live with silence.

They won’t let him see his lawyer, can’t give a satisfactory answer as to why he’s being kept isolated and it’s only a matter of time before he blows up and let’s his frustration get the better of him. They insist the plan is still in place and when the time of its execution comes, they will let him know.

They tell him to sit tight then laugh as if they've made the funniest joke imaginable because Juice is locked in a cell and can barely sit at all.
As early evening draws in, he begins to lose his mind. When his pacing has made his legs ache and his obsessive regime of pushups, pullups and squats has left his muscles burning as much as his mind does, he kicks the wall and bites down on his lip so hard it bleeds. He knows that screaming bloody murder will do him no good, that bashing his head against a wall will earn him a deeper, more enforcing level of isolation where his arms will be strapped around him in a grotesque facsimile of a hug. He’s been there before. Never again.

Juice is not dumb enough to think he isn’t slowly degrading, day by day, hour by hour. He’s also not stupid enough to think that his estranged brothers will thank him for it.

When the sadistic guards come to take him to the exercise yard for his paltry fifteen minutes of freedom, he begs them for information.

“What *is* this?” he pleads, because he’d tried to be tough and to put on a front but he’s unravelling minute by minute, hour by hour. "Why am I still here? Why are you doing this to me?’’

When a small smile passes by the bastard’s lips, the penny finally drops.

“Ask your boyfriend.”

He is isolated because Tully wants it that way.

He is inaccessible because he doesn’t want to share his toy, the one that’s so shiny and new, the one that bends over when asked because that’s what its been brainwashed into doing.

It'd roll over and die if it's master demanded.

“When will he be here?” Juice asks, ashamed he’s even saying those words aloud. "Tully?’’

The guards smile.

“Soon. But, he asked me to give you a present. A care package, if you will.”

Maybe Juice had been expecting something other than Vaseline, heroin and a battered book of love poems, the first to make it hurt less, second, as Tully has already stated, to make him not care.

There’s something to be said for the third, the book of poems, though Juice can't bring himself to say it.

He vomits twice when the door locks behind the guards.

Gemma and Nero aren't here to clean it up this time.

(*)

He doesn’t know how much longer he’ll survive in here, not with his mind intact.

He's starting to wonder if it's worth it.

As time passes, Ron is the only constant in Juice’s life, a mark, a silencer and a filler of silence.

After he takes his payment (because that's what Juice keeps telling himself it is: payment, not rape) they talk. It's not all neo-nazi bullshit that makes Juice's skin crawl and Roosevelt's photograph of his black daddy burn into his head like an infection. They talk about things that aren’t related to clubs or groups or brotherhoods, things like sport and movies and computer games, all of the things that normal people talk about when in each other’s company for copious periods of time.
If he closes his eyes (or takes enough coke or heroin or pills to dull himself senseless) Juice can almost pretend they're just two very different guys passing the time in a very small dorm.

When Tully sits alongside him, the voices in Juice's head are silent and that's all he wants, right now. He's come to realise he'll endure anything if it would just stop screaming.

Sometimes, Tully will read Juice poems from the book he gave him and it's nauseating and disturbing and inappropriate and emotionally damaging – but, at least it's not quiet. At least he's not alone with the shit that doesn't make sense and the crap that doesn't sync up.

"You're a good kid," Tully him, the well spoken man at odds with the rapist and abuser they both know he is. "You're loyal. Braver than you think. No clue why the Aryan pinup thinks so little of you."

"I did wrong by the club."

"Didn't they all?"

"I betrayed our King."

"A King is only as strong as his weakest subject. He did you wrong, Juan Carlos. Single you out. Why are *you* the only one to suffer when the rest of them get to stay close?"

"I...I don't know."

(...it doesn't seem fair...)

Juice should know that Tully is planting seeds but he can't bring himself to care. It's denial in it's purest form and it's no longer a river in Egypt but Juice's life.

"Who knows? Maybe it's because you're not milky white like the rest of them."

"Yeah. Maybe.

"Jax is an amateur. I'll work with the kid because it benefits me - but, he's no Clay Morrow."

"...no."

Clay would never do this to him. Never.

There's a mental disparity that befalls Juice, that screws with his mind to such a level he's not sure where he lunacy ends and everything else begins. It's a repellent truth that burrows deep until the butterflies in his stomach become maggots and the maggots make him bleed inside.

The truth is this:

The only time Juice feels calm, now, is when Tully is with him.

He wonders if it's been manufactured that way and, God, what kind of madness is that, the thought that anything, even this, even coercion and humiliation and force, is better than being alone? He hates himself for the fact that being held down and rendered powerless is preferable, somehow, to being left to suffer in silence.

That's what his brothers did to him.

It occurs to him, in the midst of a heroin induced stupor, that this has been his life for as long as he

How is this different?

He tells himself it could be worse. He could be dead. Jax could've burned off his ink and killed him. It could be *so much* worse....at least, that's what he tells himself.

"I'm tired," Tully tells him, pressing his lips softly against Juice obsessively shaved scalp. "Get some sleep, baby. I'll see you tomorrow.

Tomorrow could be the day. The beginning of the end, or the end or the beginning, Juice is fucked if he knows which.

(*)

It's not so quiet any more.

He finds himself enjoying Bronte, wiles away hours in his cell with a gift that was supposed to be a joke but ended up a lifesaver because the words of long dead sisters are better than the cries of a dead mother murdered by a woman he loved.

“Did you read the passage I told you to?” Tully asks, first thing in the morning, and Juice nods his head like the eager student he always wanted to be but never quite had the intelligence for. He was always more interested in hot wiring quad bikes and pissing off his foster parents.

Here, now, he does his homework like a solid pupil. The words of My Comforter run circles around his head.

(A brotherhood of misery, their smiles as sad as sighs...)

They spoke to him, as Tully knew they would.

“I read it. I got it.”

“Of course you did, sweetheart.”

Juice flinches at the endearment because it’s not Tully’s to use. Each and every time he bites back a "fuck you" because here, now, self preservation is stronger than pride - but he's no man's sweetheart and the last person to call him that wanted him dead.

(Please, sweetheart, don’t kill me...)

"I know why you had me read it."

So that he saw.

So that he finally understood.

"You’re not the idiot he paints you as, kid. You shouldn’t sell yourself short.”

"Yeah. Thanks."

Juice wonders if this is Stockton Syndrome, a variant on the Swedish capital. Perhaps it’s just
embracing the lesser evil, an evil that sees fit to hold him after it uses him, that compliments him after it's taken him for all that he is.

(My comforter...) He wonders, when did he become so starved and so desperate that this would become something he craved, like the kid that will tolerate his father's violence because he hugged him afterwards and told him how sorry he was; how much he loved him?

He takes a deep breath. He can't think about it any longer.

"So...what's going on? With Jax's plan? You keep telling me it's going ahead and nothing happens. I'm going crazy waiting. It feels like you're fucking with me on purpose."

(When will this end? Please, when will it be over?)

"Lin's in position. It won't be long now. Your debt will be paid and this will all be a distant memory. Patience, baby, is a virtue."

"Yeah. Sure."

Tully runs a finger over the scars on Juice's back, yet more blood and pain he shed and felt 'for the club.' He tries not to shrivel up, to shrink away from the touch because he's learned that Tully does not tolerate insolence well and Juice knows when he's defeated.

It's something he's learned only recently.

"You and me, we'll be done. You'll only have the Chinks to worry about."

(This gets done, this gets done. Everyone will forgive...please...everyone will forgive...)

"They're sadists. Never trust a man with slanty eyes."

"I can handle Jackie Chan and his cohorts, Tully."

"There are a lot more of them than there are of you, sweetheart."

Juice always fought harder when he was outnumbered, a life's lesson learned well.

"Of course, I could be persuaded to keep you on a tight leash if your continued existence is beneficial to my workings. There's be a price, of course, but nothing you couldn't handle."

Juice says nothing as Tully pushes his palms outward and asks: "Am I so bad?"

(Yes, yes, yes, yes...no...yes...oh, God...)

"I'll be okay."

"There are worse men than me, Juan Carlos, guys who'll make things a lot less comfortable for you."

"I know that. I'll be fine."

"No. No, you won't. Your King is counting on that."

"...yeah. Yeah, I know."

Sometimes, in the depths of his hard heroin high, Juice wonders if he's even alive at all or whether
this is some sick half-death that he cannot escape from. He wonders if he’s still hanging from that
tree, his body dangling from the branches like some strange, rotten fruit that wears a face but isn’t
human any more. Perhaps this is purgatory, punishment for his sins.

Perhaps God wasn’t listening when he tried to reach him at the site of his own demise.

Now, in this not-life, he feels the weight of Tully’s head in his lap, his gentle, even voice reading
words of beauty and truth and love in what has come to be a painful, pilfering parody of all the
things Juice ever wanted.

It sickens him that he feels comforted by it.

(*)

There’s a specific level of humiliation in being taken and petted by a man who, by way of his own
ethos, considers him a second class citizen.

In a moment of bravery (or stupidity) he asks Tully what his problem with colour is; whether or not
he sees the irony of an obvious-Jew like himself wearing swastikas on his skin citing white-power
mantras to the blacks in the cafeteria.

The response he receives is such typical, myopic propaganda he stops listening after the first citation.
He just pops another pill: Xanax, he thinks, though he couldn't be sure. Tully said it'd sedate him and
Christ knows he needs the rest.

He doubts he'll be waking up in a diaper with a sign stapled to his chest any time soon.

He's gone way beyond 'pissing off his buddies'.

Tully calls him a ‘pretty Spic’, a race he turns a blind eye to because ‘Spics are good workers’ and
‘wetbacks take out the trash that nobody else wants to dirty themselves with.” It's derogatory, it's
hateful - but, he somehow sees it as acceptance, as if being allowed to breathe the same air as the AB
is an honour.

When he strokes a hand over Juice's head it's with an air of ownership, not affection.

Juice rubs his hand absently over his neck. Sometimes, when he's really low, he can still feel the bite
of the chain as it choked him. He doesn’t tell Tully his dad was black, though, that this very fact
alone started the spiral of events that led to him being here in the first place and peaked when he'd
tried to do away with himself in one of Oswald's field of dreams.

He knows what the outcome would be, knows Tully would use it as justification.

Maybe he’s not ready to die yet after all.

(*)

He’s not so far gone that he doesn’t know how *wrong* this all is and how, if he does what his
President has asked, there's every chance he won't come back from it.

He doesn't think he ever came back from Darveny.

Jax didn't even care.

After breakfast, on The Chosen Day, he reads that poem again, the one that has become his
favourite, the one that represents him to such an extent that it could’ve been written for him. He likes
it. The words are clever. The rhythm is good.

Their madness truly did madden him, that much he knows.

It briefly crosses his mind that he could’ve enjoyed this, that all those years reading nothing but motorcycle magazines and Kerrang might’ve been wasted years when he could’ve been reading something like this. Something that means something.

There’s a lot Juice regrets and, surprisingly, not all of it has to do with the club.

There’s a stain on the right hand page, a byproduct of his quiet rage and despair when he'd scratched at the wall until his fingers bled before returning to the book because it's the only thing he has.

He knows that Tully will see it as performance art. Bleeding passion for the old works.

When the guards come for him he feels like he's been waiting for this moment his whole life. He stands, clear and calm, though that might be the meds Tully has been ploughing him with; his own private dispensary.

He stares straight ahead. He sees nothing.

Is he just a spark?

The guards say nothing as they cuff his wrists, as they lead him from his cage by his arm. He's torn between feeling as though they're leading him to the gallows or guiding him to his destiny - the destiny Jax chose for him, whether he wants it or not

(When did what I want ever matter?)

Juice Ortiz has killed...but, he's not a killer. Not really. Not in soul and not in mindset.

He will be after today.

When he gets to the execution chamber, they tell him there are fresh clothes inside 'in case it gets messy'. For a split second (one of the near-millions passed) he loves Tully for preparing for that eventuality knowing that if the killing didn't destroy him the mess would.

(Out, out damn spot...)

He smiles, tells them he's ready but he looks deader than he ever has.

The smile ("prettiest God damn smile I ever saw" Gemma told him) stopped reaching his eyes years ago.

(*)

It's done.

Lin's done.

He's done.

Juice doesn't know why he's hoped for anything different.

He gets back to his cell and he lies on his bunk, doesn't know how much time passes at all. It could be hours, could be days but, when Tully finally gets there and Juice asks him to just make him forget,
he knows there no going back.

He's finally snapped.

Tully tells him Jax will be here to see him soon, that he has to be on guard. His brave little soldier, standing to attention. Tully gives him rest for the day and, by way of 'making him forget', presses three tabs of Oxy in his palm.

"It'll help," the older man promises.

Juice remembers the burn of vomit in his throat.

He knows it won't.

(*)

TBC...
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Part 2. Any words and clicks are very much welcome and appreciated.

I've tweaked the timeline a little so that Juice's meeting with Unser takes place after his Asian tune-up. Thought it'd have an impact on Unser, if not Jarry.

Tully goes first. Juice waits quietly in a holding cell, his cuffed hands pressed between his knees giving him an air of childlike deference that seems to be his default, of late. He looks like a middle-schooler awaiting one-on-one time with the Principal to remedy his behaviour. It's funny because that's exactly how his President has made him feel over the years.

('Cut the shit, little brother. Cut the shit or lose the kutte. I won't tell you again.')

Jax Teller is four years older than Juice, a mere glitch in time. He was Abel's age when Juice came kicking and screaming into a world that didn't want him but it feels like he's a lifetime advanced. He is the alpha to Juice's beta, the leader to his follower.

He always felt so insubstantial in comparison to Jax. So small and insignificant. He still does.

He wonders if they all did.

For ten minutes Juice doesn't move, barely breathes. His body is so still that anyone with a lick of concern might think him catatonic but this is prison and Juice has been in solitary for days, now, and that can mess with even the strongest of guys.

It's his eyes that give him away.

(The story of my life.)

"Christ, what'd he give you?" one of the guards asks.

(Serenity. Zen. Twisted fucking love.)

"Just medicine. It's prescribed. You can ask the infirmary."

"Of course it is. Strung out little fuck like you wouldn't last ten minutes without some magic fairy dust."

The Oxy wasn't prescribed. Maybe it's reacting with the Xanax, which he's been popping for as long as he remembers when he's not riding Klonopin or Ativan. The guys never knew. He'd tell them it was long-term antibiotics for his kidney, the one that wasn't ruptured by that shivving but succumbed to a serious infection that kept him in the hospital for long enough that his hair grew out and he forgot what it was like not to piss through a tube.

('How's our favourite pincushion? We miss you, little Rican."

('You've got what in your dick? Shit, man, that's nasty'.)
Juice doesn't give a fuck if doping himself up makes him weak. His doc always told him it was weaker to refuse help when it was needed. He's holding it together, that's all that matters. He's peaceful. He'll get through this.

Jax needs to *see* that he can get through this.

In the holding cell, he notices the tiniest speck of blood on his inner wrist, right where the metal meets the skin.

('There's Shakespeare in you already, Lady Macbeth)

He doesn't even care.

"Tully makes a good old lady out of you, Ortiz. Don't let that one get away."

Juice smiles, refusing to rise to their bait because after this, everything will be different. He will enter that room an exiled son and will leave it with a family again.

Isn't that all that matters?

Isn't that the most important thing?

(He's been telling himself that for weeks, now, but he's no longer sure he believes it)

(*)

It's time.

Juice hasn't seen his brother since it happened, not really, not since the Mayans when he'd reached the end of his rope and had been hoping for them to help him or hang him with it.

(A rope. Never a chain. A chain doesn't tighten and, if the drop isn't big enough, a slow suffocation is the best you can hope for.)

It occurs to him that he can't remember the last time he saw anything but misplaced, unwarranted hatred for him in this man's eyes.

( "You betrayed me..."

When Tully calls him 'baby' and tells him he'll see him later it reeks of territorial pissing. A lesser bastard might've grabbed his balls on the way out but, thankfully, Tully doesn't cross that line.

It's a small mercy.

Juice doesn't look to see Jax' reaction to their 'thing' because he already knows there will be none; that his former leader is not only well aware but was actively encouraging it.

Perhaps he deserves it.

(No, he really doesn't...)

Perhaps Jax was right to put him though that knowing he'll simply endure.

(The absence of 'no' is not consent.)

Perhaps this is the rock he has to push in order to get over the other side.
Juice finds it difficult to look Jax in the eye even now, as he walks slowly across the meeting room and takes his place before him. They're not equals. The restraints around his wrists see to that, as do the letters on his back that mark him prisoner instead of son. If Jax were to attack him here and now he would be defenceless. He also knows he would take it like he took it from Chibs.

He doesn't know what that says about him.

When he finally builds the courage to fix his eyes on his older bother he doesn't recognise what he sees. The face is the same but the spirit is different, much like Juice's own. There's a hardness that was always there but is cold, now, where it had only been firm before. His eyes are not full of hatred but something deeper and more primitive.

This is a man who is lost.

This is a fallen 'hero' who has lost a wife, a fact Juice breaks his own heart over but Tully shrugs off as an excuse.

('He's a hypocrite. He would've killed her himself if he thought she was going to turn rat and we both know he started on this Hamlet spiral long before Miss Goodwife met her grisly end.')

Juice had ensured he hadn't lost a mother, too, because Gemma was the queen and loyal subjects protect royalty from the shit the world may throw at them.

("It's the right thing to do, baby. For Jax. For those boys. You come clean and you'll break him, you understand")

Looking at him now, Juice can see he broke anyway.

He takes a deep breath and composes himself. He doesn't want Jax to see the pieces he's in. That would only seal his fate.

"Tully tell you about Lin?"

"Yeah."

(I did what you wanted, I did what you wanted...please, Jax...)

"It wasn't Jury, it was Barosky. All about money."

"And you believed him?"

(Rats can be liars too.)

"If anything, Lin would want to hurt the club. He got no reason to protect Jury."

Silence. Quiet. Stillness.

A knife to Juice's stomach.

A burning, niggling doubt.

(What did I do wrong?)

Juice smiles earnestly, desperately, a smile that says he's of no threat, that asks without saying that he

(Please.)
He looks like everything Jax wants and needs him to be at this point, but he's still not saying anything.
"I did everything you asked, Jax."
(I completed my part of the deal. I bloodied my hands for you again. I was the trigger that went off for you.)
Jax looks at him as if weighing him up and Juice is transferred back to his first meeting with Tully when he turned his head from side to side as if to get a better look.
He knows there's something wrong but the Oxy and the Xanax hold his panic prisoner and the only thing that escapes is another disarming smile.
He shifts imperceptibly as Jax delivers the blow.
"I found out that Gemma was helping you hide..." Jax says. "The Chinese guy she ID'd, he was in Vegas the night Tara died."
And, just like that, the precariously balanced house of cards falls down.
He nods his head but thinks, this can't be happening.
Of course it is.
(*)
It takes only a few minutes for Juan Carlos Ortiz to break his King. Like Laertes to Hamlet, he stabs him with the poisoned blade of truth.
As he speaks, even voiced and steadier than he's ever been, he tells himself that this is for Abel; that if he can save just one innocent person this life and these horrors will not be for nought.
He confesses with such a detached clarity that he doesn't realise he's crying. He doesn't feel the tears on his face, doesn't digest the pain in his chest and in his gut.
He just talks.
He just releases, like he wanted to do all along but was forced into silence by a woman who knew how to play him too well.
When he is done, when he is finished, he feels the burden lifting from his shoulders and he's so light, so light he feels he could float away, now.
Bobby is dead.
Bobby is dead and Tara is dead and Juice is dead, passed away a few years back when a black sheriff turned him so far away from himself he could no longer see where he was going.
He is so sorry.
He is so very sorry.
(Don't apologise to him. It's him who should be apologising to you )

"Don't say you're sorry", Jax tells him, echoing Tully's words. "Don't say anything"

It is now that he realises he's backed the wrong horse; that the lie he shared with the woman he saw as a mother becomes what frees him, when put straight, and will inevitable kill both of the men sat at this table.

It'll kill her too.

Her own twisted love will be the death of her and, isn't that the saddest thing? He's just a kid with mental scars and a mind that was never his own.

There's no tragedy in *his* death.

"Thank you for telling me the truth. I'll make sure it's quick."

Juice, broken yet somehow less broken than he's ever been, smiles at the biggest lie Jax has ever told him.

It'll never be quick, because Juice has been terminal for years, now, and instead of offering palliative care, all Jax ever did was heap more on top of him.

This is just his final stretch.

(*)

"Your King hasn't told me if your debt is paid off yet. You're still in my favour - and, my offer still stands."

"Yeah."

"What did you tell him?"

Tully asks because he knows that meeting will benefit him as much as anything.

"The truth."

Tully doesn't know the truth, not all of it.

Nobody but he and Gemma ever did and he wonders, would that have changed anything, if he'd known?

"Did the truth set you both free, Juan Carlos?"

(I'll make sure it's quick.)

Did it?

"Yes"

The truth condemned him but, God, it freed him too.

(*)

He's getting used to solitude now, though there are times when he'll perform another soliloquy just to fill the space. It's amazing how much acceptance he has now that he knows there's an end to all this.
He knows how hard he's been ridden, now, how much he's been played and yet still he wants to believe that they cared for him. Jax. Clay. Gemma. Chibs.

He wants to believe.

There is clarity in a death sentence, one that cannot be available to those who see no finish line. There is no doubt that Juice will be dead by the end of the week and the only thing left to wonder is when, how and by whom.

One bet would be the Chinese. They'll learn he offed Lin, will assume it on Tully's orders. They're big on an eye for an eye so he knows he will bleed out quick - unless they're planning on making an example of him. They'll be looking for a scapegoat.

It's a role he's played to rapturous applause since he first became a prospect.

Maybe one of the guards will tie him down, will inject him with too much heroine and push a pillow over his face, just like he did to Darveny, only they wouldn't offer a gentle word before he died or try to make him go in peace like Juice had wanted for that pretty, sad burden who didn't deserve to die.

It could be anything, though he's pretty sure that Jax will have tasked Tully as the man to 'love and protect' only to end up killing him regardless. It's a parody as ugly as anything.

If nothing else, he knows Tully will let him choose because he may have taken him for all that he has but he's not a man that hasn't got a sense of fairness to him.

For now, he stops thinking. It's always been a burden to him, his thinking about thinking, getting lost in the details of nothing. Nothing could pull him out before, but now it feels different.

(I feel different. I just need to know I'm doing something right, Jax...)

He sits on the bunk and opens his book. He's been loitering around page 78 for a long time, now.

He hopes he lives long enough to finish it and to know he's seen through at least one beautiful, bittersweet thing to the end.

(*)

The guards tell him they've boarded the Orient Express before they beat him bloody and unconscious.

Juice's last thought before the world falls away from him is that he only had three pages to go.

Shit.

(*)
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Juice goes through a lot - but his life is saved by some unlikely sources.

Goes AU towards the end.

He wakes up in the infirmary, just like they said he would, and Lincoln Potters words scream at him through the antiseptic quiet.

(You are a pawn, Mr Ortiz. The weakest piece on the board. With the right moves, you could be even more powerful than the king - or, you could carry on being pushed around on the whim of the other players. Moved as they see fit)

Juice would never be King. Not ever. He's the hobbled Gladiator who betrayed an Emperor and it's all he'll ever be, now. He'll never die a hero like Maximus. The best he can hope for is going out like a man.

The pain in his head is offset by a kind of whiteness behind his eyes and his wrists are strapped to the bed frame. It worries him because it means one of two things, first that he lashed out in his disorientated state or second that someone has engineered this whole move and wanted him to be helpless. He doesn't want to think about that right now. A cursory tug indicates locking leather restraints. He knows what money and promises can buy in this place and it seems he's been a bargaining chip changing hands all the time.

He stops moving.

"Jesus."

There's an IV in the back of his hand, taped down firm. His eyes trail up to the bag that hangs next to his bed. Saline and glucose. Juice hasn't eaten in three days, has done enough drugs to run a small elephant into the ground so it's no wonder he's weak and dehydrated. What seems ironic to him, however, is that they're trying to keep him healthy with his imminent death approaching.

What's the point?

He sits up when the room stops moving against his field of vision. He feels like he's downed a fifth of vodka and he's riding.

(Leave me alone, Chibby)

"Hey," he yells, then winces when the volume jars his concussed head, "hey, is anybody here?"

The room is empty but for him. It's strange. With the amount of mayhem that goes down on the inside it's rare to have an empty space on a hospital floor. He knows it should unsettle him but the only thing he's thinking about is getting out of this bed and taking a piss.
"Hey, you gonna cut me loose or what?"

It's the story of his life that his pleas are met with silence.

It takes ten minutes for someone to show up. By that time, Juice is verging on panic. He could feel it encroaching on his fragile mind, dancing around the edges. When he looks up he's grateful to see it's one of the more personable guards, a Texan named Otis who reminds him a lot of Filthy Phil, only thinner. Less hairy. The kid shouldn't be working here, Juice thinks. He hasn't got the sadist vibe going on like the rest of them.

"Problem, Ortiz?"

"Can you let me up? I gotta piss."

"Sorry. I don't have the keys."

Juice indicates toward the straps on his wrists curiously. He's not angry. He's so doped up he doesn't think he could be if he tried.

"You, uh, you wanna find someone who does?"

"Smoke break. Give 'em 10."

Juice is easygoing by nature and the answer satisfies him. He knows Otis won't fuck with him, not even to get in their good graces, and he knows if he miraculously survives the next few months in this place, Otis will be gone.

"What'd I do?"

"Cracked Dresden in the face. He wasn't too happy about that. He was about to go at you good but Harris pulled him off. Didn't want to handle the paperwork. You're lucky he's a lazy fuck."

Juice knows he's not completely dead inside when a smile starts forming on his face. He regrets it, it hurts bad, but he feels like he did in 7th grade when he finally got one back on the guys who'd been giving him shit and hell since the first day of school because he was a foster kid.

Fuck Dresden.

Fuck Salazar, messing him up and taking his kutte. That little bitch had it coming.

(Fuck Chibs, beating him down without even letting him explain)

Maybe *he* has it coming, whatever 'it' is.

"What's goin' on? This have something to do with the Chinese?"

If Otis knows he says nothing and Juice thinks, he's learning. The guy places a piece of paper in Juice's hand quietly, efficiently.

"A message. From Tully."

"Where is he?"

"Held up. He can't get down here. Wanted me to pass that on. Told me to tell you he's got it covered."
"Got what covered?"

Otis knows. Juice knows he does. He also knows how it works. Otis isn't a rat like he is. He'll give him nothing.

"The guys'll be back soon."

He'll let him suffer in the dark...

"Got what covered, man?"

"They won't let you piss yourself, don't worry. They're sick but they're not that sick."

Realising he isn't going to get anything, Juice lies back down. His head hurts and his mouth hurts and his wrists hurt and everything hurts - but what hurts most is not knowing what the Hell is happening.

He knew it wouldn't be quick.

He unwraps the note as best he can with his hands tied and he focuses on the small black lettering as much as possible with blurred vision and an obvious concussion.

"Just lie back and think of Queens," it says. "I got you."

Juice reads it in Tully's voice, that slow almost-slur-almost-purr the bastard likes to give out.

It's not the implication of sexual abuse that gets him but the ownership that bleeds from those last three words.

(*)

When the Chinese come to 'relieve their tension' Juice is as defiant as he's ever been because, what could they possibly do to him that hasn't already been done? Kill him?

Bring it on.

Something in Tully's note made him think that death is not marked on his chart for today but, shit, would he even give a fuck it was? He's at peace now, no matter what. His conscience is clear, and so when they tell them they need to let off some steam with him he's beyond caring.

"Have at it," he whispers, because his broken brain tells him it's not rape if he's asked for it.

(It's still rape...)

He's not going to give them the satisfaction of putting up a fight he knows he cannot win and so he just lies there. Preserves himself. Holds himself inside for the final ride that must be coming soon.

(Please come soon)

It's a blind ride. He isn't there. He isn't even in the room. They can't do anything to hurt him because he's not even with them and, as they throw him down on that hospital cot and take him, one by one, he does as Tully advised.

He thinks of Queens.

He thinks of Queens with its water hydrants and it's dive bars and it's corner gangs. He thinks of the
Liberty Park Gambino shitheads always looking to ride him for odds.

He thinks of his girl Sally, ten years older and always, always willing to show him the way.

He's running through his old neighbourhood, his chest burning, his legs aching, the chill of a NY morning seeping into his soul and his bones. He hears the voices of old telling him they knew his aunt real well and they fucked his sister. He smirks and tells them Juanita's an old whore and his sister was pregnant at fifteen, has seen more motel rooms than booking.com.

He runs faster. His smile is so bright it could stop traffic.

He wonders why he ever left that simple, ugly, beautiful place.

(*)

"Wow, I'm a popular guy."

Juice sees something cross Unser's face that looks remarkably like pity when he's led into the meeting room. It's hard to walk, hard to stand. His lower back hurts and when certain muscles twitch involuntarily it sends shooting pains through his whole body. He tries to appear steady on his feet but he knows how bad this looks.

"Jesus," Unser whispers under his breath because last time they saw each other, Juice was intact, for the most part. At least visibly he was. Juice likes Unser. He's a good guy - crooked, but in a good way.

He's starting to think he'd have been better off emulating him, rather than Clay and Chibs.

"What'd you want?"

"We, uh, we came yesterday but they said you were on lockdown in the medical wing. Something happen?"

"What do you think?"

"I think someone did you over, son."

That's an understatement.

"Good observation."

Juice's bones ache. His soul aches. The bruises on his body are only the half of it. He focuses on a spot above Unser's head, his voice monotone.

"Gold star for you, old man."

He doesn't know why he's being an asshole. He guesses it's because he doesn't want to be here because he's tired of talking to people who don't want to understand his side. He has tried pleading his case time and time again only to be told "I don't want to hear it."

"Sit down," Jarry says and she's not Unser so for a second Juice just looks at her because, who is she to order him around? She hasn't earned his respect. The words that follow just sicken him.

"I hear you're getting cozy with the AB."

"That's one way of putting it."
He does sit down then, but it’s on his terms not hers and for Juice that’s an important distinction at this point. He wonders if she’d make such a comment if he was a woman who had been cornered and abused and it bothers him because he doubts it entirely.

"Did this have anything to do with Lin?" Unser asks. “Terrible what happened to him."

(He was a means to an end. He was closure. For Jax.)

"Yeah. No-one lives forever, right?"

He sounds so hardened and it’s alien to his own ears. He’s not tough, not hard, not in that way. He never has been. He knows that Unser knows it and Jarry, she doesn’t know him at all so fuck her and what she thinks but, when he listens to himself speak, the truth is he barely recognises himself.

Unser looks at him like he doesn’t recognise him either.

"Seriously, what do you want?"

"What did you say to Jax?"

"Watch the tape."

"Don't be an asshole."

Oh, the fucking irony.

"Trust me. All I am in here is someone's asshole."

It's passive aggression at its best. Juice almost feels like he's achieved something when that woman-cop leans back a little in her seat and at least has the decency to look a little disturbed.

He answers the question when Unser asks him because, again, fuck her. What did you say to Jax?

"I told him the truth."

"So, why's he looking for Gemma?"

"Because Gemma knows the truth. The truth behind every lie inside every secret. She's the gatekeeper, Wayne."

"Listen, if you know anything about Tara - you've got a chance here."

"I have no chance."

"We can help you, son."

'(How they treat you? It ain’t right. They don't give a damn about you. Let me help you.)

God, if only that were true.

If only Juice deserved help.

"You can't help me. Your heads are all so far up your asses you can't even see it. I'm done. It's too late for me. It's too late for ALL of us."

"I'm not an idiot, Juice. I know the club's been playing you. I know you didn't have a choice."
Juice used to believe that, once upon a time.

"We all have choices, Wayne. I don't know what you're talking about."

"This whole thing with the Chinese. We know it was a lie, Juice. So, why don't you start by telling us where that lie came from?"

It was born out of fear. It was conceived on in a bloody kitchen on a day that may just go down as the worst day on Earth.

It was a mistruth fertilised by a broken son and a shell shocked mother who happened to find each other at the worst moment of their lives.

Gemma killed Tara.

Gemma killed Tara and I protected the only mother I have ever known.

Even now, he can't bring himself to say it. Jax knows the truth, that's all that's important to him, but some sad little part of him still thinks he can save Gemma. He doesn't even know why he wants to.

Maybe he just doesn't want another death on his conscience.

"Look, have you talked to Gemma or not?" he asks, but he knows the look in his eyes is desperate, says "find her."

"She took off."

Juice can see in Unser's eyes that he already knew. He already knew that this was all her; that she had been the beautiful, sensual puppeteer all along. Juice knows how hard it is when a person you love suddenly reveals themselves to be something who represents everything you hate in the world. He knows it only too well.

It’s hard for him, being the harbinger of that truth for someone else.

"I'm sorry, Unser. I know she meant a lot to you. She meant a lot to Jax too. I'm sure he'll remind her of that when he finds her."

"You think he's gonna 'deal with her', son?"

Juice won't answer that. Not straight out. He'll guide the way but he won't 'tell on' his brother. Not again. His eyes move to Jarry and he can see something that looks like understanding in her eyes, so different to how coldly she had regarded him before. It's hidden, but it's there. She doesn't know Juice. She doesn't know his history. She has no connection to to him, not like Unser does.

But, apparently, she does know a person who only wants an end when she sees one.

"Just – get to her first. Please. That’s all I’m gonna say."

He knows how he looks. Beaten down. Tormented. Far, far too worn for a place like this.

He knows how young he looks...

"We can help you," she says, "if you help us. It might not seem that way, but - "

He smiles at that because she may well believe that, but he’s not the one that’s naïve any more. Maybe it’s the rest of the world.
"Trust me, you really can't help me. Not now. I really am all done."

(I won’t be here in the morning.)

Juice can see the wheels ticking over in Jarry's head. He can almost hear her realisation: that he
doesn't intend to live for long enough that she can even try.

He wonders if she'll do anything to try to stop him. He wonders...

(*)

Tully doesn't understand that Juice was ready to go when he handed him that shiv.

"It's better they saw you this way." he tells him as he pays him another visit in his cell. It’s getting to
the point where Juice welcomes the warm rush the white powder gives him and he’s grateful that he
is not long for this world because he doesn’t think he can go through withdrawal again. He was
nineteen the last time he did it, went cold turkey in a dingy apartment in Brooklyn with his pal Mario
looking out for him.

It crosses his mind that he never did repay him for that.

“Looking like this, all bruised and forlorn. That’s gold, Juan Carlos.”

"Yeah? Why's that, then? Because it's not enough that I'm sacrificing myself for the club, they gotta
see the other shit too?"

The 'shit' Juice refers to is at least partly perpetrated by the person he is speaking to. Even he sees the
stupidity in that.

"You gotta play the system, baby. It’s all about appearances. Propaganda, if you will."

“’You’d know all about that.”

If Tully takes offense to what Juice says he doesn’t make it known. He just carries on as he always
does and, though he’s blatantly eccentric, Juice has to acknowledge that his mind works in a certain
way that, to some, might be considered effective.

“’You don't look so dangerous now. You look like a beaten child. The woman, especially, she’ll be
be sympathetic. She's, what, forty? Clocks ticking on those maternal instincts. I bet your bruised up
little boy face played right into those. She’ll be on the phone right now trying to organise your
protection.”

This is meant to be protection. This. Solitary. An isolated cell away from the sharks.

Tully just manages to get through the bars.

“’No-one can protect me. I'm dead. The Chinese? You think they're gonna let me live even if you
have? You think they’re gonna just let me go after this?’”

"I told you I had you. You didn’t believe me? Sweetheart, I own this town"

"I'm done, Tully. I'm done being the club's bitch and I'm sure as Hell done being yours. I want out. I
asked you for an out."

"And, I refused your request."
"I’m through. I’ve said my piece. There’s nothing more for me to do, now, other than let you kill me. But you won’t do it."

“You’re not gonna die, kid. I’m not gonna kill you.”

“Then, I’ll do it myself.”

“With what? I took your shiv. You gave it to me, remember? You gonna hang yourself from the bars? You tried that once before. Didn’t work out so good.”

A pale white finger trails the side of Juice’s neck but he’s too far gone to even flinch. Tully lingers just a little too long before moving his hand away and putting it on Juice’s thigh.

“You’re not supposed to die. It’s not your time.”

“And, what if I want to?”

“Wants don’t get, baby boy.”

Tully’s legal diatribe continues as if Juice hasn’t even spoken because Tully sees him as a child who should be seen and not heard. He doesn’t care about Juice’s wants and needs. He doesn’t care that he’s been ready to go for the last few years but hasn’t felt the time was right.

He doesn’t care that Juice is at peace with leaving this world because Tully doesn’t want him to leave it and what he wants does go.

“This look? This whole thing you’ve got going on right now? It'll make them more sympathetic when you get to trial. It's all about mitigation at this point. Are you a cold-blooded criminal or are you a beaten down kid who cracked at the seams and covered for the only woman who gave him reprieve from the madness?"

"I wasn’t beaten. Gemma didn't beat me. She didn't force me to do anything."

"Beating isn't always a physical thing, Juan Carlos. You've been beaten all your life. You just didn’t know it."

People always see Juice as a victim. A poor, abused kid. Why is that? Why is that, when he's not?

"That's bullshit. This is bullshit. Why are you doing this to me?"

"Because I find you interesting."

“Christ.”

That Juice is part black makes it all the more bizarre.

“You know what they’ll see now? They’ll see a guy who was manipulated six ways before Sunday and didn’t have a choice anymore.”

"That's not who I am."

"Baby, that's precisely who you are. They might even look at your obvious mental health issues and send you psych rather than prison. You think I haven’t noticed it? You think they won’t notice it? You’d be out in no time. A clean slate away from the madness.”

What madness is this, though? What madness is any of it?
"Why do you care what happens to me?"

"Because I'm bored, and I'll take entertainment anywhere I can get it."

It's a chilling indictment of Tully's state of mind. He'll pull strings from the inside. He'll build up partnerships only to tear them down on a whim because he's got nothing better to do. He knows what they think of him. He knows what he is to them. He also knows he's earned a bit of disloyalty and can afford the fallout of this game he's playing with a pretty Puerto Rican's life.

He's built up such a reputation that even his inside eccentricities are tolerated and accepted because the benefits outweigh it all..

Juice is nothing but a pliable distraction.

"I like you, Juice."

It's the first time Tully has called him that

"There's truth in you."

"And, what will you tell Jax when he asks why you didn't kill me like he asked you to?"

"Baby, I don't think he's gonna be around for long enough to even notice."

(*)

Jarry does try to stop him.

She tries to stop what’s happening to him too, just like Tully said she would, because even a cold-hearted bitch couldn't go unmoved by Juice's predicament.

The guards come for him just before final lockdown. They smile as they tell him to pack his shit because Juice owns nothing but a shiv, some Vaseline and a book of poetry and all of those were taken from him the minute Tully left his cell.

If nothing else, it indicated the rapes had stopped.

He's moved to the infirmary only this time it's not by orders of the Chinese. He's on suicide watch, a necessary evil before he's moved when the sun rises. He'll spend the night with two sets of eyes watching his every move. His hands will need to be in view at all times if he doesn't want them in restraints.

If he tries anything at all, they'll drug him so hard he won't even know his own name.

"Someone out there has a vested interest in your wellbeing. They're moving you out in the morning. We're to ensure that nobody lays a hand on you in the meantime."

They tell him that tomorrow he's going to Hill View, a secure mental health facility just outside of Charming. There will be no more Chinese, no more Tully, no more invisible targets on his back.

There will be no more club.

No more pain.

“Your continued existence,” he’s told, “is obviously of importance to someone.”
He doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry because that’s a fucking rarity.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary


If you are reading please let me know ;)

Juice doesn't sleep that night. Not with so many thoughts racing around his head. Not when the space he’s confined in is filled with anxiety; with fear of the unknown. When he’d awoken this morning he’d had an expectation of an end. He’d thought he’d be closing his eyes for good before the sun set and the resounding thought that had bounced around his mind was that he deserved it and was ready.

This is not what he was expecting, this reprieve. This forced security. He doesn’t want a part of it.

('This is the way it's supposed to be, Juan Carlos. Stop fighting it."

He was assessed by the prison doctor when he was first brought down, an Asian man named Chang who had initially sparked a little discomfort into him because his mind had formed an association that Juice imagines will take a long time to break.

Chang’s bedside manner left a lot to be desired. The questions asked were invasive and provocative and left Juice feeling like he’d been assaulted all over again. His mood had fallen so low he could barely raise his eyes from the floor and he gave the doctor all the fuel he needed by flitting between agitated and dead, seemingly without provocation. He’d been labelled ‘unstable’, had received a shot in his arm, some clear liquid in a hypodermic that hurt as it went in.

He’d told the doctor he didn’t want it but apparently, what he wants is still of no importance to anyone.

The doc had said it would 'settle' him for the night. Relieve his stress.

("Make you easy...")

Oprah told him to get used to it, that where he was headed there'd be a lot of that.

"You won't be giving no smart mouth in that place, brownie. I doubt you'll be able to string a sentence together with all the shit they put into you."

She’s still there four hours later, tells him with great pleasure that he’s ‘hers’ for the night and he’d do well to remember it.

“Remember what I said. You talk back and I *will* strap you down.”

He can feel her hatred from yards away. He knows the reason behind it and can only blame himself. She takes pleasure in his predicament, in her ample control over him during time in her presence. It gets to the point where he feels he has to ask permission to breathe, permission to speak. In the end, he stops speaking entirely. His every move is seen as a threat of self-harm and her guarded,
threatening stance is one which troubles him

A time not long ago he would've begged her forgiveness for the insult he’d flung in her direction. A
time not long ago he would not have uttered those words in the first place.

That was then and this is now and it grates on his nerves that there’s a before and after. He's not that
kid any more

("Stop saying you're sorry, Juice. It means shit coming from the likes of us.")

He wonders when the niceness was cultivated out of him.

(*)

At 3am, when his unnatural calm had started to alleviate, he started to ask questions to himself.

What? Why? How?

He wonders what grounds they’ve laid out for having him moved. He wonders why it happened. He
wonders how he could be a criminal in one breath and certifiable in the next.

Unser’s been aware of his precarious mental state since the incident in the motel room, hadn’t seen fit
to move him ahead of time. Jarry, too, ordered him into segregation but never thought to think of
how that might affect his balance.

So, why now?

Why do people suddenly give a fuck?

Perhaps he’s tipped over. There is that. Shit’s gone all to Hell and maybe he’s gone down with it.
Tully said people were starting to notice his tendency towards repetitive movements, the way he’ll
gently rock in his cell with his arms wrapped around his knees, how he’ll spend the whole of his
allocated meal time lining up peas on the side of the tray and trying to figure out a way to arrange
them by shade. He's been doing it for years, a compulsion to many but a desperate ploy to control
even the tiniest part of a stressful environment to Juice.

Maybe it’s got something to do with that.

Or, maybe it's the obvious dissociation because if ever there was a sign a person was headed towards
a serious psychotic break, that’s it. Unser had seen it firsthand. Gemma too, only she wasn’t really in
the frame of mind to care much. Chibs pulled him aside one day and asked him if he had a death
wish because, why on Earth would you stand in the path of a moving car if you didn’t? Juice barely
remembered doing it.

He knows he killed Darveny because she is dead and because he was the only man in the room with
her.

He could not describe it in detail because, on some level, he wasn’t even there.

"Where d'you go?" Oprah asks, and he knows he’s doing it again. "When you zone out like that.
You go to Disneyland, little boy?"

Juice doesn't answer.

He just turns his back on her and closes his eyes. Pretends she isn't there at all, pretends he isn't
either.
It's amazing how well that works for him lately.

(*)

Juice tells his lawyer he doesn't want this.

His lawyer tells him what he always tells him.

"Sit tight. Ride it out. I'll have a look at your options."

The administrative review took place the night before in his lawyer's presence. They've got him on an acute referral, a 72 hour evaluation hold. Juice asks on what basis and the look he receives is one that makes him reel inside.

“We both know you’re not well, Juan Carlos.”

“72 hours. Then what?”

He’s told that what comes after that will remain to be seen, that it will be dependent upon the evaluation but concerns had been raised and measured had been taken.

“Based on what I’ve seen, and admittedly that isn’t a lot, I doubt you’ll be back here any time soon. There are serious concerns about your mental health and this facility isn’t set up to deal with that.”

The lawyer leaves Juice feeling less represented than he ever has and safe in the knowledge that nothing he says will matter.

He knows they’ve had him moved because of the AB; because protection in prison means shit and they need him alive since they know that he knows something. He also knows they’re not wrong, that he’s been unravelling ever since Miles, but he never expected to live long enough for it to become a problem.

He remembers Unser offering his help and it seems like a lifetime ago.

Christ, he’d like to think this is Unser fulfilling that promise but he knows deep down that it’s not all about him because good deeds and expressions of concern are always double-sided.

Juice has learned that pretty much everything that passes, regarding him, is laced with ulterior motive.

(*)

Tully comes to see him in the morning and it’s funny to Juice how his face no longer strikes the fear of God into him.

(‘Better the devil you know, huh?’)

Tully’s still in one piece, though Juice would expect nothing less of the man. He killed a cockroach in his cell the other day, crushed it with his bare hands. Tully, to Juice, is the kind of man who would outlive vermin regardless of anything he does. He does wonder how much longer Tully will last with the club on his back for backing out of a deal, with the Chinese on his case for believing he ordered Lin’s hit.

The fact that Tully doesn’t appear phased by either eventuality makes Juice wonder If he’s got more of a death wish than he, himself, has.
“You’re good, Juice. You’re all good.”

“Am I?”

Tully reminds him they only have him on a parole violation, that until they find Gemma they can’t pin anything on him relating to ‘Golden Boy’s wife’. If the shit hit the fan he could claim coercion. Fear for life.

“Tell ‘em it was kill or be killed. And, if all else fails, follow in the footsteps of the SS. You were working under orders, nothing more.”

If Gemma blamed him, Tully says, any lawyer worth their weight would point out he had no motive yet she had probable cause and reason coming out of her ears

He tells him "Lin's on me,” and it leaves him shaking and unravelled because, why would he do that? Why?

“What have I got to lose, sweetheart? All you have to do is sit tight and ride it out. Listen to what they have to say, what they have to offer. Your loyalty should be whatever sets you free. Because the club? Your MC? They got no loyalty to you, little man.”

They're not the saving graces he wanted them to be.

They’re not the family he needed.

“Was it you?” Juice asks, because he needs to know. He needs to know if he owes his life to the very man who was tasked to take it. “Did you put In words as well as the cop? Did you tell them I was planning on offing myself?”

“Let’s just say I added fuel to an already burning fire.”

“What fire?”

“Their fire. Their fears for your wellbeing. Their faith that, if left alone and in the confines of this place, you would bash your head against the bars and brain yourself. I clued people in to your more…eccentric qualities.”

"Holy shit."

Juice closes his eyes. He feels overwrought and overstimulated, blinded and deafened at once. He can hear every last voice in his head and every single one of them is screaming at him that this isn’t right.

“I’m not crazy.”

“No, baby, you’re just a little unwell.”

Don’t call me that, don’t call me that, don’t call me that, don’t call me that…

“This isn’t what’s meant to happen.”

“Your fate cannot be parted, Then journey on, if not elate, Still, never broken-hearted!” What will be will be, Juan Carlos. Remember that.”

In the version of events that ‘fit’ for Juice, he handed Tully a scalpel and asked to be taken with dignity.
In the version of events that is warranted and will have him pass out of this world a brother, he bleeds out all over the cafeteria floor, the sweet cherry pie resting quietly in his stomach. As a condemned man, he had chosen his final meal. He had opted for his time and his place. He had chosen the weapon with which to meet his creator, hopeful above all things that God would forgive him.

This version of events is yet another betrayal.

It kills him that it matters so much to him when he matters so little to them; that no matter what Tully tells him, he could never, ever bring himself to put himself first.

It kills him even more that a white supremacist hypocrite is the one who drew his attention to just how far he’s sunk.

"You need to make good with Jax. That's what I was trying to do. To make up for it. To make good."

"For what?"

"For all I done. You know that."

"You think I want to make good with him on your behalf? Teller lost my respect the minute he greenlit you and me, Juice. I’m a sick, twisted lifer. Worst of the worst. I don't claim otherwise. He masquerades as a good guy and I find that abhorrent."

("I don't want Abel and Thomas to see a monster when they look at me, Juice, do you understand that? I want them to think their father was a good man.")

"That boy would have looked good on the cover of every Aryan magazine on this planet – but, no self-respecting good guy does that to a kid who's willing to die for his cause after all the shit he put him through."

Juice has heard it all now. A Nazi with a moral code. A rapist who’ll condemn the man who gave him permission.

Tully was just the bullet.

"He screwed you by-proxy. In every sense."

Jax was the gun.

It's the wicked, hard to stomach truth.

"Besides, he doesn't need to know what I did. As far as he's concerned, you were shipped out before I could jam that scalpel into your pretty brown neck. Lin's dead. We’re good with that. I'll make some other deal. That’s all life is, Juice. A series of deals."

How grand it must be when your mistakes and shortfalls are simply written off.

“I don’t understand. I really don’t understand. Please…”

"What, you think this hasn't happened before, Juice? You think I haven’t sent any other pretty little foot soldiers off on their merry way? I take care of what's mine."

(You're just a puppy jumping up at the heels of your owner.)
"I work out the loose ends later. I have all the time in the world."

Juice has never known such a life. He has only known a life of harsh punishments; of each and every minor transgression being hit full and hard like a ton of bricks falling on his head.

He looks up at Tully, a man whose face will be deeply ingrained on his psyche, and he pleads with him for something he cannot understand.

“They’re gonna fry my brain. You know that? They’re gonna lock me up in padded room and make it so that I’m not myself any more. They’re gonna take everything away from me. I’m gonna die in pieces when I could’ve gone out good. You’re dragging this out for me. Jax promised it’d be quick."

“He promised you a lot of things. When was the last time you were yourself, Juice? What do you have to lose?”

The truth is, he can’t even remember.

“That’s what I thought.”

Tully leans in and he kisses Juice on the cheek. Juice doesn’t move, doesn’t breathe, doesn’t reciprocate. He is simply still.

(Dead. Dead confused.)

“Why?” he whispers, one last try, one last push at understanding why his life has so much meaning to a man who helped destroy it. “Please, just tell me why.”

“Because I like to play God. And because, despite all of the shit I pull, I’m a better man than your esteemed leader.”

“No – “

“Yes.”

Juice's voice cracks as he repeats his protestation.

"N-no."

It cracks because deep down, though he knows that Tully isn't a better man than Jax Teller, he also knows he isn't a worse man.

It renders his devout loyalty somewhat problematic.

(*)

It’s not the same as prison. There are no cavity searches, no sadistic guards forcing him into cells too small for human habitation. There are no aggressive warning alarms, no darkened walls that put him in mind of submarines, all black and submerged. The wall in his (private, isolated, solitary, locked) room is painted what the nurse refers to as ‘jasmine white’ and it’s soothing in a way that hard, stone is not.

There are no cockroaches.

As nice as this place looks, though, with its floral paintings and its bright floors, it’s still a prison. There are still locks and there are still bars. There is a bracelet on his wrist that he cannot remove which is white against the brown of his skin and he knows, should he happen to luck out and get
anywhere near the exit, that this very bracelet would shut the entire place down.

He also knows that he will not be left unmonitored for a single second and that anything he may have been planning to achieve an end will be met with fierce, harsh resistance.

Juice has been in the hospital for an hour and a half when Unser arrives.

He sees him through the window of his locked room, his gilded prison with grates on the reinforced window and no handle on the inside door. He stands up, walks to the window and presses his hands against the glass.

He probably looks like a monkey in a science lab, a monkey in a plain white t-shirt and sweat pants and shoes with no laces.

By the look on Unser’s face, grave and pained, Juice knows. He just knows.

It's the agonised look of a man was simply too late.

He hears the electronic click of the lock on his door and Unser is granted access. It’s a one off, Juice knows, because though isolation is what triggers the worst of it for him they’re keeping him on his own regardless, which makes such little sense to Juice he doesn’t even know what to do with it. They’re looking for psychosis yet insist on holding him in the very conditions that will ultimately trigger it. What is that but dumb?

When he looks into the old man’s eyes he looks sicker than he ever has.

“Unser – “

“How you doing, son? They taking good care of you?”

Juice isn’t interested in platitudes.

“You found her,” he whispers, and his fists clench so hard they cut the skin on his palms. “You didn’t get there in time.”

“We found her. She was at her dad's old place. Figured she'd run there. It was where she was sending you. Knew it was out of the way, knew it was safe.”

“She's alive?"

For a second there’s hope. It’s misplaced, but its hope. Maybe he saved her. Maybe he helped her. Maybe his words of warning were enough.

“It wasn’t safe, son. She was dead when I got there. Bullet to the back of the head. She bled out all over the rose garden.”

For a split second, Juice feels a sense of peace knowing she went out in a place of love.

Then he remembers he’s still here; that the only other person who shared his burden was free of it and he was left behind to pick up the pieces.

He clears his throat.

It doesn’t clear his mind.

"And, Jax?"
"Gone. Don't know where. You have any idea?"

Juice shakes his head no.

This time, Unser believes him. He doesn't know why that breaks him. He doesn't know why the thought of her shot execution style sends him to his knees when he's been trying so hard to be stoic in front of the doctors because he doesn’t want to give them anything to pin on him.

"Shit,” he whispers. Then, harder. ”Shit,shit, shit…”

He’s shaking. He’s losing it. He doesn’t know why Unser's hand on his shoulder sends him further downwards, why the comforting whisper of a broken man telling him "you tried, son" is something that resonates so much with him.

He doesn’t know why this meeting of two men who had been so badly played is what’s needed for the dam to break.

“C’mon, Juice. C’mon, now.”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Wayne.”

He was in love with her. Unser.

In some ways they all were.

“You did good, kid. You tried to make it right when it all went to hell. I know that.”

(I didn’t do enough).

"Some things are just too messed up to fix."

All Juice knows is that Gemma is gone, that Jax is gone, that everything is falling apart around him and on top of him.

He knows he loved that woman.

He knows he loved that woman and he knows he loved her son.

Now, in this place and in this time, he knows that his loving them meant absolutely nothing.

Not a God damn thing.

(*)

After, when Wayne has left, Juice sits on his bed and stares out of the window. The room overlooks a concrete parking lot and, in the expanse, there are trees and trees and trees. He can see the sun in the distance as it cuts through the branches and, even inside, he knows how warm that is.

He wonders where Jax is.

He wonders where Chibs is, where Happy is, where Bobby is - until he remembers that Bobby is dead and Jax pinned that one on him too.

He feels a sense of bitterness that hasn’t been there before, bitterness towards Jax, who killed the man he thought of as his father and now has killed his ‘mother’ too.
He hates him for that.

Juice’s mind wanders to the poems of old, the words that have been spinning in his head for the last few days. The brotherhood of misery, their smiles as sad as sighs.

He finds he doesn’t miss it. Not right now.

In a rare moment of clarity, he wonders why he ever wanted it at all.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

In which Jax is taken down and Juice is given some history.

Drop me a note if you can. I like notes :)

Juice has been here before. He knows the drill, understands what’s expected of him.

At fifteen he spent three months in a juvenile mental health facility after setting fire to his foster parents’ camper van. It had been a difficult few months for him in the run-up to that event. His sister had aged out of foster care and left him behind and his fear of abandonment had kicked in tenfold. They’d never been close, her three years older and far, far more streetwise than her little brother ever was. Their mother had died when Juice was eight and she was eleven and the little girl who had once been so sweet and so jovial had turned into a sullen, destructive adolescent who hated the world around her. She gained the first notch on her criminal history when she was thirteen and robbed a convenience store in Harlem and, by fifteen, she was pregnant.

She hated her brother, made it clear each and every time she saw him. She blamed him for their mom’s death because she’d been walking to collect him from his after-school soccer club when the car had hit her. It was a harsh burden to place on a little boy and something which still hurts Juice even to this day which is why they don’t keep in contact. He knows that every time his sister looks at him, all she sees is blame. Still, when she got pregnant at fifteen he’d been the first one she’d told and even to this day, the trust she’d put in him in her hour of need resonates with him. She didn’t keep the baby but the fact she trusted him with that meant so much to him, even at only twelve.

When she left, everything fell apart.

Distant as they were, a blood relative had been something that Juice had cherished because when he’d looked into her eyes he’d seen their mother’s eyes and when she smiled he could almost remember the warmth of the woman and, in the cold years that followed as mixed race kids flitting between foster homes, that memory was something that could pick him up when he felt he couldn’t get any lower.

The family they’d been entrusted to was not the best yet somehow, together, despite the bitterness from Maria and the desperate confusion from the younger, more sensitive Juan Carlos, they’d made it work. The mother was a rabid church-goer who spent 90% of her time out of the house and felt that, as long as she fed them, everything else would take care of itself. The father was a gambler and a passive criminal who would send Juice on errands with his bent money and his betting odds right into the ‘wrong’ side of town. Years later, when that fat shithead Prulow had got himself jumped with a bagful of cash on the way to Ozone HQ, Juice’d had so much sympathy for the kid because he knew how knife-edge it could be running cash for those guys. He’d done it himself for years before he managed to get away.

He saw many bad things running cash for a man paid to care for him, so many terrible things.

That day, the day his sister left and his mind had left along with her, he’d arrived home to find her side of their shared bedroom empty, not so much of a note to wish him a happy life.
The house was empty, and Juice was alone.

For hours and hours it stayed that way, foster-daddy out losing his wife’s hard earned cash, foster-mommy praying to a God that never graced her with children of her own but gave her the strength to put a roof over the heads of what she referred to as ‘society’s feckless’. By the time night came he’d gone into shutdown, those voices he came to know well not only screaming but deafening him, sending him into some kind of mental overdrive that he did not know how to handle.

He wanted to hurt them all for leaving him. He wanted to crush them for not telling him that his sister was going. He wanted to make them suffer the way that they were making him suffer.

He didn’t want to hurt anyone but he wanted to do something to express what he was feeling.

That camper van had been their pride and joy and so, when he lit a match and he set it to those hand-sewn curtains that she’d spent so very, very long on, he’d felt a strange sense of justice. Every single minute she’d spent on them she could’ve spent on him and his sister, knitting and sewing them into something beautiful and secure instead of leaving them to fend for themselves. For every penny she spent on fabric, lace, ribbons and thread, she could’ve spent spending quality time with the children she had vowed to love and protect for as long as they were with her.

Even now, Juice doesn’t remember much of what happened, just remembers gazing into the soft, flickering flames and feeling a sense of calm. He hadn’t expected the whole van to catch fire.

He only wanted to ruin the damn curtains.

Later, they told him that it would’ve taken a long, long time for the heat to build up to such a point that the whole vehicl caught fire. They’d asked him how long he’d stood there; how long he’d watched for?

As far as he was concerned it was just seconds.

(‘Are you even listening to me, lad? What’s so important on the fuckin’ ceiling?’)

He’d been found passed out on the grass with burns on his arms, the pattern suggesting he’d tried to bat the flames with his hands. Now, even now, you can still see the remnants of those burns when he catches the sun. Some are covered with tattoos but the outline of blisters and burned flesh is still visible in some lights.

He said he didn’t remember doing it, had gone before a juvenile court who immediately recommended a psych evaluation based on his clean record and his obvious distress. In the three months Juice had spent ‘inside’ he had learned the true value of the word ‘help’.

He’d learned that his words do matter, that his thoughts are important, that he does deserve love, happiness, a family to call his own.

He learned so many things.

So many things that his subsequent ‘family’ threatened, ruined, took away, destroyed.

(*)

Almost immediately, they diagnose him. Less than a day in and they're got him boxed off, categorised, signed off for a long term stay.

It really is that easy.
(‘I’m surprised nobody picked up on it sooner, Juan Carlos. You’re practically textbook.’)

He’d asked that they call him Juice but upon hearing them say it aloud he’d only just made to to the
bathroom in time to throw up the sandwich they’d made him eat. The name is associated with the
club. The club is no longer associated with him.

It’s a thought that hits him like a sledgehammer to the gut.

Juan Carlos doesn’t fit any more either. It strangles him, like he thinks his cut would if he saw it now,
if he pulled it on.

He asks them to call him JC because that’s something he’s never been before.

PTSD with an obsessive-compulsive co-morbidity. That's the bottom line.
They tell him its common for one to coincide with the other at a rate of 1 in 5. It's a label he doesn’t
like but he ticked the majority of boxes: excessive fear and agitation regarding specific events.
Depression. Dissociative behaviours. Avoidance. Repetitive thoughts and actions. Exaggerated startle
response. Suicidal ideation, to name but a few.

Oprah hadn’t been kidding when she said they’d jam him full of meds without his express consent.
Zoloft. Carbamazepine. Ativan. He remembers Tully’s words well, a quiet drawl telling him to do
what they say and to take what they say and to let them believe what they will about him.

He’s too tired and confused to argue, lines them up by order of size and takes them systematically.

He's used to following orders.

(*)

The first night, with his door locked tight but his window open wide, as per his requests, he listens to
the night, to the sound of the crickets and cicadas, to the wind in the trees. Dogs in the distance. Cars
pulling out of the lot, others pulling in.

He hears a bike on the streets a little further out, knows it's make and model just by the sound of the
engine because shit like that always just sat right with him. It's a Ducati Scrambler, modified judging
by the noise it makes. Just the one, a lone rider just like he is now. Not a nomad. A recreational rider,
he thinks. Probably a weekend dentist. Goes home to his little suburban wife Mindy and his two
kids, Brad and Cindy. They have barbecues and Scene It nights with the neighbours.

The guy's name would be Chuck and he'd play the doting fucking husband but deep down he would
wish he was riding with the best of 'em.

Chuck doesn't know what he's missing, doesn't know just how good and how bad it can get with an
MC. A home charter. A family.

That's gone now, for Juice. That's all gone.

He doubts he'll ever have a Mindy, a Cindy or a Brad either.

Could be it's the sedative he was given, mild but enough. Or, the herbal tea he pleaded for on the
grounds that it would be a comfort to him.

Maybe it's the knowledge that nobody is going to come through that door to push him into the wall
so as to fuck him or shiv him.
He doesn't know what it is, but it feels different.
*He* feels different.

Despite everything, he feels safe.

Juice, Juan Carlos, JC - none of them remember when the last time was they felt anything but scared.

He closes his eyes and he listens to that Ducati as it growls further and further away.

It seems symbolic, in a sense.

(*)

Juice sleeps through probably the biggest thing.

He sleeps through the tip-off that leads Unser, Jarry and the rest of them to the winding, rugged roads of California, where Jax is trying his hardest to follow in his old man's footsteps.

He misses the commotion as ten, twelve, twenty cop cars join in the tail to a crescendo of oil and engine and noise.

He isn't aware of the sharpshooter taking aim and firing, taking Jax's bike off the road and Jax along with it as the shot out tyres spin out of control.

He'll hear about it, though. He'll know because Unser will tell him when he awakens, will tell him that Jax is safe; that he's secure and that he will feel the hard hand of the law like he should've done years ago.

He'll hear about how Jax was taken down much like he was, in silence, without protestation, not because he knew he was beaten but because he had nothing to fight for.

(Poor Thomas. Poor Abel.)

Sons don't kill themselves, Juice will think bitterly, when he's told that Jax's intention was to plough himself into an oncoming truck.

It'll be the hypocrisy that burns him the most.

The blatant double standard just doesn't seem fair.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

There's a little shift in perspective in this chapter, which is necessary for when I'm covering 'scenes' where Juice isn't present. For the most part this is his story but here, we're looking from Unser's eyes before he hands the reins back.

Again, if you are reading, let me know. I know people aren't fond of non-love stories and this certainly isn't a love story between Juice and Tully, at least. But it might end up that way.

(*)

For Wayne Unser, this is a difficult thing. Seeing Jax sitting silent in that interview room, wrists cuffed in front of him, the look of a dead man on his handsome face, it's a visible representation of everything that is wrong with his town.

It's hard to imagine that this young man before him murdered his mother in cold blood only days ago, a mother he loved, a mother Unser loved more than he can bear think about since he found her lying dead and cold amongst the petals.

He wonders sadly how it all came down to this, how it all went so badly wrong that death and life imprisonment is the only option for any of them.

"He's not talking," Jarry warns. "Patterson's been on him trying to get him to talk. He just sits there, like he did before. Just eats, washes, sleeps. I doubt we'll get a word out of him."

"Give him time, Althea. The kid just lost his mother."

"Killed his mother, Wayne, not to mention a town full of people. I'm losing count of how many kills have gone down in his name. You know it and I know it. So, let's not be sentimental and let's call it like it is, here."

It's hard for Unser not to be sentimental, not when he's known this kid since the day he was born, held him the day he came out of the hospital in that gaudy Samcro blanket. He'd leaned down and kissed his forehead, told him "don't let this stain you, son."

How can he reconcile that baby with this man in front of them?

"You don't know this guy. You don't know this town. There's a lot here you just couldn't possibly understand."

"No, you're right. I don't and I couldn't. But, you do, so I'm counting on you to right it."

He remembers Jax as a little boy running round his dad's coat-tails and throwing baseballs up against the clubhouse wall while the 'big boys' talked crime and shop and Christ knows whatever else around the Reaper table. Jax was always his mother's son, that much was clear, a confident, oft-defiant little boy who knew what he wanted and stopped at nothing to get it. Thomas was more John's shadow, quiet and intense despite all his shortfalls. Gemma would beam with pride at her
focused, intensely motivated sons who would one day lead a gang of brothers just like their father.

Jax changed when Thomas died. Still focused, he became harder, less sweet; still determined, but this time with a more barbed edge. He got into trouble at school for cornering the weaker kids and having them do his bidding for him, a real ringleader who called a lot of shots and held a lot of power even on the recess yard. He wasn’t quite a bully, never that, but there was something inherently threatening in the way he conducted himself even back then.

It grew, that tendency.

It grew along with his bitterness, his twisted logic, with the power that corrupted him as it had corrupted his step-father before him. Thomas never would’ve grown like that, Unser knows that for sure, and what frightens him the most is that history is destined to repeat itself with Abel. He is his Daddy’s son, that much is the truth, and lately, when Unser has looked into that little boy’s eyes, he has seen the genesis of exactly what he could become if he was not shifted away.

He feels the only way of honouring Tara’s memory is to make sure that the pattern does not replicate.

In this room, a room like which Juice had looked so damaged and so broken, Jax only looks cold and, when Unser looks into his eyes, he knows. It’s a knife to his gut, twisting and turning and leaving a Jax shaped hole where hope once was.

He knows there’s no redeeming this kid.

He knows that Jackson Teller is so far beyond his reach that he’d be wasting his time even outstretaching his hand.

“You can’t keep quiet forever, Jax.”

Jax turns to look at him, his jaw hard, his face defiant as always.

He takes it as a challenge.

(*)

“I’m not supposed to have visitors for the first 2 weeks.”

He runs a hand over his hand and digs it in at the temples a little. There’s a shadow, the tiniest hints of hair growing in. It itches like crazy and he’s starting to feel like it’s some kind of karmic punishment, a constant discomfort that he can’t quite shake even when his mind is calm and his thoughts are quiet. He looks so young when his hair is growing in, that much he knows, so lacking in any natural threat.

The Mohawk had all been bravado but he doesn’t quite need that any more, does he?

“Why are you here?”

“When have I ever stuck to the rules, Juice?”

(’I’ve got my own code. I protect what I need to protect and I do what I need to do to make things run smoothly. Sometimes, it doesn’t fall within the law.’)

“I told ‘em to cut you some slack. You’ve been alone for long enough and I know you don’t got time for that. I guess a dying old man can be persuasive when he wants to be. “

Juice knows that all too well, knows all too well just how persuasive old men in general can be,
remembers how Clay used to play on him with the oxygen tubes in his nose and the haggard, wayward, lumbering walk that came from weeks in a hospital bed.

He imagines Unser told his docs that this was important; that it was imperative they speak and that perhaps, just perhaps, he could make a difference with him.

He imagines he pulled the ‘legal’ card if they’d happened to say no and it makes him smile just a little because for a guy so damn fragile, Unser could talk down a raging elephant, he’s pretty sure.

Looking down, he rubs his hand against the fabric of his sweatpants. They’re looser than they were when he first got in and one of the nurses expressed great surprise at how his meds had reduced his appetite rather than increased it.

"How’s Jax?"

"In isolation. Not saying anything."

(‘You get into segregation, Juice, and you say nothing, you understand me? I know your tongue’s loose and all but I need to be able to trust you with this. Not a word. You got that?’)

Juice swallows.

It’s almost like he’s swallowing his pride.

"Chibs?"

He braces himself after saying the name and it’s reminiscent of a little kid blurting out something it shouldn’t and covering it’s ears because it can’t handle the backlash of what it’s said. He needs to know but he’s not prepared for the answer. Chibs is a raw wound for him but it’s a wound he likes to press sometimes just to see if it still bleeds.

It always does.

"Apparently, he’s stepped into the helm. We can only see how that goes."

"Yeah, well, that’s none of my business."

Juice still hears those words, seethed and barbed.

All he’d wanted to know was if Jax had convinced the table he deserved to die because perhaps if he had, Juice would be able to convince himself. He still sees Chibs face, so full of mindless, misplaced hatred as he tells him to swallow a bullet. It was the words that killed him, not the kicks or the punches. It was the words and the abandonment more than anything else.

He sighs, because this is too difficult for him right now, thinking about this, thinking about them. He’s tired, both from adjusting to this place and from the constant battle of trying to keep up against the tide of shrinks that are twisting him.

All he wants is some peace.

"You’re not here for a social visit, Unser. I know that."

(‘You think they care about you, Juan Carlos? Sweetheart, you’re nothing but a pawn to them.’)

"What’s going on?"
"Jarry's ridin' my ass about getting you talking about Gemma. Your docs say it's too soon. Need to get you stabilised on your meds before we start asking questions."

"I'm fine."

"Famous last words. You're in a hospital and you're not getting' out any time soon. I'd say 'fine' was the furthest away from what you are."

Juice shrugs.

"Can't talk without my lawyer. You know that. I'm so screwed up you wouldn't be able to use anything I said anyway."

"Yeah, I know. I'm here as a friend, son, not as an ex cop. And you don't got many friends, Juice."

It seems frivolous to remind him.

"Yeah."

"But...off the record."

"Off the record. Sure."

In his world, that's a grey area he's practically lived in.

What he's expecting is a throwaway question designed to trick him, something loaded, something provocative but in a way that still makes Unser seem like a good guy. He's always been good at that, at twisting something in such a way that it sounds so much better than what it is.

What he isn't expecting is a raw, wounded plea, man to man, the desperate words of a broken soul who knows the person in front of him can soothe his pain even just a little.

"I just - I need to know what happened. It's killing me, son. Nothing's adding up."

Juice has always been easily swayed by vulnerability. There are certain triggers that, when pushed, will break down all of his reservations. Clay did it, grated on Juice's weak side.

('I've lost everything. She's all I got left."

He recognises when he's being played, though, and Unser doesn't look like he's playing. Not when there are tears in his eyes. Not when his hands are shaking with every movement and the pain and grief is written all over his face; tattooed across his features like some permanent score.

"I can help you and I'm trying to. But, you gotta give me something. Just for peace of mind. Just for me, son."

There's that word again. Son. He's so many people's son but nobody has ever wanted to be his father.

He sighs. He's so tired. So tired of all of this.

Why can't people just leave him to close his eyes?

"I told you once before that no-one can help me. That's true. Nothing has changed. I'm just trapped in a different place is all."
"I know what they had on you. I know how they pushed you. I know how they twisted you up and wouldn’t let you go until they spat out what was left of you because they were done with it. I know they forced your hand, Juice."

"Nobody forced me - -" 

(‘You’ve been beaten all your life. You just don’t see it.’)

"Anyone would’ve cracked under that kinda pressure."

"I didn’t – I didn’t – "

“Hell, I would’ve cracked. And I’ve seen a lot in my time. You’re not that way, kid. You’re not. They saw that. And they used it.”

" STOP."

He can’t hear this anymore. He can’t hear how he was played and he was used and he was pushed and pulled and nobody, not one single person, thought about what that meant for him. He can’t think about how stupid he was to go along with it when he should’ve been walking away.

“Just…stop. I killed a cop, Wayne. A cop.”

Maybe he says it because he’s hoping for a reaction, maybe it’s because he’d reached another limit. He doesn’t know.

“Nobody made me do that.”

He sees how Unser’s face drops when he says the words but he tries not to let it get to him too much.

"Roosevelt -" 

"Yeah. Roosevelt. And, you know what the worst part is? After all the shit he put me through, I felt justified. I felt happy that it was him lying on that ground. Then I just felt nothing at all."

"And, Tara?"

Poor, beautiful Tara who had been kind to him once upon a time. Poor, beautiful Tara who only wanted what was best for her sons.

Poor, beautiful Tara who he hurt once, just for pleasure, because he was tired of being used as someone’s emotional punchbag.

"I might as well have killed her too."

“What do you mean?"

“Just like you, I wasn’t fast enough.”

It’s the same kind of guilt he carries for his mother. If he hadn’t been at practice she never would’ve died. If he hadn’t been such a scared and nervous child and had been brave enough to walk the short distance home by himself, she wouldn’t have died.

If he’d left earlier that day, skipped practice, she would still be here.

If he hadn’t blacked out (‘dissociation is a common symptom of PTSD’) he may just have been able
to save Tara.

He’d stopped.

He doesn’t remember stopping.

Jax’s words ringing ’round his head had destroyed him. He’d been on autopilot when he got on that bike, doesn’t remember taking a left and ending up in some back alley God knows where with his head pressed flush against the wall and his own gun presses against his right temple.

When he ‘came to’ his finger had been millimetres away from pulling that trigger.

"I…got lost on the way.”

“Got lost on the way to Jax’s place?”

“Yeah. Lost. Took a wrong turn or…something.”

So many wrong turns he’s taken in his life. So many…

“If I’d got there sooner, maybe – “

His voice cracks at the word ‘maybe’. Maybe he could’ve stopped her. Maybe he could’ve saved her.

Gathering composure, he looks Unser dead in the eye. There’s the smallest hint of a smile pricking the corners of his mouth and he feels it, can’t suppress it. He’s trying to disarm. He’s trying to make Unser understand just how hopeless he is.

He just wants an end, that’s all. Just an end.

“Tara was dead when I got there. You might as well pin that one on me too if it gives you closure. I betrayed our King and I failed his queen. There’s not much more I can say than that.”

He wants to apologize, to express how he’s so, so remorseful for what he has done but it’s too late for that now, he knows that.

It’s too late to atone for what he’s done and for what he didn’t do, too late to recover from what he did unto others and what was done unto him.

He forgives those who trespass against him – but, he can’t forgive himself for trespassing.

The words, words he’s said so many times in the past couple of years, they escape him because he can’t hold this remorse in, can’t let it eat away at him like his fear has for so long.

"I'm sorry."

He has to let it be known.

“Was it her?”

“You know it was.”

“For sure?”

No doubt about it. Juice can still see her, even now, her face like nothing he has ever seen before, her body bathed in Tara’s blood.
He held out his hand for her and she took it.

She took it.

“I really am sorry, Wayne. I knew how much she meant to you. Gemma, I mean. I know you loved her. I’m sorry you didn’t get there in time for her. I’m sorry I didn’t either. I’m sorry Jax won’t talk to you and I’m sorry I can’t be of help to you – but...please. Please. I can’t do this anymore.”

“Do what, son?”

“This. All of this. I can’t be...this. Not anymore.”

“Then, don’t. Let them help you be something else because, Jesus, I know you’re better than the trained animal they had you become. I know you are. I always did. You were different.”

“No, I wasn’t.”

“That’s not a bad thing, Juice. I mean that in a good way.”

Juice can feel the tears pricking at his eyes and, damn it, where does it all come from?

As humiliating as it sounds, it’s the nicest thing anyone has said to him in a long, long time.

“I always thought that you, of all of them, were the one who could be saved. And, Christ knows, I haven’t done a lot of good in my time. Not with the club. But, you?”

He leans over and touches Juice’s arm and he closes his eyes because that touch, so comforting in the midst of everything, means everything.

“Let me redeem myself with you, son. Okay?”

(‘…and, deliver us from evil…’)

Juice smiles through his tears, that broken little boy smile that always used to make Chibs so angry.

It doesn’t make Unser angry, nothing of the sort.

It looks like it just makes him sad.

“O-okay.”
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

*Reposted chapter because I deleted by mistake. Oops.*

In which Jax gets taken down a peg or 20 and Juice is finally able to talk.

It doesn't take long for Ron Tully to set a meet in motion.

Orders are that Jax remain isolated. No contact. No opportunity to score points or build bridges, not until he's talked. Tully knows the authorities are punishing him for his silence and, while it's not inherently lawful, it's a common tactic, especially when a person is of previous bad character. Teller knows how to work the system so the system is, in effect, working him. There is an obvious lack of trust, much as there had been for Juice, only Jackson Teller is a more capable monster. The cops know it and so do the guards.

That's why they've placed him in the hole.

There are special quarters for men like Jax, a separate level of Hell to the one Juice inhabited. Jax's cell is precious more than a box within a box within a cage because in solitary, there's still a chance that prisoners can talk between the walls and they don't want him talking to anyone other than them. Tully has been in there before, knows the pressure of those dark walls, the lack of natural light and space enough to make a person feel as though they've been buried alive. It harks back to old school prisons when prisoners were thrown into cells and forgotten about.

Jax won't be long for that place but, while he's there, he can be swayed.

"Give me ten minutes," he says to Dresden, who still bears the marks from Ortiz on his face, less than handsome and held together by white butterfly stitches.

"That quick?"

Dresden smiles that sadist smile that Juice had wiped off so beautifully but Tully doesn't react. He wouldn't waste his energy on a man like this, a man who calls out prisoners for their proclivities whilst his own leave a lot to be desired.

"Doesn't matter. Ten minutes. When you want out, just knock."

Tully still holds the cards in this place and, though his pocket guards had briefly walked on the slant, so to speak, he reeled them back in with a whisper of green and a promise that little niece Ellie up in Fresno and little grandma Rosa in San Francisco would not be harmed if they climbed back into bed with him. The Brotherhood's fight with the Chinese had left two seriously injured and four transferred to another correctional facility in order to 'regain a semblance of order'. It put the AB firmly on top with no rivals even coming close, which is how he comes to be in Teller's presence three days into his incarceration.

There need be no introductions. They've already met, in a bought room guarded by bought men in a paid off prison of Tully's own. Jax knows what Tully is and vice versa. They might not appreciate each other's ideals but, once upon a time, there was a mutual respect.
Teller isn't a man to beat around the bush. He gets straight to the point, looks up at Tully with those cold, calculating eyes of his. They're blue, bluer than they should be, but they look more tired than they ever have. There's loss in them, Tully sees, and rather than the eyes of a leader, they're the eyes of a dead man.

"I hear you didn't close the deal."

His voice is the same husk it always was. Gruff and quiet. Gravelly and serious.

"You were supposed to take care of our problem."

"The opportunity did not present itself."

('If the Chinese do it, it could impact your relationship with the MC. Just let me finish my pie, okay?')

"What, you couldn't have slit his throat while you bear-backed him?"

Tully smiles.

If this is a pissing contest then Jax is destined to fail.

"I needed plausible deniability. Reasonable doubt. Hard to have that when there are only two of you in the room. You of all people should realise the benefit of deniability. Of being in a...position...to shift blame."

('He was the President. I had to do as he said. I couldn't say no.')

Jax is on the floor, his back pressed against the brick, knees pulled up at an angle. His forearms rest on his legs and, on some, this would be a look of absolute vulnerability yet on Teller it looks relaxed. Sardonic, even. He looks careless. Bored.

It's offensive, in a way.

"Doesn't matter anyway," he says, finally. "I hear they got him in some psych ward just outside of town. Maximum security. Drugging the demons out of him or something. He's no threat."

He smirks just like he did when he told Tully his vulnerable, broken brother 'could use a little loving ' and it rattles something inside of Tully, some long forgotten need for fairness and retribution because he is many things in this world but nobody could ever accuse him of shitting on his brotherhood.

The darkness builds. Tully shackles it. For now.

"Juice is not a concern to us. Not any more. If he gets out there'll be nothing left of him to kill."

He sighs, though his eyebrows raise to show that it's not from exhaustion. There's a look on his face and Tully recognises it as amusement.

It would appear he wants to be put down.

"All that shit in his head. The guy's a headcase and a liability."

All that shit in his head. All those nightmares that had him writhing and choking in his sleep. All those traumas that had him gasping for breath and calling out for it to stop.

All those times he'd visibly tensed in stress and anxiety at the mere mention of Jax's name.
"You really did a number on him," Tully says, and Teller has the nerve to look affronted. "You must be real proud, breaking a man like that. Breaking a brother like that. Bet it made you feel like a true leader."

"Juice made his own bed, Tully. You should know. You lay in it. Countless times, I imagine."

What he misses out is 'with my blessing.'

He's so proud of himself. So proud.

"You made it happen."

"Did I? Did I really?"

Tully leans back. Sitting on Jax's bunk like this feels invasive, like stepping on his territory - but in here Tully rules the roost. Everyone else just falls into line. He smiles. Tully knows what his smile looks like. He knows how his lips wrap around his teeth, how it looks more threat than disarm.

"Don't get me wrong, I have an appreciation for scared little brown boys - "

"Then, what's the beef here?"

"No beef. But, I knew him less than a week and I saw the burden you gave him to carry. Your burden. It's a heavy one, especially for someone whose back is already broken."

"He was never cut out for this shit."

"No, he wasn't. I have my own code of ethics and that kind of thing? It doesn't sit right with me, sweetheart."

"DON'T call me that."

It's building, Tully can feel it, and this is the kind of exhilarating game that gets him through the long, cold, dark nights in this place because with Jax on the outside, maybe he had the advantage, but in here?

In here he's Tully's to play with, just like everyone else is.

"I find it...weak. Easy."

"Listen, how I treat my guys is none of your business. I never forced Juice's hand."

"Is that what you told him?"

'(I am what the club made me, Tully, but this shit is all on me.)

Tully knows that's what he told Juice.

The kid repeated each and every soundbite like it was some mental self-harm mantra, taking on blame, convincing the world and himself that it was all for the good of the club and that each and every grenade Jax launched in his direction was warranted.

It was repellent.

"A leader is only as strong as his weakest link. Generally speaking, a solid leader will try to build that link up to strength, not put enough pressure on to snap. You can't build an army on brainwashed,
traumatized foot soldiers. You either make them men or you cut them loose."

"Like I said, none of your business."

"It is when you task me to 'take care of them'. Despite what people think of me, I'm not an abuser. Not in the same way you are."

It's coming. The rage. The temper Tully has heard of, that famous Teller volatility.

His weakness is his reputation and to have that stained by being reduced to little more than a middle school bully will wreak havoc on him.

It's no surprise that his 'comeback' is juvenile, something along the lines of "...if that's what I am, what does that make you?"

"You're not an abuser. Right. So, you didn't fuck him? You didn't hold him down until he was shaking? You didn't dope him up with coke and heroin in the hopes he didn't care any more?"

"I never gave him anything he wasn't expecting. I never pretended to be something I wasn't. With me, he knew what he was getting. I was transparent in everything I did to him. You pretended to be his friend. You dangled a carrot in front of his eyes and made sure it was always out of reach to him. That, Mr Teller? That's bona fide hateful."

Jax leans forward, not a threatening gesture but one which closes the space between them.

"Mr Teller. Is that what I am now?"

"I was just being polite."

"I thought we were good."

"We were."

"And, now?"

Now, things are different. Now, the weighting is different and the footing is different and things just aren't the same as they were the last time these two met.

"Now, after careful consideration, not least brought on by...recent encounters...I'm re-evaluating my position."

"So you're gonna put rocks between the clubs and shit on all of our progress because you think I was a little harsh on Juice? C'mon, brother."

It's the way he spits out his name that gets Tully, as if it's incredulous to think that Juice could possibly have any meaning.

"You do realise his old man's black Doesn't that shit all over your Adolph Code?"

"It mattered to me a whole lot less than it mattered to you. I hear you patched in a negro. Was that going to be in Juice's honour? You feel you could only reward him when he was dead?"

"That had nothing to do with him."

Why would it, because Juice was only as useful and only as valuable as his next targeted kill. He was only as embraceable as the very next thing that Jax could use as a stick to beat himself with.
"Of course it didn't. Because, you never would've changed it for him, would you? Golden boy Teller only makes decisions that are good for him, then tries to paint himself as a giver. You would've made the cut as a congressman, baby, if your brains had been in pole position with your beauty."

"Careful -"

"Oh, sweetheart, that's funny. You think you got power in here? You think your club's got many friends left after the shit you pulled?"

"Based on your honey's lies."

Lies concocted by an emotionally shattered child and his devastated, unstable mother. Lies brought forth by a guy who had ran to the only person he could trust on this Earth and found her cracked and emotionally bleeding on the ground.

Lies born out of some misguided loyalty to the poison in this world.

"Take some responsibility for your actions, Mr Teller. You weren't following orders. You weren't under duress."

Not like Juice...

"You made your choices."

"So did he."

He truly believes that.

He truly believes he didn't cultivate an environment where the word 'no' was no longer in existence.

Or, maybe he doesn't believe it at all. Maybe this is just him talking aloud and trying to convince himself as much as he's trying to convince Tully.

"Juan Carlos never had a choice. You made sure of that. Twisted his pretty little head up so bad he actually thought you were worth something. Worth killing for. Worth dying for. You think I respect that kind of manipulation? That's putrid."

"I can see he got under your skin."

"He never got under yours."

"I don't have time to deal with parasites."

"Oh, come now, Jackson. Look at who you're taking to. You don't believe that any more than you believe you were justified in what you did to him."

That silences him.

That's when Tully knows he's hit the nail on the head.

"Do you enjoy literature? History? The arts?"

"Not my thing, bro."

"That's a shame. You might understand the term 'whipping boy' if you had any ounce of refined intelligence about you. You think if you punish him you can absolve yourself? It doesn't work that
It never did.

A 'brotherhood' based on that kind of imbalance is destined to crumble and fall.

"You were never bedrock, Jackson. You built your club on shaky foundations and that's why it's fallen to pieces. You were a weak leader. You were a coward."

Finally, it breaks through. Jax is on his feet in a second and Tully finds himself pressed hard against the wall. He doesn't move his eyes from Jax's eyes, doesn't give him the satisfaction.

"And, there he is."

He growls.

He pants.

His face is ugly when it's contorted like this.

"You're not exactly paving the way for a good deal, bro."

"That's the thing though, isn't it, brother? Word on the grapevine is, you're no longer a Son. That means you're in no position to make deals or build bridges. My dealings, from now on, are with the Scot. So, you and me?"

He kisses him fast. Kisses him quick.

Then he smirks, just like Jax had.

"Any love we had? All lost. You're a low rider, Jax. You're...insignificant."

Tully lets that settle for awhile, just awhile, before gathering himself up to go.

As he stands, takes the mere steps to the door of this box, he feels the tension in the air. He smells the scent of discomfort, senses the weight that's falling down upon Jax in this very second.

He's earned it.

Tully is a man who has been the downfall of many - but he rarely ever pulls a trigger or digs in a knife. His weapon is his words. His biggest power is that which he can wield with syllables instead of bullets.

Jax's Achilles heel has always been to matter. To be considered important. To rise above the mere mortals he presides over.

He's not president any more.

"You're not of importance any more, Jax. You've got no more shots to call. In here? In this place? You're just another ass to claim."

(*)

It was Unser who convinced him.

"You have to help yourself, son. If you want anything out of this, anything at all, then you have to be
willing to cooperate."

He's had what the staff have labelled 'a good day'.

The ice had broken, had not quite melted away but parted, somewhat. Juice had found his voice because, though cautious of late, he's never been a man who held back on his feelings and, when made to feel that his environment is safe, he's often been labelled 'emotional'.

('You cry more than any man I ever met, Juicy Boy.')</n
('Is there anything that would wipe that smile off your face, kid?)

He spent two hours in therapy just talking, not about anything specific but about little things. Small things. It was hard letting go when he had been conditioned to keep quiet but eventually he had opened up, albeit cautiously.

('We can start off small. Work our way up. Baby steps all the way. We can build on the progress we make.')</n
Juice is very aware of how it works, how the patient-doctor privilege extends even in cases such as his and, unless specifically approached by the courts and the law, all sessions conducted are confidential. It gives him a kind of safety net that will allow him to release some of the negative energy that is stifling him so, like taking a blade to a swelling in order to relieve some pressure.

Still, he doesn't refer to the guys by name when talking about them because, even in the confines of this place, he's not a rat.

Despite what people think of him, he's not a rat.

Chibs became Phil, which isn't far from the truth of it. He smiled when he talked about him and it felt alien on his face, like he'd forgotten how those muscles worked because it had been so long since he had used them.

The smile had faded when he talked about how he and Phil had 'fallen apart from each other' over a misunderstanding he's never been able to put right.

He'd told his doctor that Phil was a stubborn man who often didn't want to face the truth and, because of his past, was set in his ways to the point of being unshiftable at times.

When asked how he felt about Phil now, at this moment in time, Juice had said nothing, instead diverting his attention to a blackbird that had perched on the window. Crows, he had stated, had been the bird of choice in his parts.

"Second only to vultures, i guess."

He'd seen out of the corner of his eye how his doctor had noted a word down on his crisp white doctor's notebook.

'Diversion tactics.'

He'd smiled at that, a quiet smile meant only for him because that's what they'd said about him the last time he was hospitalized, back when he was fifteen.

Juice can deflect with the best of them.

When he talked about Clay he referred to him only as C. It seemed disrespectful to call him anything
else because Clay was his name and Juice didn't want to take that away from him, not now he's dead.

It had felt cathartic speaking with an outsider who did not judge, did not jump to conclusions, who did not know the man that he was. Somewhere in the middle of it, Juice realised it was the first time he'd ever been able to express himself about the old man, his thoughts bottled up for so long they had threatened to suffocate him time and time again. He'd wake up at night with Clay's name lodged in his throat and a feeling that the only way of getting him out would be to scream it.

He'd been rendered silent.

Gagged by his brothers, bound by his 'tie' to Jax.

He knows, now, how unhealthy that was for him.

"C was good to me and...I let him down. I tried to make it right, but..."

But, he couldn't.

He couldn't make it right because Jax wouldn't allow him to.

"Doesn't matter. It's done now. Can't change it. Can't take it back. God only knows I would if I could."

There's so much he'd take back. So much.

"He meant a lot to you," was their observation. "I can tell by the way you talk about him. Almost like a son talking about a father. Is that how you saw it?"

"Yeah. Yeah, kind of."

Jax didn't get a mention at all.

Juice is trying to convince himself that Jax meant nothing.

At the end, when they told him his session had gone excellently and he had responded in precisely the way that they wanted, he had felt good about himself, as if that tiny bit of praise had built him up just a tiny, tiny bit from the dead-floor dweller he'd been a couple of hours before.

(‘I just wanna feel like I'm doing something right...)"

It had been so long since he heard positive feedback that it sat with him for a long, long while afterwards and for a split second, he'd dared himself to think 'maybe'.

Maybe, just maybe.

Maybe he could be helped.

Maybe he could be dragged out of this dark, dark place he'd been forced into.

Maybe he could look in a mirror and recognise the person looking back as someone who is worthy of time and effort and praise, rather than someone who is worthy of nothing at all.

*Maybe he could be put back together again.*

Juice is reading a book when the orderly comes for him. His name is Stewart and he looks a lot like August Marks, all handsome as Hell black man with a style all of his own. He has a warm smile and
a no-nonsense demeanour and, despite his reservations, Juice is beginning to like him.

"What's up?"

"You gotta phone call. Your lawyer. Says it's important."

"Why didn't he just come in, then?"

"Outta town I guess. C'mon."

He hasn't spoken to him in a couple of days. There was some talk of an in-absence hearing relating to his parole violation. His docs had already gone on record to say he was unfit to go before a Judge so they were applying for leave in lieu of medical reports before deciding on the case.

It's not quite as straightforward as they'd hoped, Unser had explained to him.

The fact Juice was in possession of a gun at all, as a convicted felon, forms part of the case. That he fired it unlawfully at cops, no less, is another aggravating feature. Juice knows it'll mean a pretty mean sentence if a Judge is unsympathetic, however his lawyer, as well as Unser, are certain that his psych evaluations will go a long way in supporting him.

("You're just a little unwell..."

When he picks up the phone he's expecting the monotone of his legal rep.

He doesn't get that.

It's Tully.

"Good morning, sweetheart."

It's a good job Juice is already sitting down because when he hears that voice, those words, his whole body seems to wilt.

("It's important for us to identify any triggers. Sights, sounds, smells. Anything that sets off a physical reaction."

He clutches the phone so tight his wrist hurts.

He squeezes a little harder.

("If you get to the point at any time where you're physically hurting yourself to try to detract from your feelings, you need to tell someone."

"What d'you want?"

He voice is strained. His throat forces the words out.

All he can think of is Tully's hands on him.

"I paid the esteemed Mr Teller a visit yesterday afternoon. Just thought you might want to know."

His heart sinks, because now he's imagining Tully's hands on Jax.

"Right."

"Not that kind of visit."
Of course not, because, obviously, why would it be? The guys all knew that, in a prison situation, it was only ever going to be Juice that took it.

It's why their first time in Stockton became such a mess of rape jokes, all bearing his name.

"So. you're good? With the club?"

The feeling of hope is unbearable because maybe he'll have fixed things second handedly not for Jax but for Chibs, the man on the outside looking to gather the shards together.

Maybe Chibs will see this as progress towards 'getting right' again.

Tully laughs and for a man so sickening as a whole, he has a surprisingly disarming laugh.

"You poor, loyal idiot. That really is all that matters to you, isn't it?"

"I told you. I wanted an end. Closure. I wanted things to be where they were supposed to be when I went out. I wanted to keep my word."

"But, you didn't go out."

Juice doesn't say anything because that's still on the table. That hasn't changed, not yet, and one good day doesn't drag him away from the thought of it.

"What happened?"

"I took him down a few, Juan Carlos. Went for his Achilles heel."

"What are you talking about?"

"His importance. Or lack thereof. He and I made a new deal."

"What kind of deal?"

"That all future correspondence and cooperation goes between me and the Scot. That he calls off his hit on you. Domestic peace! best joy of earth,When shall we all thy value learn?White angel, to our sorrowing hearth,Return--oh, graciously return!"

Juice closes his eyes and presses his head against the wall.

Nothing makes sense to him.

"What are you talking about? Please. I'm too sedated for this shit. Can you just give me a straight answer? Please?"

He doesn't want to be talked around. He doesn't want to be tied up and confused. He just wants people to be honest and straight and easy.

He just wants things to be easy. For once.

"It means it's over, sweetheart. No more running. No more hiding. No more screaming in the dark. It's done."

Those two simple words.

It's done.
They're a barbed edge; a two-sided sword and they mean both good and bad, in his opinion.

They are both the best and the worst thing in the world.

Juice no longer has to fear from his life, not from the brothers that were once his heart and soul - but, it also means and end to the only life he's ever felt happy in.

He might as well take his cut and burn it because he doesn't exist to them, now.

It'll be like he never did.

His eyes drop to the floor and, all of a sudden, the patterns on the carpet are so very, very interesting. He stares at them for a long while until they burn into his retinas and he commits the grain to memory.

He wonders how long he's gone for because, when he returns, Tully is asking him if he's still with him.

"Y-yeah. Thanks. For telling me, I mean."

"Sure."

He can feel it building up in his throat. The crackle. The pain.

He can feel his head begin to swim and his thoughts begin to congregate behind his eyes.

He feels as though a weight has been lifted and another one thrust over his shoulder to compensate.

It's not relief. Not at all.

"I-I, uh, I gotta go. Have to take my meds. I'm on a tight schedule here. Have to cooperate if I don't want another shot."

'(I gotta go, have to take my antibiotics.)

Tully smiles. Juice can hear it in his voice.

He can see it, too, sees it each and every time he closes his eyes.

"Always such a good boy."

"Yeah."

"Sleep well, Juan Carlos. Don't let the bedbugs bite, now."

Juice pauses.

Swallows hard.

"Yeah. Thanks."

He puts the phone down slowly. Quietly. It's only when he pulls his hand away that he realises how much it had been shaking.

It's done.

It's over.
So, where does he go from here? He’d never planned for a future without the club.

Lately, he’d never planned on having a future at all.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

A tiny smidgen of hope re: Chibs.

Again, let me know if you are here. Words always appreciated and thank to those who take the time to leave ‘em.

Unser meets Jarry at the diner.

She's a half hour late and, had any more time passed, he might've thought she wasn't coming at all. It'd been a long time since he'd been stood up but he's grown tough in his old age. Cancer does that. It had taken every little sensitivity Unser had ever had and hardened it. He figured it was his mind's way of preserving all of his negative energy into battling the ever multiplying threat inside of him.

When she finally arrives she looks dishevelled, a little rough around the edges, though her uniform is pristine and there's nothing showing on her face. Her hair, though, normally so neat, is falling out of the tight bun she usually wears it in. Unser hasn't got a mind that strays too far into the gutter but he's heard the rumours, that she's got a thing for Scottish timber and has been using her body as a sweetener for the club. He hadn't wanted to believe it but, the more he thinks about it and the more he hears, the less doubt he has.

Unser's on a lot of meds to try to get a few more months out of this world. One of them makes him piss twelve times a day no matter what he's been drinking, another gives him stomach cramps and indigestion that whole bottles of PeptoBismol would relieve.

One of them leaves him particularly susceptible to smell.

He'd recognise that oil, leather and whiskey scent anywhere.

"Chibs keep you late, did he? Something on his mind?"

"Chibs...Filip...wanted to run something by me."

"I'm sure he did. He must really trust you. He doesn't share his name with just anyone."

"I don't think you're in any position to judge me about anything I do to keep relationships with the MC running smoothly. Need I remind you where I came from? I understand how this works."

Unser smiles.

(You keep telling yourself that.)

He thinks of all the sweetbutts and the crow eaters and the old ladies, all of these women that fall for the misogynistic tough guys who will treat them like commodities and nothing more. He thinks of all their cut off denims and their leather and lace, their push up bras and their pouty red lipgloss.

Then he thinks of Althea Jarry, forty-one year old cop and mother-of-none hitching her uniform up so that Chibs can fuck her quick.
Is she any better than them?

"Sit down, Jarry. I ordered you coffee but it went cold about twenty-five minutes ago. I'd have drank it myself but I have to go easy on the caffeine, y'know, since I don't have much time left."

He places emphasis on the word 'time' so as to remind her how late she is. He doesn't know why he does it. Might be something to do with the look on her face. Drawn. Hard. Defiant, as if she's daring him to question her about Chibs when he's been sitting in their pockets for years.

He's done with all that.

It might be a little late to see the error of his ways but he has every plans of atoning before he meets his maker and he'll put right as much as he can before he's in the ground.

He wonders how the town will fare left in the hands of a woman like Jarry.

It doesn't bear thinking, at this point.

"So, what do you have? I assumed it was important since you called me here."

"I went to see Juice."

She'd looked a little put out before, like Unser was wasting her precious time but, the minute she hears that ridiculous name, her body language changes entirely. Juice, to her, is the key to a puzzle that will help 'make' her. That young man who is worthy of her contempt and yet somehow earned her compassion may well be her saving grace.

"I thought he was off limits?"

"To cops, yeah. To friends? Well, there's a little bit of leeway there. Think of it like your meetings with 'Filip'. You're not there as a cop but, whatever he gives you, you're sure as Hell gonna use it as if you were."

"So, it was another one of your 'off the record' things, right? Because that went so well last time."

Keeping Juice 'off the record' resulted in a dead motel worker with an imaginary gambling debt and a serious decline in the kid's already precarious mental state. Keeping him 'off the record' landed him in prison at the mercy of men who wanted only to use him for kicks.

Unser tries not to think about that too hard.

"Did he tell you what happened with Tara and Roosevelt?"

"He told me enough to put the pieces together myself."

"It was Gemma Morrow?"

('I killed Roosevelt. I don't want that pinned on her. He was all me.')

('You can't hurt her, Juice. She's dead. But, she can help you. Don't you think this would be what she wanted? Don't you think she'd want to help a son?')

('I'm not a son any more, Wayne.')

"They were dead when he got there. Gemma was covered in Tara's blood and Roosevelt was on the floor. She convinced him to help her cover it up."
"You believe him?"

"They got him on so many drugs in that place he doesn't even know what day it is, Jarry. He can barely keep his eyes open. I don't think he got much scope for makin' up lies. Yeah, I believe him. The kid's a halfwit but he's not a coldblooded killer. It's nothing we can use, not yet, and we can't use anything he says at this point because..."

"....because, off the record and crazy aren't exactly two ingredients that blend well for a murder investigation. Right."

Unser tries to imagine Juice, as he is now, going up against Jarry or Patterson in some cold, clinical space in the hospital. He tries to imagine him standing up to their questions, their accusations and their undertones, each and every question designed to trap him, to scare him, to force him into 'slipping up' and giving them what they want.

He tries to imagine him treading water against people that want to drag him down, hold him down and smother him until he talks.

The doctors are right.

That kind of pressure would kill him, right now.

"Just let him get himself together. Let me talk to him. If you go in there all badges blazing right now it's just gonna set him back. The kid needs a break."

"Need I remind you what he is?"

What is he?

What is he but a young-minded guy who fell in with the wrong people and who, out of absolute loyalty, did their bidding blind?

What is he but a tragic representation of gang culture and just how damaging it can be for a kid with nothing and no-one else?

"He's a criminal, Unser."

"Careful, sweetheart. Chemo's a strange, strange thing, sometimes. You think I can't smell the latex from the condom you had him put on?"

"Jesus -"

"You're dancin' with the devil, Jarry. Juice is -"

" - a child. Not too savvy. I remember you telling me that. But, that 'child'? He covered up the murder of a doctor. A mother, Unser. A mother you knew. A mother you loved."

"And, he had his reasons for that. You're not judge, jury and executioner. You don't know him. You just have to trust me on this. I'll get what you need to close the case I'll get him to talk on the record, but, you have to let me do it my way."

"And, if you die in the meantime?"

Unser shrugs his shoulders. He's reminded of his own mortality day in, day out. He no longer sees such things as jibes but as sad, bitter truths.
"I'm sure you'll work something out."

His eyes fall down to the table, to the empty cup of coffee and the plate of half-eaten spongecake he'd treated himself to while he waited for her.

"I assume you're paying, y'know, for keeping me waiting."

She looks as if she's about to say something. Unser can tell. Her lips are pursed in a certain way and her body language is uncertain, unsure, as if whatever she has to say might change something, somehow.

"What is it?"

"Filip was asking about Ortiz. He was asking what had happened to him. Where he was. He seemed...concerned."

It doesn't surprise Unser. He knew that Chibs was all bravado when it came to Juice because that's what Jax expected of him but he remembers his face in this very same diner, in this very same seat, in fact. He remembers how he'd looked when he reached for his gun and tried to head out after the man whose hopes he had just shattered.

It had not been the look of a man who was certain his 'rat bastard' former brother had to die, more the look of a father who acknowledged he had failed his son and was being forced to look at the damage of what he had created and know, know without a doubt, that there was nothing he could do to fix it.

Without Jax breathing fire down his ear he may well have stopped to think, to really think, about just what Juan Carlos Ortiz is and isn't capable of.

"They were close," he tells Jarry, "once upon a time. Juice looked up to the guy until he beat the living shit out of him and dropped him like a sack of manure."

He smiles sadly because this woman has herself convinced Filip Telford is a rogue with a heart of gold.

Juice has worn the deep, hard bruises that prove otherwise.

He still wears them, even now.

"You might think you know him but, trust me, he's not a nice guy. Something changed in him. Something I can't put my finger on, but he went from being a guy I could trust to - "

His hand waves.

How does he even describe it?

"Well, you know. Just...be careful."

She sighs. Unser pities her. She's only been in this town for a short period of time and already it has tainted her. How sad is that? How sad is that a time named Charming is so utterly devoid of charm?

"I need something more than this, Wayne."

"And, I'll get it for you. But you gotta stay away from the boy. You going in there and pushing his buttons? All it's gonna do is send him further inside. Then where will you be?"
Nowhere.

Up shit creek, with only Chibs and his deep, deep scars to pull her out of it.

(*)

Juice wakes up in a very familiar position, flat on his back in a hospital bed with his wrists lashed down at his sides. This time, he feels it must be warranted.

He knows he lost it after that phonecall. He knows he went inward. He knows he acted outside of himself because his mind is a dark, empty space where hours once were and he doesn't know what he did to fill them. The last thing he remembers is cutting off Tully and then nothing at all.

He knows it must've been hours ago because it's night-time. The lights are on and the outside is dark. It hurts his eyes and so, when he opens them up, they snap tight shut again.

"Holy shit," he mumbles. "Bright."

"Are you with us, JC?"

His doctor's voice breaks through the silence and scratches at his ears, though it sounds like he's underwater and that voice is at the surface. He turns his head as if to hear it better, as if to clear the water from his audio canal. He coughs, because his throat is dry and he feels like he's screamed his whole spirit out.

Maybe he did.

"Doc...Doctor Harlow."

"Ah. There you are. I was worried you were going to be out for the whole night."

"I'm restrained. You said no restraints."

"Unless necessary, but you were going at that wall so hard you broke three bones in your hand and one of your fingers isn't looking to pretty either."

"Oh, shit."

"Oh shit is right."

It's funny hearing a man of this profession curse and Juice knows he's still out of it when it makes him laugh out loud.

"I'm going to give you a little bit of time to get yourself gathered, then I'm going to come back and we're going to talk about what happened."

He's going to leave, Juice knows it.

He's going to leave and he's going to leave him like this.

He's going to leave him vulnerable, unable to defend himself.

It doesn't occur to him to wonder why he feels he'd need to.

"Please let me up."
"We need to assess you first"

"I'm not gonna do anything, I swear."

There's a rising panic in his voice that he can't keep back. It makes him sound both desperate and desperately young.

"Please - "

"Soon, I promise. You're probably thirsty. I'll get you a glass of water, then we'll talk. Okay?"

('This is an argument you're not going to win, Juice.')

"Yeah," he whispers. "Yeah, okay."

Juice looks down at his hand, at the bandage wrapped tightly around it, at his index finger taped tight to the finger beside it. He tries to remember driving his fist into the wall but he can't, can't even bring up the memory of the feeling that inspired it but Tully can have a strange influence on him at the best of times so it's no wonder his impromptu phone call had such a profound effect.

He feels a dull ache in his bone, a sharp sting in his knuckles.

He can only imagine how he looked, bashing at the wall as if it were his mortal enemy.

"I'm not doing myself any favours here," he says, to nobody at all.

When Harlow comes back he performs a rudimentary evaluation upon Juice, asking him questions about his space, time and orientation. Do you know where you are? Do you know who you are? Do you know why this happened? Can you tell me how you feel?

The most important question is "Do you feel you can trust yourself with your hands free?"

(Yes. Yes. Yes. Please, yes.)

His doctor keeps his word, unfastens those buckles and lets him sit up. He holds the glass of water to his lips because Juice is still jittery from being put out, his arms heavy and laden with being held in position for so long. He's not particularly in control of his body and is happy when Stewart stops him from falling and rests him sitting upright in bed, his back against the wall.

"Thanks, man. I'm not good with drugs. Mess me all up."

"We've noted a couple of sensitivities since you were admitted. Have you ever had a problem with sedation before?"

('You must've really pissed off your buddies.')

Out of nowhere, Juice laughs, laughs at the memory of waking up in the middle of town clad only in a diaper and boots, a sign stapled heartlessly to his chest. Taking himself out of it, it was funny. If it had been anyone else he'd have been laughing his ass off and, once the humiliation had died down, he could certainly see the amusing side of it.

Looking back now, maybe it's not so funny.

Maybe that was the innocent start to the hazing that would only increase in cruelty and malevolence as the months and years went by.
"I, uh, took one recreationally once. By accident. Put me out for 18 hours straight, like, 'dead to the world' out. I'm feeling pretty fuzzy all the time, kind of like I'm not really here. I don't like it much."

"We can take a look at that."

He smiles softly, that sad smile he knows doesn't reach his eyes but the one he always hopes will appease people.

"Thank you."

"Do you want to talk about what happened? I thought we'd been having a really good day then something triggered you. You were in a dissociative, violent state, unresponsive and uncooperative. That's why we had to restrain you. Have you ever suffered a panic attack before?"

At Diosa.

He remembers clawing at his chest thinking his heart was going to stop.

"Yeah."

"Did something trigger this one?"

"The phone call."

"Your lawyer?"

Not his lawyer. Not him. Not his lawyer but his rapist. His victimiser.

His fucking saviour.

(Don't cry, don't cry, don't cry....fuck, stop it...)

He shakes his head.

"Wasn't my lawyer, was a...friend. He, uh, had a message to pass on to me. I guess I took it kinda badly."

"Any reason why he'd lie about who he was?"

"Because he knew I wouldn't talk to him. He and I have history together."

Rape. Drugs. Poetry. Mindfucking beyond anything Juice has ever experienced before and yet also care. Such twisted care, the kind that makes a person question everything that is real and unreal and everything that should be embraced or denied.

"Would you like to talk about it? It was significant enough to bring on a break, JC. Like I told you before, in order to work through your issues we have to address them. Tackle them head-on."

Juice shakes his head. He can feel himself sinking further and further and he's not ready, not for this. Not now. He's not ready to talk about Tully. He's not ready to talk about family, or lack thereof.

He's not ready to accept he's lost it just yet.

"I can't talk. Not right now. I just - I can't. I just wanna process it for a little bit. Get my head around it. Then I'll talk, I swear. I'm not trying to be difficult, I just - "
He just can't.

"It's okay. I'm not going to force the issue. We'll keep a close eye on you for the next day or so."

"Can I go outside? I know it's late, but...please. It helps. Always. When I was losin' it before, I'd go for a walk or I'd take my bike and I'd just run or ride. Clear my head. I always felt better when I got home."

"Of course. Give it a half hour or so, make sure you're steady on your feet. I'll have Stewart come by and get you when you're ready. How does that sound?"

It sounds like he won't be trusted without a babysitter. It sounds like he won't even be allowed a few minutes alone in the freshness of the outdoors but it doesn't matter. Not at all. Christ, Juice doesn't even care, he just wants to look at the God damned stars.

"Perfect, doc. Thank you."

"Anything you need, don't be afraid to ask. This is a safe place here. We want you to understand that."

It's strange to Juice, to think that these people are here for him. It's odd to think he's gone from prison to a place like this where people genuinely care for his wellbeing and will take it slow if that's what he needs.

He can't reconcile that with the life he had before, the people would would forever rush him, forever push him and, if they saw him trouble, would ply him with vodka or Jack and tell him to suck it up.

He tries not to think about them, not now, tries not to picture the warmth of the clubhouse back when it was good, the buzz of the table when they were talking through a good deal.

He tries not to remember Gemma's hand on his face, kissing his cheek and calling him sweetheart or Clay, arms wrapped around him, hugging him close and calling him son.

He tries not to remember Chibs calling him brother...

He tries not to remember because he knows, knows without a shadow of a doubt, now, that all of these 'triggers' and all of these 'soft spots' that the staff have been telling him about are all related to the club and to the life he once led.

The life that Ron Tully just told him he was free of for good whether he liked it or not.

It's horrible to imagine that the family, which was all Juice ever wanted, was the very thing that has made him this way and that their 'love' was what has tore him apart.

"Just cool it, Juan Carlos", he whispers. "You're good. You're good, dude. Remember what your mother used to say? Close your eyes. Take a deep breath. Count to ten. All will be well. All will be well."

He says it repeatedly, those same four words of hope and reassurance.

He doesn't care if anyone can hear him because, look at where he is.

Who would they be to judge him?

He wouldn't be here if he wasn't crazy.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

CHIBBY. Not happy with him but I feel the need to offer him a chance to redeem himself.

Not sure anyone's reading but I'm having fun anyway.

"You remind me of someone," the orderly says as he walks Juice along the guided pathway.

It's dark, 9 o'clock at night, but there are lights along the way and it's a balmy one tonight. The sky is clear and the moon casts a kind of haze across the place. Stewart keeps himself close. Juice is still a little shaky on his feet and won't be running any time soon but that was never his intention. He just wanted out.

It's quiet. So quiet. He hasn't experienced this kind of night silence since he sat on the branch of that tree, and his head was saying so much to him that night there could've been a thousand men with him.

"Yeah, I definitely see it now. I've been trying to figure it out. A Rican kid called Fernando I used to run jobs with. You look just like him."

"You gonna ask if I know him? 'Cause, you know, I'm from Queens. It's not like one big happy Puerto Rican family."

Stewart laughs.

"Funny guy, huh?"

Juice's smile is quiet but his humour is good, at least. It's been a little off of late but he's finding it in himself to go back to it.

"But...yeah, man, Fernando was one of my crew's associates back in the day. You're wearin' his face."

He eyes Stewart cautiously. Incredulously. Is he playing him? Making up shit so as to build a rapport? Jax used it as a tactic to bait in contacts. Find a common ground and exploit it or, if none can be found, make shit up.

"You? You were a gangbanger? Seriously?"

"Don't look so surprised. I'm thirty-nine now. I was a part of a crew until I was twenty-four. I wouldn't make that up. If I was gonna do that I'd say I was on Days of our Lives or something."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. That gang, man. It was both the best and worst time of my life."

That, to Juice, is the perfect way of describing it. The best and the worst. The beautiful and the just-
plain-ugly.

The salvation and the sacrifice.

If he were to describe Samcro to anyone listening it would probably be in those very terms. Without it he would be dead. With it, he'll probably be dead too.

"So, why d'you quit?"

"Because of this."

The orderly lifts up his uniform to reveal an angry purple scar that runs from his right hip to just underneath his left nipple. It's mean shit, ugly and vicious, and Juice knows whoever did it wanted to hurt him bad.

"Fuck. What did they use, a chainsaw?"

"Linoleum knife. Practically eviscerated me. Left me lying in a pool of my own blood holding my own intestines. So much for brotherhood."

"One of your guys did that? Jesus."

"Yeah. My guys."

Juice processes that for a moment.

It says a lot about his state of mind when he wonders what Stewart did to deserve it.

"So, what d'you do, rat?"

('Filthy rat bastard.')

"Steal?"

('You stole from the club...')

"Kill a member?"

('Then, you killed a brother.')

(Leave. Me. Alone.)

Stewart shrugs.

"Nothin' like that. One of my crew was high. Got it into his head I'd had at his girl. Didn't want to let me explain myself. He was going in for a hug. I didn't see it coming."

Juice knows only too well the pain of being seen in a certain way and not being allowed to rectify it. He also knows what it is to be blind sighted. Samcro didn't gut him, not literally, but figuratively?

His intestines are splayed out just the way Stewart's were.

"I was in the hospital for six months. Did a bit of evaluating in that time. Thought about everything that matters to me. It's amazing how open your eyes get when you come that close to dying."

Juice is beginning to see that. Still, he can't imagine a life where he doesn't long for the community being part of a club brought him; the sense of being part of something big.
He can't imagine a time where he doesn't feel naked without his cut and where his fingers don't look to grab it like an appendage that isn't there.

He leans against the wall. Looks up as if searching for something.

"You still think about 'em?"

"All the time, man. We had some good times. I got a wife and kid now, though. They're my life. I realised that, as good as it was, there was only ever one or two ways it ended."

In a cell or in the ground.

"Death or prison, right?"

"Exactly. It's tough to let go. It's a lifestyle. People who tell you otherwise ain't lived it. The real world takes time. Adjustment. But you gotta decide what you want."

('You gotta figure out what you want, sweetheart. There's no room in this life for vulnerability.')

"Do you ever regret it?"

He sounds so small when he asks that question. Hands in his pockets, sneakered foot messing the dirt under his feet, he feels as timid as he knows he looks because here he is, in the grounds of a psychiatric unit, sharing war stories with a guy a decade older yet far, far wiser.

"Leaving, I mean."

"Regret? Nah, man. After I came through that I decided to live my life without regret. It's too short. Life is too fucking precious to waste it worrying about what you lost. You gotta think about what you have to gain."

As far as life lessons go, it's a good one.

It's food for thought, and Lord knows Juice is starving for that.

"You ready to go back?"

No. No. God, no. Not to that room. Not to that place. Not to that isolated little hell-corner that fences him in.

"We just got here."

He doesn't mean to sound so whiny but it's how it comes out.

Shit.

"I got rounds to see to."

Juice knows he's pathetic. He knows he's pitiful and desperate and ridiculous when he stops dead.

"I just - I don't want to be alone again. I'm not good on my own."

('My head gets so loud and shit doesn't make sense.')

His eyes are bearing deep into Stewart as if trying to reach a part of him that will understand.

"It's driving me nuts, dude."
"It won't be for much longer. Just until you're stable."

(Just do this last thing and we're good.)

"They'll start integrating you with the other guys for group sessions and rec time once they got you on an even straight. You just gotta ride it out."

Juice nods his head a little too hard for a little too long, agrees a little too emphatically, but he's terrified.

He's terrified of going back to that room and it's quiet.

He's terrified of being put back inside his own head.

"Thanks," he says finally. Softly, as he pulls himself together. "For talking to me."

"Good to get it off my chest every once in awhile. Thanks for listening."

"Y-yeah, no problem."

This time, the smile is real.

Despite his fear and his reservations, that one gets through.

(+) "I'm here about Juice."

Unser is cleaning his (tiny, squalid) kitchen when Chibs appears at his door. He's been expecting him. After what Jarry said about his 'concern' it was only a matter of time.

"You wanna pass me that, uh..."

Unser signals with his hand for the towel. Chibs' face remains unchanged as he hands it to him.

"Thank you"

It's started already, Unser thinks. He's only been at the head of the table for a millisecond but already his eyes carry it's burden.

He wonders why they don't just take a match to that carved reaper and watch it burn.

"You know where he is."

"C'mon, Chibs, you gonna break into that hospital and stab him in his sleep? Somehow, I don't think that's gonna happen."

Chibs shakes his head but his eyes remain fixed. Intense. His body doesn't change.

"I don't mean the boy any harm. I just wanna talk to him."

"And, what about what he wants? You ever think of that?"

"I need to understand."

"Understand what? What happened? Don't you think it's a little late to start hearing him out?"
"That boy got poisoned, somehow, and I cannae for the life o'me figure out how."

Unser knows exactly what he's saying without actually uttering the words.

He wants to know what happened and where he went wrong.

"Are you that blinded by all of the mayhem, Chibs? Did all of this...shit...get in your eyes? He got poisoned by the club. By Samcro. By the countless 'brothers' who have patted his head when he was doin' good and threw him away when he wasn't. You understand that?"

"Aye. Aye, I do, but there was more to it than that."

"No, Chibs, there really wasn't. There was a two sided story and you only listened to part of it. And, Jax? Let me tell you, that kid's been able to spin things in his favour since he was nine years old. He'd have you believe the sky was green and the birds were made of redwood. That's the God damned truth."

Chibs may be a master of stoicism but Unser's anger breaks through even to him. Wayne knows that Filip Telford is not an unreasonable man. He knows that deep down there is a part of him that wants the madness to end just as much as he does. He also knows that removing Jax Teller, the catalyst, there might be hope for him.

Chibs was a loyal soldier, but what kind of General he is remains to be seen.

"Orders are he lives. If we want to keep relations good, the boy stays breathing. I couldn't kill him even if I wanted to."

"Do you? Want to?"

"No."

"But you want to get right with that like the last time. The time you went at him for ten minutes straight and left him looking' like he'd gone ten rounds with Tyson. That right?"

There conflict in Chibs' eyes. Unser sees it.

He pushes it.

"You gonna tell him to stick a gun in his mouth again? Cause, y'know, I don't think his docs will appreciate you putting new ideas in his head. Not with them trying to take out the old ones."

"No. Christ, I just want to see the lad. Look him in the eye."

"Make sure he's not gonna say anything?"

Chibs sighs.

Unser knows when he's got a man and Chibs, all strong, scarred warrior he is, looks defeated.

He looks...bereft.

"Him and me - look, I loved that kid. I brought him in. I trusted him. I did everything I could to keep him on the straight and narrow."

(Beat him. Threatened him. Threw him away...)
"But, somewhere along the way, he fell out of my hands."

"Kids grow up, Chibs. They make mistakes."

"Mistakes? Right you are, but mistakes in this business cost lives. Juicy boy cost a lot of lives."

"And, yet, you're the ones who were pulling the triggers. Not him. You don't get to pin that on him. He was too busy locking himself in motel bathrooms and trying to talk himself outta killing himself like you told him to."

Chibs takes the hit directly and at least has the decency to look away.

He exhales, long and deep, and it's like he's letting go of something he's held on to for a long, long time.

"Christ. What a mess, eh?"

"Yeah."

He sits down on the couch, if he's noticed the photos pinned up on the wall linking Jax and Gemma and all of them to a sad little picture of Tara, he says nothing.

He just rests with his arms on his knees, a sardonic, bitter smile on his face.

"What a bloody mess."

It'd be callous to push him now. That's why Unser sits down beside him, equally tired, equally spent.

"What are you hoping to get out of this, Chibs? An apology? Closure?"

"I just want to see what he has to say. I can't get any of this right in my head."

"You think it's sitting pretty in his?"

('His head's screwed on the wrong way, I'm surprised he can even see where he's going."

"You never let him explain before. You took Jax's word and you let it sign his death warrant. What's different now?"

Everything.

Everything is different.

Jax tried to take his own life. That's one thing. Jax killed his own mother.

Jax proved to be a man without boundary and the trust, the trust he had from his brothers, that lies on shaky foundations.

Chibs looks up at Unser with a dark, drawn, shadowy face. Its a face that seems to have forgotten what decency looks like.

"Why are you protecting him?"

"Because someone's got to. His family? They split,"

"I'm still here."
"No, you're not."

Strong, determined, Chibs repeats "I'm here."

And, Unser believes it. He looks into those eyes, those eyes that have seen too much damage in their almost-fifty years, and he see honesty.

He sees truth.

He doesn't see enough of that.

"I'll give you the details, but I want your word, your God given word, that you won't lay a finger on him."

Chibs takes a finger and he draws a cross over the heart Unser knows is lost but may yet be found.

"On my life."

If it wasn't for the sheen of unshed tears and the poorly masked guilt in his eyes, Unser would've given him nothing.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

...in which Jax feels a certain force, Chibs makes a disturbing discovery and Juice wears a pale blue hoodie. That's all.

Many thanks for the comments that people have been leaving. Much appreciated. As always, drop me a line if you can. Even just a single sentence can make me feel great :)

On Thursday, a few days after his phone call with Juan Carlos and when Teller has been released into gen pop, Tully extends his verbal beat-down to include something a little more physical. It’s a line Tully rarely crosses out of the principle of leadership but to him some things are worth making exceptions for.

Jax Teller, with a facsimile of disappointment in his eyes and no shred of irony to be seen, had labelled Ortiz a coward.

What seems ironic is that Tully puts Teller on the ground in the middle of the cafeteria. If things had gone another way this may well have been the spot where Juice had met his death at Tully’s own hands on his President's order.

Tully remembers how calm Juice had been as he walked his dead man's walk and waited for his end to come. The kid was brave, braver than Tully thought he could be. He’d seen him try that first night when Tully laid out the rules for him. He had recognised that as the faltering faux-courage of a man who knew he was beaten yet wanted it known he still had some fight and some pride left. No matter how many times Tully visited him, Juice did not once plead, did not once cry. Stronger men had been reduced to nothing, but not this one.

This time it had been different. This time he'd been ready. His eyes had been fixed and calm, more calm than Tully had seen him without being held by an undue influence. Tully had wrapped his arms around him and Juice hadn’t even flinched. It might’ve been Tully’s imagination but he swears Juice had tilted his head to allow for better access.

In that moment, for the very first time. Juice has been offering consent.

Tully had leaned down and whispered in his ear knowing he’d be expecting some final words to carry across to the other side with him.

He didn’t offer them, couldn’t give him that.

Wouldn’t.

Instead of driving that scalpel into his jugular, Tully had gently kissed it. Instead of changing tack and snapping his neck, he had caressed it. It was only then that the younger man had tensed and flinched, as if death was welcome but comfort burned. Tully had pulled him away from the commotion so that neither of them could be taken down as part of it - and that had marked the moment he had spared him.

Juice had pleaded. It was sad just how desperate he was to die for these men.
“Shh,” he had told him. "Not today, sweetheart.”

Tully had guided him away, a shellshocked lamb following it's shepherd and he'd followed because he had known his place - but there's no doubt in Tully's mind that If he had gone through with what Ortiz had wanted he'd have gone out like the loyal, faithful brother he always hoped to be. It would’ve been more than they deserved.

So to hear Teller call him a coward?

That just doesn’t sit right.

Generally speaking, he dishes out violence by-proxy, a word in someone’s ear, a promise left underneath someone’s pillow. He never, ever flicks the knife himself. Leaders don’t get their hands dirty. There are appearances to be upheld.

He makes an exception for Jax.

Tully doesn’t need a man to hold someone while he hits them. He’s larger than he used to be and with considerable strength that can cause significant damage. He won’t be excessive, it’s not his forte, but when he drives his fist into Jax Teller’s face he can be certain he’ll be bruised for days and that pretty boy face will be ruined, albeit temporarily.

He waits for the potential blowback, knows it’s not Jax’s style to take things lying down.

He also knows he isn’t stupid, accepts with sound logic when he is outnumbered and for this reason the blowback doesn’t come.

"You wanna clue me in?" Jax asks.

“A coward is incapable of exhibiting love,” Tully says, simply. "That is the prerogative of the brave. Gandhi said that."

"What are you talking about?"


Grabbing him by his prison issue shirt, Tully pulls Jax to his feet. There is blood streaming from his nose but he doesn’t move to staunch the flow. He just lets it come.

“There are many forms of cowardice. I think you’d know something about those. There are many forms of strength too. You are a fierce force, Jackson Teller, but sometimes you don't see the wood for the trees."

Jas breathes deep, says nothing.

The look on his face is murderous and Tully can see the thoughts racing around his mind, can hear how internally incensed he is that he could possibly be felled in the middle of a dining hall without anyone there to back him up. The Mexicans are hands-in for the most part as a camaraderie thing but they’re outnumbered 2 to 1 and, though wetbacks aren’t renowned for their counting skills, Tully knows they won’t rise up unless they’re on a more even footing. The blacks are also in with the club but they, too, are outnumbered.

Not many men in this place will stand up to Tully. Not without guarantees. He’s earned his place at the top through fierce propaganda and internal manipulation.
Leaning across, he smooths a hand over Jax's collar, straightening it. He can feel the disgust rolling off him like waves.

He carries on.

“I hope you know what you’re doing,” Jax says, and Tully just curls his lips. “I’m not a man who acts before he thinks, brother”

There are no brothers in this place for Jax. There are no sons and, though Jax has rage in his eyes and that same pent up tension that made him famous as a streetfighter at some of the club meets, he doesn’t retaliate. He can’t. Not with four of Tully’s guys standing behind him. Not with the AB’s associate Europeans waiting in the wings to step in should they be needed. In here, he’s a man alone, and his former MC’s ‘sway’ can only go so far.

All he can do is take it. Take these words. Take these truths. Take whatever Tully has to throw at him.

“Until you’ve fallen at his feet and begged his forgiveness,” Tully drawls, “let that be the last time you even mention his name.”

And, just like that the pawn, the weakest piece on the chessboard, has second-handedly taken out the King.

(*)

When Chibs finds out about Tully’s actions it leaves a bitter taste in his mouth – and, a lot of unease in his gut.

Jax is no longer a member and they’re all aware that he’s living on borrowed time. Indian Hills will be out to settle the Mayhem vote in any way they can as retribution for Jury and Samcro will be in no position to argue.

The events of the last few weeks have soured Jax to each and every enemy they have but the Brotherhood? Word from Tully had been positive and the relationship between the groups had appeared solid. The AB are aware they owe Samcro for Tully’s failure to follow through on his task but immediacy isn’t necessary. Things had seemed concrete and stable.

So why this?

Jax puts it to Chibs in its simplest terms, a disembodied voice on a smuggled prepaid cell.

"It was payback. For Juice."

That’s when Chibs’ heart sinks and the sense of niggling unease intensifies.

"For Juice? Why?"

Why would a white-supremacist defend the honour of a half-black, half Puerto-Rican traitor against a former President? Tully is a racist and a bastard but he’s not an idiot. He’s not a man easily swayed by the whispered words of a condemned man.

What could Juice have possibly told him to inspire that kind of loyalty and protection from Tully as well as Unser?
"They got close."

"What do you mean, close? Can't see an Aryan takin' on a mutt like Juicy. He isn’t exactly Brotherhood material."

"Not that kind of close, bro. I told Tully Juice could use a little lovin'. It would appear he took it more seriously than I thought."

Those words, those vicious, ugly words, are the rod that breaks Chibs’ back. Those words coming from a man he had once vowed to stick by until death leave him stone-cold because absence is a strange thing. Distance can make a person see things entirely differently.

It's called clarity

"You greenlit that? Rape?"

He spits the word out like it’s poisonous and it is. It truly is.

"Tully was very specific about what he wanted. I had no other choice."

"We always have a choice, Jackie."

Chibs remembers the first time the guys were in Stockton together. Bobby and Tig had been laughing about how they’d ‘pimped the Rican’ when they got out; how they’d used that hard little brown ass of his to gain favours and protection. Chibs hadn’t seen the funny side, not especially since Juice spent weeks in the hospital after ‘taking one for the team’ because the shiv might’ve missed his vital organs but it did nick his kidney. The infection that set in had him pissing and shitting blood for a long time afterwards.

He remembers visiting Juice in the hospital expecting antipathy from the boy but there was nothing. Not a thing. With eyes glazed from pain meds, he’d smiled brightly, too brightly, and told him that he couldn’t wait to get back to his family. He promised he’d be riding within a few days if they’d pull all this shit outta him and let him leave.

Chibs had told him he could wring the guys’ necks for putting him in that position because it angered him that they used Juice for this. Was he so dispensable? Was he so bloody unimportant? Jesus Christ.

“It wasn’t the guys fault, Chibby. They weren’t to know. I’m good. I’m getting good drugs and they’re all legal, too.”

Chibs couldn’t figure out if the lack of resentment was a good thing or a bad thing because, to Chibs, the guys went above and beyond what was acceptable in setting him up for that.

Nobody deserves that, not even as a possibility.

"Look, Juice was always going to be collateral, Chibs,” Jax tells him, and they’re a long way from that time now. A lifetime has passed since. “You knew that. You voted that. It was a club decision.”

“Aye.”

Aye, he knew, and now that the metaphorical shit is being lifted from his eyes he's starting to realise how wrong he was.

How wrong they all were.
He can’t bear to speak to Jax right now, not after that. Jax had already been on shaky foundations with Chibs since he found out he was going to plough his bike into oncoming traffic because Chibs has seen a lot of shit in his time and none of it, *none* of it was worthy of committing that sin.

He once called Juice a coward for an attempt on his own life.

The glove fits Jax now, too.

"Just lay low," he says, and he can hear in his own voice how heavy and empty he sounds. "You've no allies in there. Not really. If Tully’s got it in for you for whatever reason you’re on thin ice, boy. Watch your own back because I doubt many people will be watching it for you."

He's crashed through the ice already on the outside, is fast losing allies out here too.

Between Unser's words and Jax's own, Chibs isn't entirely sure he deserves them.

(*)

Juice has settled into a pattern, a regimen of early morning walks in the grounds and one-on-one therapy sessions with his primary doctor. Now that his ‘episodes’ are lessening in frequency and his mood appears to be heading towards stability, they’ve opened him up to company.

He hates the pansy-ass group sessions where they're expected to blub their hearts out to complete strangers but it's nice to hear voices that aren't in his head. There's a lot of bullshit passed around but he hasn't been pushed to talk yet and he's just thankful there are people as fucked up as he is.

It's not 'chapel' but it makes him feel less alone.

Those who knew him before might not recognise him in his current guise. It can take weeks to get the levels of serotonin right and this odd, oft-dreamlike state, is a temporary burden as his meds start to level him out. Juice scowls at times when his mood is low, argues that he doesn’t want their fucking medication. He doesn’t want their God damned therapy. He doesn’t want to be in this shitty place with all of these lunatics. When he's really worked up they offer him one of two things, a pill or a shot, and as fucked up as it is he's grateful they at least give him a choice.

He doesn't feel he ever had that before.

Of course, when he's feeling *particularly* angry he lets them go for the shot because, fuck them, that's why. Harlow tells him he has every right to get angry and so ‘letting it out’ from time to time isn’t going to hurt anyone. As long as he’s not physically violent towards himself and anyone else, he should go with it. Sometimes he just doesn’t want to stop, wants to carry on getting worked up until the next step is always going to be harmful - and that’s when they step in with their ultimatums.

It's rare he's in that state, though.

Juice might not want to be here - but when he's thinking rationally he's starting to realise that he *needs* to be. He hasn't required restraint since the phone incident, hasn't punched any more walls and hasn't scratched any more lines into his chest as he unconsciously tries to tear his tattoos away. He's still obsessive about a tidy space and can't sleep without help, though, is still losing patches of time where he goes someplace else.

But, he’s getting better. He’s starting to *feel* better.

(‘You’ll be patched up in no time.’)
He’s learning that life goes on.

Yesterday afternoon he ran laps of the grounds with two other guys, both max security, neither of whom wanted to discuss ‘what they were in for’. It was cool with Juice because they were good guys and they didn’t ask too many questions. One of them was originally from Staten Island, a blue collar neighbourhood Juice knows well. He lived there for six months on a temporary foster care placement and it had been there he’d remembered who God was; the evasive prick Almighty Father who had abandoned him years before.

Little Juan Carlos been an altar boy in his childhood, a good Catholic kid with a good Catholic mother who taught him what sin was and how he should avoid it. After she died it became less of a priority and he fell into a pattern of juvenile misbehaviour that marked him in his early adolescence. The only time he ever visited church in his whole time in ‘the system’ was St Ann’s in Staten Island and the guy, Freddie, knew one of the priests in the Parish.

“Father Michael,” Freddie had smiled. “That old prick saved my life more than once. You know him?”

"I knew Jack. Fat bald fuck with a receding hairline? Loved the Mets? Michael wasn't there when I was. I wasn't there all that long. Didn’t stick to one place for long as a kid.”

"Yeah, old Mick was probably dead by the time you got there, kid. He enjoyed the blood of Christ a little too much, know what I’m saying?"

"Mm-hmm."

Juice finds himself rusty when it comes to conversation but it feels like he’s been silenced for so long it’s no real wonder. When he’s back in his room, when the door is locked and the lights are out, that’s when he really starts opening up. He talks to Clay a lot, sometimes his mom. Lately he’s started taking to Bobby, telling him how sorry he is that shit went down the way that it did.

“Sorry you lost your eye, man. No-one deserves that. You were blind as shit already. That must’ve sucked.”

It’s cathartic. And painful.

“I never meant for that to happen, y’know? You were a good guy. Gave me some bad shit advice sometimes but I loved you, man. I really did.”

He’s past the point of being embarrassed by his own behaviours and, if this helps him, he’s not going to stop. He hopes the day comes when he feels he can stop.

He hopes it comes soon.

Stewart's a smart dude, too smart for this kind of shit job. He has told him not to set his expectations too high, that at this level of disorder it’s natural to struggle a little until the adjustment happens. The mind is a computer, he says, and his has been overloaded. Certain systems have gone into shutdown and he’s rebooted in safe mode until the issues are resolved.

"You’re an IT guy, right? Gotta work through all the shit. Defragment. Forcing it just makes the system run funny."

Setbacks are just learning curves and he has to understand that the person who comes out the other side of all this might not be the same person he was before.
He’s starting to wonder who he’s ever been.

“We’ve had a visitation request,” Dr Harlow tells Juice at the start of his third week. He’s still following the club’s ingrained ‘codes’ when it comes to what he says and does not say but he still feels he’s getting something out of their sessions. Juice trusts the guy. The fact he has a grandfatherly quality to him helps. He’s got a kind of Piney vibe to him only he’s thinner, less hard, probably not like Piney at all but Juice is always looking for familiarity where he can find it.

He loved Piney…

“Well again?” he asks, about the request. “Told me he was going outta town when he came last. He miss me already?”

The last time he came in he brought Juice a handful of gaming magazines and, for some reason, a postcard with a scarecrow on the front.

He'd told him: “work it out.”

He said Chibs had been around asking after him but had played it down, told him not to get his heart set on any kind of reunion there. Chibs was in a bad place, he said, and there’s no telling what he might want from him.

“It's not Unser,” the old man tells him, and that's when his heart stops. “Said he was an old friend. Hopefully not the same old friend we dealt with on the phone. Robert McGregor?”

As soon as Juice hears the name he turns white, though not out of any God-given fear. It’s more shock than anything. Shock and apprehension and hope, God, so much hope, despite what Unser had told him. He wonders why Chibs is using his alias when it comes to making the request then figures it might have something to do with deniability. He doesn’t know where Juice is in terms of the law, doesn’t want any courts pulling up his visitor’s log and seeing a Son’s name there in vivid technicolour.

He doesn’t know that Juice’s parole violation’s been dealt with via hospital order or that Unser's pulling Jarry off his ass about Tara and Gemma because Unser is done with the club and he wouldn’t share any of that shit with its newly appointed Pres.

So much has happened since they last saw each other that Juice can’t even keep up with it.

“Robert,” he says finally, when he's processed it. "R-right.”

“You don’t look particularly enamoured by the idea.”

“I am,” Juice says, a little too quickly, and kicks himself for how uncertain he sounds. “I'm just – I don't know, doc. Surprised, is all. Haven't seen him in a while.”

('I thought he was done with me. Told me to kill myself last time we met.')

“Would you be up to seeing him? He’s left a number. I can call him off it you’d like. Ask him to give it some time.”

“NO. I mean, uh...it’s fine. We’ve known each other for years.”

('They don’t know you at all, baby. None of them do.’)

Juice clears his throat and his eyes furrow just a little, as if he’s trying to push his thoughts out of his
mouth but they’re getting trapped somewhere up top. He tries to silence Tully’s voice, tries to pull forth Chibs’ instead just so he can visualise him. See how it truly makes him feel. All he can hear is a crotchety Scottish accent telling him to put a gun in his mouth and that’s not useful at all.

(Stop. Deep breath. Calm. Calm. Calm, Juan Carlos, you’re okay…) 

He blinks hard. This is difficult. Sometimes it's just so hard to get himself together.

“Uh, when? When would it be?”

“This afternoon, if you feel that’s enough time to mentally prepare. If you haven’t seen him in a while you might want to think about what exactly you’d get out of the visit; if it would be a positive or a negative thing.”

The truth is, Juice doesn’t know. He doesn’t know if it will give him the closure and the freedom of mind he needs – or, whether it will send him scuttling back into suicidal depression. How can he tell? How can he know? All he knows is that Chibs wants to see him, wants to talk, and isn’t that what he went to that diner to achieve before everything fucked up?

For a split second, it occurs to him that maybe Chibs is looking at taking him out - but he wouldn’t do it here, not with his face on show and doors that lock tight with the push of a button.

Not with security cameras and vetting procedures.

He’s not stupid.

“Are you still here?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m listening. Sorry. I didn’t zone out. I was thinking, is all. A little lost in my thoughts.”

“If you think it’s going to have an impact on your mood then I’d advise you to think long and hard. I’m going to leave the decision up to you but if you think it’s going to set you back – “

“It won’t.”

“Can you trust yourself to think about this rationally?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. I’ll be good. Robert is a good guy, I swear.”

(‘Are you trying to convince him or yourself?’)

Juice smiles his brightest smile and he’s getting good at it now. It’s almost, almost convincing.

“Call him. Tell him it’ll be cool.”

“If you’re sure?”

“I’m absolutely sure.”

”Okay, then. I’ll sign it off. “

Later, when he’s alone, he looks in the mirror and he marvels at how much difference three weeks has made to him, some good, some not so good. His face has thinned out because his appetite still hasn’t normalised and the meds make him nauseous. It makes his eyes look big, his jaw less soft. He doesn’t look harder but younger. With his energy levels sapped, he’s lost muscle mass and his wrists
look like they might snap if someone were to twist them hard. It’s only in the past few days he’s started feeling ‘with it’ enough to work out, though that’s restricted to a few laps around the grounds and some squats and pushups in his room when morning comes.

He’s desperate to feel the pull of a bike on his thighs but he has to satisfy himself with the burn he feels when he presses his back against the wall and holds in position until he can barely stand, until his muscles scream at him in protest.

Juice’s hair has *always* grown quickly and the tattoos on his head are barely visible underneath the thick dark stubble but, despite that change, he thinks it’s his eyes that look the most different. They look calmer. He remembers looking at himself in the mirror back in the motel and thinking that each and every wrong he had committed was reflected in those eyes; that all of the pain and the suffering and the terror that had been a part of him for so long rested right in the brown.

He swore he could see Darvany’s shadow nestled right against his pupil, a constant reminder of what he’d done, but she’s not there now. He knows how to keep her quiet. Sometimes.

(‘One of the key components of CBT is visualisation. Compartmentalisation. You need to learn how to hold the obsessive thoughts off until there’s a more suitable time to deal with them. That way, the thoughts become less invasive, have less control over you.’)

Juice has placed Darvany in a velvet-lined box in his mind, soft and luxuriant so that she’s comfortable. It is a place where he can’t hurt her any more – and, where she can only hurt him if he lets her. Sometimes he lets her. Sometimes he just wants to feel the pain and the guilt and to know that he’s human; that he feels remorse. Sometimes he can’t get her to stay where he’s placed her and she screams at him all night long. Those nights are difficult but he’s working on all these things because it’s all he can do.

He’s given up trying to silence Miles. Miles is a permanent fixture in his conscience and Juice doesn’t think he deserves anything else.

Juice doesn’t see a Son when he looks at himself now, doesn’t see criminal, a bad guy, a killer.

He just sees someone who wanted to be all of those things – and then didn’t want to be those things at all.

(*)

He can’t explain why he’s so nervous.

(‘Juicy boy’s always nervous, aren’t you, you daft sod?’)

When he is feeling overwhelmed, he has always resorted to his own self-regulating tactics. He closes his eyes and allows his fingers to dance over the surface of his leg, of a chair, of the table in front of him. In his head he’s programming. He’s inputting lines of repetitive code that keep his mind occupied and this thoughts at bay.

Here, sitting in the visitor’s room waiting for Chibs, he's in an oversized pale blue hoodie that he's purposely pulled down over his hands because it's the only way to stop the habit. He doesn’t want to look unravelled in front of Chibs, not like the last time.

He wants him to see someone strong.

It bothers him, then, that his first instinct when he sees Chibs is to want to scramble out of his seat
and run as far away from him as possible because he's starting to recognise his limits and the thought of being rejected is something he doesn't know he could handle right now.

He doesn’t run, though, takes a deep breath and roots himself so firmly to his seat he doubts he’d be able to stand up if he tried.

There courage in that, he thinks.

There’s strength.

Club’s gotta know that – even if it means nothing at all.

In much the same way as he did with Jax in that meeting room in prison, Juice offers a gentle smile. He's not in handcuffs this time, not in prison issue denims. He looks like a young man, nothing more, nothing less. One thing that strikes him is that Chibs is not wearing his cut. It puts them on equal terms, at least if discounting the fact that Chibs can leave at will and Juice would be tackled and restrained if he tried.

That isn't relevant at the minute.

Samcro' new President sits down in front of his exiled son. Juice just hopes he can achieve something here, something meaningful, something to ease the ache.

"Hey Robert," he says softly, and he hopes his voice and demeanour will set the tone.

('I love you, my brother.')

Chibs says nothing. He stares at him, such infinite feeling in his eyes, just like always. The only thing Juice can read in his face is sorrow.

The only thing he can think is that, hey, at least it's not burning disgust.

There’s that blind faith.

There’s that misguided hope again when he thinks to himself: That's got to mean something.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Long, long, long chapter in which Juice gets everything off his chest - and Chibs finally opens his eyes.

This might be dreadful - but, it's what came to my page.

Please let me know if I've done them the biggest disservice there ever was.

The last time Chibs laid eyes on Juice was out on the open roads right at the spot where John Teller took a final spill into the rocks. He'd looked bigger then, his head shaved, eyes as black as coal. Tougher than Chibs had ever seen him, but at the same time more destroyed. He was pale, as if he hadn't slept in weeks and the nights he'd managed it had been with one eye open.

Chibs can well imagine that was the case.

The boy was in fear of his life.

He remembers Juice looking over at him as trying to make one last connection with him. Maybe he wanted to see if there was any hope left or whether all love was truly lost. He'd turned away, though not out of disgust. It was because he couldn't bear looking at him knowing it would probably be the last time.

He didn't want to see that hope in his eyes knowing that, chances were, he was walking into his death.

He didn't want to open himself up to the temptation of betraying the club's decision, of which played a hard part, and screaming at the lad to run.

Today, he looks like a different person entirely with the hair and the clothes and the false calm that people get when they’re in places like this. He looks like a little lad, really, with a growing head of thick black hair and a face that's lost years it didn't have to spare. He looks to have dropped at least 15 lbs and the hooded jumper he's wearing looks like something he's borrowed off his old fella. It cocoons him in the same way his cut did and it's clear he's using it as armour.

The main difference for Chibs is the look on his face. It's not haunted, not like it was back on the roadside. It's the look he used to wear when Chibs first knew him. Eager. Hopeful. Impossibly young.

When he speaks, his voice is as clear as a fucking whistle at an Orange Lodge parade, and for Juice that's something.

"Unser said you might come but I didn't want to believe him. I'm glad you're here."

He smiles.

There's that bloody acquiescence again. The boy just wants to please. It sets something off in Chibs' gut that no mint tea or herbal colonic will get rid of because it's just like the last time in that hospital
years ago.

Juice forgives. Clearly.

He forgives when there's probably no fucking way any of them deserve the benefit of any doubt he might have about them.

Chibs doesn't smile back at him. He can't. He gets the impression if he moves his face his scars will burst open and he'll bleed all over the table and it'll be for all the fucking shite that's gone before and between them, all the beatings and the disappointments and the hurt pride and the betrayal and, Christ, when did things get so out of control?

He doesn't do anything. He just sits down.

The boy's so nervous. Chibs thinks back to the last time he was like this. He thinks he must've been a prospect at the time. That doesn't even seem like long ago.

Time moves fast in this life.

"So, how - how have you been?"

Bobby's dead. Jax is In jail. It might well be he's backed the wrong horse at the National for fucking years. He's grand.

(He's not grand.)

He's brilliant.

(He’s FAR from brilliant)

"To be honest wi’ yeh, I've been better, Juicy boy."

It's the honesty that gets Juice. That hopeful smile fades from his face to be replaced with something that more mirrors how Chibs is feeling.

It makes it a little more balanced, at least.

"Yeah," the boy says, his palms splayed out and pressed against the table.

He looks down at them and doesn't look back up.

"Yeah, me too."

(*)

"Can they hear? Is the room clean?"

The paranoia is deeply indoctrinated. Back in Ireland, no place was safe. Not even a church confessional. Everywhere was bugged. Eyes and ears were never far away.

“Nah. It’s cool. This isn’t prison. They can’t invade patient’s privacy like they can prisoners."

Where did it all go so wrong that half of them ended up dead and one of them ended up losing his bloody mind? It's a question that keeps Chibs awake at night. He knew this wasn't what he got into this shite for. The fight in Ireland, that was worthwhile. That was for something. This? This has all been for nought.
“So - what do you want to talk about?”

It's a loaded question without meaning to be. What does he want to hear? What does he want to know? How far in does he want to jam the nail into Jax's coffin? He's not even sure of that himself.

He figures full disclosure is the best bet.

"I want you to tell me everything. I need you to tell me everything."

Juice laughs, and it's a tainted laugh tempered with an edge of bitterness that doesn't suit him.

The worst part is, it's completely justified.

"You never wanted to hear it before. Every time I tried to speak, you'd just tell me to shut my mouth."

It's not exactly aggressive but it's definitely accusatory. Juice knows it, that's why his face changes. He's so used to being subordinate that he instantly apologises.

"Shit, I'm sorry."

It's so wrong. It should be Chibs that's apologising yet somehow he can't bring himself to say the words. He's looking at Juice now, looking all of Kerri-Anne's age, and the only thing he can think is "we made him that way."

He doesn't see a rat bastard traitor in this moment in time. All he sees is a victim of his own fucked up circumstances and the family that left him to carry the weight of it.

It sends a pain in his chest so deep and so vicious he thinks he's going to keel over.

('We did this to him. Everything he is, that's on us.')

He knew this was a bad idea. He should've listened to Unser. What in the name of Christ is he hoping to get out of this? Unser said it himself. Juice is lost, perhaps never to be found again. He's not the person he was, never will be, and that's because of everything that's happened.

"I can't do this, Juice."

He shakes his head and pushes the chair back.

"This ain't happening."

Chibs knows he’s a coward for walking away. What he's not prepared for is the look of absolute distress that crosses Juice's face. It's painful in its conception, a jagged line across his lips, those near-black eyes wider than they've ever been.

"No. I’m sorry. I didn't mean - Please."

He looks like his little girl did at five when her cousin Aiofe taught her about the monsters that lived in Lisburn under the ground with the sewer rats. She'd clung to his trouser leg pleading to be allowed to sleep with him and Fiona, begging him not to leave her alone.

This is that same level of fear.

"Please, brother. Don't go, okay? Please don't go."
There's part of Chibs that wants to shut off his emotions like he did at the garage that day when he
beat the living daylights out of the kid. What holds him back is the memory of a bright eyed lad
telling him that if he ever got patched, everything else would take a back seat. The club would be
everything to him because brothers don't turn their back on each other the way families sometimes
do. Chibs owes it to that idealistic scrap of an idiot to show him it's thick and thin and that, even if it's
a long time coming, family don't walk away from family without at least hearing them out.

Maybe it's a little late but he's here now. He's here.

He's here because this lad loved him and because once upon a time he loved him too.

"Alright, Juicy. S'alright. I'm not goin' anywhere. Pull it back, now, eh?"

"Y-yeah. Yeah, okay."

The boy nods hard. His smile is edged with hysteria when he sits back down and Chibs knows that if
he leaves this room, there's a high chance that it'll kill him; that it'll break each and every fibre of him
until there's nothing left but a shell.

It's quite a landmine to hold onto.

"I said I'd listen, Juicy. I told myself I'd come here and I'd hear your piece. Get things straight. Unser
told me you deserved that. I hope he's right."

"I'm grateful. I am. I just - I'm on a lot of meds right now and sometimes I find it hard to get it
together. I'm not being a little bitch. I'm trying. I'm glad you're listening now."

"Right you are, boy."

Long ago, Chibs had tried to teach Juice how to stand up for himself, the times and the places, the
moments when strength and pride trumped subordination. Someone has untaught those lessons and,
as much as it hurts him to think it, he's pretty sure who that someone is.

"So much stuff's gone down, Chibby, I don't even know where to start. It's all in my head and it's
like a fucking patch-in party. It's a complete mess. You know how much mess gets to me."

('I like things in their place. Keeps me calm. The more stressed I get, the more OCD I get. It's a real
life medical condition. It's on file and everything. ')

"Aye, I know, lad. I know. Why don't you just start with Miles, alright? Right at the beginning.
Work your way through. I'll hear y'out."

The name is a spark. A trigger. A catalyst.

"Miles. Right. Sure."

Juice's face changes entirely and it's not something Chibs has ever seen before on him. He's usually
so emotional when pressed on stuff that meant something to him. He’d cry openly when talking
about his mother, downed a half bottle of Tequila once and talked in great, passionate detail about
how one of his foster-moms had beat the shit out of him on a regular basis just for the damn Hell of it
but he couldn’t fight back because she was a woman. Chibs used to worry about him because of it,
this tendency to over-share, this uncontrollable sadness and fear that sometimes burned his veins and
pressed him. His tell was blindingly obvious and each and every worry in that wee head of his would
write itself all over his face.
He takes a deep breath now, though, and there's something in his eyes, something that tells Chibs the kid's putting things in order.

He'd never been able to do that before and it makes Chibs realise just how much he’s changed.

"Miles...was an accident."

"Five to the eye and you call that an accident? Jesus Christ, boy."

"I swear on my mother's grave it was."

And, that's the precise moment that Chibs knows it’s the truth, not the truth as Jax painted it but some other truth that Juice was never allowed to share. Juice has sworn on his grandfather's grave, even his old dog Milo's - but never his mother's. Juice's mother is a rare, untouched treasure that he holds on a pedestal and will never let the wet-rot near, much like Chibs' own Ma and his Pa before.

The only time Juice would swear on his mother's life would be if he were telling the truth.

"Go on," Chibs says, urging him to continue.

"That tree up on the hill, the one where you found me. I used to go there to talk to her when stuff got heavy. I know you thought I was crazy for doing it but it helped. We all have our own ways of dealing with stuff, right? Well, that was mine. I'd go up there on her anniversary and stuff, after Half-Sack, after any bad stuff that went down. Roosevelt had pulled me in, said he wanted a sample of coke to check for markers or some shit. He said he'd leave the club out of the RICO case if I did what he said."

"And you took his word for it?"

"What was I supposed to think? That shit with my dad. The by-laws. He had my head all twisted up."

"Played on your insecurity. Knew you were a weak link in the club."

Chibs doesn't mean to sound accusatory or insulting, not really and, when that familiar look of distress finds its way to Juice's face he's sorry for that. He’s sorry for putting it there.

If he were a better, less stubborn man, he might tell him that.

"I don't know what to say, man. It just happened. You already knew that part."

"I know."

"I knew that none of you guys woulda cracked but I'm me. You're you. You told me once when you were shitfaced that I never shoulda been in an MC and that was the first time I thought you were probably right."

Chibs truly hadn't known Juice would let it get that far. If he had, he'd have taken him in and beat the temptation out of him before having someone do the same to the good Sheriff. It might not have been a good way but it would’ve got the message through his thick skull.

The boy just didn't trust him enough, didn't trust the club enough.

He wonders what they did to make him think that way.

"I got to the warehouse, told Phil I was doin’ a sweep. I was only gonna take a bit, couple of grams
maybe. Not enough so that anyone would notice but enough that they’d get off the club’s back. Phil started knocking on the door. I don't do good with pressure, Chibby. I never have, so I took a block. Just grabbed it without thinking. Worst thing I ever did and I knew it even then. I just..."

He laughs helplessly, raises his palms outward in submission.

"I panicked."

Chibs can picture it well. Clay used to always say of Juice that he couldn't be trusted to keep it together when the shit hit the fan. Too much anxiety there and too little common sense. "He's a panic button with its wires tapped." It's why he had him on surveillance and transport early on in his game. They never thought he'd make the cut but he proved himself, eventually.

Maybe they assumed too much of him.

"I needed to clear my head. I went up to the tree to ask my mom what I was supposed to do with all this bullshit. I was looking for spiritual guidance or something, I don't know. I was just so tired. I hadn't been sleeping, not since it all started. They kept dragging me into lockup and not telling me a thing. That time I told you I’d headed out to Yosemite, they had me in a cell pressin’ me for intel. It all got so fucking loud. Too much noise up here, y'know? "

He indicate to his head as the source of the noise.

Chibs understands that well.

"I must’ve fallen asleep and when I woke up I realised I'd fucked up. I still had the brick. I could hear all the guys comin' back, knew the pickup was there. I hid the block in the grass near a couple of rocks. When I got back, everyone was pointing fingers. It was chaos."

"All that shit with the prospects. That was 'cause of you?"

Juice looks distraught.

The push button is still there, Chibs thinks. Nothing is worse to this guy than the idea of hurting somebody else.

It doesn’t make him fucking weak, no matter what Clay and Jax would have him believe. It just makes him good.

"I tried to stop it. I really did. That's why I gave 'em the talk about it all being cool if they just made it good. I was gonna go get the coke and put it back, act like nothing had happened. Hope for the best. It’s what I do."

('All I ever wanted to do was be a good guy. To do the right thing. That's all.')

"I was trying to make it right, but it all went South when I went back to get it."

"That's when Miles caught you. He was out scouting for the block of Charlie himself."

"Yeah. He saw it. I told him I could explain but he didn't wanna listen. I just wanted outta there but he started talking about taking me back to the clubhouse, putting it in front of the table. Jesus, I couldn't go back there. Not without getting my head straight."

Chibs blanches at that because his head skips forward and the outcome sickens him. He always pinned Juice down as a good-natured idiot who put his foot in shite too many times, not a cold-
blooded killer out to save his own fucking back.

How could he have got it so wrong?

"You emptied a whole barrel into his face so he didn't drag you back to face the consequences of stealing from us? Jesus Christ, laddie."

"No. No, I would never..."

Juice takes a deep breath and pauses to gather himself. Again, that's new.

Self-regulation was never his thing.

"I wasn't trying to steal anything, and that's not what happened, Chibby, I swear. I threw the block at him and tried to run. It happens in the movies all the time. Someone throws shit and gets away while the other guy's distracted trying to catch it. Like it's reflex or something. I tried it. It didn't work."

He’s serious. He’s deadly serious.

Chibs doesn't know whether to laugh or cry, whether to shake him or pity the wee bastard.

"Life isn't the fucking movies, laddie."

"I know. I know. He shot me in the leg. Grabbed a rock, started pummelling me with it when I was on the floor. I was trying to find something to hold him off with. Another rock, maybe. Something to launch at him, I don't know. I wasn't thinking. He pulled a knife. He was about to finish me off."

Juice's hands are trembling. Chibs notices how he tries his hardest to restrain them but it's no good. He can't hide it. The boy's scared shitless, that much is clear. In the past, Chibs might've reached over and laid a hand on his arm, a non-verbal command to calm himself and pull himself together.

He doesn’t move. Not this time.

He isn't sure he wants to.

"I didn't want to use my gun. I don't even remember doing it. I don't remember what happened. I just wanted to keep that knife away from me."

"You wanted to live, aye?"

"Yes."

Juice nods his head and the look in his eyes is so desperately grateful that it makes Chibs feel sick because, shite, if he'd only bloody listened. If only he’d listened when he’d tried to plead his case. The boy didn't kill in cold blood. It was self-defence, just like Jax argued Jury was.

It was kill or be killed.

"I just lost it. Everything was so messed up with Roosevelt and Potter and the Irish. After Miles found me, I just wanted to get away. I would've come back when I had it figured out but he wasn't letting me leave. I didn’t kill him to keep him quiet, Chibby. It was an accident. I just -

" - reacted. In a panic. Fight or flight. Like me and Patrick Munro."

“Yeah. Yeah, kind of.”
Like him and Patrick Munro. Holy Mother of God, it feels like that happened in his childhood, it was that long ago. Right in the middle of the troubles, he and Paddy had been tasked with a recon mission in Ulster trying to scope out Aidan O'Malley's arms dealer and the guys who kept picking up their men. For three nights they hadn't slept. Bone-deep with exhaustion, Chibs had started to drop off when a flash bomb had gone off right next to him, right by his head, leaving him deaf and half blind.

All he'd felt was a brush against his arm and, assuming he was about to be taken and killed like Frank Donnelly had been the week before, he had done the only thing he had been taught to do. He had reached for his weapon and, on absolute fight or flight autopilot, had fired.

The first two bullets hit Paddy's shoulder and, as he'd gone down out of instinct, the third had hit him in the head. It was only when Chibs' vision had cleared that he saw what he had done. The bomb had been one of their own. Stumbling around in the dark so as not to wake him, Paddy had obviously let it off by mistake.

"He kept hitting me. I was so fucked up I could barely see straight. I thought I was gonna pass out. I just wanted him to leave me alone. There was nothing else I could do."

A cornered, wounded animal will hiss and scratch and claw.

A wounded soldier will press his back against the wall and wait with his gun aimed, safety off, ready to shoot anyone or anything that threatens his waning life.

Adrenaline can make us do the craziest of things.

"I tried to tell you, brother. I knew you'd understand if you would just hear me out, but ."

"….but, I shut you down. We all shut you down."

There's that smile again. That sad, forgiving, pathetic, heartbreaking little smile.

Chibs is torn between wanting to slap it off his face and wanting to hug him.

"I was gonna tell them to fuck off. I really was. Roosevelt and that psycho fucking fed. Then that happened with Miles and it really messed me up. I felt...lost."

So lost he'd been driven to suicide.

So frantic he'd tried to take the easy way out.

"And, the swing from that tree?"

Chibs leaves the word cowardly out. He doesn't want to send Juice running, not now that he's on the path.

"I thought it was the only way. If they didn't have me they couldn't use me against the club."

"For the club, aye? For Samcro."

The daft bastard actually believes that offing himself was for the good of the club. That's the worst part.

That's the part that leaves Chibs scratching his head in utter bewilderment.

"I only wanted what was best for the club. The fed told me that was it. Said he'd take the Irish and
whoever was at the meet and leave the rest alone. I’m a dumb asshole, you know that. I fell for it, just like I always do, but they gave me their word."

Juice is capable of so much stupidity if the threat of loss and abandonment comes into play. Those scummy pricks saw that.

Exploited it.

"Then, the RICO case fell through and Roosevelt told me he’d bury it all. The club would never know what I did and he’d keep my secret. Guess he changed his mind because he tipped off Jax. I couldn’t exactly tell him to suck my daddy’s big black cock could I?"

No. No, he couldn't.

Not unless he wanted a beating an an exile.

"What did Jax say?"

"What do you think he said?"

Chibs could hazard a guess.

Now that the circumstances are different he's not sure Jax's assumed words were truly warranted.

"He said I had to do everything he ordered or he’d take it to the table and I’d be dead. I killed a brother, man, he wasn't interested in knowing why."

Neither was Chibs.

Neither were any of them, by the end of it.

For shame.

(*)

"I never understood it, y’know? I never understood why I was the one who was punished so bad when everyone else was forgiven. It’s only since I’ve been in here I’ve been thinking about it. They’re all about self-esteem. Apparently, mine’s in the tank."

Chibs thinks he knows why it always fell down on Juice and it's as sobering a thought as any because he was guilty of it himself.

He opts for brutal honesty because, otherwise, what’s the point?

"You were easy," he tells him, not unkindly but directly. "He knew you wouldn't argue. Knew he had a ready made lapdog at his beck and call if he needed it. All he’d have to do is whistle and you’d come running because, unlike the rest of us, you had nothing else."

He was Jax's trained puppy who'd wag his tail when his head was patted and cower when his master's voice was raised yet he always came back, no matter what. No matter how much he was kicked and beaten he'd always come back because the alternative was being left out in the cold with nothing and no-one to tend his wounds for him.

"Your loyalty, Juice, was unconditional."

“I never doubted my loyalty. Not once. I never did one single thing that I felt wasn't right for the
He never doubted his loyalty, it was just everyone else that did - but, what if those black and white conclusions were reached because the evidence presented to them was tainted?

Chibs is starting to see that as a real possibility.

(*)

After about half an hour, Juice suddenly bolts from the room. It's unexpected, but the boy’s always been as skittish as a colt when things were getting tense.

It's the mention of Clay that gets to him. He gets this look in his eye that scares the bejesus out of Chibs and then he just runs. Chibs is left wondering whether he should stay, whether he should leave, whether the boy is coming back at all. With anyone else he’d have been out of there the minute it happened but he’s been in this place before with Juice.

When things get hard, Juice’s instinct is to run, and it’s not that he doesn’t want to face things. It’s not that he’s a deserter.

It’s to catch his breath.

To clear his racing head.

He’s gone for a few minutes, comes back with a plastic cup full of water and a strained smile on his face.

"Sorry about that."

"S’alright."

"I just – “

“– did your thing. I know. How many times have I had to come after you when you took off?"

(I'm a bit worried about Juice. I can't get hold of him on his cell. He ran off about an hour ago. He's been a little off. Gonna go out and look for him.)

Juice smiles the best he can in the circumstances.

"You said you were gonna tie me down or put a leash on me. Keep me chained to the bar in case I ran off and got lost. Take me out twice a day for a walk and a piss."

"I did say that."

He sits down gingerly and his movements are so slow Chibs wonders if the docs have given him something to calm him down. His eyes remain clear, though, and he’s ready to go again.

There’s honour in that, he reckons.

Minute by minute a weight is lifting off his shoulders and he wants it all gone.

“That stuff that went down with Clay? That wasn’t for the good of the club. That was personal.”

“That man was poison, Juice.”
Juice laughs, that same bitter laugh from earlier, the one that isn’t his, the one that Chibs wishes he’d never had to learn.

“That’s funny. Those are the exact same words Jax used when he tasked me to betray him.”

It’s a sobering thought and Chibs wonders if the word are his at all or whether they were planted there by Hamlet on a fucking bike, dead-set on clawing his way to the helm.

“He made mistakes, I know that, but didn’t we all? What Jax did to him was overkill. Just like what he did to me. Clay was poison? Seriously? Well, Jax must’ve been fucking nuclear, in that case.”

“You really mean that, boy?”

“Absolutely.”

Chibs knows the loyalty and the thoughts of his men. He knows that Happy would walk in front of a train for Jax even now, that Quinn and the Mexican would lay down their lives for him because they weren’t there for what went before.

Tig is another matter entirely.

Since it all went down he’s been increasingly vocal about his thoughts on the matter of Father and Son. Chibs always put it down to his loyalty to Clay but some of his words have had merit.

Clay may have been a tyrant, Tig has said, but what was Jax?

Morrow may have been a devious, lying, cheating scumbag who beat his wife and soured the club – but, what about Teller?

(“That boy makes Clay look a Saint, and we were all too blind, dumb or fucked to notice it.”)

“The stuff with Clay was bitter vengeance, man. He did some bad shit, but Jax? He just lost it. All that talk about getting the club out of guns and drugs and going legit? Didn’t matter. Wasn’t gonna happen. Jax was all about Clay. Nothing else mattered but making him suffer.”

Chibs would do the same if it had been Fiona that had been threatened. He’d have skinned the guy alive if he’d dared put her and Kerri-Anne at risk.

Maybe the boy doesn’t understand because he hasn’t got a wife, hasn’t got kids, can barely take care of himself let alone a wife and child.

“He tried to have Tara killed, Juice. He tried to have Opie killed. He went behind the club’s back because he knew if he’d put them on the table for a vote we’d have all told him to hitch a fuckin’ ride.”

“What, and you think Jax never did that? Christ. Jax was the master of puttin’ things under the carpet without the club’s vote. I should know. I was his go-to guy.”

And, that opens up to another chapter.

Chibs listens.

He listens as this poor dumb bastard pours his heart out over what Jax had him do, how they’d put him together with Clay because they knew he wouldn’t argue about having to do dirty-work Prospect shit like taking him to doctors appointments and cleaning his apartment. Chibs remembers that Juice had volunteered because he’d always wanted to impress the old man, any old man for that
matter because this was a guy without a father and he was always looking to fill the space.

For weeks, he’d acted as Clay’s all-but-babysitter, sitting in waiting rooms, helping him lug that monster-tank of air ‘round with him when he didn’t have the strength to do it himself. The way he talks about it it’s like it was an honour, not a burden, like he’d felt good about making someone’s life easier.

While the rest of them would’ve been bitching and moaning about being treated like a slave and a skivvy, Juice had been genuinely happy to help.

“It was a real shitty time for me but Clay was good to me. He talked to me, like, really talked. Not like small talk shit. We’d have proper conversations, kinda like you and me had sometimes when we weren’t knee deep in club crap. I never had anyone talk to me like he did before and it mattered some, y’know? I was at my lowest point, so when the old Pres told me he was proud of me? Shit, man. It felt like something.”

Chibs understands that.

He understands being in a bad place and looking for a kind word to ease it. He remembers coming home to Fiona after each and every shitty day in the field feeling like each and every bullet he’d fired had been taken inward.

She’d stroke his head and she’d kiss his scars.

She’d tell him “You’re a good man, Filip Telford,” and it made everything go away.

“I told him about my mom. My sister. I came clean about Roosevelt, about Miles. He told me it didn’t matter, that we all did stuff that fell outside of the cut and that no man at that table could claim otherwise.”

He was right. He was fucking right. They’re all liable, yet somehow, the punishment only ever fell on Juice.

He wonders whether Jax just needed a voodoo doll, some stuffed little ragdoll to stick his pins in each and every time he fucked up.

“After all that stuff with Frankie, Jax just laughed, made it all meaningless like he always did. Told me that Clay was poison, that I shouldn’t believe a word he said. Said that he was using me, which is funny, considering, but Jax always did like to follow in Clay’s footsteps, didn’t he? He told me I had to get evidence, paperwork from some safe. Some legal shit. He said if I didn’t do it, if I was lucky they might be able to identify me by my dental records.”

It’s hard to understand how he’s been carrying this all around with him without it drowning him, Chibs thinks.

Then he looks around at the locked doors and the barred windows and the guards and the alarms and he remembers that it did drown him; that he's still drowning.

Juice buries his head in his hands. His voice cracks.

“I said I’d do it.”

What choice did he have?

What choice did he have when Jax was playing him behind the club’s back?
“It all went wrong. Of course it went wrong. I’m a fuck up. That’s what I do. I get shit wrong. I found the paperwork but Clay figured out people were looking for it and moved it. By the time you all got there to pick it up it was gone. I tried to explain. He didn’t want to hear.”

“He threw you a right hook. I threw you out.”

“Yeah.”

Jax decked the kid in what can only be seen as spoiled, bitter anger. Chibs remembers it well, remembers the look on Juicé’s face as he’d picked him up by the scruff of his neck like it was nothing more than a disobedient dog that had shat on the carpet. He remembers his eyes when he’d closed the door in his face.

He remembers telling himself he didn’t care, that Juice was a traitor and a coward and deserved nothing less.

He doesn’t think he ever truly believe it but it was easy to convince himself when he saw the hateful sneer on Jax’s face.

“I got his gun.”

“Aye.”

There are tears in Juice’s eyes, right in the corners. They’re light against the dark and the way he moves his eyes it’s as if he’s willing them away.

Chibs knows a man broken by his own actions when he sees one. He used to see it every time he looked in the mirror after Paddy.

“I was helping him pack his stuff up, getting it all into boxes for him. He thought he was goin’ away. He’d blacked out his tats and that was it. No more club. That’s what he thought and I let him think it. I saw that gun and I picked It up. It was the silver one, y’know? Real beautiful. A beautiful gun. He said he’d always planned on handing it over to Opie after his five years but that he wanted me to have it for being so good to him the past few weeks.”

He blinks.

The tears fall.

Chibs just watches them.

“He gave me that gun because he trusted me. To thank me for all the stuff I’d done for him since he got out of the hospital. He called me ‘son’. He told me he’d miss me and that I’d earned it, just like I earned my Mayhem patch.”

“The one you didn’t earn at all.”


It was a low blow, Chibs knows it.

Juice just nods his head.

“He gave me that gun as a show of appreciation and, all the time, I was going behind his back on his real son’s orders. He called me ‘son’ and I let him down. Jax set him up with that same gun he had
given me because he had faith in me. He said it had poetry to it. God damned poetry. How fucked up is that, Chibby?"

No more fucked up than the fact that Jax had him do it, knew of Juice’s glaring Daddy issues and took another one from him to settle his own vengeful score.

“I betrayed him to save myself, and he knew, Chibs. He knew, and he told me it was okay. That he knew I had no choice. He’d spent the last few days telling me how proud of me he was and all the while I was giving Jax exactly what he needed to put him away. I wanted him to run. I wanted him to split. I told him to. I knew giving him the heads up would get me killed but I didn’t care. I didn’t give a shit, I just wanted him gone. Then we voted mayhem and - I couldn't say no. Jax made it so I couldn't.”

He made it so that Tig couldn’t either after all that shit with Pope.

How long before he’d have found some misdemeanour in Chibs’ history so that he could bend him over and fuck him, too?

“It was all in my head. I couldn't get it out. I tried everything. Drugs made it worse. Getting shitfaced made me hate myself. I couldn't be with anyone because I was the worst company ever –“

“ - And you couldn’t talk to me because I’d washed my hands of you.”

"I couldn’t talk to anyone. I was so isolated. I don’t do so well on my own.”

They all know that. It’s why he was rarely tasked to do anything by himself, always had a prospect with him, another one of the guys. Some people are solitary creatures that move well by themselves but Juice has never been one of them. It gets to him. He spent a few days in solitary at the end of a short spell inside and the guy that came back wasn’t the guy that went in. He was unravelled and jumpy and nervous as Hell.

“I felt distant after Clay. Different. I’d started hearing voices, my own, mostly, but sometimes other people’s. I started talking to Clay. When I got really bad off, I swear I could hear him answer me. By then, no-one but Tig would even look at me and he scares me at the best of times. He was messed up enough as it was about his daughter. I didn’t want to be a burden to him by putting my shit on him so I just carried on.”

Chibs ran with the IRA for long enough to understand what shellshock is. What PTSD is.

Juice had been exhibiting the symptoms all along but nobody had cared enough to question it.

He remembers, around that time, just how neat everything had been at the Clubhouse. Just how tidy. How brand spanky fucking clean. He’d pulled Chucky aside to thank him for the stellar work but the idiot had stared at him blankly as if he didn’t know what he was talking about.

Those neat stacked bottles, those fresh pressed and folded towels, that was all Juice.

That was his way of trying to exist in neat, ordered surroundings, of trying to make sense of the chaos.

“I thought after Clay we’d be done, me and Jax, that I’d be good. Every time, that’s what he would tell me. "Just do this one thing for me and your debt is wiped clean". That’s what he’d say. I did it. I did all of it, but it was never enough. It was never going to be enough.”

“He just wanted to use you until you ran out of rope. Then he'd let you hang yourself.”
Those had been his words at Chapel, almost to the letter. That Juice was useful for as long as he was useful – and, after that, he could rot in Hell.

And, for what? For making a mistake?

For loving the wrong father?

For not having the gall to stand up to a man on a rampage?

He’s cautious when he asks the next question, cautious because it’s no longer solid in his head. He's cautious because he really doesn’t know what’s going to come of this.

He had his ideas as to what went down, ideas that came straight from the mouth of Jax and, reading between the lines, from Nero, too.

“What happened, after Tara was killed? What happened that made you run? What went down with Nero?”

Juice’s head snaps up so hard it looks as though it’s going to snap off. His eyes are wide and intense, burning in their focus.

He looks angry, and Chibs thinks finally.

Everyone has their breaking point and thank Christ he’s actually got one.

“What did he tell you happened?”

“That you ratted him out to Nero. That you killed that kid’s mother and pinned it on him.”

“Seriously? And you believed him? You think I’d do something like that off my own back?”

At that moment in time, none of them knew what Juice was capable of at all.

“I don’t know. You’d been acting off for months. I could barely look at you because of what Jax had said. You were acting out left, right and centre. I didn’t even recognise you.”

“And, because I was already a traitor and a coward I might as well be that, too? Jesus.”

This is the first time Juice has heard it, that much is obvious. Chibs can see it on his face. This is the moment it is all coming together for him.

“That’s why you all wanted me dead. Because you believed what he told you.”

He laughs.

It’s the ugliest laugh Chibs has ever heard.

“I never understood it before. Kinda makes sense now.”

“You weren’t exactly covering yourself in trustworthiness, son.”

“DON’T call me that. Just…don’t. Not after…not after that.”

Hearing all this shit, having all of this thrust in his face, Chibs is starting to evolve, because every last thing he’d chosen to believe over the last couple of years is turning out to be dirty and tainted and stained. Everything he stood for, fought for, believed in – it’s all crumbling down around him, with
Juice Ortiz at the centre of it through no real fault of his own.

Juice's anger is understandable. His resentment, it's so much fucking healthier than his acquiescence.

“He told me I had to do it. If I wanted to earn my way back, I had to take the shit with the gold. Said he’d promised Nero he wouldn’t kill her – but he hadn’t promised him he wouldn’t get someone else to do it. Sons don’t kill women, isn’t that right? They don’t kill themselves either. I’d already tried. Might as well break the other rule while I’m at it, let him keep his hands clean.”

“So, he put it on you?”

“Yes, he put it on me. Said there was nothing more dangerous than a junkie rat and that she needed to be made quiet. If she wasn’t made quiet then I would be. He’d make me a junkie rat, too.”

Chibs is starting to notice a pattern. Kill or be killed. Do my bidding or face the consequences. Considering Juice’s precariously mental state at the time, a mental state they all saw and pointedly ignored, it wracks him with guilt that he let Jax get away with it.

Ignorance is not an excuse for inaction.

Disappointment is not an excuse for indifference.

“He made me shoot her up with junk and put a pillow over her face. I didn’t wanna do it. She was a mother and she’d just lost her baby and all Jax saw was a problem that needed to be dealt with.”

It’s all he ever saw.

People were not people towards the end, they were just things that got in his way.

“She was so pretty and sad. She’d just lost her little boy and I was the last damn face she saw.”

“So, you did it? You went through with it?”

“I assume so.”

That doesn’t make sense. Not to Chibs.

At the same time it makes perfect sense – but, its meaning is the thing that disturbs.

“What do you mean, you assume so?”

He was zoning out.

He was losing time.

That’s the only thing that explains it.

“I got real good at blocking shit out. The docs call it dissociation. All those times you yelled at me for starin’ off into space, I’d gone somewhere else. Shut down to protect myself.”

(….because none of us were interested in the job.)

“Mid way through that beating you dished out? I was gone then, too. I don't remember you cleaning me up. I only know it happened because Gemma told me.”

Chibs should’ve realised.
It wasn’t like Juice to go silent like that, not for that long. He’d practically had to carry him from that room and the boy hadn’t uttered a peep.

“I’m not a killer, Chibs. I’m not. Never was. I’m a hacker with a sideline in weed. But Jax? The Club? They turned me into one then shut me out for having a conscience about it. That night with Nero? Clay had just met Mr Mayhem and I couldn’t get right with it. Bobby had sent me over to Diosa because I was stressin’ everyone out. Told me to drop some oxy, get my dick sucked, chill the fuck out.”

Stellar words for a man who’s falling apart, but Chibs knows that Bobby meant well.

Knowing Juice as he does, it wouldn’t have been what he’d advised, but Juice didn’t come to him. They’d cultured an environment where he had nowhere to turn.

“Something happened in the bathroom. I don’t know what. I started having a reaction to the Oxy, I think. I felt like I was outside of my body, like I was watching myself from the outside. It’s another sign. Another symptom. Apparently, I’m textbook. Go me.”

He smiles sadly, proud of his sad little achievement.

Though he’s still cold, that just breaks Chibs’ heart.

“Apparently, I took enough pills to put down a small horse. I don’t know why I did it. I wasn’t in my right mind, I guess. I woke up in bed puking my guts up. I don’t remember much, but I know I almost died on the floor of a brothel – and that was without even getting the head. I woke up the next morning and Nero was gone. I don’t know why, I just had this feeling I’d said something. All night long, all I could think about was Darvany. I was in a house full of beautiful women and all I had on my mind was the beautiful woman I’d killed. I didn’t rat, Chibby. I confessed. I was so out of my mind I didn’t even realise I was doing it.”

He didn’t rat, he spilled under the influence.

He cowed under the pressure of murdering an innocent woman – and, Jax was planning on letting him hang for it.

It’s too much.

It's too much to take in.

“No.”

Here comes the denial.

(‘Open your eyes, you fat Scottish cunt.’)

“Jax can be a bastard but…Christ. Jesus Christ, boy, are you having me on?”

“Why would I lie, Chibs? Look at where I am. I’m out. I know that. I’m done. I can’t get any lower than this, brother. This is me laid bare. You wanted the truth? This is the truth, in all its twisted glory.”

“And, what about Tara? Gemma? What were you thinking, boy?”

“I didn’t know what I was thinking. I didn’t even know who I was anymore. All I knew was that this was what I was taught to do. You see a cop lookin’ to call it in? You get rid of them. You see a
member of your family in trouble? You help them. Gemma was the only one I thought I could trust. I had no place else to go. You all wanted me dead.”

“So, you covered up a murder for her. Not just any murder, the President’s old lady.”

Chibs misses out the part where Jax had already threatened to kill Tara because, in his eyes, ratting was worse than putting the lives of children ahead of anything.

It’s there, though, lingering at the surface.

There are a lot of petty hypocrisies that he’s starting to open his eyes up to.

“Gemma said that pinning the murder on someone else was better for Jax and the kids. I guess she saw me coming, right? Played on that same Achilles heel the Feds did. She said that I could stop two little kids from losing their dad and their grandmother and I could stop Jax from losing the only woman on this Earth who can help him. All that, if I would just lie for her.”

“And you believed her?”

“I had to. What else could I believe? What else could I do? I'd already gotten rid of the evidence at that point. She caught me at my lowest ebb. I wanted to come clean when it all settled but she kept digging deeper. The club had ordered maymen. I was hiding out trying to figure what had gone wrong. She was the only one who came to see me the whole time I was shut away. Each and every damn time she told me how our lie was the only truth Jax should believe in because it was better than the alternative.”

There was a war started by that mistruth.

“Do you have any idea what went down because of that?”

“Of course I do. Do you think that’s what I wanted?”

“What you wanted doesn’t matter.”

There are tens and tens of people in the ground because of that manipulation.

(‘You were the ones who pulled the triggers, not him. You made your choice.’)

Who is more to blame, the one who helped sow the seed or the one who made it grow all out of control?

“I was desperate. Everything was spinning all outta control. Gemma told me I had to get outta town, so I called you. I had all these ideas about what I was gonna say. I was gonna make you see, somehow. I had it all planned out in my head – but, when you picked up, it all just went away. I lost my nerve. I hung up, but just hearing your voice made it so I...something. When I met you in that diner I knew what you were gonna say. I just needed to hear you say it so that I was sure. I wanted to know if you thought I deserved Mayhem too - and you did, so that's the truth I went with. That I was a coward. That I deserved it.”

He smiles.

He reaches over and touches Chibs' hand. Chibs stares down, wondering if that touch is real at all.

“I always trusted your judgement, Chibs. Telling me to kill myself, though? That was a low blow. Didn’t think I could get any lower but...yeah.”
“I didn't mean it that way. I never should’ve said that. Christ, what did you expect me to say?”

“Hearin’ me out would’ve been nice.”

And, isn’t that the bloody fucking truth?

“I wanted to believe so bad that you didn’t mean it. I wanted to believe you were trying to save me all of the pain you knew would be coming. I wanted you to be saying that because you knew I had no other way out, not because you wanted me dead. I was so done then, bro. So done.”

He was so done – and yet Chibs had still found time and room to dig the fork in.

Looking at him now, remembering how he was in that diner, he can’t believe he ever did that. Not to this kid. Not to Juice. Not to his lad. But Jax was a bee that burrowed into his eardrum and settled next to his mind and he just kept on buzzing, over and over, until his noise was all the noise Chibs could hear. He never thought he’d be that way. Ever. He never let any of his sleeping Generals or his IRA commanding offers get inside of his head like that.

Jax did and for that reason, Chibs doesn’t even recognise himself any more.

“When I went to the Mayans - shit, I don't know. I tried to pay 'em off with chump change, a Grandma’s car and a handful of lifted lollipops. I wasn't exactly in my right mind. Mexico, for Christ’s sake. I don't speak Spanish. I couldn't tell you what I was thinking but I never, ever would’ve sold out the club.

“That's not what we heard.”

“I was gonna give them dead intel and hope I was far enough across the border by the time they found out. I did it before. Why do you think I was on the run from Queens? “

“Some IT shite, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. I stole a fuckwad of cash from a guy's bank account on a job. Put a bug on his system that replicated his PIN details and bled him dry. I ran before he could figure it out. But, this lie? Our lie? Gemma and me? That lie cost lives. That cost Bobby’s life.”

“No, Jax cost Bobby’s life. He’s the one who led him, laddie, not you.”

“Never would’ve happened if not for that lie, bro. I tell him that all the time when I talk to him. I hate myself for that. But that lie was supposed to be for Jax. I was supposed to be for Abel and Thomas. I never would've agreed to it if I knew what was coming but I couldn't bear to do to those kids what was done to me. I couldn't subject them to that if I could help it in any way.”

“I know that. I know.”

“You do?”

What else can Chibs say? He’s sat here, quiet and objective, and he’s listened to every last shred of agony this boy has laid out for him in painful, brutal honesty.

"I know you don't mean to do the things you do. I know that. I know you don't mean to cause the pain you cause - "

"I really don't. I'm so sorry. For everything. But, all of this shit? God, it wasn't meant to be this way.”

The Juice he knows, and still knows, would never have done any of this if he’d had a fucking
choice.

He never had a choice.

“What happened with Tully?”

It’s the last piece of the puzzle, the final nail, the one that will render Jax dead to Chibs, if he’s not already.

He asks because he has to ask and he knows the answer is going to break him.

For Juice, it’s too much. He'd been so stoic through all of this, even through Clay, when he'd cracked and broken enough that Chibs could see how hurt he'd been by all of that.

Now, he just falls apart.

"No. I'm not going there."

He starts to cry, a real, heartfelt sob of a cry that comes from deep inside of him; a wracking, wrenching pain that is immeasurable, incomparable to anything Chibs has felt before. He’s seen him fall apart before, out there by that tree with the chain and the bruises and the attempt on his own life. Chibs had wanted to punish the wee bastard by leaving him to wallow in his sins but he never could bear to see him cry like that.

Like this.

He draws his knees up and he holds them, holds them tight, and he buries his face in his arms because he cannot bear to be looked at. It might be shame. It might just be trauma. God only knows, but whatChibs knows for sure is that if he lets him go any further he’ll be unreachable. He leans out his hand to touch him but pulls back, pulls back not from disgust but because he doesn’t think he has the right any more.

“Hey. Hey, Juicy, c’mon, now.”

“Please, I don't wanna talk about that. Not yet.“

“It’s okay. It’s alright. You don't have to say anything. We don't have to talk about that. Just answer me this. Is what Jax told me true? Did he agree to that?”

(Did he give that Nazi bastard permission to take the last part of you that was there to be taken? )

Juice lifts his head up and Chibs will never forget that look for as long as he lives. He stares Chibs right in the eye, and it spears him.

He nods his head and smiles through the tears, just like he always does.

“Y-yeah. I’m sorry. I know you thought he was a good guy.“

He’s smiling so as to soften the blow.

He’s sorry because he knows that his truth is what will shatter every illusion there ever was and he can't bear being the one to unveil a truth that'll hurt someone.

When he should be the one that is comforted, he’s offering it to someone else.

“Oh, my God.”
“Please, Chibs – “

“Oh, my fucking Christ.”

“Please don’t.”

Don’t get mad, he’s saying. Don’t get upset.

Don’t break down, but it’s too late for that.

Chibs thinks of Juice, the boy he saw as his kid, thinks of him raped and beaten and abandoned and broken. He thinks of him emotionally abused, threatened, psychologically tortured. He thinks of his own coolness, his own need for putting it straight as he hit him again and again and again.

He thinks of his unvoiced pleas as he looked at him for something, anything, to take the pain away, and he *hates* himself for it.

He pulls himself up like his body is deadweight. He goes to that poor, sad, terrorised kid and he grabs him hard, harder than necessary. He flinches, tenses up as if expecting to be hit or hurt, shook or abused because that's been his life for as far back as either of them can remember, now, and that's the most shocking thing of all.

Chibs just holds him like he should’ve done months ago.

He just holds him.

"I let you down, Juicy Boy. Me. Myself. Not the club, not the bloody club, but me. I’m sorry, son."

He knows it’s what Juice wants to hear.

"I am so, so sorry."

He also knows it will never, ever be enough.
Juice doesn't want it to end. Not now. Not ever.

For the first time since that first meet with Roosevelt, Juice feels like things are okay, albeit in the loosest sense of the word.

They sit side by side on the floor because Juice felt it was wrong just to stay at the table after all that had been said. He wanted to remove himself from the scene physically as well as mentally putting distance between him and the source of pain. He had found himself a spot near the window, a warm spot right in the sun, and it was like opening up a new chapter and leaving all of the bullshit behind. Chibs had followed suit and the slight groan that passed his lips when his knees clicked had brought a quiet little smile to Juice's face.

Just like old times.

He'd called him an old fuck and said there are proven herbal remedies for arthritis; that he could probably hook him up with something good if he wanted.

"You cheeky little bastard."

It's been ten minutes since they sat down and, in that time, Juice has gradually pieced himself back together. The tears have dried up, the despair pushed back. The shame and humiliation has been put back in its box, secured away for when he's ready to face it. Tully has been bound, gagged, silenced and banished. Juice doesn't want him out in the open just yet, not until he’s ready for it, and he hopes Chibs understands that.

The brutal recent history, so much a part of Juice, has been set aside. It’s spoken too much today and he's not prepared to listen to it any more. He just wants to listen to the birds outside, to the distance sound of cars. To Chibby sighing and complaining about his ‘bloody old man’s joints’ like he always did.

It feels like the old times he wants to remember.

"Look at the two of us," Chibs says, a sardonic smile on his lips. "Look at what's become of us, eh, boy?"

Every so often, as if to reassure him he's still there, Chibs pats him on the knee and if Juice goes deeply inward and focuses really damned hard he can pretend they’re in another place in another time. He can pretend that this is then, not now, that none of the madness has happened.

In his head they're sitting on the dusty floor of a warehouse, not a sterile hospital visitors room, and they're guarding guns, not waiting for staff to come and kick one of them out and lock the other back away. It’s late, really late, and they’re on watch duty. Juice volunteered to do it alone but they never
let him be alone, not back then, and it was always either Chibs or Half-Sack who volunteered to sit up with him. They're sharing the time between talking shit and playing cards, drawing tits and asses with a stone on the ground.

('Bigger, lad. Always bigger. The bigger the better.')

They're happy, and they have purpose. A path.

('Samcro is your future now, Juice. Don't forget that. The past is the past."

Neither of them has any idea of what's to come and Juice has this repetitive thought, so firm and absolute, that if he could just go back to that very point in time to warn himself of just what was about to go wrong then all would be good. He pities the idiot he was, so naïve, so unaware of just how shitty life with an MC can be. He pities the man who thought having a black dad would trump all of the loyalty he’d shown to the club, the weak-minded, vulnerable kid who let a black cop pull the race card on him for leverage.

He’d go back and he’d shake himself. He'd still have the club, wouldn’t change that even now, just not the burdens he's had to carry.

"I'd do it all again if I could, lad," Chibs says, dragging Juice from the past into the uncertain present and it's like he's reading Juice's mind because it's exactly what he’s thinking. Juice blinks and clears his throat, leaning inward slightly so that the physical pressure of Chibs' shoulder against his own proves he's really there.

Sometimes, Juice doesn't trust what's right in front of him.

"I'd go back and open my bloody eyes, though. To you. To all this bloody shite. My head’s minced with all of it."

"No point lookin' back, brother. The past is the past. You told me that once. Can't change nothing. A cool guy told me recently that we should live our lives without regret."

"I don't remember saying that."

Juice rolls his eyes, amused.

"Shut up, asshole."

They both smile. It's a pained smile they share, tempered by the residue of the life-affirming truths they’ve aired in this room, but it's there. It's breaking through all of this.

"Right y'are."

Chibs leans back, his hand curled around the back of Juice's head. His fingers brush the growing hair in rhythmic, soothing motion that Juice finds he appreciates. Chibs has always been a tactile guy. He put it down to the Scottish in him. Juice flashes back momentarily to that moment with the Mayan’s, with Chibs’ standing in front of him, hand on his shoulder. He hadn’t been able to look him in the eye but a tiny, hopeful part of him had been wishing that Chibs would pull him close like he used to, tell him it would all be okay.

(Stop. Forget about it. Don’t look back.)

"Aye you're right, though, boy. The past is the past. Doesn't mean I can't wish for a better one, does it?"
"Guess not."

"Think we could all do with better pasts, Juicy. Every last one o’ us."

They sit in quiet for a little while. Juice never valued quiet. He always felt he had to fill the space, part ADHD, part racing thoughts he wanted to quiet. That's different, now. Chibs can be a man of few words when that mood hits him and Juice is just happy to know he's here. When one of the orderlies finally comes to take him back, Juice is struck with a sudden panic that he fights hard to control because this is it and he's not ready for it to end.

“Hours are done, JC,” the guy says, middle aged, blonde. Juice can’t remember his name, doesn’t care in this minute. “Got to get you back. You’re on a schedule.”

“I know.”

He takes a deep breath.

“I know.”

Still, it rises. He visualises two hands pushing down, down inside of him, grasping onto that rising fear and holding it there. It continues to rise and he continues to push until finally it retreats, tail between its legs. He's getting better at putting on a brave face, at controlling his emotions. He can't help but think that it's typical because, wouldn’t that have done him the world of fucking good way back then?

He stands up, and he feels taller and lighter.

He smiles as he holds a hand out to Chibs, an offering of peace and friendship and respect.

This feels like a bittersweet goodbye.

"Take care, Chibby. Thank you. Y’know, for hearing me out."

Chibs stares at his hand as if the gesture is alien to him, and for a second Juice thinks he's going to reject it, that this has all been some mind-game or, worse still, that the past half hour didn’t happen at all and they’re still as they were. Cold. Distant. One hating the other, the other wanting so badly not to be hated.

He falters, is about to pull his hand back, but Chibs grabs him by the wrist and pulls him close, hand cradling his head like Jax's had before he gave him that fierce Judas kiss.

There is no tension. No hatred. Chibs doesn't tell him he has betrayed him. Those words don’t burn his ear and pierce his shattered mind like Jax’s did.

He doesn't tell him goodbye like Juice was expecting.

He tells him he’ll see him soon.

More importantly, so very, very importantly, he tells him: “I love you, my brother.”

It's something.

It's everything.

(*)
Dr Harlow comes to see Juice before he leaves for home. It’s nice of him, Juice thinks, something he didn’t have to do but he guesses it’s all part of the patient/doctor bond thing he’s always putting so much emphasis on.

“How was it?”

“All good, doc.”

Juice is sitting on his bed and he feels...free. He knows how he looks, red eyed from crying hard and drained of all energy but he’s also drained of tension - drained of fear, of apprehension.

His hands rest palm-down on his knees and he’s sitting straight, not with his knees pulled up and his arms wrapped protectively around them. It’s been his go-to pose any time someone got close, shut-off and defensive when he’s not staring into space or looking like he wanted to run as far away as he could. Even in their one-on-one sessions he is not still and not particularly calm, spends most of their time together pacing the room with his arms folded in front of him.

He knows he seems better.

It’s amazing what just talking can do for him.

“How do you feel? You had a little moment earlier on. Did you implement the tools we’d talked about?”

When he looks up at his doctor, Juice smiles.

It may well be the first real smile he’s ever given him.

“I feel good. I did what you said. Took myself away for a little bit, got it back together - climbed back on the motorcycle and went at it again with my head clear.”

He knows the doctor’s analogy had actually been centered on a horse but Juice has never ridden a horse in his life, can’t stand the jittery fuckers and feels this analogy is more ‘him’.

“Do you feel like you resolved anything with this visit?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I think so.”

(God, I hope so.)

“That’s good. I’m glad it went how you wanted it to.”

The old man smiles that Piney grandfather smile and he hands him a cup of pills. Juice is taken back momentarily to Tig handing him something similar, a bag not a cup, and assuring him they were ‘vitamins’.

Juice isn’t that stupid any more.

Samcro slowly edged away at all that gullibility.

He takes that tiny cup and stares at them for a minute, stares at those little things that are changing the way he thinks, treating the cancer that has settled into his thoughts and multiplied. For the first time since he’s been here, he doesn’t even bother lining them up. Not by colour. Not by size. Not by shape. He doesn’t even look at them, just takes them obediently with a mouthful of water and a nod of his head.
It’s a tiny thing, insignificant to some but huge to him.

It’s one less thing he needs to control.

It’s one less thing he feels a compulsion to control.

(*)

Chibs’ relationship with Althea Jarry is bold and ugly and vicious and visceral. It is hard and ruthless and carnal and wrong.

They are a means to each other’s end, a dirty bond forged in a dirty world where the only understanding they have of each other is that they’re both entirely jaded by it.

They are a way of working out the brutal tension that each of them faces on a daily basis and it’s never going to be anything more. It’s never going to be anything but this, in all its ugliness, in all its brutality.

She slaps him and he slaps her back.

She pushes him and he pushes her back.

She fucks him, he fucks her harder, but it’s never enough to work out the knots in their spirits; the ties and the lacerations in their bloody souls. They are a means to each other’s end and it’s as exhausting as it is exhilarating; as consoling as it is depressing.

She told him it was done once upon a time but he knew she couldn’t stay away. A woman like her tastes the badness and she hungers for it. The threat he’d passed her way played no impact, he knows that, because he’s always been able to taste the corruption in this woman. She’s bad cop. There’s no good cop in her, never has been.

She came back, just like he knew she would.

He took her back, because she served a purpose to him.

“Did you know?”

Chibs holds her against the wall, her legs wrapped around him, her lips parted and her eyes daring him to press her more.

“Know what?”

She leans forward and runs her tongue over the scar on his cheek before biting his bottom lip hard.

Pleasure.

Pain.

It’s all the same.

“Did you know what was happening to Juice inside? With Tully?”

It’s not the most appropriate time, not with her underwear wrapped around her left ankle and her nails pressed hard into his back. Chibs can see the confusion cross her face, then the affront, then the incredulousness.
“Now, Filip? Really?”

“Aye, now.”

He pushes back harder. His eyes don’t leave hers. They hold her captive as his body holds her captive and it doesn’t please him any more, not like it had, not like it did when he held her over that car hood and screwed her in broad daylight.

It served a purpose then – but, now?

“It wasn’t exactly a secret inside. I knew the minute I saw him. You get a feel for these things. You learn to see it in their eyes.”

Chibs can imagine those eyes, those huge brown eyes that held so much fucking pain, even way back when.

He’s seen it. He knows it.

He wishes he didn’t.

“You didn’t even tell me you’d seen him. Slip your mind, lass? I thought we were give and take. You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours.”

(You push, I pull.)

(I bend, you break. )

“I’m investigating a murder, Filip. This thing? This thing we have? This has no impact on me doing my God damned job. Besides, I didn’t think you’d want to know. It’s not like there was any love lost between the two of you.”

How little she knows, Chibs thinks, then remembers the woman doesn’t know him at all. He’s never let her. He’s never let her see beneath the cut, even as she’s stripped him bare and tattooed him with her perfectly manicured fingernails of hers.

He’s never allowed himself to be vulnerable with this woman, has never allowed him to truly ‘be with’ her at all.

It’s foul, if you think about it. Aye, he’s not gonna lie, he enjoys the sex. It’s good. It’s really fucking good, but it’s not making him feel anything anymore. It’s not a relief any more. It’s not a release.

It’s another reminder of just how ugly he’s let himself become.

“I put a stop to it, Chibs. The guy looked pathetic sitting there, all bruised up like that, trying to put on a brave face for Unser and me. Who do you think pulled the strings for him to be shipped off to looney paradise?”

For a moment, Chibs thinks there’s a side to her he didn’t know, a good side, a side that might be worth letting inside.

Maybe there’s a shred of decency in her after all.

“You did that?”

“Needed to protect my witness. The guy’s not exactly shuffling a full deck of cards, Filip. After the Chinese got to him, I knew there’d have been nothing left of him if I’d let it carry on. Nothing I
could use, anyway.”

Just like that, it’s gone, vanished like a fart in the fucking wind.

It’s like a cold bucket of water poured over Chibs’ head, a dampener, a killer of mood and thought and everything else.

Nothing I could use anyway…

The Chinese…

He didn’t know about the Chinese. Jax didn’t say anything.

That information never did leak through.

“Anyway, he’s done, now. Unser’s holding me way off, says the guy knows shit. “

“He’s right.”

“How do you know?”

“I just know.”

He stops moving, releases the pressure he has held against her and lets her drop to the ground. Her feet fall flat and it’s only when she’s on the ground that he realises how small she is, how utterly fucking insignificant.

He reaches up, and he brushes the hair from her shoulder where it’s fallen. He pulls up her bra straps and he sets them, neat and precise. Tidy. Clean.

She looks confused.

Chibs has never been less confused about anything.

“This is done. “

“What?”

Crouching down slowly, he picks up her blouse, her belt, her trousers, her hair band. He presses them against her chest and he holds them there.

“Put your clothes on.”

“What is this? Am I missing something?”

She’s missing everything.

He’s not prepared to carry on missing things, too.

“Let’s just say I’m shufflin’ a full deck of cards, eh? Get dressed, Althea. And go. We’ll be in touch.”

Chibs doesn’t stay to listen to her incredulous protestations, her outrage at being treated like this, like one of those little junkie whores that ended up on the floor at Diosa weeks past. He bites his tongue to stop him from reminding her that she took money for every tryst, that she might do well not to distance herself from those 'little junkie whores', being precious more than them herself.
He doesn’t stay to listen to anything. He just walks into the bathroom and closes the door behind him.

He turns on the running water as hard as it will go and listens to it dash against the sink.

He can’t even hear her, now.
It’s Good Friday when the cops are given the all-clear to interview Juice about Tara’s murder.

It doesn't feel particularly good to Unser.

The guy’s been in the hospital for six weeks by then and is, according to his doctor, ‘fit for questioning’, though he won’t be allowed to leave the grounds to go to the station so they will have to make the necessary arrangements to come to him. It almost puts Unser at ease to know that it’s going to take place off of Jarry’s territory because the way she’s been acting recently has been a worry to him.

(‘Woman sheriff? Brave new world.’)

He’s cautious around her. She’s been a lot more gung-ho in this investigation than she had been before and that’s a feat in itself since she was like a horndog in a whorehouse already. To Unser, she looks strung out, as if she hasn’t been sleeping - or, at least, that she hasn't been getting laid. This morning, not for the first time, he arrived at the station to find her sleeping on the couch in yesterday’s clothes with a toothbrush in a cup on the table and a shitload of instant coffee within easy reach.

It’s clear she hasn’t been going home for days at a time and the papers, strewn over the floor, remind Unser of a college student's dorm floor when they're cramming for finals.

Unser’s seen this kind of thing before. Hale did it for a while when he was trying to build a reputation, 20 hour days with no break, sleeping on the couch or the floor so he didn’t have to waste time with the commute. It’s the fastest way to burnout at best, a prime breeding ground for mistakes that can be disastrous at worst. Unser has seen cases lost on technicalities because an exhausted cop hasn’t ticked the right box or carried out the right background check.

For Hale it was all about proving himself.

For Jarry it seems to be something else entirely because this case, Tara’s case, it’s pretty much nailed shut. Pretty much unsolvable. It's a difficult case to prove but with witness statements all testifying that Gemma Morrow had a vendetta against Tara Knowles-Teller (to the point where Restraining Orders were sought and domestic violence accused) it’s clear they have their gal. Or, at least, their best bet. Tara feared for her life and the lives of her children. Her colleague had seen it with their own eyes, the fierce manipulation from what one described as a ‘truly awful woman’.

Little Abel Teller came straight out and said he heard his grandmother confess, for Christ’s sake, and the only meaningful words Jax has uttered since his incarceration have been "my mother murdered my wife."

For some unknown reason, though, Jarry doesn’t seem to want that to be the case. She wants there to
be more. She wants it to be deeper, darker, more twisted.

Maybe she’s trying to be clever, Unser doesn’t have a God damned clue, but here she is driving this car as if she’s on her way to prove something – and, it makes him feel decidedly nervous.

“We all good here, Jarry?” he says as she slams on the breaks at the lights, her knuckles white around the steering wheel. “We’re not in a hurry. We got time.”

She says nothing, just stares pointedly ahead.

She hasn’t said anything about the case at all.

“So…you not gonna clue me in? We’re on our way to take a statement and you’re just gonna leave me blind?”

“You’re not blind, Wayne. You’ve seen all the same evidence I’ve seen.”

“Right. And…”

“And, there are some things that aren’t adding up. You’re a good enough cop to see that.”

“Nothing in this town adds up, Jarry. Sooner you learn to live with that the better.”

“What he told you doesn’t make sense.”

And, there it is.

She’s looking to catch Juice out. Looking to trip him up.

He shrugs his shoulders.

“Makes sense to me. I told you, he aint the smartest. Can’t lie for shit. Gets himself all twisted up in the details. It’s why they had him on comms duty and driving, for the most part. It’s why he learned to keep his mouth shut.”

If she hears it, she’s not listening. Unser can see her mind ticking over. He can see her words spilling into themselves and he knows, knows full well she’s probably been up all night running rings around herself trying to figure things out.

Part of him thinks he should call this off, tell her turn the car around and come back another day, but he’s held her off for long enough. He knows he can’t hold her off any longer and Juice doesn’t need the apprehension of this meet hanging over his head, holding him back.

The kid’s been doing well, recently.

“There’s something else, Wayne. There are things I just can’t wrap my head around.”

“Such as?”

"Motive."

Motive. The burden of proof of intent.

"Gemma had motive comin' out of her ears. Everyone knows that."

"Ortiz had motive for Roosevelt."
This is all new to Unser. He figured it a formality pinning that on Gemma because he didn't have motive.

"His arrest history shows at least 9 occasions when Roosevelt picked him up. 9 times in less than a month after fourteen months inside. A day, 2 days, all spent in lockup. All released without charge. That'd piss off someone with the patience of a Saint."

(He just kept hounding me, Wayne. All the time. Twisting me inside out. I couldn’t take it any more.)

“So? The guy was yankin’ his chain. Pickin’ on the little guy ‘cause he can’t get near the leader. You call that motive for murder?”

(‘It felt justified. How fucked up is that?’)

“I can’t rule it out. Neither should you. It’s called objectivity.”

“No, it’s called ‘clutching at straws’. Juice isn’t the type to fly off about things like that. Look at his rap sheet. You see much evidence of violence or aggression there?”

It’s the truth as Unser knows it. Juice is not, by nature, a violent man. He never was. He remembers him sitting in TM cuffed to the chair, remembers blowing a fuse and throwing a cup of his own piss over him in a quiet moment of malevolence.

He remembers Juice just blinking it away and ask him if he was happy, now?

Juice hasn’t got a short fuse. This kid’s problem was always that he barely had a fuse at all.

“His record’s pretty much all drugs-related. Cyber crime. Nothing to support your theory.”

“Drugs and gun crime, Unser. Roosevelt was shot with an unidentifiable weapon. Your boy Juice? Shot at cops a couple of months back."

"He shot at their tyres, Jarry. He wasn't aiming at them."

"Not the point. It shows a tendency to fire a weapon towards an officer of the law."

It’s almost like she wants it to be true, like she feels she has to justify her position in this town by finding a living, breathing perpetrator for this one senseness crime.

It also worries Unser a little because it's plausible.

“Come on, Jarry, you’re chasin’ rainbows here. Is it not more likely the woman who just offed her daughter in law wanted rid of the guy that was gonna call it in? Does that not make absolute sense to you?”

“That’s the thing.”

Oh, here we go, Unser thinks, because she’s got that look on her face, that look he’s seen a ton of times before when the conspiracy theorists are out in force. It’s a look that says “I am smarter than you,” a look that says “you might not be clever enough to see this but I’ve figured something out.”

He hasn’t got time for this today.

He just wants for this to be done.
The way Roosevelt’s body was found indicated he was shot from behind from someone standing in the doorway. Ortiz told you he found Gemma on the floor covered in blood. How could she shoot Roosevelt from the doorway if she was inside the house? The evidence indicates the shooter came from behind. From outside, not inside.”

She has a point, though not a particularly damaging one and a decent lawyer could reel out a convincing explanation in a second.

As it happens, so can Unser.

“How do you know she hadn’t started making a run for it? How do you know she didn’t see him entering the house about to call it in so she came back and shot him?”

“Because if she’d got out without him seeing her she could've carried on running. Why would she come back?”

“For the murder weapon, maybe? Gemma wasn’t an idiot. She’d have known her prints were all over it. Maybe she left it behind, panicked, went back to get it. Saw him standing there about to make the call and stopped him.”

“No, she wasn’t the one that shot him at all but a second person. An accomplice, namely Juice Ortiz - who happens to be the only person alive who claims to have attended the scene. Off the record, of course. From a mental institution.”

The way she says Juice's name unsettles Unser, almost like she's hanged him already, like it’s something she wants to be true. It feels like linking that boy to this crime is some kind of golden ticket for her and the sparkles are blinding her to everything else.

“What if it was club rules?”

“Club rules don’t extend to old ladies, Jarry. You need to start readin’ up on the paperwork I gave you. You’re not gonna get every bit of MC knowledge you need by ridin’ bitch with Chib Telford.”

He can see he’s hit a raw nerve when her jaw clenches, the way her fingers curl more harshly around the steering wheel. He thinks back to her clothes piled up in the corner of her office at the station, her toothbrush on the table, the dishevelled look she’s worn on the times he’s happened to see her.

He thinks back to her passive-aggression, her short temper, her sudden distaste for all things Club related, and it hits him full force.

“What happened? He decide your agreement wasn’t worth it anymore?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“When you’re floatin’ round my town, it is my business.”

“Happy to know my sex life is town business, now. Thanks for the heads up.”

Unser’s only glad he never had to resort to sleeping with the enemy to get ahead when he was in charge here. Sucks to be a woman, huh?

“Look, tell me what’s really going on here, Jarry? Why are you so dead-set on Juice having something to do with this? Is it cop loyalty? Sherif code? ‘Cause, I gotta tell you, Roosevelt? Wasn’t exactly walking on the side of the angels.”
“And, that means he deserved to be shot like a dog?”

“That’s not what I’m saying at all. I’m saying, he did enough shit to the club that Gemma had reason enough to want him dead, and that’s not even taking into account saving her own ass if he happened to stumble across a crime scene that had her name all over it. Juice? He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. And I truly believe that.”

He believes it, even though he knows the truth.

He believes it because, regardless of what happened with Roosevelt, it is the truth. Always was.

Juice was in the wrong place, wrong time, wrong damn life.

“He covered up a murder, at least, Unser.”

“Yeah, and look where he is. You think you can prove, beyond reasonable doubt, he was in his right mind when he did it? He was under duress from ten different angles, Jarry. Physical abuse, emotional manipulation, threat of death, the whole nine yards. His docs will attest to that. It's a wonder he could decide what socks to wear, let alone make any other choices with a clear head.”

She seems subdued. For now.

“Yeah. Well. If that’s the case, his statement will be enough to satisfy it, won’t it? I won’t need to press him anymore.”

Unser hopes that’s true.

He hopes Juice can put forward a convincing version of events, partly fed to him by Unser himself.

He hopes he can keep it together for long enough not to tear down the middle and spill his guts about Roosevelt, hopes his deepset guilty conscience doesn’t prevent him from saving himself at the expense of a woman who is already dead.

He hopes that six weeks of intensive therapeutic care in a specialist environment has given him enough free will and enough mind of his own to start acting and thinking for himself, for once.

He hopes that Chibs building bridges with him was enough to give him that little bit of confidence; that little bit of faith in himself. It’s that thought that strikes him more than anything.

“Is this because of Chibs? You trying to get to him through Juice?”

“Stop talking, Wayne.”

He does.

He does, because he knows in that second its true.

It leaves him with that sinking feeling he cannot, cannot shake; the thought that, what is supposed to be a straightforward note-taking exercise may well be nothing of the sort.

Love fucking hurts.

(*)

When Juice walks into that meeting room, lawyer in tow, he looks better than Unser has seen him in years. Healthier. Calmer. Stronger. Fuller.

He’s still thin, his cheekbones and jaw sharp where they used to be soft, and there’s still a slight
hesitance in the way he walks, but this place seems to be doing something right for him. His eye contact is strong, his back straight. There’s an ease in his smile that hasn’t been there since years ago and it almost takes Unser out of himself.

It’s so different to the walking dead man that met them in that grim meeting room in prison.

User watches the exchange he has with the orderly in the doorway, the tall black man with the big shoulders and the scar on his eyebrow. He’s not sure what the orderly says to him but they stand close and Juice is nodding in eager, quiet agreement. When the guy raises his fist and presses it together with Juice’s it feels completely familiar to Unser, a similar exchange to those that act as a show of support between brothers.

It’s good to know he’s found an ally in here. He's a kid that's always needed allies.

“Hey, son.”

“Hey,” Juice says as he sits down in front of Unser.

He pointedly avoids eye contact with Jarry, just as he did before, though it doesn’t last for long. Unser watches as he builds himself up, allows his eyes to move to her and smiles, pleasantly but cautiously. He nods his head in respectful greeting, but she doesn’t reciprocate. She’s all business now, with her tape recorder and her neat, neat hair and her office-pressed shirt that she’s probably worn before.

Juice’s lawyer, Paolo, he's a decent guy but his voice holds no emotion at all. Unser imagines him to be the type of guy to puts his kids to sleep by reading them stories at bedtime but more out of boredom than anything else. He's got a good record, though. Juice had enough cash in his side-business to pay for someone decent enough. He has enough cash stashed under his bed to pay him to turn a few blind eyes, too.

Whether Paolo will be able to handle the forceful ruminations of a woman scored is another matter entirely.

(*)

As anticipated, she treats it like an interrogation.

She starts off with his background, both criminal and personal, as is customary when taking what could be the most relevant statement in an entire case. They’re trying to get a baseline; a full picture of who this guy is and what he’s about.

She asks him about his birth town (‘Woodhaven. You know it? Think Ozone Park That kinda stuff’), the circumstances which led him to move to Charming (‘I just felt like getting’ away, nothing for me back in Queens, what, with my mother dead and all…’) and his association with the MC (‘I just ran IT for them for the most part’). She asks about the club’s time in prison (‘Yeah, things got a little bit ridiculous for a little while’), about the circumstances which led to him being committed to a place like (‘I wasn’t well.’).

Every questions she asks has an accusatory tone, no matter how benevolent it is, and it’s no surprise that confusion sets in. Every so often, Juice will look to Unser, who will urge him silently to continue in the way he’s been going. Calm. Focused. No-fuss, no noise. He's there as back up only because policy is two for every interview. He's surprised she even let him sit in at all.

He wonders of she's trying to prove a point.
Still, on more than one occasion Juice's lawyer intervenes warning Jarry to back off, that his client doesn’t need to answer questions with no basis and no relation to the actual case or she’s leading him in ways that aren’t strictly to his liking. Always she responds with her most professional smile, her most insincere apology – and presses on.

With all this posturing, Unser wonders if she’s even going to have time to get to where she needs to be. Juice’s doctors gave him an hour, no more, said that anything else would cut into his court-approved treatment plan and would put him in violation of the Judge’s hospital order. It doesn’t seem to bother Jarry, though, and it strikes Unser that she’s biding her time so that she can rush him through the important parts.

It’s a tactic he’s used himself when a time limit has been imposed. Ease them in relatively gently then hit them hard and rush then with the important questions so they haven’t got time to think. It can work well. It can also backfire drastically, and the risk for Juice is that he’s not strictly telling the truth. Unser knows him well enough that figures he may struggle under that kind of quick-fire pressure. He’s seen him do it before.

The look he gives him when the pace changes is quiet. Steady.

He’s telling him “Don’t slip up now, son.” He’s telling him “hold it together.”

He can only hope the kid hears him.

(*)

“Did you kill Eli Roosevelt?”

“What?”

The question is a slap in the face. Immediately, Juice’s lawyer objects and the man himself looks like he’s been physically hit.

Unser sighs.

“Jarry – “

"This isn't what we agreed to," the rep continues. He tells Juice he doesn't have to say anything. He advises him to invoke his right to silence.,

Unser sighs, but he knows it’s no use. She’s entitled to ask the question and she knows it. It might be a low blow in a place like this but, if Unser were not emotionally involved, he’d probably ask the question himself just to tick off the box that said he’d covered the possibility.

Jarry seems to take distinct pleasure in it, though. The way she leans forward is testimony to that.

“Did you kill Eli Roosevelt? It’s a simple question. Because, I can think of one or two reasons you might.”

“No. No, of course not. Why would you even think that? Jax already told the cops his mom confessed.”

Again, after four weeks of silence, those were the only words Jax would utter.

That his mother killed his wife, as if that excuses his subsequent rampage.

That “it’s all over.”
“Gemma Morrow confessed to killing Tara Knowles-Teller, that much we have on record, albeit only taking into account the word of a known murderer. But, Roosevelt? He didn’t say anything about him. All we have on Roosevelt is an unidentifiable bullet – and your word, spoken off the record to my colleague, here.”

“Juan Carlos, I must reiterate, you really don’t have to say anything,” the lawyer prompts. “Remember your rights.”

“No. No, it’s okay. It’s okay. I’m okay. I wanna talk. Get this over with.”

He looks her dead in the eye and Unser is shocked to see just how convincing he can be when he wants to be.

His gaze is imploring. Honest. Sincere.

“I didn’t kill him.”

Unser almost wonders if he’s convinced himself of that.

“I had no reason to kill him.”

“Other than the fact he had a phone in his hand and was about to call it in? Isn’t it true that you’d do anything to protect your family, Juice? Anything?”

“Within reason.”

“Doesn’t that include killing a cop so that the woman you saw as your mother doesn’t spend the rest of her life in prison?”

(‘She told me it was for the best.’)

(‘She told me that killing Roosevelt was what any club member would’ve done and that helping her was the best choice for everyone.’)

“What about revenge for the time he spent rattling your cage a couple of years back? That must’ve made you so angry, being pulled out in front of your brothers all the time like some naughty little schoolboy. Didn’t that make you angry, Juice? Didn’t that make you rage?”

He laughs at that.

“What, you think I’m not used to people trying to set me off? You think I don’t know I was seen as an easy target because I’m the only one with no family and everything to lose?”

“I think you’re well aware of it. I also think there’d be something wrong with you if you weren’t mad, because, you know what? I would be. I’d be so mad. I’d be so mad I’d want to show him he couldn’t push me and my club around anymore.”

Her voice gets louder, louder with every word. Juice closes his eyes.

He counts. His lips move.

When he opens his eyes, he smiles that disarming smile again.

"I'm not like you."

It’s when she pulls out the picture she crosses the line. They had an agreement in place with his
doctor, written and signed and sworn and promised.

She places it in front of him, a side by side photograph of Tara and of Roosevelt, each lying in a pool of their own blood.

She really does cross a line.

“Stop it. Stop it.”

“What the Hell are you doing?” Unser asks, and his own voice surprises him in how disgusted he sounds.

This could render all of this pointless. Worthless.

The wilful disregard for the agreement they had, an agreement set in place to protect Juice’s fragile grasp on his mental state, may well be one of those ‘technicalities’ Unser was thinking about earlier on.

That she does this at all is evidence of where her mind’s at – and, that this is personal.

She’s desperate.

“See this?” she says, as she points at Roosevelt’s limp, bloodied corpse. “This was a good man. And, by all accounts, this was a good woman, too. They were murdered in cold blood in broad daylight in a neighbourhood with neat cut grass and white picket fences, Juan Carlos.”

“I – I – “

Juice’s lawyer leans over, much to Unser’s relief, and snatches the picture away.

“We agreed, no pictures. A signed agreement. This is way out of the realms of legality, Sheriff, and I will be making a complaint. If you want to continue, I’d tread very carefully.”

She goes on. She goes on like nothing has been said.

She goes on like a woman who is on a mission, that mission being to pull, drag, tear and twist the truth out of her witness using any means necessary.

“Did you kill Tara, Juice?”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake.”

“N-No.”

“Did you kill both of them? We all know Jax wasn’t too happy about his wife taking off with the boys. Maybe he ordered you to do it and you followed like the good little soldier you are. Because it took some force to get that fork to penetrate her skull. Some might argue Gemma Teller didn't have that kind of strength. You might not look like it now but, back then? You looked like you could bench-press a decent weight.”

"You think I'd do that?"

"I don't know. I don't know what you're capable of. You tell me."

"Not that."
All of Juice's composure is gone. Unser sees it. His lawyer sees it, which is why he’s gathering his
papers together and preparing to cut this short.

If she’s looking to get him to snap, she’ll be in with no luck. What Unser knows of Juice is that,
rather than snap, he’ll simply shut down.

He’ll just…go.

“Was the Chinese lie to protect you, Juice?”

“Why are you even asking me this?”

“Because it’s my job to ask it. And, what I think? Is that you’re way, way more involved than your
pretty little doe eyes try to make us think.”

"You planning on charging my client? If not, then I suggest you consider your next words very
carefully."

It almost seems like she does, considers them as to what will inflict the most damage. What will
cause the most distress.

"If I can prove it, Juice? If I can pull it all together? No amount of lubricant is gonna prepare you for
that kind of invasion, do you hear me?"

Juice’s eyes widen. They flicker desperately towards Unser and he sees, now, that the boy's about to
break. He wasn’t prepared for this. He wasn’t prepared to see that image and he wasn’t prepared to
have the finger of blame for not one but two murders pointed in his direction by a woman acting
clearly out of her fucking mind.

He wasn’t ready for any of this, and the look in his eyes reflects that. His body language changes
entirely as she continues to press. His shoulders to go slack and his eyes lower down, stare off to the
right. He stops moving, stops breathing, by the looks of it.

It’s clear he’s no longer with them.

“Get out,” Unser orders Jarry. “Shut it down. Now. Jesus Christ. This has gone way too far. Is there
something wrong up here?"

He taps his head. She stays firm. Stoic.

It’s not unheard of for cops to press on personal matters but that was way, way beyond the realms of
fairness and acceptability.

It’s Unser who goes to Juice, who puts a hand on his arm and tries to get him to come back to them.
He doesn’t, won’t, is so far away he cannot be reached with physical contact, with a soft voice in his
ear, with his lawyer calling his name on one hand, and demanding that Jarry get the hell away from
his client in the other.

When she whispers under her breath, scarcastic to a fault, that “this isn’t convenient at all” Unser
crosses his own line and physically pushes her out of the door.

This is what stress looks like.

This is what stress, fear, overwork and a woman trying to prove a point looks like.

This is what true crazy looks like, and Unser doesn’t want to be a part of it anymore.
“Just go. Don’t you think you’ve done enough here? You feel good about yourself now? This make up for being dumped?”

As if a flick is switched, she looks towards Juice - pale, lost, gone - and, it visibly twists her.

It lasts a split second before the mask of hardness is pulled back into place.

"I’ll see you back at the station,” she says, and her voice gives away nothing at all.

(*)

"You need to give him a bit of space,” the doctor says as he kneels down in front of Juice, still gone, still in another world, still absent.

"Mind if I wait?"

"Not such a good idea."

"It might do him good if I can explain things to him,"

It takes twelve minutes to bring him back. Then, with lights shone brightly into his eyes, he starts to blink.

“Hey.”

He smiles warmly, confusedly. It puts Unser In mind of Thomas waking from a nap, looking around to see exactly where he is. That kid could fall asleep on a clothesline so it’s no wonder he has to re-establish time and place when he opens his eyes. Must be tough closing your eyes in one place and waking up in another. The only experience Unser has of that is the extreme abuse of alcohol he partook when his wife left him.

He imagines for Juice it’s a little like that, a little like waking with a hangover and wondering what the fuck happened the night before.

“Are you back?” the doctor asks, as he continues to shine the lights in Juice’s eyes. He raises his hand, still bandaged from the breaks, and swipes it away with a frown.

“Yeah. Yeah, what – what the - ”

“Do you know where you are?”

Obviously not, by the way he acts.

“What are you talking about? I’m – “

Again, he frowns, because he thinks he knows something but it keeps getting away from him. He looks so unlike himself, barely recognisable as a man who ever ran around with an MC. This guy, with his soft dark hair and his placid expression, is someone new and, if someone were to tell Unser he’s capable of half the shit he knows the club has pulled, he’d laugh in their face.

“Just give yourself a second to reaffirm orientation, JC. Hands together, that’s right. Center yourself. When you’re ready.”

“Huh?”

Unser is concerned. It’s a little disturbing to see him so undone, so unaware of what had gone before.
He asks quietly if he’d gonna be okay, if this is normal, if this has happened before, but his questions are unheeded as the staff tend to their patient. He can’t help but feel responsible. He’d told Juice that he’d fix things, that this would all be a formality.

Now he’s left with the worry that someone’s going after him.

When Juice finally looks at him it’s like he finally clicks.

"Hey, Juice."

"Wayne – “

“Yeah, I’m here. I’m here. You’re okay.”

His eyes clear and, almost immediately, they’re darting around the room. It’s obvious what he’s looking for. Unser can only reassure him that she’s gone, that she took her tape recorder and left – and that he’s so very, very sorry for the way she behaved.

"Wasn't you," Juice says, and his voice sounds so very far away. "Not your fault,"

He seems to be sinking, perhaps exhaustion, maybe something more.

It sounds a lot like defeat,

Juice’s doctor, concerned, again asks for Unser to leave but Juice asks quietly for him to stay.

"Just for a little bit. I'm okay now."

It's hard to refuse a struggling man a life raft.

Even if it doesn't seem safe at all.

"No more questions," the lawyer says. "That's an order."

And, Unser, who would normally arch his back at a fucking hotshot like this prick trying to piss on him, couldn’t agree more.

(*)

"Why did she say those things?"

"I have no idea. Your laywr’s gonna put in a formal complaint. So’s your doc. I don’t blame them. If I’d known she was gonna go off like – “

“It’s okay,” Juice says. “It’s alright. It wasn’t you. Don’t apologise for things that aren't your fault.”

He says it as if he's reciting it. Like it's something he's heard over and over. Must be one of his lessons; one of his therapist-led mantras that seem to be setting in.

"It was just – those pictures, man. All that blood. I wasn’t – I wasn’t ready for that. If I’d been warned, I’d have been able to get my head around it. Prepare for it or something. But seeing Tara lying there like that…seein’ Eli…God, I see it every night in my head. Just not like that."

He’d seen it first hand, he was there, but his head was so stuffed full of cotton and wool that it’s all a little far away from him, now.
Juice, Unser has leaned, sees a lot of his time in recent months through what can only be described as second-hand eyes, almost like he wasn't there at all but was watching from the outside.

('It's called depersonalisation.')

"The pictures, her attitude, it all just sent me someplace else."

"That happen a lot?"

"Mm-hmm. Less, though. Better now."

Better now that someone is finally addressing it rather than making like Jax and exploiting it.

"Yeah. There was a reason your doc requested no pictures. No visual evidence. I had no idea she’d even brought it along."

"This is the reason. This is why I'm in here for the next six months. Because this happens, and there's no tellin' what I might do when it does."

Unser lets that sit there for a minute, doesn't really want to think of that that means for him. What it must feel like to be outside of yourself.

"I messed up," Juice sighs. "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologise for things that ain't your deed. Remember? You did good. You were clear and precise. You told her everything you knew. She had a rocket up her ass and she went too far. Not your fault, son."

Shifting, he looks pained. Desperate.

"She thinks I killed Tara. I didn't. I would never Do that. No matter what."

"She doesn't think that. She's looking so hard she can't see the woods from the trees."

"But, she said – "

"No evidence, Juice. No proof. No witnesses. Plenty of witnesses that paint Gemma as an obvious choice, though, and paired with her confession to Jax? What Abel heard? It's nothing concrete but nothing in this case is concrete. All the evidence is tainted."

"Because of me and Gemma."

"Well - let's not go there, son. What matters is that she can't pin anything on you. This is just a desperate woman trying to close off a file with a perpetrator she can physically present and you fit for her. Trust me, son, you won't fit for the DA and you certainly don't fit for me. They're not gonna waste ton of cash on a case they can't prove."

"Why would she do that? She was like Tig's dog with a ham joint."

Unser sighs.

"I don’t know, son, but I could hazard a guess."

(*)

"Chibs," Juice says, after Unser has explained. He painted in the plainest colours possible because
he's not looking to sensationalise, just to explain.

He just wanted to settle his nerves a little by giving a possible reason.

"So, Chibs cuts her loose and she takes it out on me? Seriously?"

"Let's just say it didn't end well. I can't believe she's resort to this kind of entry level shit, not at her pay grade. It's unprofessional."

"She was boning Chibs for Intel, Unser. How professional can she possibly be?"

"Well, there is that,"

Juice takes a sip of water and sets his plastic cup aside. It's strange seeing him in sleeves but it seems like a conscious decision to hide the tattoos. The reaper and his friend.

"Speaking of unprofessional, You lied for me. About Eli. Why?"

"Meh. Figured someone needed to have your back. Nobody else was gonna do it. It's what Gemma would've wanted."

The look on his face indicates Juice doesn't quite believe it but he nods his head anyway, probably so as not to offend.

"Just keep saying what you're saying, son. It'll be over soon."

Juice nods his head, passive, quietly agreeable.

"Yeah. Sure. It's funny, I don't think we ever talked this much before. Deaths, funerals and murders, right? Isn't that what they say?"

"Yeah, something like that. You never stayed still long enough."

"Ritalin never did shit for me, even as a kid. Strattera gives migraines. Gave up in the end, just let it be. Drove the guys crazy sometime. Something they got me poppin' in here seems to be doing something though."

"Seems so. Seem to be a lotta good changes in you. You should be proud of yourself."

Again, the look on Juice's face is skeptical. It's sad to see.

"You need anything else from me?"

"No. I'll make sure she keeps it straight. If anyone asks I'll tell it like it is. We can do this another time if it comes to it and I'll make sure its not her."

"Thanks."

Later, when it all settles, Unser can't get right with it. He can't get right with Tara's death being used by a disgruntled fuck-buddy looking to hit out at someone.

There's no hesitation in his voice when he lays into Chibs at the clubhouse. He's mid-way through a game of pool with TO, looks to be winning the pot.

“You might wanna call off your attack dog. I’ve seen bitches in heat with less teeth than her.”
Chibs glares at him in that deadpan condescending way he always has.

“What are you prattlin’ on about, Wayne?”

Aware that this is not a conversation for club ears, Wayne indicates that they take this outside. Chibs, as curious as he is affronted, obliges.

"I'll ask again. What in Christ's name are you on about, Unser?"

"We got the all-clear to talk to Juice about the info he gave us on Tara’s murder. The good Sheriff tore him a new one. Set him back all kinds of miles. Get the impression she was pent up about you. Not satisfying her, Chibs?"

"Reel it in, old man. What did she do?"

The look in Chibs' eyes is precisely what Unser was expecting. Dark. Brimming with angry promise.

He gets up close. It's strange. Unser may be fearless in his terminal status but Chibs doesn't normally back down. Not like this.

"This is what happens when you dip your wick in cop pussy, Telford. It always ends up drippin' on someone else."

"Aye. Well, it won't be happening again."

"You sure about that?"

"I promise."

Tomorrow, before that taped interview even reaches the station for typing and before even a word can be passed on apology, Althea Jarry will pack her bags in that modest flat she barely sees, and she will leave. She will cite family problems, overwork, stress, burnout.

She will thank the department for their consideration and the opportunity it has afforded her.

Nobody will miss the tremble in her voice or the slight burn in her eyes.

They won't miss the pointed look she flashes in Unser's direction as if to say "you did this."

Unser will simply smile. Bid her farewell with a hope for the best, wherever life happens to take her.

He will warn her to be careful with such grace in his voice that nobody will hear the threat in it.

And, she will be gone. gone.

Wayne will look around, look around the town, his town, and he'll figure it feels brighter already.

There's no chemo for her kind of cancer.

They look after their own here.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Tig, anyone?

Thank you for all your wonderful comments. As daft as it sounds they really do help me write faster.

(Have a few replies to do, shall get to that on the train home tonight)

The day after he warns Jarry off with the promise of a dirty bullet in an unmarked grave, Chibs decides to unload the mental baggage.

If there's one thing he's learned it's that secrets are the cracks in a man's armour and mistruths are the poison that can seep inside and settle. The club needs transparency because trust is a thing that's hard earned yet so very easily lost.

He doesn't want to lose it. Not over something like this.

His first port of call is Tig because Chibs' strategy tells him he'll be the path of least resistance.

It's not that Chibs doesn't trust the other lads. It's just that they haven't been with him from the start, not like Tig and Hap. It feels like the history here is important. Tig and Hap, they know Juice, watched him grow up. They saw that daft brat from Queens patch in and work hard, fight hard, play hard. They also watched him fall hard. They saw him at his best and his worst and in cases like this it's important to see the whole, rather than just the fragments.

The other guys knew Juice only briefly or not at all, the sole life breathed into the boy being two dimensional, propaganda that Jax so convincingly pushed onto them.

('That boy deserves everything he gets. We find him? We kill him. Show anyone whose watching what SAMCRO does to traitors'.)

It still makes Chibs' stomach churn when he remembers similar words of hatred coming from his own mouth.

He opts for Tig over Hap because Hap's loyalty to Jax runs too deep and will be hard shaken. Still reeling from the events of the past few months, Happy won't be able to process it. Not with any kind of objectivity. Tig made mistakes of his own. He saw the power of Jax's malevolence, felt the harsh hand of his power-crazed tyranny when it reared back and slapped him hard in the face. He's doo-lally, aye, no doubt about it, but Chibs has no doubt in his mind that if you cut Tig from top to tail he'd bleed SAMCRO, and that loyalty isn't tied to the President alone.

He's with the daft bloody mutt when Chibs finds him. It's his pride and joy, that fucking thing, with her battle scars tattooing her as deep and as hard as the Reaper on her master's skin. Tig called her Cordelia after the Queen in King Lear, hardly a name befitting a gruff pitbull with a tear in her ear. Chibs had been surprised that Tig could read, let alone Shakespeare, but what he's is learning more about Tig these days is that he's a man capable of surprising anyone. Losing a child can change a man in so many ways, it seems, and the wild-eyed maverick shite that Tig used to pull has fallen by
the wayside.

The dog, beautiful in her ugliness like so many of them, shows she knows her place when she lies on the ground in front of Chibs and shows him her belly.

Chibs can only hope Tig will roll over as easily.

"You need me back inside?" he asks, taking a drag of his cigarette. "The whole place feelin' ugly without her and me?"

"Have to talk to you. One to one. Off the table."

It's amazing how quickly Tig can go from jackass to dead-serious.

"Sure."

He unfastens the dog's leash and signals for her to go on inside.

It's testimony to his patience with that thing that she obeys immediately.

(*)

Chibs knocks back a full glass of Ireland's finest in a few seconds flat.

Dutch courage for a Scot.

"What's this about?" Tig asks, after he's done. "This got something to do with Chucky? I heard you chewin' his ass about his scooter this morning. Kinda felt sorry for the nutcase. Bad enough he drives a pink scooter, but -"

"- It's about Juice."

It's evidence in favour of Jax's ability to flavour a person's opinion in the way Tig's defences prick up. Chibs sees the shift straight away, the poorly masked look of displeasure that settles behind his eyes.

"What about him? Thought we made a deal with Tully?"

"Aye, we did."

"Nothin' more to say about it, then. You gotta stop beating yourself up over the rat bastard. That shit's gonna mess you all up inside."

The words feel physical. Rat. Bastard. Chibs feels the anger building up inside of him but it's misplaced. He'd be a hypocrite if he did anything with it because until recently he'd have reacted in the exact same way.

It's deeply ingrained. Juice has been dehumanised to the point he's barely even a real person.

"It seems we were...misled."

As far as understatements go, its a mountain; a deep, cavernous gorge of a thing. They were more than misled, they were flat out twisted around a pack of fucking lies.

Chibs feels Juice deserves it to be told like it is.
"Actually, screw that. Teller was talkin' outta his fanny flaps. To put it crudely."

Tig responds to crude terms of speech and any good leader knows how to address his troops, be it a firm word, a gentle touch or, like here, something vulgar.

It's a tactic Chibs has been using since his army days.

"What are you saying, Telford? Someone been whispering in your ear? That's where it all starts, man. Chinese whispers."

In the circumstances, those colloquial whispers seem tragically fitting in their ethnicity.

Chibs sighs, swirling the amber nectar around his glass.

"I went to see him. Juice. In that unit."

"What? Are you crazy?"

The look of distaste Tig had worn when he'd heard Juice's name morphs into something worse. Now, it just looks like disgust.

"Why would to do that?"

"Because it was a wee maggot gnawing on my mind. Couldn't get it out. Had to see for myself."

What he saw was something that he'll never forget. What he heard, something that changed everything.

"Those places are not the kind you wanna set foot in by choice, Chibby. Not even for old friends."

Chibs knows Tig's history, knows he spent a long, long while in a place just like that after a conviction that is down on his record as 'indecent exposure'. It's not the only mention of lewdness and deviance but it's the one that landed him in a clinic. He's never given any full explanation as to what went on that day but Clay told him once it involved a naked Tig running laps around Charming Gardens waving a black dildo in his hand.

Chibs didn't ask again, can only be grateful that his 'proclivities' seem isolated to Venus alone, these days.

"I needed to hear his side, Tig. See what the boy had to say for himself. Nobody ever bothered to hear him out.

"Probably because he's got his dick in so many lies he doesn't know what the truth looks like any more. After what Jax told us, that shit with Roosevelt? With Miles? Miles was a good guy, man. He didn't deserve that."

"Aye. Aye, he was, but so was Juicy once upon a time. We both know that."

Chibs smiles tersely because the more he thinks about it, the worse it gets.

"We also know how he can't lie for love nor money. But, Jax?"

("Let me tell you, that kid's been able to spin things in his favour since he was nine years old")

"Well, he's got it all down to a fine art."
They were so certain about Jax's truths, so sure that they were ready to cut off Juice's ink and throw
him away like a bag old worn scrap.

It's hard to imagine, now.

"In plain English, Tiggy, it seems our esteemed boy king was a little sparing with the truth.

"Yeah, well, we already knew that, didn't we?"

Tig doesn't know to half of it.

Chibs, clear minded and strong in his resolve to set things right, sees fit to fill the crazy bastard in on
the dirty, ugly reality of it.

(*)

They sit side by side at the bar, Chibs on the left, Tig his literal right hand man. There's a burden in
the space between them, a blond and blue eyed weight that it seems just got heavier. Chibs had laid it
all out in a neat line in front of Tig and each revelation was like a blister popping, it's innards spilling
out all over the table.

"There's more," he says grimly, "but that's not for me to tell you."

He left out the sicker details of Tully and the Chinese for now because that truth isn't his to share.

For five minutes, Tig has just stared into his Jack on the rocks shaking his head, as if the answer to
his troubling questions might somehow be in the bottom of the glass like some fucked up stand-in
tealeaf scenario.

"Fuck."

The periodic word Tig utters resonates with Chibs.

"Fuck."

"Aye."

It's as if he can't get it right in his skull, like this new version of events is spinning so fast inside of
him he can't pin it down.

"I didn't think he was screwing Juice's tight little ass. I thought I was the only one he had by the
nutsack."

"You weren't that, Tiggy."

Unfortunately, he wasn't. Not by a country mile.

"Jesus, the kid's a retard. We all knew it. Fucking with him feels like fucking with a twelve year old.
What the Hell was he thinking?"

"I don't think he was thinking at all, brother. That's the God's honest truth. He saw an opportunity
and exploited it."

Exploited a virtual orphan with the promise of a home and a life if only he'd do his bidding.

Whoring him out to Tully just seals the abuser cliche.
The fact that Tig believes without question speaks loud and clear for Chibs, indicates a much deeper discord than he had imagined. Hap would've been defensive, that much he knows, and his question would not have been "how the fuck could Jax do that to Juice?" but "why the fuck is that dirty traitor lying about Jax?"

Tig's been there, though.

He didn't buy the t-shirt because the experience has imprinted onto him permanently like keloid scars on his mind, like the lines Chibs sees every time he looks at himself.

"I ran Jarry out of Charming because she was rattlin' his chains. Trying to get him for Tara's and Eli's murders. Unser seemed to have an inkling it was something to do with me pullin' away from the lass."

"Cop tail, man. Worse than Mexican hooker pussy. I warned you that."

"I know. But, you cannae teach an old Scot, not when he's getting his end away I figured the boy's probably had his fair share of being pushed around. After all we put him through, it was the least I could do to warn her off him."

It's not all they can do, though, and that's just another thought that's been pressing on Chibs.

Tig knows there's more to this. Chibs can tell by the way he takes in the info, the way he sucks his bottom lip in, the way his eyes flicker in such a way that Chibs knows the cogs are turning away.

"So, where you goin' with this, Prez? Is this the mother of all guilt trips or is there a point to it?"

Chibs isn't quite sure. He's just testing the water at the minute, dipping his ugly little toe in and seeing if anything bites.

He takes a drag from his own cigarette and releases it slowly, slowly...

(He remembers a time when the smoke would've seeped through the hole in his face but that was another life ago)

"We never took his cut. After the thing that came through with Tully, never took a vote on it. We agreed no mayhem but - the kid's still got his cut. He wasn't meant to survive Stockton."

"Isn't there some kind of double jeopardy by-law? Y'know, in case people rise from the dead or something? Didn't Piney make them plan for every eventuality?"

"This all kind of sets a precedent."

"Yeah, but Chibs, come on. Even if what he told you was true, the boy's seriously fucked up. I mean, seriously fucked up."

"This coming from you, Trager?"

Second chances don't normally come with the territory but there's something about this case that poses the question of whether they should. Or could.

"When we voted mayhem in the first place it was on the back of some pretty shaky intel. Christ knows what Jax's game was in what he did to Juice but can you honestly say that, given what I just told you, you'd have voted yay if you'd been dealt the full hand?"

There's not a chance in Hell. Not Tig.
Especially not Tig.

But, memories run deep. So do feelings. Experiences, they all know, can change a person entirely to the point they're barely recognisable.

"Those places," Tig says, his voice somber, "they change you. They put all kinds of shit in your head. Christ, when I got out, first time I held a gun I had a voice in my head telling me how wrong it was. First time I took a hooker it was telling me I wasn't right. They took the Tig outta me and it took me months of sordid porn to put it back. Can you imagine what it'll do to a dipshit like Juicy?"

It's a valid point. That, together with the experiences he's had, might make him unreachable entirely. Trust Tig to be the voice of reason.

But, what if he's not unreachable? Does that idiotic moron of a kid, with his original innocence and need for camaraderie and his almost-desperate value of family, not represent the very foundations of what John Teller wanted for this club?

Chibs thinks he does.

"I wanna see him, man. Just like you said. See for myself."

"Aye, but that would mean setting foot inside. Tig."

"Yeah, well, I owe it to the dumb bastard. If I see for myself. I'll know."

"Know what?"

"If there's any way back for him.

Or, if months of therapy is going to make too good a man of him to ever consider the idea of going back.

"I'm the only one whose been there, man. Juice and me? We were both fucked by the same guy, and if he's been fucked by the same place? I need to know before we start talkin' cuts."

Tig isn't wrong.

That's the painful part.

The more painful part is that there's so much more that's fucked him, literally and figuratively.

(*)

Juice's mood is low the day that Tigger comes. It's touch and go whether he's going to be allowed the visit at all, so deep is the 'funk' he has got himself into.

"You might as well take this from me as well," he'd said bitterly of the threatened cancellation, "you've taken everything else."

All he keeps hearing it that it often gets so much worse before it can get better, that it's normal to have to trial med regimens before finding what works, but it's hard to listen to that meaningless nonsense without wanting to drive someone's head into a wall, preferably his own.

He just wants out, now, and if that's not going to be allowed he just wants to check out. Mentally. He's tempted to ask them to snow him just so he sleeps through his 'sentence'.

He just wants out, now, and if that's not going to be allowed he just wants to check out. Mentally. He's tempted to ask them to snow him just so he sleeps through his 'sentence'.
"This place," he says to anyone who will listen, "it's making me more crazy than I ever was."

It riles him that his mood is somehow seen as a positive; that his frustration is viewed as progress because anger is so much better than despondency and it's natural to feel anger at the perceived loss of one's liberty.

He feels like they're laughing at him, and that just makes matters worse.

Maybe it's got something to do with the fact it's Tig's name on the visitor's sheet. He didn't refuse the visit on the basis that anyone is better than no-one but he's not having a good track record with visits lately. The last person he wants to break down in front of is a man who has made no bones about how ridiculous and incompetent he thinks Juice is.

He wonders if he's coming here to harass him like the captive monkey he feels like.

"Hey, Juicy."

Any slanted suspicion he may have had about Tig's intentions should disappear the minute Juice lays eyes on him, all passive body language and pity-filled eyes, but somehow it just pisses Juice off even more.

Tig should never look meek. It's like ripping the teeth out of a pitbull.

It's wrong.

"Why are you here?" he asks curtly. There's no time for niceties.

"Wanted to see you."

"Why? So you could see if everything Chibs told you was true?"

"No, so that I could get my dick sucked. What do you mean, why? I came here to apologise."

"A little late for that."

Juice hates himself for being this way because, out of them all, Tig was the only one who would even look him in the eye but today is a bad day and he hasn't got time for playing around.

He hasn't got time for anything.

He sighs, and his whole body sinks with it.

"Look, I'm sorry. I appreciate the sentiment but...I don't want your balls in my mouth, and you made it clear that was the only way we were gonna be friends."

He doesn't want any more balls in his mouth for as long as he lives.

"Plus, the whole mayhem vote thing, y'know? Kinda hard to move past."

"Then, why did you agree to me coming here?"

"Didn't think you'd show up anyway. I was never exactly high up your list."

At that little bit of passive-aggression, Tig snaps.

"Stop being an asswipe, you whiny little shit."
"Excuse me?"

"Did they cut you a vagina in this place? I just told you I'm here to apologise and you're acting all bitch on me? You just gonna sit there and cry like a whore about how shitty your life is or are you gonna invite me in so we can talk like men?"

Tig snaps - and it reduces Juice to silence. For a second, he just stares at Tig like he's been struck because that's a brutal truth right there. That's a brutal truth and it's the first time anyone's actually thrown it at him.

Tig's face is thunder - and, ironically, it clears some of the dark clouds.

Juice sighs, a smile finally breaking through the current fog because all he's wanted today was for someone to put him in his place.

"Shit, man. Thanks."

"For what?"

"For calling me out on my bullshit. I've been an asshole all day and not a single one of these clinical pricks has done a thing about it. Not one. Fucking eggshells, man."

Tig hated that same nicely-nicely approach, where he'd be an absolute jackass and they'd still smile patronisingly and tell him it was good he was expressing himself.

"Damn, don't I remember that well? Half the time I used to throw shit just to see how much would hit before they'd throw it back. And I mean literal shit."

"Why am I not surprised by that?"

Of everything that's messed with his mood today it's been their passive approach that has pissed him off the most.

As much as he is wary of the guy, thank fuck for Tigger
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Tig forms an understanding of Juice.

"They say when you're out?"

They're out right now, technically. Outside. Outdoors. Juice had asked if he could take his guest to see the garden and the staff had obliged, though not without supervision.

Tig has no interest in seeing the garden but Juice had clearly seen his poorly hidden agitation at being 'inside'. The kid's always been oblivious to danger but perceptive to feeling, good for normal life but not exactly prime for an MC.

"Is it gonna be weeks? Months? Years?"

"The programme's six months. The Judge signed it off, said it'll be on my record but that the circumstances will be recorded. Shooting at cops doesn't sound as fucked up if you're crazy. It would've been 18 months if I'd stayed in jail so this is better. I've already done six weeks so that's..."

He's counting in his head. Part way through, he gives up.

" - a lot more weeks."

"CBT? Group? All that bullshit?"

"Yeah."

Bonding over psych therapies, Tig thinks. What the fuck is this and what happened to bonding over tits and pussy?

"CBT. Group sessions. Critical thinking. Stress management. All of that."

Juice smiles and rolls his eyes.

"Oh, and anger management..."

"Anger management? For a pussy like you?"

"Yeah, I know."

Juice isn't angry, never was, but Tig figures it's just another government tick-box designed to show that they're tackling criminal behaviour.

It's always the fucking government.

"I'm not complaining, could've been worse, but...six months."

"I did eighteen. I've taken dumps longer than six months."
"Cause you never got to Clear Passages."

The name of that place always cracked Tig up. He knew the kid came up with it himself, ("I'm planning on opening a hair place called Curl up and Dye") but he never thought to congratulate him on its comic genius.

He always avoided praising him at all, never forgave him for that dog incident that left him with a tooth embedded in his ass and an ugly scar to go with it. Tig’s a fan of holding petty grudges so he’s probably not the best person to criticise Jax for his but Tig’s is more in good nature; a joke, more than anything else.

"I offered all the time. 50% discount and everything. Brothers rate. I was practically giving it away."

"You think I'm letting someone stick a pipe in my ass?"

"C'mon, Tig, when was putting things in your ass an issue?"

Touché.

"Jackass."

Tig's never sat with Juice, never talked to him. The kid always pissed him off for some strange, inexplicable reason. Who was that happy? Who smiled that much if they were all there upstairs? Who would go to all those lengths just for approval the way that Juice did? It was just sad.

After Stockton, he started to see him in a different light. He still thought he was an idiot, always would, but he was a loyal idiot, an idiot who would eat, sleep, sweat and shit the club if he were asked to. Here was a guy who would literally bleed for the good of SAMCRO and, in the days after being released from the hospital, would shed even more when they went up against the Nazi scumbags. No question. No hesitation. He just went for it. Tig saw how he walked funny for days after that run-in, knew he took a few blows to his healing kidneys. Caught him popping pills for weeks after but he didn’t say a word.

Juice had earned his begrudging respect at that point.

He's shed so much more than blood now. Looking at him now, he's shed his fucking spirit, but despite all that he's a good kid. Despite all the shit the club put him through he's still positive, albeit tentatively.

Again, Tig would ask, who does that? Who is that enduring?

"What will you do? Once they take the locks off?"

Juice shrugs. If Tig were in his place, he wouldn’t want to think about it either.

"I still got my place. The weed shop. Clear Passages. With the tech jobs I get thrown my way I can make enough to live."

He smiles. It's a sad smile that doesn't really register anywhere. A clown smile. Tig thinks, painted on by grief and loss. He knows how to apply that smile himself. He perfected it when his little girl died.

The only one to see that it's a mask at all is Venus, and she removes it with such delicate grace and tender loving care that he sometimes forgets he's been wearing it at all.

"I got a life here, Tig, even if it's not the club. I got nowhere else to go. The thought of just packin'
up and leaving? I don't even wanna go there. I'm trying not to think that far ahead. If I think too much I get nervous. Sets me back."

"I hear you. Setbacks in this place are not what you want - although, I gotta say, I developed a leather fetish. Something about heavy duty restraints bein' slapped on by a buxom blonde. I can go for that."

"Problem is, it's never that. It's big black guys. Less of a turn on, more of an inconvenience."

"Hey, I'm an open minded guy."

He's famed for being an open minded guy. Likes to dance with the freaks, as Venus says, and she's not wrong. The guys in this place would have him believe there was something wrong with him for that but Tig is exactly who he is supposed to be.

Juice grins at him, his real grin, the shit-eating grin that Tig could see his face in, the kind of grin that always told him this boy was trouble.


“Now you're getting’ it.”

He's a real smartass. He never used to be.

Or, maybe it's just that Tig never bothered to know him at all.

(*)

"Hey pal, I'm not gonna molest him. Could you give us some space?"

It might just be bad memories coming to the surface but Tig just can't stand the proximity to the literal men-in-white-coats.

It’s not just that. They can’t speak freely with enquiring ears so close within reach.

"How's he gonna feel trusted with you keeping him on a leash, huh? I give my fucking dog more space than this."

“It’s policy.”

“Policy my ass. You trying to justify your existence? Show your authority? Get outta here.”

"Tig - c'mon. He's cool. He's just doing his job."

Tig knows Juice is right. The guy's just doing his job. He just remembers how cornered he felt when they did this, following at a few feet, always waiting to pounce should he step out of line.

Maybe it's his tone. Maybe it's his Einstein hair and his crazy motherfucker eyes. Whatever it is, the guy falls back a couple of feet and it's nothing but it's something all at once.

“Thank you. You see? All you gotta do is learn how to talk to these people.”

There's a bench in the middle of the grounds. It looks into a patch of yellow flowers. They're always yellow. They're always tended to perfection too, as if showing that if these fucking flowers can be tended to and kept well, so can the basket cases locked behind the walls.
They’re a temptation, though, because destroying beautiful things is part of the pathology of so many disorders. It’s why men beat women. It’s why mothers harm their children. On a lesser scale, there’s nothing more satisfying than pulling the petals off a flower and watching the stalk wither away.

He watches as Juice fiddles unconsciously with the bracelet on his wrist as if willing it off but it’s not going anywhere, fortified by design.

"Easier getting outta handcuffs than that thing," he says.

"For when your safeword fails, right?"

"Actually, yes."

They fall into silence, a tentative yet comfortable quiet aside from what is playing on both of their minds. It’s loud for Tig. He can only imagine how much it’s screaming for Juice. What’s going on? Why are you here? What do you want from me? What do you think of me?

Tig breaks the quiet before it breaks him.

"He had me too, y’know? Jax. For a while, anyway, before he dug into you. It was do or die, man."

Juice just sighs, like this is the bane of his life.

"You do as I say or you're out," he says, repeating Jax's words. "And, you know what happens if you kill a brother."

Eyes closed, he looks like he's just trying to breathe.

"He told me I betrayed him. Not the club, him. But I’m starting to wonder if it was him that betrayed me."

Juice speaks slowly and quietly so as not to be heard by his guard dog, but there's no doubting the pain in his voice. There’s no doubting the thinking and rethinking, the obsessive thought processes that go with something like this. Tig can see it in his eyes. He knows this inside and out but at the same time he doesn’t know it at all.

There’s as much confusion as there is pain. He looks so jaded by it all.

(‘My brave warrior. What has jaded you so? What rancid, ugly things did you see today, my darling, sweet Alexander?’)

"I never wanted to kill a brother. It just got out of control. It was an accident."

Tig does not have the same excuse for Opie, for Donna.

He feels Juice would benefit from knowing that, right now. He also feels he’d benefit from speaking it aloud because purgation is a beautiful thing.

"Opie wouldn't have been an accident," Tig confirms. "Donna was a mistake, but if that had been Opie driving that car? I’d have hit my mark as intended. But, it would've killed me. To put a bullet in the head of a Son? I know how you feel, Juice, I really do."

“It killed me. It still kills me. I can still see his face when he’s comin’ at me. So hateful. Doesn’t make it right, what I did.”

“But, it makes it understandable, Juice. That’s the thing. Opie and me? There’s no excuse for that,
just an old man’s paranoia buzzing in my ear. An order.”

Just like Darvany was for Juice, albeit with less of a threat of death hanging over, Tig imagines.

“But, if you’re on the ground with only a hair between yourself and the fucking reaper, you do what you have to do.”

“Jax never saw it that way.”

It seems Jax never saw it any way for Juice, that no matter what he did that kid was going to feel the full force of his Shakespearean wrath.

With Opie, Tig had Clay's words in his ear. He had Stahl's twisted plots weaved around Opie, around the club - but, now that he thinks about it clearly, Why were they given an 'out' for that when Juice wasn't given an 'out' for Miles? Why was all that blood on Stahl when nothing was ever put on Roosevelt?

If what Juice says is true, what happened with Miles was not murder. Not like Donna. Not like Jury. Not like Clay, executed in cold blood because in his eyes he was trying to protect the club.

What was Jax’s angle here?

"What did I do that made me so different? None of it felt fair. It just felt uneven."

What did he do? Did he act as a mirror for Jax's own guilt? Was it something he couldn't bear to look at?

Did Jax look at every moral conflict that Juice expressed and resent him for bringing it to light?

"I shouldn’t have been given an out, Juice. Jesus, every time I look at those kids and remember what I took from them, it just gets me. All the time."

"But, you got to stay. Nobody voted mayhem for you. You weren’t choked until you couldn’t breathe any more. You weren’t sent to prison to – to – “

To what?

Juice shakes his head, doesn’t complete the thought.Tig has an inkling where he might’ve been heading with that but he won’t go there, not yet, because it’s bad enough how it is without adding that to the mix.

“I just can't wrap my head around what I could've done to make him hate me so much when everyone else got his mercy.”

It’s a painful question. Tig can’t even imagine how it must feel to look around at your brothers and feel like you are the only one; to see them being given a pass for each and every fuck-up while you’re still in the stocks for your own.

Juice would’ve died for that club, earned an Aryan Brotherhood leader’s respect for that very fact.

And, still, Jax would’ve spat on his grave.

"I can't answer that, kid. Only he knows. If it’s any consolation, I don't think he had much love for anyone.”
It’s not. It never could be.

“I guess some of us were just easier to push than others.”

(*)

"Would you go back? To an MC, I mean."

Tig throws it out there just to gauge the response. The Juice he knows would perk up instantly, those big fucking eyes as eager as a little kid at Christmas.

This new Juice is not exactly reluctant but it's the same face chicks get when Tig suggests anal; a look that says "I like the idea but I'm scared it's going to hurt."

"I've ran with a crew since I was fifteen. A gang. An MC. That's pretty much half my life. I don't know how to be without one."

"But now you're on your own you've started wondering, right?"

“Maybe.”

Absence can make the heart grow fonder.

It can also make reality set in.

"My doc's been talking to me about realistic goals. Based on my track history, there's not an MC that would come within three feet of me if they weren't there to kill me."

Tig could've said the same for himself and yet he's still there, still kicking around.

The fact that Juice's 'track history' is not all of his own doing works in his favour, at least for Tig. It's not an excuse but it's reason enough.

He bites the bullet.

He throws it out there because there’s no point in pissing around the room any more.

"You still got your cut, kid. Chibs threw out a hypothetical about letting you keep it."

"He did?"

It’s obvious he’s trying to keep his interest in check but Tig can see it, can see it as it starts in his chest, as his back straightens and his hands clench into fists. He can hear it in how his voice raises at the end, how the energy seeps up into his face as he contemplates the idea.

“He says the Mayhem vote was based on flawed evidence. Not a chance in Hell we’d have gone that way if we’d have known. It all just got outta hand.”

“It’s just – I’ve been thinking a lot about it since I’ve been in here. I never wanted any of that. Guns. Drugs. Killing. That wasn’t what I got into it for. Yeah, I’d peddle a little weed and coke but, Jesus, nothing like that. I just wanted the bikes, man. “

“The steel and the pussy between your legs.”

“Right.”
“The family.”

Juice swallows hard.

“Yeah.”

He was never made for the life they went into. It was always obvious. Again, who smiles that bright? Who tries that hard? Who needs that much? Who feels that much pain and guilt and sorrow for each and every little transgression? They had it all at the beginning before the club went South. It was paradise for a lonely kid like Juice; the surrogate family he never had.

Then it all changed.

“It wasn’t what I thought it was gonna be, Tig.”

Juice, in essence, was what it was supposed to be. Family. Love. A home town. A family. Jax was what it became. Death. Mayhem. Twisted fucking loyalty.

"Things are different. It ain’t like old times, not like it was. Too much shit has gone down for it to bounce back right away. The club’s still recovering. But, it's getting better. Jax did a lot of bad stuff but we're good now, mostly. We got stakes in the business."

"Drugs? Guns?"

"Movin' away, man. Chibs has got it all figured out. We're going legit. It's gonna be the way it was meant to be, once we get our footing right."

"A little late."

"Better late than never, Juicy. It’s never too late to change. Trust me, I know."

He knows that, years ago, he never would’ve entertained Venus, not in the way that he does. He knows he never would’ve been able to make something out of her that wasn’t just casual and meaningless and all on his terms.

Since his girl died he’s looked at things differently. There’s no more posturing, no more tough guy shit. No more bigging it up when all he wants to go is go home with his head in someone’s lap and his face in a mountain of breasts or curl.

“IT all sounds good, Tig, it really does, but I don’t think the other guys would be as quick to forgive. Teller blood runs deep.”

It does. It always did.

Tig knows the only time he’s seen Happy show any kind of overwhelming emotion was when he thought he was losing Jax. He remembers Rat’s face when the Mayhem vote went down. But, how would they feel if they knew?

Tig knows deep down that loyalty can be deconstructed, given the right ammunition.

Chibs is that ammunition.

“The Pres is...emotionally invested, let’s say. You’re his fucking kid, man. He loves you like nothing you’d ever imagine, like, really fucking loves you. I got kids. I know. I don’t get to see mine. He doesn’t get to see his. But he always had you. And, I got Rat. I’m not saying you should call him Daddy but he’ll always look out for you. He always did. Even if it doesn’t seem like it.”
It doesn’t feel like love when a man is beating you senseless, that much Tig knows. It doesn’t feel like love when he’s telling you to swallow a bullet.

Deep down, he knows he’d do the same for Rat. He’d beat him if he thought it would teach him a lesson. He’d tell him to suck on metal if it meant giving him an out that was quick and fast and didn’t hurt.

He forgave his daughter time and time again.

“He’ll make it work for you, and if he doesn’t? Well, at least you can say you gave it your best shot.”

Juice nods his head. His smile is young, almost shy. Chibs hadn’t warned him how young the kid looked with his hair grown, with his college-kid clothes and his white sneakers.

“Are you turning sentimental in your old age, Tig? I never thought I’d get a pep talk off you.”

It’s true.

"Blame Venus, man. That girl's changed me. "

"Venus? Really?"

Tig often forgets she hasn’t been around forever, so deep-seated she has become in the lives of the club. Of course, Juice hasn’t been around to see it, to feel it, to know her, to see just what she’s capable of bringing to the table.

He just looks confused.

“But, how – “

“Don't even go there, kid.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean - I mean - right."

Watching him stumble over his words is a thing of true beauty, Tig thinks, and a pastime and pleasure he’s truly missed. He tries to imagine a clubhouse without it and it feels empty, somehow. Things have been empty since Juice was gone and it was hard to figure out why.

This goes a long way in explaining.

“You’re cute when you’re flustered, Anyone ever tell you that?”

“Shut up.”

“Pretty little blush on your cheeks – look at that.”

“Seriously, stop. But, really, how do –y’know – and her. Does she have - "

“– a penis? Not info for little boys, Juicy. Use your imagination.”

“Fuck, no?”

“You don’t know what you’re missing.”

There’s an ease with which they speak, now, an ease that wasn’t even there before all of this. Tig is starting to realise that his own standoffishness can deny him a lot of good things, can deny him the
pleasure of a lot of good people.

Juice is still an idiot but he’s a good idiot.

Juice has made mistakes – but, the guy’s heart has always, always been in the right place, and isn’t that the very foundation of their club? Isn’t that good intention something that needs to be built on to try to crush the malice that overcame it?

“Look, it's there. Provided the other guys get on board, it’s there if you want it. I was holdin’ back because I wanted to be sure.”

"Sure of what?"

"Sure your heart was in it.”

It is.

“Sure you could be trusted.”

With the right guidance, he can.

“That you weren't gonna step back in and lose your fucking mind again, cause, let me tell you, if that had have been me? If Jax had gone that way with me? You'd have been picking me up off the fucking highway."

It’s the God’s honest truth, and it shows a kind of courage, bravery and durability that you’d never, ever guess from Juice’s face.

He knows that Juice won’t say no.

He also says he won’t say yes, not without being absolutely certain.

"It's gonna be awhile for me. I got some serious issues, Tig. A lot of shit to deal with. A ton of baggage to offload. I'm not even gonna lie. Without the meds I’m a mess. Even with them I can’t sleep, I barely eat, I have the most morbid fucking thoughts in the world. That’s gonna take time."

"We’ve all got serious issues, kid. Half of us just aren’t man enough to deal with ’em. You just get yourself well, get yourself straight, and we’re there if you need us to be. That fair?"

He looks so taken aback it breaks Tig’s fucking heart.

“Yeah. Yeah, that’s fair.”

Tig can see the issues. He can see the shit. He can sense the baggage, though some of it hasn’t even been brought to the surface yet. He can sense the strain and the conflict, can feel the way Juice’s foundations have been shaken to such a point they’re as weak as plastic; as brittle as fine bone china.

But, he’s fighting. That's the important part.

He’s fighting as hard as he can because what else can he do?

"Tell Venus thank you."

"For what?"

"For making you less of an asshole.”
She’s got a lot of talents, that man who knows she’s a woman.

That may just be her meanest feat yet.

They fall quiet again and, out of nowhere, Juice smirks his cocky little shit smirk, the one that always meant his mind was ticking over.

“Spit it out.”

“So – does Rat call you Daddy? That one of your little bonding games?”

Tig looks at him, looks him dead in the eye, and his face gives nothing away.

“As a matter of fact he does.”

The kid looks like he’s swallowed a wasp and it’s now that Tig remembers just how fun it is to fuck with him.

Maybe that’s where it all started for Jax.

“Don’t ask questions you don’t want the answers to, Juice. Remember, I hold nothing back.”

He doesn’t. He never will.

Not even Venus can change that.

He knows she wouldn’t change it for the world.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

A proposition for Chibs, a difficult request for Tig and a mended broken thought for Juice.

Again, thank you for comments/clicks. I love to hear ’em. Feel free to ramble at me.

He’d prefer a face to face meeting but, if this is the best he can do then so be it. He’s a firm believer in evolution of plans and compromise where ideals cannot be achieved. It's how Tully explains away his penchant for brown when the Aryan ideal is Jax Teller. He hasn’t touched Teller, no-one has. He’s off-limits in a way that suggests paid protection but also a begrudging respect. Though he’s a lone fish set loose amongst sharks there’s a strange kind of ‘field’ around him.

Tully wonders how long that will last; how long it will be before someone breaches the forcefield and takes him for the pretty-boy he is, rather than the powerful man he was.

He’s been biding his time, trying to choose the most opportune moment to make his move with Telford. There is no hurry with Tully, never has been. He has all the time in the world.

“How’s my boy?”

Even over the phone, Tully can hear it, the possessiveness, the seething hatred, the Papa Bear puffing its chest up to ward off the thread to his cub.

Chibs Telford, current Samcro President, practically defines the term.

“Jesus Christ Almighty, if you refer to him as ‘your boy’ again, on my mother’s life I will castrate you.”

“I assure you, you won’t, but I’m sure he'd appreciate the thought.”

There’s something so incredibly entertaining about the Scottish, Tully thinks. He’s always had trouble taking them seriously, them and the Irish. He’s well aware the Irish are a force to be reckoned with in terms of brutality but there’s something so distinctly imbecilic in the way they talk, so lyrical, so musical, so hopelessly funny. He often wondered if the potato famine of yesteryear was God’s way of culling a race with no added significance to the planet outside of comedy value; kind of a natural born Holocaust.

With the Scottish it’s more the anger, as if every word is punctuated with a kick or a headbutt no matter what the context. It’s thoroughbred aggression that’s as verbal as it is physical.

Chibs Telford is no different, his brusque voice and his Glasgow smile.

Every conversation is a fight. Every grin is a grimace.

“I sent him a couple of letters after he left. They were returned unopened. I had hoped to start a dialogue with him, having saved his life from the MC and all, but clearly someone’s been having words in his ear. Would that ‘someone’ be you?”
“Nothing to do with me. You don’t even come up in conversation. You clearly didn’t have the impact you hoped for.”

"I'm sure you wish that were the truth."

They’re lies, all lies. Tully can hear that too, recognises Chibs’ verbal tells even down a phone line. He imagines he’s clenching his jaw in such a way that those grisly scars look like lightning bolts and his eyes look like tiny slits of things in his head. At this time of year his skin will be turning light coffee coloured, like tan leather, craggy and unappealing.

Tully would like to see it all up close. He’d like to sit that man in front of him and confess all of his sins. He’d like to watch him fight to control himself, mindful of the guards on Tully’s payroll standing like sentinels to stop any retaliation.

He’d like to tell him how Juan Carlos would call out his name in his sleep, see if it affects him as much as it affected Juice himself when he woke up panting, shaking and, yes, still abandoned.

He’d like to remind Chibs of how he failed him, whether he’s making amends or not.

It’s an obsession of sorts, but that boy’s changed him.

“Did you enjoy it?” the Scot asks.

“Enjoy what?”

He's digging for info

“You know what.”

He's looking to drive his claws in.

“Of course I enjoyed it. That was the point. Pleasure, in these walls, is hard to come by, and when it’s offered by an esteemed leader it’s hard to turn down.”

“So, Jax Teller offered you a toy and you broke it because you’ve nothing better to do. Aye. Aye, that makes a lot of sense.”

It’s quaint that he believes that.

It’s also pretty sad.

“That boy was broken way before I got my hands on him, Telford. You’ve a lot to do with that yourself. Of course, it’s easy to pass off the blame when you’re trying your best to atone for your sins, but let’s not be coy here. He worshipped the ground you walked on and you pulled it out from under his feet.”

Tully knows he has Chibs when he says nothing. There’s pleasure in that and, in some warped way that doesn’t quite make sense to Tully, it satisfies a territorial kind of jealousy that’s been kicking around in his head.

He’ll take points wherever he can score them in this place, especially with this man.

“Putting all that aside for the time being, I have a proposition for you.”

“What’s that, then?”
Chibs has got 'begrudging' down as an art form but Tully has no reservations about his cooperation. None at all. Not with something that will strike him like this does.

“I need a favour. Well, two favours, but we’ll get to that. First off, I need you to find someone for me on the outside. On the downlow. The AB don't need to know about it. It’s a…personal matter. A deal I did on the inside that went sour, shall we say?”

If a snort can be Gaelic, this one is.

“I don’t do personal favours.”

“You’ll want to do this one.”

“You say that like you know me. You don’t know a thing about me, Tully. You want me to do a favour for you after what you did?”

“I want you to be an MC President and do what’s best for your club and its relations. That it benefits me personally is one thing but, let me assure you, it benefits you too.”

“Right.”

There’s glory in doing this right, Tully thinks, and if he has to share that glory with Chibs Telford then so be it. There’s exaltation in it, he knows, and that’s as rare as diamonds in this place.

“I’m not asking you to kill anyone. I know you're trying to move away, get legit, and that’s good. That’s admirable - misguided, but admiral. I just need you to send a message, man to man. I need him to know that I’m still…thinking about him, let’s say.”

“And, who is this man?”

“That’s is your incentive right there. I get to deliver my message, and you? You get to cast your vengeance on one of the chinks who took their pound of flesh out of our boy Juice.”

Our boy.

Tully will share but he won’t relinquish entirely.

“You know who did it?”

“Of course I do. I’ve taken care of one of them myself. He’s currently drinking through a straw in the infirmary and will never speak again. There are two more, plus the one who gave them permission, but we have to take it where we can get it. I can get you one.”

He smiles that devil smile and he offers Chibs a lifeline.

“He deserves reprisal, Mr Telford. You know that.”

As far as incentives go, it’s a good one, maybe not for the club but on a personal level for Telford. Tully isn’t stupid. He knows how to work a man, how to get him right where it hurts the most. He knows how to offer him something that’ll hit him right in the chest, something he wants so badly it suffocates him.

“You do realise how duplicitous this is, don’t you? A rapist setting off an attack dog to punish someone for the very same crime? And, people say the fucking Irish are backward.”

“Rules are different in here, but there is etiquette. What those Chinese did to him, Chibs, it was
brutal. He wasn’t human being to them. He wasn’t a person. He was just a thing to be used. We had an agreement. No-one was to touch him, especially not the way they did, especially not over. And over. And over.”

“I’m warning you, Tully.”

Tully can feel the warning.

It makes his temperature rise.

“Oh, hush. I was just trying to get your focus.”

Tully can hear it ticking over, can hear the cogs turning in Chibs’ mind.

He starts the slow count.

Five. Four. Three.

“What’s the other thing? You said two.”

And, there it is. First challenge accepted, second still to be played. Tully takes a deep breath. He gets the impression this one’s going to be more difficult than the first. It’s a lot to ask, he knows, but he’s never been one to shy away from pursuing what he wants.

“I want to see him.”

The door slams closed. The bolts are pulled across. The shutters are down.

“Not a chance in Hell.”

“It’s important.”

The padlocks are clicked tight just for added measure.

“What could you possibly have to say to that boy that meant anything to him at all?”

So much. So many things.

“I want to apologise.”

“You can do that through me. I’ll tell him you’re so very, very sorry for holding him down and fucking him until he wasn’t in his mind any more. I’m sure it’ll mean the world to the lad while he’s locked up trying to right himself.”

“It’s not the same. I want to look him in the eye and tell him.”

“Why’s that, then?”

"Because he deserves it."

It’s the truth as Tully knows it, that Juice is worthy and deserving, that Juice has meaning.

"Are you gonna say he changed you? Turned you into a new man, full of repentance and remorse? A few Hail Mary’s would do you the world of good, Tully, but you’re not getting near him. Not again.”

“And, how do you think he’d feel if he found out you stood between him and closure? I’m the only
one who can give him that. Just me. I’m the only person in this world who can close that door for him.”

When Telford laughs it's a great booming, looming thing that rattles in Tully’s ear.

“A black kid changing the mindset of a Hitler nut. I’ve heard it all now. I’d have thought a half-nigger like him would’ve been the least of your problems.”

“Black lives matter,” Tully says, sardonically, and if Chibs could see him, he’d see that he’s holding his hands high. “What he was going to do for your club? For Teller? That was honourable.”

It moved Tully, moved him more than it should. It moved him in ways which his own teachings, his own mantras and his own beliefs deem incredible.

“I’m not sure it would’ve been marvelled at in Mein Kampf, Tully.”

It always comes down to that with men like Telford. It's always about his beliefs and inevitably, admittedly, his hypocrisy. He moves past it, uninterested in getting into a political debate about his racial principles.

He just wants to push this forward.

“As a gesture of goodwill, allow me to pass on a little something I uncovered during exercise a couple of days ago. I think you’d be interested to hear it.”

"What's that, then?"

He's listening now. Tully imagines him sitting back in his chair, the grey at the root of him shining under the bright, bright light. He imagines the intense focus of his eyes, the lines and furrows on his forehead getting deeper as they set.

"You might think you've played down the slant threat, but there's a very, very substantial price on your head. They figure they take out the leader and the rest will fall. You, Sir, are Samcro's Bin Laden."

"Who?"

"I hope you know Morse Code."

"Aye."

Of course he does. He was a soldier. Soldiers learn many forms of communication in case one of the falls out of use.

Tully taps it out the best he can, gets around his rule as a technicality.

"You didn't hear it from me," he says, and it's the literal truth.

Tully didn't speak the man's name. But he did convey it

Yung.

Tully knows that Yung was particularly brutal with Oritz, that he left marks on him that probably didn’t disappear for weeks and scratches on his spirit that will probably be there for life.

If any man deserves to lose his manhood, it’s Yung.
"So, do we have a deal?"

Of course they do.

He can hear it in Chibs’ voice.

"He’s not getting out soon. He’s got another few months at least so if he does agree to seeing you, it'll be awhile."

"I'm a patient man.” But, I'll need you to see to my other request within the week. I'll text you the details. I'm sure I can trust you to be discreet. You'll need to take your time with his...warning."

"Understood. And, while we’re on the topic of understanding, don’t think me doing this favour absolves you for what you did. You’re not off the hook. You’ll never be off the hook."

Tully smiles.

“Understood.”

They're both on the same page when it comes to this matter, a shared interest between two very different men.

Tully would think less of Chibs if he didn’t want him dead.

(*)

"He's good."

"Yeah?"

"In my expert opinion. Needs a bit of repair work but, some polishing up, maybe the touch of a good girl or boy but, all in all, he'll still run okay, given time."

"Sounds about right."

Tig throws his keys down onto the table and takes off his gloves, throws them alongside. Chibs is making notes on a piece of paper but folds them away once he realises he's got company.

"He made mistakes, Chibs, but he deserves a chance. Christ, if any of us need a second chance it's him. He was what it was all about, Pres, the fucking brotherhood. And we crushed him."

"Aye, we did."

"You want me to talk to Rat? Test the water?"

"Wouldn't be a bad shout, Tiggy. Not right now, though. Other stuff to worry about - and, the club can't know."

They both know this is how it all starts. Keeping secrets. Holding back.

"The last time I was told to keep something off the table it didn't go so well. You know that. I love you, brother, but I’m not going down that road again."

"It’s not like that. It's for Tully. I can give the club part of it, but not all of it."

Chibs becomes quiet and grave, his eyes darting around the room so as to be sure they’re alone. It’s a
quiet kind of paranoia that’s been with him since this all began.

“Part of it relates to Juicy. What happened inside. They can't know about that, wouldn't be right.”

They can't know, not when he's not here to defend his own honour. Not when they believe he has no honour to defend.

"One of the guys from prison, one of the Chinese. It’s fucking hypocrite's gold, it really is, but Tully wants me to send him a message. Make sure he doesn’t misuse his family goods again."

He doesn't have to say anything more. Tig understand entirely. His face reflects a kind of newly restrained menace that he used to just throw out unleashed. He's learning to hold it back.

Like Cordelia, he’s proof an old dog can be taught new tricks.

"Whatever you need. Just say the word."

(*)

"Your mood seems better. Less argumentative."

"Guess the day perked up a bit."

He's writing in his book again. Sometimes Juice swears he's writing his grocery list or reminding himself of all the stuff he needs to do around the house. When he's feeling really agitated he wants to take the book, tear out all of its pages and tell this guy he's not some God damned bike wreck that needs to be catalogued for repairs.

Other times, like today, he understands it's all necessary. It's all evidence to prove to the courts he's being a good, compliant, well behaved nutcase.

He shrugs his shoulders, smiles good-naturedly. What they've learned is that Juice's mood can change instantaneously. His swings are apparent and easy to notice, typical of his disorder. There had been talk of adding a mood stabiliser to his daily concoction but he figured he'd rather try working through them by himself.

It's getting better. Slowly but surely, they're getting his numbers right.

"Sorry for being an ass. Sometimes being stuck in this place frustrates the Hell outta me."

"Perfectly understandable. Loss of liberty can be an incredibly negative thing, but I hope you'll find some appreciation in your status being downgraded."

"No locking door? Fuck yeah."

It's such a small thing in the grand scheme of things and pretty much meaningless. He still can't get out and, in all honesty, why would he need to be walking around at night anyway? Still, it's a psychological thing more than anything,

It's earned trust.

It's a sign that things are headed up.

"I hear your friend was a little rambunctious."

"That's one way of describing him, yeah."
Juice smiles at his doctor's choice of words. Other relevant words could be deviant, pervert, weirdo, any such things along those lines, but rambunctious is good. It makes Tig sound like a rowdy old man.

"Is he an old friend?"

"Yeah. We go back years."

"Good times?"

"We didn't used to get along. There was an incident with a crazy dog. It was totally my fault but he hated me for a long time because of that. We're all good now, though."

"Is he a member if your, uh -"

"My club? Yeah. Crazy guy. He was a patient here too once. He doesn't have great memories of his time here. Kinda made me feel a little less embarrassed about it though."

"You're embarrassed? Would you like to tell me about that?"

Juice shifts. The doc clearly doesn't understand the meaning of the word "embarrassed" if he’s asking him to talk about it.

"Not really."

"A medical condition is nothing to be embarrassed about. Would you, be embarrassed about having an aneurism? A tumour?"

"...subtle difference being, they’re not caused by having a total meltdown and not being able to get your shit together."

It's true. Juice just couldn't shut it off. He couldn't box it away like he's learning now. In his kind of circle that's just about as bad as you can get.

"Did you learn that it was weak to have problems? Human issues?"

"I learned it was weak to let yourself get to a point where they start to become your life. I never learned to put stuff to bed at night. I just let it all run wild. That's weak. Having a conscience is pointless."

That is truly what he believes. At least, that's what he tells himself he believes.

"Do you not think having a conscience is just human?"

"I think that, in the shitty world we live in with all the terrible stuff that goes down, it's just about the worst personality trait you can get. When you’re forced to do things you’re not proud of, feeling bad for it is just another little kick in the teeth."

Juice rarely speaks of the coercion but, in passing, he has made his doctor aware of his lack of choices. He sometimes refers to having things put upon him, being ‘made’ to do things rather than asked. He knows his choice of words puts across a certain powerlessness and strongarming but he’s trying his best to be honest.

He’ll take responsibility for what is his, just like he’s being taught, but he’s learning to offload things that were not solely his to own.
He figures it’ll take him a long, long time to get his thoughts straight but at least it’s a start.

"I think the opposite," Harlow says. “I think that conscience is the only thing that separates us from animals.”

"Yeah? Well, it's a good job you're a doctor, then, and not someone like me."

“Someone like you. Would you like to explain what you mean by that?”

“A bad guy who does bad shit, doc. Simple as that.”

“That may well be, in your opinion. But also a guy who was made to do, as you say, ‘bad shit’ – and who was placed in an environment where choice was not an immediate given. There’s not a lot of autonomy in that, JC, and the fact you had a conscience leads me to believe that perhaps you’re not the ‘bad guy’ you like to put yourself across as. I personally think that not having a conscience is weak. Not taking mental responsibility for your actions and the implications they have in relation to your own moral code, that is weak.”

"Moral code?"

"Yes. You have a very distinct moral code, JC. It's firm and strong. The problems you are having are because you have acted in ways which directly contravene your moral code."

Juice sighs.

"Can you please just speak in English? All these big words..."

"Alright. To put it simply, you broke your own rules of right and wrong and you feel guilty about it. You’ve been taught your guilt is a sign of weakness so you try to push it away, which leads to a kind of war inside of you. You try to process things in terms of your moral code...your inner right and wrong system...but, then you fight with yourself because the outcome you reach leads you to believe you’re weak. It's a lot more complicated than that but, put in it's simple terms, there it is."

“Jesus. What the fuck is my head?”

“It’s a place that’s been short-fused because of extreme stress. That’s the bottom line of it. Each and every problem you are having is because of the trauma you’ve placed upon yourself - and, have had placed upon you by others who maybe didn’t care for your wellbeing as you’d hoped they would. But, there's no weakness in remorse, JC. As I said, it’s all that separates us from the beasts."

Juice hears Tig’s words in his head, chiming in alongside the old man’s.

(‘We all got serious issues, kid.’)

He hears him in all his oddities, all his complexities.

(‘Half of us just aren’t man enough to deal with ‘em.’)

He starts to look at things a little differently.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Unser and Venus bond. Juice pisses off the wrong man.

“It’s been a long time comin’ but...things are looking up, Gem.”

He comes here sometimes in the early light of morning, a sad, quiet corner of Charming where people come to contemplate life and death, two things far too close to Unser’s heart of late. He’s been joking for years that he’s just getting himself accustomed to his new place, getting a feel for it before he moves in.

Unser’s been cheating death for as long as he can remember and he never once though that she’d be the one to go before him.

She’s buried next to her boy. Unser thinks that, had things gone differently, Jax could’ve been completing the set by laying down beside her in the cemetery his father lies in. It would’ve been a sad end, an entire family laid to rest far too soon.

He takes comfort in where she is, that she’s with Thomas, now, and she’s with John.

Unser thinks that if she’d stayed with him, none of this would ever have happened. She was idealistic back then, a damn good woman.

Clay just led her astray.

“This place. Charming. It’s starting to get its old feel back. Remember how it used to be, back in the day? None of the dark clouds loomin’ over it. Just sunshine, Gem. A good place to raise kids, you always used to say.”

It’s high in the sky today, a warm blanket casting shadows over the grass. It’s a perfect even 70 degrees, the kind of day made for families. He pictures Thomas and Abel in the fields out back at the farm with a mound of dogs chasing them all over. It’s a nice life for little boys. The same sun is shining down on them, Unser thinks, but it’s not casting the same shadows.

“They’re doin’ good. I called Wendy a couple of times last week. She said Abel’s sleeping better. No more nightmares. He’s still asking for Jax but that’s to be expected. Thomas has started talking. She’d been a little worried but the docs say there’s nothing there. He’s just a little lazier than his brother.”

He smiles.

“Your Thomas was the same, remember? Never had too much to say for himself. A man of few words, just like his father.”

The other brother springs to mind. He’s barely left Unser’s mind since this all happened and he’s been going over and over it in his head looking for something he missed. Were there any warning signs? Was there anything that could’ve been done differently? Was there some point in time where he could’ve intervened and nipped it all in the bud?
Each and every time, he comes up with a blank.

Each and every time, he pinpoints Clay Morrow as the catalyst.

He’s come to the conclusion there was nothing he could’ve done that would’ve preserved his own life. Maybe he could’ve been less accommodating but that would’ve meant being dead.

He fought too hard for that.

“Jax has started talking too. I think being inside is starting to make him realise just how messed up it got. He was living under a black cloud, Gem, the darkest imaginable, but he made his choices.”

He sighs.

“He always was your son. He won’t get out, not alive, but I think he’ll learn how to get some of that peace he was always talking about. It’s shitty that it had to come this way.”

It’s sad to think the only peace that boy will get is behind bars; that the only peace the world will get from him is if he’s removed from it.

It’s a wretched state of affairs.

“I’m sorry I was late, Gem. I never meant for that to happen. You were all I had.”

He places a rose on the simple stone that marks Gemma Morrow’s exit from this world. The earth is settling now, and so is the dust. He might’ve been the only one at her funeral but at least she wasn’t alone.

He hopes she didn’t feel alone at the end, hopes she went with some kind of peace that maybe she didn’t deserve but he wanted for her all the same.

All she ever wanted was to love them.

“I’ll try to stop by again sometime,” he says softly, as he places a hand on top of the marble. “You were good to talk to, Gem. I always needed someone who was good to talk to.”

Quietly, with tears in his eyes that do not fall, he adds: “You should’ve talked to me.”

(*)

“He in?”

“He’s off on his steed, Darlin’. I’m just holdin’ fort with Chucky ‘til he gets back.”

“I’ll wait.”

Unser finds it difficult with Venus. He’s an old fashioned man. The way he was brought up, men were men and women were women. He’d never even heard of a transsexual until that old song came through back in the 70s.

(‘Girls will be boys and boys will be girls, it’s a mixed up, muddled up, shook up world except for Lola…’)

Seemed they were everywhere after that, almost like that song opened a door that nobody ever closed. Still, she’s an interesting character, a real Southern Belle if you discount the dick between her legs. She got charm. She got grace. She got bigger breasts than any woman Unser’s ever seen and
they look real, too, some real good workmanship went into them things.

He’s respectful enough he doesn’t stare, not like the rest of ‘em. Figures Tig’d have his head if he tried it, terminal or not.


There’s something about the way she speaks, Wayne has always thought, rolling her words around like everything’s seduction. He figures it’s a way to offset the depth of her voice, kind of like a diversion. The pitch doesn’t matter when he words distract so much; when the tone is something else.

“A beer’d be nice. It’s been one of those mornings.”

“Something you’d like to share? People always say, that Venus? She’s a good listener. Tell her all your problems and she won’t say a word.”

“Nothing important. Just…well, y’know.”

His hand waves in the air as he minimalises things; as he renders an old man’s grief meaningless in the grand scheme of everything.

“Just thought I’d come by, check in with Chibs. Got a few things I’d like to speak with him about.”

“Charming business?”

More like a shared interest in an old Son.

“Kind of.”

“Oh, you boys and your secrets. Seems there aint nothin’ out in the open these days. Not even in a quaint little place like this. It’s all just ‘hush hush’

“He ever talk to you about stuff? Tig? You ever talk to him?

“All the time, darlin’. He aint got no secrets from me. Everything he says stays in our four little walls. I am the keeper of all things Alexander Trager.”

Just like Gemma was the keeper of all things Samcro, its Queen, it’s blood provider. Juice called her the gatekeeper once and he wasn’t wrong. Problem always was, she couldn’t let her own secrets go. She just let ‘em fester inside like an old, rotten wound, and when the maggots set in she’d let them fester some more.

Venus places the bottle down on the table in front of him. Her nails, always pristine, are longer today. They’re painted white with tiny black dots all over, carefully applied and evenly spaced.

“They do custom paint jobs,” she smiles. “I’m learnin’ to do those myself. Only nails, not bikes. Not interested in getting myself all oily. Wouldn’t want to get my pantyhose in ribbons, now, would I?”

“No. Guess not.”

She leaves him be. Unser watches as she glides around the basic clubhouse, still in its infancy, still waiting to have the mark of the club splayed across it. Chibs, it seems, is a man without fuss. There are no proudly framed mugshots up on the walls, no leather studded Redwood Original to backdrop. There is something decidedly less flashy about the place, something less ‘money’ and ‘women’,
something more homely. Seeing Venus grasp a yellow cloth in her hands to wipe over the tables is strange to Unser because he never saw Gemma do the same thing. That was always down to the croweaters.

Then it hits him that he hasn’t seen one of those in weeks either, that any given time this place would’ve been crawling with them.

Today, there is only Venus. There is only Venus and the prospects, three of them, all changing tyres out front and polishing up the bikes for when their elders return.

It seems…new.

“It feels different,” Unser says, “this place.”

“That it does. Chibs is workin’ real hard at making it right. Says he’s got a lotta makin’ up to do.”

“That’s true.”

She looks concerned. Coy. Her bottom lip pushes out just a little and her head tilts to the side. It seems rehearsed but in the same way, it seems entirely natural, entirely ‘her’.

“I worry about him sometimes, Wayne. When I look at him, I see the weight of the world on his big brute shoulders and nobody on this bright, green Earth to pull it off of him.”

Unser sees the same thing, though what he's seen more recently is hope. Brightness.

The nurturing kindness of a man who forgot how to feel it.

“We gotta find him someone real good,” Venus says, softly, her fingernail trailing back and forth on the bar. “Someone to put the smile back onto that face of his. Someone to put the love back in his sweet tartan heart.”

“I don’t think he’s ready for love, Venus. Not like that.”

“Oh, but there are many forms of love. You don’t have to slide between the sheets to give a man a purpose in life. Hap’s as giddy as a pig in shit whenever ‘Delia’s around. He loves that girl like she were his own. She brought light to his eyes. Just like I brought light into Tiggy’s.”

Sounds about right, Unser thinks. Rather a dog than a woman.

It’s almost intimate when Venus places her hand on his cheek. He doesn’t pull away, wouldn’t want to be seen as something he’s not. He just smiles in such a way that tells her he appreciates the sentiment and she reads it, reads it well, because her hand falls gently away.

“When’s someone gonna put light in your eyes, hey?”

Gemma did that, once upon a time.

Nobody could ever compare to her.

“Been and gone, sweetheart. Aint no more room for light in this old wagon.”

“Never say never, honey pie.”

(*)
Chibs still isn’t back when Unser gets the phone call. It’s from the hospital and it’s strange the call’s not coming from Tara. For a second, it hits him hard in the chest that she is gone and that all of the things that have gone down happened at all.

It’s Juice’s doctor and, since Juice has no family, this was the only number he had to call. It strikes Unser as strange he’s calling from the general hospital rather than the psych unit and, to him, it can only mean one thing.

“There’s been an incident,” the doctor says, and Unser is used to detecting tones. He reads ‘serious’ but ‘not life threatening’.

He shouldn’t be reading anything at all.

“What the Hell happened?”

“He got into an…altercation…with another patient. Things got heated. His wrist’s broken. Took a good knock to the head.”

“Christ. Gimme ten minutes. I’ll be right over.”

Unser should’ve known it was a bad day. It was just a feeling he had. He woke up with Gemma on his mind, couldn’t get her out. He could hear her plain as day, smell her as if she were next to him. If he closed his eyes and concentrated hard, he could feel her hand on his arm, her breath on the side of his face, and then she was gone as if she’d never been there at all.

He hates the fact she’s become a bad omen to him but it is what it is.

“I gotta go,” he says.

“Something wrong?”

“A friend’s in bad shape. I gotta get to the hospital. He doesn’t do good on his own and he got no-one else.”

Not with Chibs unreachable. Not with everyone else who ever gave a damn gunning for his head.

He grabs around in his pocket for the keys but this new chemo drug’s playin’ havoc with his nervous system and his hands are all shaking all over the place.

“Damn it.”

Venus’ hand falls onto his to steady him. She is a grounding force. She is a calming measure. She is a voice of reason.

“You can’t drive. It’s the law.”

“I’ve only had a couple of drinks, Venus, I’m fine.”

“You think I’m letting you get behind the wheel after seein’ you tremble like one o’ them church quakers? Darlin’, you got another thing coming. I’ll drive you. It aint no bother.”

“I can call a cab.”

“You’ll do no such thing. Get your coat, looks like the Heavens are gonna open.”
Of course they are. Blue skies don’t stay long in this place.

Sooner or later the clouds always come.

The only shining beacon is a man in a dress.

Figures.

(*)

“Who’s the friend?”

(‘Alexander tells me all of his secrets.’)

“It’s Juice.”

She sighs, her hand flicking through her hair as she glances in the rearview mirror. She is pristine and she is perfect. She is neat and she is smart.

She is driving Unser to see what was the club’s most hated man was once, and she was around for all of the hoopla that Jax placed on the kid.

She doesn’t judge. She sympathises.

“It aint right, what happened with that boy and the club. Those big eyes he got, those big, beautiful eyes. So lost. I told Alexander, I said ‘that boy just needs a Momma’. That’s all he needs. Life will be right if he got someone to take care of him. I know a lamb when I see one, Wayne. That boy is a lamb.”

And, he followed those men right to the slaughter, as trusting as the day he was born.

"I'm tellin' you, Wayne Unser, Jax Teller may look like an angel but, make no mistake, he is the devil.”

Unser seems to remember calling Juice that very name.

How wrong he was.

They’re led to a waiting room when they arrive. It seems Juice’s doctor has pull around here and has set himself up in a room within the ER referral area. Unser sits down, Venus at his side, and he knows how they look, an old man on his last legs with this strange, beautiful thing beside him.

People stared.

Neither of them cared.

“Thanks for coming,” the old man says as he reaches his hand out. Unser knows him. He’s met him before. Leonard Harlow. He’s one of Charming’s oldest and best.

"Can we talk privately?"

Venus, ever graceful, excuses herself to "go powder her nose."

“How is he? What the Hell happened?”

It’s not a pretty tale, not one the doctor is proud of and not one which should be taking place on his
unit but it happens. With mental illness, it happens. Setbacks occur. People jump when they should take a step.

Balances are shifted.

“He’s been coming out of himself a lot more this past week. I wouldn’t say he was getting ahead of himself, we’re still on fragile ground with him, but he’s learning to say no when he means no and I can see a lot of fire in him where there wasn’t any before.”

Unser can't remember ever seeing fire in Ortiz. Oh, he picked him up on a call-in once or twice for fighting in the street with another prospect but even that was provoked.

He's glad to hear he's getting some of that back.

“Kid’s standing up for himself. That’s good, right?”

“Of course. But, with that, there’s always the risk of shirking hierarchies. Although we are a clinical establishment, our patients are all court referred. They’re all men with criminal histories, some violent, and as a man of the law, you’ll understand that there are rules within this world. There are pecking orders. There are power balances that need to be maintained."

The criminal law of Dog eat Dog,

Survival of the fittest.

It's a food chain, pure and simple.

“Did he step on the wrong man’s shoes? That what you saying? He asked for this?”

Juice was always low ranking.

He didn't provoke.

“What I’m saying is that, sometimes, confidence is mistaken for something else, and men who suffer from certain debilitating disorders can take things the wrong way. They can… fixate, shall we say? They see it as a personal affront.”

Harlow sighs.

Unser’s head aches too much for this but he feels it his duty to listen.

“He got a little cocky in the middle of a game of poker. He won game after game, which obviously got people's backs up. One patient in particular. He got it into his head Juan Carlos was responsible for the abduction and murder of a local priest some years ago, back when he was living in New York.”

"Because he won a few hands of poker?"

"As absurd as it sounds, yes."

Unser couldn't be a doctor. Not this kind. He couldn't deal with this kind of other world bullshit on a day to say basis. It was bad enough dealing with cops and criminals.

Lunatics, Unser got no time for those.

“When was this murder supposed to have happened?”
“It was…hmm…’94? ’95 maybe? Mr Ortiz was thirteen at the time. Living in temporary foster care.”

“Thirteen. Christ. Did the guy even think things through before he lay into him?”

“Well, logic isn’t exactly a strong point in the midst of a psychotic break. What you need to understand about his illness is that it can fixate on tiny, insignificant details and blow them all out of proportion. In his head, Juice had gone to that church and murdered the priest as some kind of punishment for his crimes.”

“He was just a kid.”

“That fact would’ve been ignored because it didn’t support his belief.”

Unser has seen psychotic breaks before. They’re never pretty and rarely make any sense at all.

He’s seen fathers kill their daughters having mistaken them for wolves. For dogs. He’s seen husbands murder their wives because they they were convinced a photograph looked at them the wrong way.

He’s seen a lot of shit.

"Don't make a whole lotta sense, Doc."

Paranoia rarely does.

“Look, I can discuss this with you because it’s a matter of public record. I just want to try to help you understand. The priest in question, he had racked up severe gambling debts. Underground gambling circuits. Cards. Tables."

Cards.

Poker.

"He was in deep with some of the local gangs and loan sharks. He owed hundreds of thousands. Started stealing from church funds to cover the debts but he couldn't put the cards away. He was found dead at the waterfront. Official cause of death was a massive heart attack, probably brought on by drink."

"So, he died of natural causes. How did this guy jump to murder?"

"There were suspicious circumstances. He’d been missing for weeks. When they found him, there was evidence of certain physical abuses that happened to coincide with the local gang’s MO. Marks on his lower back near to the kidneys. Fading lines on his wrists. The man wasn’t known to abuse drugs but there were track marks on his arms."

Unser has seen it before. A murder made to look like an accident. A heart attack brought on by too much drink, too hard drugs.

“What’s this got to do with Juice? Why fixate on him?”

Unser already knows. For all it's ridiculousness, he knows exactly why. It's all circumstantial, but that wouldn't matter to a crazy guy.

“He went to the same church. He's good at cards. He wouldn't be a patient if he hadn't committed a crime. He said something about the priest already being gone by the time he was at that church. That’s what I can gather. They talked about it in a group session. Probably outside, too. I'm not sure. Nobody's being particular forthcoming with info"
Unser can well imagine. Even in that scenario, nobody is a rat.

The minds of madmen are terrifying things.

“He was in the process of shaking a confession out of JC when he managed to pull himself free and staff were able to restrain.”

Unser can only imagine it.

He can only imagine having to fight for life in a place that was meant to preserve it. They're meant to be watched. They're meant to be kept safe.

Wayne can't believe this was possible.

“How could this happen? I thought you were supposed to make sure it didn’t. Whatever happened to patient safety? Jesus Christ.”

“He’d been stable for months. No warning sign whatsoever. When we got back to his room we found weeks’ worth of medication stashed in a hole he’d torn on the underside of his mattress. It was only a matter of time before this happened.”

“And, Juice just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, right?”

“Not quite. They spent some time together. They were on good terms. They’d go for runs together in the grounds, shoot a few hoops from time to time. Sometimes, that can be a bad thing. Gives the paranoia more ammunition.”

The doctor sighs.

Unser can see there is more.

“Of course, taking into consideration Juan Carlos’ history, the main reason he’s in my care, the confrontation and subsequent physical altercation became an issue.”

“How so?”

“It would appear he had a flashback in the middle of it. The patient held him down. There are marks on the back of his neck that show it was pretty forceful. It’s how he broke his wrist. He was trying to get away. We can only assume he was – “

“ – reliving something? Jesus Christ.”

There are so many things he could relive it doesn't bear thinking. There are so many abuses in that boy's recent history that any one of them could've taken hold of him.

"Where were the orderlies?"

"I'm looking into that. But, just to make you aware. You’ve seen one of his absences, Mr Unser. It lasted ten minutes or so.”

“Right.”

“This one’s still ongoing. It's been..."

He looks at his watch.
Unser's heart sinks.

"...ninety minutes. That's why we felt a familiar face, someone he trusts, might help bring him out of it."

There aren't a lot of people Juice trusts, not now.

It's a good job one of the two could be reached when the other one was God only knows where.

(*)

It should be Chibs, Unser thinks.

It should be Chibs, not himself and certainly not Venus, but if there’s one thing he’s learned about this woman; this woman who is also a man, it’s that she can calm the storm from the skies. Her faux-feminine voice, lyrical and profound, it could settle anything.

She doesn't know half of what she's settling but that doesn't matter to her.

Unser isn't good at this kind of thing. He remembers sitting with Gemma after a heart scare and he was do disturbed at the thought of losing her that he found himself at a loss for words.

"Tig says he wants to do right by that darlin' boy," Venus says, softly. "Let me get the ball rollin'."

He’s cuffed to the bed, just one wrist, the other in a heavy plaster-cast right up to the elbow. He didn’t flinch when they set it, just sat passive and quiet as they moved the bone into position. Harlow tells them he’s on a morphine drip to ward off the pain, that it’ll make him loopy even when he does come ‘round, but it might also make him more confused.

“Really?” Unser asks, of the soft tie that’s fastened around Juice’s arm, and Harlow can only apologise.

“He’s high risk.”

“He’s scared outta his God damned mind. Literally out of his mind.”

“There’s nothing I can do. Hospital policy for any of my patients.”

Gemma was cuffed down too. It seemed like a kick in the face.

Juice's body is perfectly still, his arms resting lax at his side. He’s fixated on a spot on the wall and Unser can only imagine what he’s thinking. The bruise forming on his forehead gives his face a more familiar look and Unser wonders if there was ever a time he didn’t look beaten in some way.

He wishes he could explain why that was.

It’s Venus who holds his hand, who strokes her finger across his palm as if she’s telling his future and Unser wonders, quite poignantly, what if she'd always been around?

What if she'd always been there to patch up their wounds and exorcise their demons?

It's Venus, this strange, enchanted thing who whispers to him to come right on back, now, baby, right on back to the world that is good and kind and warm and safe.

"There aint nobody gonna hurt you in this here room. I promise you that. Sweet boy, you have Venus' word."
Her word is gospel, so it seems.

Her word is truth.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Bit of violence in this chapter.
Chibs takes a pound of flesh.
Juice is told it's not his fault.

A man's cock forms 90% of his identity as a human being and 100% of his worth and importance to the species. That is what Tig has often said, when asked.

"You think survival of the human race has anything to do with how we like our eggs cooked or how we style our fucking hair? It's all about the dick, man. It's all about sewing the seed."

Tig has shot a man's dick off before and, in turn, rendered him useless to the world. He felt nothing when he pointed that gun between the sick fuck's legs and fashioned him a pussy.

People see him as gung-ho crazy but he always has his reasons when his actions are as severe as that. It's not a flick switch that goes off in his head. It's more a turning of a dial that cranks up and up and up until the only reaction available to him is extreme violence of the sort no man wishes to believe he is capable.

He'd found the old pervert with a little girl in the back of a van, her middle school soccer shirt torn away to expose her barely-there breasts, his grubby little hands pawing her as she struggled underneath him. There wasn't even a question from that point. Tig hadn't want to listen as he'd tried to argue his case, that the girl was actually a prostitute mimicking a schoolgirl to 'assist him' in controlling his unhealthy sexual proclivities. Tig knows a lot about those but never children and never without consent.

He'd asked the girl how old she was and in a tiny, broken voice she had told him "thirteen" as she pleaded for his help and the one overpowering thought had been "this could've been Dawn or Fawn."

Tig had given that guy a life lesson when he opened fire.

"People who do not know how to use a weapon," he had said, "should not be allowed to own one."

If you can't use it properly you should not be using it at all.

He had hoped when the little girls screams had died down she has been able to understand.

Yung didn't know how to use his weapon properly when it came to Juice. He had taken aim against a disarmed captive for whom 'no' was not an option, and he had fired repeatedly, without warning or preparation. Sure, Tig had looked at Juice as a possibility at times, a tight, firm ass to help alleviate the boredom on cold, dark nights spent on watch together, but that's not the same. If Juice had offered to suck his dick when Tig put it on the table he might not have said no, the kid's got a cute-ass smile and the kind of eyes that keep Tig awake at night, but the operative word there would be 'offered'.

Juice didn't offer himself to Yung and his pals and taking someone when they can't get away, stealing something that isn't on offer, fucking a man when he's down? That's unacceptable no matter how passive they seem.

That shit wasn't Yung's to take. That kid? Not his to claim.

It's hard to breathe through the black wool that covers his face. Gone are the cuts, the tats, all trace of identity lost in thick black clothing. Both he and Chibs are blank slates, unknown assailants with knives instead of guns and masks where faces should be. This is not Samcro. They are not acting as soldiers and generals of the MC. Even if Yung knows he'll never be able to prove it. He'll never be able to prove that the men who vivisected him are Redwood.

They are just men, just men passing on a message that will change this other man's identity forever. 100% of this guy's usefulness to the species will be lost in a flick of the knife.

He's seen a lot of shit before. Alexander Trager, he is a man who has lived in Hell. He was a Marine. He was trained to let it wash over. He's seen brothers blown to pieces in front of him, guys shot in the chest and in the guts, in the head. He's seen brain matter splattered all over a concrete floor and could tell you the colour of a man's fatty tissue as it spills out of a deep, cavernous flesh wound.

He's seen skin torn apart by a machete, puckering up around the corners like a woman's vagina, and has laughed along with the victim as he compared it to his wife's and, fuck, man, was he gonna die before he got to to taste that sweet pussy again?

He's talked men down when it looked like they were giving up, has seen others do the same.

What he's never seen before is Chibs, so focused and meticulous, so hard and so clinical as he holds a man's junk in one hand, a sterile knife in the other with the intention of cutting it off. Yung had pleaded for mercy until Chibs stuffed his mouth with a balled up sock tied off with a bandana. There's no mercy in Telford now.

Tig doesn't want to think of another Chinese man tied to a chair as Jax meted out excessive punishment based on nothing but Gemma Teller's words.

There is no salt here, and this man will not die.

There is justification for this that can be seen with the naked eye; that can be proved just by looking into Juice's eyes. The boy is shattered because of this piece of shit and his buddies couldn't keep their dicks in their pants.

Chibs was a medic. He's useful to have when shit goes down, but this is something else, something Tig has never seen before from his esteemed leader and friend. This is not the first time they have castrated a man. The difference is, that clown fucker wasn't supposed to live.

Chibs will use his expertise to make sure Yung does.

This is concentration.

This is cold, meticulous vengeance.

Tig sees the absolute deadness in Chibs' eyes, offset only with a fierce kind of anger that makes him look like someone else entirely, and he wonders, is this how he looked when he went for the man that burned his baby? Was this the last thing he saw before he left this Earth; this absolute devolution of what is human?
Christ, he hopes so. He hopes his last seconds were filled with the same kind of pain Dawn felt, the same kind of helplessness Tig felt when he could do nothing to save her from that.

Chibs doesn't speak. He knows his accent would give him away. That's what makes it chilling, that he works in silence, but for a long, long while his eyes don't leave his victim's. There's a connection there, a communication that come from words. It's all Yung can see, the dark eyes of an enforcer and a punisher peeping out behind a black mask and Tig has no doubt whatsoever that the face that lies beneath is even uglier; even more hateful.

When he does the job Tig just finds it morbidly curious. The first cut is the worst. It's the one that penetrates. The word seems fitting to Tig, sexual in connotation like so many things are - but the reason Yung is suffering this fate is because he used sex as a weapon. It's only right that Chibs takes a weapon against his sex.

He does it slow, just like he was asked but also, Tig knows, to reduce the chance of him bleeding out.

"Tully sends his regards," Tig whispers, satisfied in the knowledge that this man will never, ever be able to use that weapon of his for destruction of person, destruction of self, destruction of future. "You don't mess with other people's things."

He thinks of Venus in this moment, the moment the body is exposed, the moment the tools of manhood are splayed out in front of him; when a man's identity, sexual at least, are put on show. He thinks of her though he doesn't want to, doesn't want to taint his beautiful girl with this kind of necessary evil.

He thinks of her 'gift from God', the very thing that lies between her thighs and rivals even his, thinks of how easy it would've been for her to have it taken away so that she could truly become the woman she always felt she was. He thinks of her body, her perfect breasts, her flat stomach, her long, long legs and her beautiful smile.

He thinks of how she has made him question everything he is, everything he wants and wonders if he'd love her any more or any less if she had the surgery. She could've been lying there like this, spliced and divided. Bleeding on a sterile table.

He remembers what she said about herself, about her complicated identity, about the path she chooses to walk. He remembers how thankful she was that she was able to create a wonderful son out of the thing that God mistakenly gave her.

"You see, Alexander, God doesn't make mistakes. My momma didn't understand that. God gives folk what he thinks they are meant for, and this was meant for me."

As he watches Chibs take away the gift God gave Yung he thinks this was meant for him. This punishment, devil-sent, was his destiny.

"Almost done now. Almost there."

He doesn't stay for the conclusion.

As Yung's eyes roll back in his head, the very last thing he sees before he goes is his genitals, cast aside like they were nothing; like they were never a part of him at all.

He'll live with that.

That's punishment enough.
"You okay?"

Chibs pulls away those sterile gloves, pulls away that balaclava. He pulls away those layers of vicious necessity until he's him again.

"Aye," he says, like he didn't just send that message.

His ability to compartmentalise beats even Tig's own.

"Better get back. Venus has been callin' non-stop."

"Under the thumb already, brother? You bloody fanny."

"Always."

It's such a woman thing to do, Tig thinks.

Such a typical female trait.

(*)

Unser is spitting feathers when he catches up with them.

"Two hours. Two fucking hours."

"Okay. Alright. We're here, now. What's going on? What happened? Is he alright?"

He just looks at them, really looks at them like a disgusted father so tired of this behaviour.

"I'm not gonna ask where you've been or what you've been doing but you're gonna get out of here and you're gonna wash that off. You do not let him see it, you got me?"

"See what?"

There's blood on Chibs' face, settled just under his eye in a neat, distinct pattern where the eye hole was.

He hadn't noticed.

"Are we gonna have another body to explain away? Cause I got no time for that, Chibs."

"Relax, old man. No-one died."

"You'd better hope not. With Jarry gone, Christ only knows what they'll bring in to replace her. You might not be able to screw this one placid."

Chibs says nothing.

He doesn't really have a comeback for any of that.

"Look...just go home. Get changed. He's okay. He's with Venus. He'll be fine until you get back. But he sees blood on your face? He's gonna lose it. Alright?"

They're wise words.
The last thing Juice needs is another man's blood under Chibs' fingernails as he tries to convince him he's safe.

"Thanks for taking care of him."

"You mean when you wouldn't?"

That hurts.

It's true.

"Aye."

"Like I said, someone had to. But, let it not be me from now on. Alright? I'm dying, for Christ's sake."

It goes without saying.

(*)

"I didn't wanna be there."

He's not quite lucid. Not truly. He's been mumbling for thirty minutes, blinking his eyes hard as if trying to fight his way through.

Unser talked him down when he first snapped to, calmed him into a kind of peace and quiet. His doc had been right. A familiar face and a kind voice brought him back to this world where those unfriendly hands had pushed him away from it.

He was talking to what Venus can only assume is his mother pleading for "five more minutes" when she tried to get him awake. Boys always run back to their mommas when things are tough. They always want to be held close to their mother's bosom and told that things will be fine. Venus never did because Venus was never a boy; because her mother was usually who she was running from.

Makes her sad sometimes. Girls need their mommas too.

The sounds are starting to take on shape. Venus feels awful bad for him but she has years of experience when it comes to men, to what they will say while under certain influences. She knows that those words cannot be taken other than with a pinch of salt.

She still feels like a prying ninny as she listens to Juice's stumbling words.

"Didn't wanna be there," he repeats, clearer this time.

"Be where, Juan Carlos?"

"On the floor. With him."

Oh. Oh.

"He kept..kept...pushin' me down. Wouldn't let me up. I though he was gonna...I thought he was..."

"What, baby?"

Fuck him, her mind supplies. Hurt him.
He can't say the word. She knows how that is. Even now, Venus prefers not to. The word rape is so ugly and painful, a real hellish kinda word that has no business existing at all. It's a stain on a person's soul and history through no fault of their own. For years she substituted it for something less damaging. Fiddled with. Touched. Pawed. Molested.

Saying the words are owning the experience and this fragile, broken child of a man isn't even close to that.

She hopes his boys know that. Respect it.

She hopes they tread real careful so as not to send him fleeing. 

"Had to get away. I had to. Hurt so bad. My arm...fuck, my arm..."

"Shh, it's okay."

"I heard a snap. Jesus, what."

He tries to get up but one arm is tied down with cuffs, the other with plaster and IV lines. He can't get upright and it panics him. Despite her reservations about using force she pushes him back because she is a strong woman and he is as weak as a newborn foal.

He goes easily.

"Its all fixed now. S'all good. Docs got it all patched real good. You hit your head, though, so they need to keep their beady eyes on you for the night."

"Lemme see."

"Not right now. Lie back down. Lie down, baby, you can't get up."

He shakes his head hard.

He doesn't want to be restricted and she can understand why.

"NO!"

His struggles are tepid and difficult to watch but he pulls at that cuffed wrist hard enough she's certain he's going to break the other arm. He draws blood, just a little, but she knows that will sting like a whore when the cuff comes off.

She's pretty certain the boy ain't all here but she recognises that fear in his eyes.

"Hey hey, now. Look at Venus. None of that, sweetheart, you understand? You do not hurt yourself. Alright? That's an order. Momma's rules"

"I'm done," he whispers, as he turns his face away. "Please, I'm just done. I hate this."

No more, he is saying, and she wonders if he said that to them too.
Just leave me alone.

Her heart sinks low and her stomach rises up into her mouth because the look in this boy's eyes, as distant and unfocused and full and empty at once, is the look she used to wear in her own.

"Oh, baby," she whispers, "what'd they do to get you all in tatters like this?"

She knows. She has seen it all before. She has felt it all. She knows he cannot be made to speak before his time. She also knows that morphine loosens the tongue so that maybe he will regardless.

She can listen. Venus is a good listener, always was.

"Jax knew what Tully was doing to me."

He sighs

"Why d'he let him? I don't get it. He could've said no. Tully would've listened. I couldn't say it, but Jax could."

"Power makes men do strange things, angel. Makes people act outside of themselves. He was...is...a twisted man. Body of David, face of a Botticelli angel - soul as black as the cut on his back."

She remembers Jax shooting her mother in front of her out of anger for what she had done. Lord Jesus Christ, she remembers the blood as that old heathen spilled out on the floor and met her maker with no preparation whatsoever.

Was Jax Teller such a two faced demon child?

"I thought if I just lay still and went away it'd be okay. It wouldn't mess me up so bad. I thought if I could just get through, it's be okay. Everyone would forgive. But then I couldn't stop goin' away. I'm still doing it. I'm still leaving. I can't stop."

"Where do you go?"

"Just...away. Up there. In here. I don't know."

"Are you away now?"

He nods slowly.

He doesn't look so sure.

"But, baby, I'm talking to you."

"Voices get pretty loud sometimes. Sound like they're in the room. Can talk to 'em and they talk back. Not you, though."

He smiles a sad, dopey smile.

"Never talked with you before. You're Tig's now. S'good. He's happy. You made him better."

"I'm not just his. Special gal like me? I'm a gift to the world. An angel sent down to guide people through their saddest times, my sweet, sweet boy."

She touches his head, gentle but firm, runs her hands over his hair in a manner she knows men like.
"You feel that?"

"Y-yeah."

"Then, you're here and I'm here. And you are safe with me. All of you. Don't matter what you say."

He looks as if he's never heard such a thing before and when he looks at her it's like he's grasping at ropes in the hopes of not falling.

"Thank you."

(*)

"I don't like that shit."

He's looking up at the bag that hangs beside his bed, eyeing it as if it's the devil himself.

"Keepin' you outta pain, darlin'."

"Makes my brain slow. Gets me into trouble. Causes even more pain. I should know."

"Not with me. I don't look for trouble. You have nothing to fear from little old Venus."

He feels safe, she knows it.

She knows it because the secrets come.

The secrets come fast and strong, pushing through his medicated delirium in rapid fashion. When Unser returns she casts him out, banishes him with a quiet warning he understands straight away because that man is not dumb no matter what people think.

This poor lamb is so ashamed.

"I just let them. I couldn't move. I just..."

The stigma of being a man, she thinks.

The social expectation of strength beyond reason,

"Where were you meant to go? Sometimes, when we have no other way out, all we can do is preserve. Pull ourselves inside and curl into an itty bitty ball."

"I could've -"  

"- died, Juice. You could've died. Sometimes, we just gotta accept there are times when we fight and times when we just try to survive. You get that?"

He doesn't look so sure.

"Mmm-hmm."

He's so lost, and the flock is all he ever had. This boy was literally the black sheep and the runt all at once, diversity in a form of it's own.

He had no chance.

He can barely find the strength to speak. His voice is so far, far away.
"I just...I don't know who I am. Where I'm supposed to be. I get so lost in my head."

"I know a little thing about but fittin' in, baby boy. Venus don't tick either box. And, my momma? She tried to help me along the way. She got some of her friends to try to help me too."

She's stroking his head, her words and her tone gentle even and non-threatening. She is grounding him to the real world with touch and sound and communication.

Sometimes, Tig is far away like this. He calls her his anchor; his 'port in a fucking storm'.

This beautiful boy has no port, never has.

Those who were meant to love him were the storm to begin with.

"They pushed me down too, momma's friends. Did things to me that no man, woman or child should have done to them. I was just a little thing. Didn't know who I was either."

"Jesus."

There are tears in his eyes and, she wonders, are they for her or are they for himself?

"They abused me. Liked what those cowards did to you."

He closes his eyes, now, forcefully turns away because to hear it spoken aloud like that is often overwhelming.

Again, she knows.

She wonders if she pushed too hard. Then he reaches over, his eyes still closed, and grabs a hold of her hand.

"Nothing they did to me made me change. Not like she wanted. I am still the girl I was back then when she tried to make a man outta me. And you are no less of a man because Jax Teller saw you as a polished pretty bargaining chip to be passed around as currency. That is wrong. You are a good person,"

"Don't. I'm not a good person. The shit I've done - "

"Your had your reasons."

He sighs, world weary and so, so tired.

"I deserved it, all of it, for what I did. But all I wanted was to stay."

He carries it in his eyes, this thing, these things.

He suffers for it every day. She can see that.

He's just a boy.

"Do I need to wash your mouth out with soap?"

His eyes flash open.

"No?"

She wants him to see her smile, warm and forgiving, if that's what he needs.
"I see it in your eyes. You are kind. You are you strong. And, you matter, angel. Just like I do. Just like we all do. You did not deserve that. Nobody does."

"Y-yeah. Maybe."

"No maybes, Juice. You hear me?"

She leans across, kisses him on the cheek. She smiles when those glazed, sad, unfocused dark eyes move straight to her chest because she's wearing a top that sets out her glory girls and she knows they're a magnificent sight when they're pressed in a man's face.

It's not his fault.

"I'll blame those prying eyes on the morphine, honey pie."

"I'm sorry, I -l"

"Shh."

Venus places a manicured finger on his lips and hushes him gently.

"You listen to me. Okay? Do not let what animals do in cages define you as a man. I never let my mother define me as a woman. Neither do I let these, as splendid a job as my surgeon did with them."

Her hand rests on his cheek, now, coaxing his eyes to rest on hers.

For a second he looks like he might cry.

He shakes his head instead, looks up at the sky as if he might just glimpse the heavens if he tried hard enough.

He isn't ready to accept it. Not just yet.

She's happy she's sewn the seed, though.

"M'tired."

He looks it. How couldn't he be?

This was just the first step in letting it all go.

"I know you are. You close your eyes then, baby. Momma's here, now."

There's a soft, faint smile on his face as he closes his eyes, quiet and amused.

She knows her words have hit their mark.

"Go on, now. Right off to sleep."

"Okay."

"Alrighty, then."

It doesn't take long before he's out, exhaustion claiming him before anything does.

She hopes that Chibs can help this boy find his way back, hopes that someone can take him by the
hand and show him it's not so cruel and cheap, this life.

"I am a good judge of character," she says quietly, though she knows he will not hear, "I always have been. It was never you, baby. Just like it was never me."

It took her twenty years to figure that one out.

Hopefully this boy will get a clue sooner than that.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Chibs refuses to label some niggling feelings :) 
Hope everyone or enjoying the Easter weekend. Drop me a line if you are still with me. i love hearing your thoughts.

It's early evening when Tully gets the info.

He's sitting in his cell going through the AB's bookkeeping when Matthews patches it through. A John Doe was admitted to the hospital with an injury to his genital area. Cops were called immediately due to the precise nature of the clean-up. The victim is as yet unidentified but was of Asian ethnicity.

It reads like bullet points and Tully can only imagine the loss of manhood being reduced to a few lines on a page.

"Alive?" he asks.

Matthews nods.

"And, in stable condition. Your messenger did a good job."

It's what Tully wanted to hear. He knew he could trust Telford to get the job done because, as rough as the Scots are, they're generally a trustworthy sub-species. More so than the Irish, who would screw over a deal in favour a crate of whiskey, or the English, who are too hesitant to make a deal at all.

He wouldn't touch the Welsh as far as he could launch them.

He puts his pen down and removes his glasses. They're worthless, only half-strength and made of safety glass, but Tully was cursed with less than perfect vision and contacts are just too difficult to maintain inside. The glasses make him look trustworthy, that he knows, and appearances are everything in here. They can make a man or they can break him.

"Looks like your man Chibs gets the job done," he says to his houseguest, sat tucked in the corner with an electronic cigarette in his hand.

Jax Teller's body alone could be the death of him in this place.

"What was the note about? Aren't telegrams a little 1950s?"

It's so obvious Jax is trying to look casual about it. Must be hard, Tully thinks, knowing the world does in fact turn if he's not in it. Most kids grow out of the thought as they mature, as they learn they're little more than a cog in the grand old machine, but some get trapped in the mindset.

Jax Teller's delusion of grandeur is mother-built and club-supported.
He has neither of those things, now.

"Don't worry your pretty little head about it. It's private business."

"You mentioned Chibs' name. That makes it my business."

"Does it, now?"

Tully can see it's killing him. Must be terrible living on borrowed time cut off from the men who used to answer to you.

He should've thought of that.

"You're not a member any more, Jax. Club business isn't yours to worry about. You gave Telford the patch. You handed over to him."

He smiles, ugly and condescending.

"You relinquished control."

Jax's poorly contained frustration leaps to the surface, now, something akin to a tantrum building under his chin. He must be learning because he doesn't let it out. It's gone before it can be born into the world but not before being seen, like the ultrasound image of a child that never lived.

"Is this your way of asserting power, Tully? Showing me whose in charge, here?"

"Now, why would I need to do that? We already know whose in charge here."

"Then, what?"

"I'm just showing you how it is. This is an act of kindness. The sooner you realise you're done the better. I'm just...helping you along."

Tully smiles as he pats Teller on the leg, relishing the twitch in his jaw as he does so. Teller probably thinks he's going to fuck him. He's not, but it doesn't hurt to put the fear there.

"Hurts to feel powerless, doesn't it? To know life goes on without you in it? To feel...abandoned, by those you love?"

"I'm still alive, aren't I?"

"Have they called? Been in to see you?"

"Indian Hills are persistent. They want me dead. They must be doing something to hold off the Mayhem."

"You keep telling yourself that. Right now, the only person keeping you alive in this place is me."

It's a revelation, the fact the club have washed their hands of him. He must've known it would happen. There's only so far you can take tenuous relationships for a man without a cut. There is only so long you can hold off the inevitable, with a brother-club looking to settle scores.

"Makes sense," Teller admits, but it's clearly with a heavy heart. "That's why you've got me here? To protect me? Here I was thinking you just wanted a little company."

"Needed to get you out of the way. Your card was marked, Jax Teller, but I'm making sure you live
Tully knows the whispers he heard today were the first of many. Teller's a marked man and the vast majority of powerful men want him dead. There was a shiv with his name on laid out for use in the exercise yard and the instruction to 'finish it'.

Tully put a stop it that. For now.

"Why would you protect me?"

Then, it clicks.

"Wait, let me guess. For Juice."

"Mm-hmm."

"Why would he want me alive?"

The unspoken words are 'after what I did to him' and Tully thinks the golden child is finally getting a clue.

"I figure if anyone deserves to kill you it's him. I think he's earned the right."

"You don't know him very well if you think that."

"Don't think he'd have the guts to pull the trigger?"

"Don't think he'd have the heart to."

There it is, that magical, beautiful truth. As an acknowledgment itself it's a powerful one, even if Jax doesn't realise it.

"And, yet, you still had him do your dirty work for you, this boy who hasn't the heart to kill."

"He knew what he was getting into."

"You know that's not true."

It resonates. Again, Jax hides it well, but the truth of the matter affects him so much he feels the need to deflect.

"I wasn't the one holdin' him down, Tully. You were. Remember that."

There's that Teller trait, full in its glory.

Instead of taking responsibility for his actions, he shirks it.

"Yes," Tully tells him, because he knows it to be true. "Yes, you were."

There's no way around that.

(*)

Chibs' phone rings when he's waiting for Juice to awaken. He's been given special dispensation to stay on the basis it'd make Juice easier to manage if he's not alone. The boy has slept through the last hour and a half so Chibs is starting to wonder what the point is.
Juice was always sleeping on the job, on the table, on the floor. He's found him curled up under Gemma's desk more than once as that boundless, hyper energy finally got the better of him and he crashed. He can go for days straight without rest - then, he'll sleep for a lifetime.

It's an unknown number that calls prefixed with a prepay code. He doesn't recognise it, though events of today have placed him on guard, especially with the as-yet unidentified Chinese threat hanging over him.

He isn't expecting it to be Jax.

"How's it going?" Jax asks, and for some reason even his voice puts Chibs on edge.

"It's going."

Chibs sounds terse and distant, he knows that, but he's too tired to even censor himself today. It's been a long day and, though he's used to boxing things off, they still sit with him. He can still taste the copper of that man's blood as he swallows, can still feel the weight of what he took from him in his hands.

It's the resentment he feels more than anything else, that he was put in this position by fate - but that was preordained by the circumstances they brought upon themselves.

They dug their own graves, and now Chibs is scrambling desperately to get them back on even ground.

"Tully said you did a job for him. Anything to worry about?"

"Nothing to do with you, Jackie Boy."

The name alone causes Juice to stir, his head moving on his pillow, his eyes opening sharply and suddenly. It's typical. Chibs has been trying to coax him awake with niceties since they took him off the IV yet it's Jax that brings him round.

"Chibs," he whispers, still groggy, still confused. "What's -"

Chibs places a hand on his chest and silences him with his eyes.

He's with it enough to understand.

"We talked about this," Jax says. "We agreed I was gonna be kept in the loop."

"Aye, we did. But this wasn't club related. This was a personal matter. It doesn't affect you."

"Personal favours for Tully? Bro, seriously."

That gets Chibs' back up because who is he to pass judgement? After all those years passing things under the table, who is he to have an opinion at all?

"You do not lecture me on how to handle things on the outside. Alright?"

"It's a bad idea."

"Not your call to make. Like I said, it was a personal matter. Settling scores. I think we got the message across."

Yung will regret certain choices for the rest of his life. It'd be hard to forget them in his position.
Jax's voice becomes grave. It takes on that tone, the tone that always meant something bad had gone down.

"There was a hit out on me. Today. Tully put a stop to it. That have anything to do with you?"

There's hope in his voice, poorly hidden but there. Chibs wonders if Jax thinks that's what he was dealing with Tully for. His protection. His safety. Part of him wonders if he should let him think that, give him a bit of false hope that he's still being taken care of despite the Mayhem vote, but he will know deep down that the club can only do so much for him. Giving him something to cling to, it might just keep him alive.

Then he looks at Juice, nervous as hell and twisting his sheets up in an attempt to calm it, and goes for the cold, hard truth.

"No. Nothing. Who knows why he does what he does?"

He doesn't feel good about it. Part of him still wishes things could be different for this poor, twisted bastard.

But, Jax made his own bed.

They all lay in it with him.

"I have to go, Jackie. I can't talk right now. Things are all up in the air."

"Just...be careful, brother. I know we made mistakes but I'd hate for you to be the one to pay for them because you're on a personal fucking crusade. It's not worth it."

Chibs again looks at Juice, his eyes so desperate as they rest on his.

"Let me decide what's worth it and what isn't. You just keep on doing what you're doing. You're still alive. That's a bloody miracle in itself.

(*)

"What'd he want?"

Juice looks as if he's half expecting Chibs to hold him down and press a pillow over his face on Jax's order. Chibs is of the impression it will be a long, long time before the boy can hear his name without falling into a stress response.

"Don't you worry about that, Juicy Boy. Just concentrate on getting better, yeah?"

"I am better. I feel better."

"That's good to know - but your pupils are pinned and you're talking over my head. Let's wait til you can focus your eyes before we start giving you keys to a Harley, yeah?"

"Sorry."

Juice giggles, a childish sound, a far cry from the anxiety he had shown only moments ago. Chibs remembers how comical he used to get when he dropped pills, all daft smirks and soft around the edges.

He's missed that side of him, realises he hasn't seen it in a long, long while.
"Tig talked to me. About the club. Venus too."

Christ knows what she's been saying. Chibs can only imagine.

"Aye," he says, "I know. He wanted to see where your head was."

"I've been thinking about it a lot."

Every second, Chibs imagines, tying himself up in knots.

"And?"

"And even my guy on the inside couldn't talk me back. He got out of a club years ago, picked himself up a wife and kid, but me?"

He sighs. His eyes are as imploring as they are sedated. It gives him an earnest look that hits Chibs square in the chest.

"Wife and kids? What do I know about that?"

"Never say never, laddie. You're still young."

"But this life is in my blood, Chibs. I've tried to get it out but I can't. I couldn't scratch it out. I couldn't bite it out. I swear, you could burn off my ink and I think it'd grow back."

That's the fact that Jax latched onto, that he systematically abused because that kind of loyalty in the right hands is gold, but in the wrong hands? It doesn't bear thinking.

"There nothing else inside of me."

"I know, son."

"If I can get myself good, repair all this mess. If you can square it with the guys -"

" - you want to stay,"

Chibs knows already because, as tragic as it sounds, for Juice there really is no other way.

"More than anything. I know that now, I don't think I ever didn't know it. I was just...confused."

Despite everything, Juice wants to stay.

Despite Jax -

"You're not him."

Despite all of the hurt, all of the madness, all of the agony, Juice still loves this club. This stupid, naive, idiotic, hopeful, beautiful kid still sees what a good thing it could be.

"I trust you, Chibby."

Christ, that hurts to hear.

"I just wanna make it good again. That's all I ever wanted."

He means that, too. He truly means it.
"I love you."

"I know, Juicy. I love you too. I always wanted you to find your way back. Just didn't seem like it could happen, the way things were going."

He buried it so deep it couldn't touch him, that's what it was. It was the only way to get through. But, part of Chibs wants to tell him to run away, to run far, far away to a corner of the world where Samcro can't ever touch him again.

The other part of him just wants to sigh with relief because losing him was something unfathomable, something that stirred in his gut that he couldn't explain. Something that stopped his fucking breath.

He doesn't think he's ready to look at what that means, but it's terrifying.

"Alright," he says, "if that's what you want."

"It is, I swear."

"They'll follow my lead. This is not voting you back in."

"I was supposed to die with my cut."

"Right. You didn't. There was never a chapel meet to talk that through. But there has to be trust, Juice. The lads have to right themselves with what went down."

Chibs 'righted' himself with Juice once.

Never again. Not like that.

"I wanna earn it," the boy says, and Chibs knows it, knows he'd prospect again if he had to. That much is clear. It seemed he never stopped prospecting, never stopped fighting to prove himself.

It was never fair, looking back. They were a shitty family.

"There's a lot of crap to deconstruct. A lot of walls to pull down. The boys trusted Jax."

"I know that."

"There's gonna be resentment over Bobby, over what happened with the Chinese. Happy took it really hard, all this shite. And Rat - "

"I know. I'm sorry."

He looks guilt ridden. Crestfallen. It wasn't Chibs' intention. He just wanted to paint an honest picture.

"I'm so sorry."

"You have to be realistic, Juicy. Isn't that what your doctor told you? Realistic goals?"

Juice just sighs, seeming tired again.

"Yeah."

Chibs can see that Juice thinks this is rejection and is quick to rectify that before it pulls him so far down he can't be reached.
"It's just gonna take a bit of time. Alright? Patience. You have to be ready to take the rough with the smooth."

Juice looks down at himself, at his broken wrist and his shackled arm, at his brittle body and his damaged psyche.

He shrugs, eyes soft, voice softer.

"I got nothing but time, brother."

He's been taking the rough all his life.

It was the smooth that never quite came.

Chibs will bring it up tonight. The guys are getting together to talk Red Woody, a few beers, a few games on the table. He'll corner Hap when he gets a chance, start dropping some hints and see where he falls on it.

He's the biggest obstacle.

He's the largest mountain to climb.

"You should go," Juice says, finally. "It's getting dark out. Must be late. I'll be going back in the morning. It's just one night."

"Right you are."

Juice smiles, dazed and honest. There's that feeling in Chibs' gut again.

He can't label it.

"Thanks for coming. You didn't have to."

"Thought you might need someone around to help you get back. Didn't want you waking up alone. Forgot you slept so bloody much. I miss the old days when the procedure for concussion was to keep people awake not rouse them periodically just to piss them off."

Leaning his hand on Juice's arm, he tells him "I was glad to be here."

"I just - I got a little freaked out, is all. That guy said some crazy shit. Put his hands on me."

"I know."

"I'll learn to deal with it, I promise. You don't have to worry. I won't let you down."

Chibs wonders how long it will take to reverse the conditioning that had been instilled; the idea that everyone else comes above him and before him. That everything he is and does is for someone else.

"You didn't have to convince me, Juice. You do it for yourself. Alright?"

"Yeah, okay."

He says it, but it's clear he doesn't believe it.

Chibs will make him believe it.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Happy is an unshiftable mountain. But he will get there.

Loving your thoughts. Keep ’em rolling if so inclined :)

Chibs asked Hap once if he'd ever had his head tested. He'd just grinned that maniacal grin he wears so well and walked away.

Happy is a dichotomy until himself, a man who on the surface appears so inhuman and yet beneath the cut and the skin has some of the most surprising characteristics of all of them.

One if the most simple lessons to be learned about Hap is that you can never just go by his face. He's always been a man of few word, though the people that know him quickly latch onto his non-verbal cues and learn how to read him. He appreciates the simple pleasures in life, a home cooked meal, a movie and a beer, a postcard from his ailing mother. His joy is not always obvious but it's there. His face rarely changes but every so often it will break out into the brightest, most terrifying smile.

Its no secret that his greatest joy occurs when he's killing.

He is an enforcer, pure and simple, but he is also a fierce protector, an upright pit-bull that would fight and kill and die for whoever is holding its leash at that very time. It'd be easy to label Hap a psychopath if taking into account the pleasure he gets from causing pain and the ease with which he kills - but Chibs has always felt that sadist was more the right term, not sexual in context but true all the same. He saw guys like that in the IRA, sick bastards who found pleasure in planting bombs yet went home to their loving wives at the end of the day.

He still trusted them.

Hap's not heartless, not like a psychopath would be. He just doesn't care about a lot of people. He's not a machine because they've all watched him bleed. He's ridden with a bullet in his thigh, has held on with a six inch cut to the shoulder that exposed the tendons. Hap is a buffalo, Juice once said. "Saw a thing on Animal Planet and it was just him. If you shot him in the eye he'd turn his head and keep on charging until you popped him in the other one."

You can only imagine how it must feel to have those empty eyes be the last thing a person sees on this Earth before they leave it for good.

It was Tara who speculated he might be on the spectrum after watching him sit with the boys one afternoon. His coldness had given way to an almost childlike glee and the way he had stacked those building blocks for Thomas had set off a little trigger in her mind. The concentration. The focus on that one task. His oft-inappropriate emotional responses and his obviously-practiced eye contact. When she spoke the traits aloud they ticked off boxes in Chibs' head too.

"He just runs a different operating system. He's not crazy, just different."

Chibs hopes he's not going to tread on his toes tonight because Hap has been an unpinned grenade
since it all went down. Bobby's death and Jax's incarceration, those things have changed Happy. Though he'd never admit it aloud, the loss of Thomas and Abel is also something that sits with him. Chibs can see it in his eyes sometimes when they talk about the kids, a kind of sorrow that he would never verbalise because he most likely doesn't understand it.

But, it's there.

Happy has become even colder since this all started, even more stone-hard and difficult to reach. Chibs remembers his emotional show for Jax, remembers how he took a bullet for him before the truth of what was planned hit. He remembers looking at Happy, tears streaming down his cut-stone cheeks, and thinking that of all the things that man has seen and committed, this might just be the one thing that breaks through him and leaves him more dead than alive.

He's been quiet ever since.

Maybe this is the best time to reach him, when his emotions are still at the surface and when so many things are hanging and gaping like open wounds.

Or, maybe it's the worst.

Chibs finds him petting the dog, beer in his hand, dried meat joint in the other, just like how he found Tig. He asks him if he fancies a walk.

Happy says nothing. He just follows.

Just follows, like always.

(*)

Chibs wishes it could be easy,

He knows it can't.

Hap used to be friends with Juice. That time in Stockton, he took it upon himself to be the boy's protector. That's what Chibs had heard, that as much as Juice was Clay's shadow on the inside, he was also Happy's. Juice told him later that Happy was the only one to disapprove of the set up with Dion, though not openly. Juice could see it in his eyes. During the fourteen month stretch, Hap would walk in front of him in line, pushing him in behind like some kind of blank-faced guardian. He started calling Juice 'Fish' because he stood out like a newbie 'til they day they got out.

The name stuck.

With the patience of an angel, Juice had repaid him for his protection by teaching him how to play cards. He was slow to pick up but once he had it there was an almost savant quality to him that tied in with Tara's impromptu diagnosis. He can count with the best of 'em. Juice had named him Rainman, to his apparent pleasure. Even now, he makes a killing every time the club heads out to Nevada to scour the charters.

As much as he can know a person, Happy knew Juice - but, he also knows Jax, and Happy might be a strong man but in the grand scheme of leaders and followers, Hap will always be the latter. A follower of orders. A contract killer. The colours in his spectrum are black and white. There is no grey. There is no other hue. There is right and there is wrong. Secondary factors don't break through his simplistic world view.

That's why, when asked his opinion on the Juice situation, he misunderstands entirely and thinks
Chibs is angling for his murder.
Betray the club = death
Betray Jax = death
Mitigating factors = meaningless
"If you need it done, just say the word."
Just like that, he'd end the life of a friend.
Chibs might be rethinking the whole psychopath thing...
"Hap, I'm not asking you to kill him. I'm asking you to think about what he means to you. To all of us."
"He doesn't mean anything. He's a traitor and a coward. End of story."
Black. White.
Cut. Dry.
"Do you know that for sure, brother? No doubt in your mind that he deserves to die?"
"We voted unanimous. All in favour. As far as I'm concerned it's still on the table. Nothing's changed other than this Tully agreement, which can't last forever."
Little does he know.
"But it has changed, Hap. We voted wrong. We played judge, jury and executioner without hearing all the bloody facts."
Happy deals well with facts. Facts are solid. Facts are tangible. Facts are good.
He has his own 'facts', though.
"He covered for Gemma. The Chinese. Bobby. Everything that happened is because of that."
On paper he's not wrong - but, the paper he is reading has so many pages missing it's barely readable as truth at all.
"Is it, though, Hap? Is it really?"
That's where the doubt is planted, right there. That seed.
"Was it not Jax who ordered the bloody war?"
That's where it's sewn, right at the beginning,
If looks could kill, Happy would be ending the world right now.
(*)
He walks with Happy to the park because its where he often comes to do his best thinking. Chibs
can only imagine how it looks to the parents who bring their kids here seeing this monster of a man taking perch on a bench near the swings and roundabouts.

It's empty now but for the two of them, but for the charged air between them. They sit side by side, a bottle of beer in each of their hands like some strange middle aged ritual bonding session.

Chibs can feel the tension without even being close to it.

"He's a rat, Chibs,"

It's all so firmly lodged, this stuff, but Chibs wonders how much is truly believed and his much is just a learned verbal response.

"Aye. But, so am I. So is Jax. Every time we talked to Unser, so were we all. The boy had his reasons, just like I had mine. Do you remember when we found him after Miles? Do you remember how he looked?"

Scared out of his mind and covered in blood.

Frantic, terrified, falling hard and fast into shock.

"He was shaking when we got him in that truck. Bloody mortified. Did that look like someone who'd murdered in cold blood to you? Did that look like a guy who'd shot someone to save his arse because he was dead set on bringin' us all down?"

Happy says nothing, but the shift in his eyes indicates he's thinking about it hard. There's no way he can look back on that morning out on the hill and think that.

He pulls out another fact.

"He planted the coke on Miles."

He's got facts aplenty. Juice provided a lot of ammo.

"The kid thought on his feet, just like he'd been taught."

"He hit the bullseye on a brother. Nobody taught him that."

"Nobody taught you how to take someone's head off with a Samurai sword, Hap, but you did it once because you had to."

"That was different."

It's always different. Why is that?

"Juice took a bullet in the leg. Almost took a knife to the throat as well, but he reacted, Hap. He reacted like I would and like you would."

"What about Nero? The Mayans?"

"He was never gonna give them anything. He had nothing to give them."

That fact doesn't sit right so Happy shrugs it off, plays it down.

It's a very Jax thing to do.
"Doesn't matter."

"But it does, doesn't it? That's the thing. It does matter."

For Chibs, this was always going to be the sticking point. This was going to be the tough nut to crack; the hard stick to shift. Happy is an assassin, a man who kills for fun and for whom true happiness only seems to fall when he's snuffing a man's life out. Life is cheap to Happy and those who are seen to betray are as good as worthless to him. He'd put a bullet in their brains without thinking twice about it.

It makes him hard to get through to sometimes.

"Things aren't always how they seem. Haven't we learned that now? If there's anything these last few weeks have taught us it's that we have to look beyond that."

"I don't trust him."

"But you did once."

"That was before. Haven't in a long while. Always knew there was something off."

Juice has been living this way for so long it's hard to recall the last time he was himself at all.

"He's had someone windin' rope around his arms and legs and making him walk like a bloody puppet. Pointing guns at his head. First it was the coppers. Then it was Clay. Then it was Jackie Boy. The poor sod stood no chance."

"We all follow orders, Pres."

Aye, they do, but never outside of their capabilities.

"You want to know what Jax ordered him to do? What he confesses to Nero that night? Jax made him kill that shooter kid's ma. To task him to do that? Juicy? No fucking way."

The worst choice. The last choice.

Preferably no choice.

"He's not a hitman, Hap. Hasn't the gut for it. Jax lied to us about what went down in the cabin because he knew we'd vote against. And that wasn't the only thing he kept off the table. He's had Juice turning himself out for months."

It sounds so vicious. So inherently cruel.

So unnecessary.

To Happy, it sounds suspicious.

"How do you know Juice is not the one that's lying to save his own ass? Wouldn't be the first time."

"That boy isn't manipulative. Not like that. Trust me, Happy, I know."

But Happy doesn't trust. He sways, but the loyalty he has cultured since he patched over is deep-set. Hard to budge. Juice made so many mistakes. So many. They're so clear and so vivid, so hard to manoeuvre.
"Look. we already know he lied about Jury. He lied about his plans after the Mayhem vote, never said anything about offing himself. We put ourselves on the line based on a lie of omission."

"He had his reasons."

"Did he, though? Were they reasons, Hap, or were they fucking excuses?"

Hap had a connection to Jax, deeper than anyone thought, and these words are shattering that. It's why he stands, beer in hand. It's why he shakes his head. It's why he walks away, because he's not ready to hear it. He's not comfortable with the shade of grey.

"Hap -"

Chibs knows he's losing him and it jars him into action quick and fast. He reaches for the ace up his sleeve. He hates to use this as a bargaining chip, as a tool with which to mould Happy, but there's no other way.

"Jax? That grandiose boy you value so highly? He prostituted Juice out just so he could keep the AB sweet."

If nothing else it stops Happy in his tracks. He doesn't turn - but, he does speak.

"What are you talking about?"

Chibs sighs. He still has trouble with it himself.

"He gave Ron Tully the green light to do any bloody thing he wanted to him. I know you had a problem with that in Stockton. You were the only one. That time, it ended before it kicked in. But this time? He couldn't stop it."

He swallows hard. This is difficult. This is tough to say.

"Jax gave the okay for that."

"You sure?"

"He told me himself. Every night that you and me slept on the shit that was stirring up for the club? Juice was getting screwed for it. Literally. Repeatedly, Hap, just like Otto was."

It's a low blow, shattering his faith and trust like this, but sometimes low blows are required to drive a message home.

"I'm sorry, Hap, I really am."

"Yeah."

"I just needed you to know what the boy was up against. Who he was up against. Jax was...is...his mother's son. And that's the bottom line."

Chibs watches him go. There's a shift in him that's visible, an underscored anger that wasn't there
before and it's best not to follow. Chibs almost feels guilty for ruining his evening by dropping the bombshell but he had no other choice.

Hap's rage is poorly hidden, though who its for, be it Chibs, Juice or Jax, cannot yet be seen. He stops suddenly. It's as if he's going to come back, hit back, demand answers. Chibs would welcome that. He'd relish that.

He does none of those things.

It's only when he crushes the bottle that Chibs knows he's reached him somehow. He might be picking shards out of his palm for the next hour straight but it'll give him time to think.

"Come back when you're ready," Chibs tells him as he passes him by on his way back to the other guys. "If you need to talk, I'll give you anything you need."

If Happy is listening he doesn't let it be known.

He just looks down at the blood on his hands and, Chibs imagines, wonders how the fuck this came to be at all.
Juice opens up - and receives something and someone unexpected.

As ever, rant at me :)

Juice awakens to find a tiny yellow gift bag next to his bed, a note propped up against it that he can't reach because his wrist is still attached to the bed rail and his other arm hurts too much to move.

Frustrated, he presses the call button and waits. It's 10am, the clock on the wall says, meaning he's slept for 12 hours straight. He doesn't remember them waking him for his obs throughout the night, figures he must've been so exhausted he barely woke at all.

His first question when the nurse arrives is "When can I leave?"

('When you guys gonna cut me loose? I've been here all night.' 'Shut up, or I'll strap you down.')

He cringes a little at the memory of those words, straight from Oprah's hateful mouth, but this nurse is kind, compassionate and not looking to aggravate when she tells him it'll be any time, now.

He nods his head towards the bag and the note and asks if she knows who brought them.

"I don't know. A woman, I think. She dropped by for a visit earlier but we didn't want to wake you. Seemed like you needed the rest."

A woman. Venus.

The nurse eyes his captive wrist sympathetically, not judgementally, and asks if he'd like her to pass him the note. He tries not to think of Otis handing him Tully's, a note that prepared him for Lin's crew.

"Yeah, thanks."

In a delicate scrawl she has written a quote Juice is not familiar with. Inspirational words are not exactly his 'thing' but the fact that she has found one for him means a lot.

The words make sense.

"When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So it is better to speak."

In brackets, she has added the words "They'll listen" and signed her name with with a cross and a swirl. They, his therapists. They, the people who matter.

"There's a book too."

The nurse, Gina according to her name badge, smiles as she reads the title.

"Chicken Soup for the Soul: 101 inspirational stories to lift your spirit." She's a woman after my own
"Yeah, she's something."

Though people don't know it of him, Juice has always been an avid reader, mostly graphic novels like The Walking Dead, adult comic book stuff, but if there's one thing he learned from Tully's mocking poetry gift is that he'll read anything if it means filling in the silence.

(Read pages 45 to 64. We'll discuss it tomorrow night when I stop by.)

He takes a deep breath and banishes Tully from his mind. The CBT must be working because he's getting better at that. He's getting better at everything.

He's just getting better in a lot of ways.

"Do you think you'll press charges?" the nurse asks. "Against the man that did this to you?"

"Wouldn't be much point. The guy wasn't in his right mind. He has no criminal responsibility. He didn't really mean it."

"Still, you got hurt."

"People get hurt all the time. Doesn't mean someone's automatically responsible."

He sometimes envies the people who are oblivious to it all. He was like that once.

"It is what it is. I'm okay. But, thanks anyway. For being concerned, I mean."

Juice smiles that self-deprecating smile, the one he knows gets people to back off and she nods her head. She's young, young enough that she hasn't yet become jaded by her job. She's still at the point of wanting people to leave this place feeling better than they did when they got in and feeling like she had something to do with that.

"I'll see if the attending doctor's ready to see you. It shouldn't be much longer."

When he gets back he finds he's glad to be 'home', the familiar surroundings a comfort to him in recent weeks. He takes Venus' book and he puts it under his pillow. He'll read it tonight when he goes to bed, when his meds haven't kicked in enough to make the page look fuzzy the way that everything else does.

He will read her book and he will not dream. He's been nightmare-free for two weeks, now, and he's grateful for that. He's grateful that Miles has been sitting quietly and that Darvany hasn't thought it right to punish him in the dead of night. He's grateful that Tully's 'visits' are periodic, now, and can be shut down without too much effort on his part.

He's just grateful, really.

"Hey, man. You feelin' alright? How's that noggin'? Pretty bad-ass bruise you got there."

He loves Stewart, he really does. In another lifetime they could've been friends on the outside. Juice can imagine running scams with him, moving some cash and making some buddies

He smiles.

"I've been worse. I've had worse."
As far as bruises go, this is just a walk in the park. A broken wrist and a concussion.

It's only that.

It doesn't occur to him to find that alarming.

(*)

It's Venus' written words that resonate with Juice and so, in that first meeting with the old man after getting back a couple of days ago, he tells him he's ready.

The 'thing' he's been brushing over, he's ready to give it some air time.

"I gotta talk about it sometime, right? May as well be now when I look as beat up as I feel."

"If you feel ready."

"I am. I do."

It's a huge step, calling to memory all of the shit he's been pushing away.

('Let it all out, sweetheart. Let Tully wash it all away."

He's holding a cushion tight to his chest. He doesn't know why, figures it something to do with putting a barrier between him and the world. He remembers that asshole fed mocking him about the same thing in that holding cell but in here, right here, he doesn't give a shit.

He's been putting barriers up all along, speaking in code that only he understands, twisting the identities of those he speaks of so nobody could ever pin his words on them. All of the Phils and JT's and Roberts of this world have been a source of endless catharsis for him but he knows it's time to exorcise some demons directly.

He won't lie about Tully.

He'll straight up use his name.

"I don't even know where to start. So much shit, doc, you wouldn't believe."

"Start with something you know you can say."

And, all comes pouring out. All of the twisting and turning, all of the puppeteering. All of the false promises and cruel manipulations. All of the moving and moving again. All of the loss, starting with his mother and ending with himself.

All of the lies, so many lies.

"God, how could we not see how much of a meat grinder we were living in?"

All of the changes.

"How can a person you know suddenly become someone else? Like...doppellangland shit."

"Doppelgänger."

"Yeah."

"Trauma can do that to a person. Life experiences shape us. Do you think you're the same person as
before?"

He's asked himself that a lot recently.

"Guess not."

He keeps Darvany and Miles safe, keeps Roosevelt and Lin under lock and key because he's being honest but he's not being stupid and their deaths become figurative rather than literal.

He doesn't say much. Can't say much. All he can say is he's sorry for what he did to them.

He'd been expecting to clam up when he got to those 'difficult times', those times when he was isolated and kept, caged and abused, but it's like he's on the outside and he's talking about someone else. He knows he's depersonalising when it comes down to it but he doesn't seem to care.

He's talking. He's owning.

Isn't that the main thing?

"Was it periodic, or - "

"Every night. At least once. When he held me down, I felt... "

He smiles, brittle and ruined. Shakes his head. Shrugs his shoulders in defeat.

"...I felt nothing."

"Numbness is a sign of -"

" - severe trauma. Stress. The mind protecting itself and, blah blah blah. I know. I know."

"It's important you understand the mechanics of your absence periods if you want to get a grasp on them."

"I just didn't wanna be there is all. I couldn't get away physically but I got real good at getting away up here. I got used to the physical pain. Ron made it...easier."

Harlow shakes his head when he speaks of the gifts, those threatening, mocking gifts that brought forth such dread and fear. He describes it as a prime example of victim control through passive aggressive threat and apprehension. Juice just laughs at that because for so long he truly had himself convinced they were an offering of warped kindness so as to make things more comfortable.

"How fucking naive am I? No wonder people mess with me. I got idiot tattooed on my forehead."

"It was better for you to believe there was some care in the gesture than to see it for what it was."

And, what was it but cruelty? What was he for Tully but a living, breathing fuck-puppet and what was Tully but a vessel for Jax?

"It wasn't the...thing...that was the difficult part. It was knowing that JT was cool with it. Y'Know? Was almost like he was doin' the bad shit to me himself."

The 'thing'. The 'bad shit'.

Not rape. Never rape, because he didn't say no.
('A lack of verbal refusal is not consent. Sometimes a person can't speak.')

('Just because the body responds doesn't mean it enjoys. It's all about pushing forward. We are built with that in mind.')

"I'd lie awake at night after he was finished with me, when he was reading to me, and I'd wonder what JT was doing. Probably with a girl somewhere. Probably not thinking about anything at all."

"It's hard to understand what goes through the minds of people like that. It can drive us insane even trying."

"I just wanted to look him in the eye and ask what the fuck I'd done to deserve it."

He knows how desperate he looks because he can see it reflected in the old man.

He can see how rife and overbearing his confusion is.

"Just...why? Jesus Christ, what did I do?"

"I doubt he'd have been able to answer that even to himself, Juice."

Juice. He's taken it back recently. The name. He's no Juan Carlos and JC just doesn't fit. He got tired of trying to be something he's not.

He'll be who he is and who he is, that's Juice.

He sighs. He sinks, once more defeated by the futility of his thoughts.

"So how am I gonna get over it, then?"

How can he come to terms if he can't understand?

"It's hard to find closure in irrational acts of cruelty, Juice. But we can find closure in accepting that our life won't be destroyed by those acts unless we let it."

He's saying "they can't hurt you unless you let them."

Juice is all for that.

"He can't touch me," Juice says, shaking his head defiantly. "None of them can, not now. Fuck that. *Fuck* that."

He's physically shaking when he's finished and he knows that if he were to stand up to walk he would fall down. He pulls himself tighter into his shell and holds himself there, a defensive posture, as if waiting for a push or a reprimand. He's learned so far that the truth only ever hurts him.

Maybe one day he'll unlearn it.

He smiles bravely. There are no tears. There is just relief.

"Feels so much better. Jesus. I feel like I can breathe again."

"Think of it physically. A balloon maybe. You blow all of that air into it and it gets bigger and bigger. Sooner or later it's going to pop from all the pressure. But if you let a little air out, bit by bit, it stabilises."
"I was thinking more along the lines of taking a shit. Satisfying. Relieving, and all that."

"Well, there is that."

Harlow tells him what to expect. Flashbacks. Sensitivity to touch. Involuntary responses that might be frightening.

Problems with intimacy.

"All of the things we already talked about. But, Juice, there's a lot you can do to support yourself. Now, I'm not expecting you to talk about this in your group sessions -"

" - no fucking way."

" - but, there are support groups available. They can be as direct or as anonymous as you'd like them to be. It's invaluable, talking to people who have been through similar things and who you can relate to."

"I got someone like that already. A sad little club of me an' her."

"I hate to say that's good, but -"

"But it is? I know. I know what she told me too. That it's normal to feel powerless. To feel dirty. To feel like no amount of scrubbing is gonna make me feel clean. She hasn't seen my house so she doesn't know just how clean I can get stuff, but...yeah."

He smiles, laughs at his own compulsions because what else can he do?

"I get what you say, doc, when you tell me that these are just temporary states. I used to think I'd be scared forever but I don't feel that way now. I know. I've done this before. All this therapy shit. Just takes a while to sync up."

"You want to talk about that?"

"Nah. I was just a kid. It was a better deal than juvie. You know that. There were some good people there. Taught me a lot. Said I was sensitive. That people might take advantage of that."

"Sensitivity isn't weakness, Juice."

No. No, it's not.

It's something Jackson Teller could've had a lot more of, that's for sure.

"Own it. Own the shit. Someone told me that."

Harlow nods his head.

"Wise person."

"Yeah she is. Real wise."

It's amazing what one conversation can do to lift some clouds; how many demons a manicured had can chase away.

Juice looks his doc in the eye. Doctor. Saviour. Christ knows what else
He looks. He asks.

He searches for the honest truth.

"You think I'm gonna be okay?"

And, the doc? He smiles.

"Your affectation is better. Mood and orientation more stable. Compliant with meds and programmes. You're opening up in group. Causing trouble. Making jokes."

"I'm a funny guy."

"I think who you are compared to who you were a few weeks back tells me there's a solid chance you'll finish the programme. I don't have any concerns. Not at the minute."

"So once I'm done I'm done?"

"Like I said, I don't have any concerns at the minute..."

For now, that's all he needs to hear. It's good enough.

That encouragement is all he wants to hear.

(*)

He's kicking a ball with Alfonso, a bipolar armed robber, when he sees him, a figure through the gates, a looming, killer presence in the distance. For a second he thinks he's seeing things.

Then he sees the curling snake on the figure's skull and he knows he's not.

His smile fades. His face changes. He moves from easy to curled in a second because they might've been friends once but the last time he saw him was something else entirely.

He knows what Happy does to people who betray. Even know, he can hear the bullets as he pumped them into Miles' body, as he disrespected him even in death by calling him a bitch.

Of all the guys, the only one who would have the guts to walk into a unit like this and kill him? Happy.

He doesn't want to think that way, really he doesn't, but nobody told him Hap was coming. Chibs didn't call to let him know like he did with Tiggy. What does that mean?

"Shit."

"Something wrong?" Alfonso asks.

Juice doesn't answer, but the way he clenches his fist, the way he shakes his head a little, the way he looks to be psyching himself up for something, that says an awful lot.

"Call it a tie, okay?"

"But you're up by ten, Juice."

Juice ignores Alfonso and takes off.
Whatever Hap is here for, why ever he's shown up unannounced, Juice will take it head on. No hesitation. No fear.

No matter what, he needs for Happy to see that.

It's all he got left, his fragile pride. His brittle bravery.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

...in which Jax makes a choice and so does Happy.

Throw it at me ;)

"How's the club?"

It's typical Jax, Unser thinks. Typical Jax to call him into this place and the first thing he asks after is the MC.

Jax was a President first, a father second.

Unser learned to live with that.

He came in this morning because he figured Jax might want to reach out an olive branch. The fact he'd requested a visit at all came as a surprise but Unser's getting used to surprises these days. Part of him wants the boy to come clean, to take out a notepad and write down each and every crime he's committed on Charming soil.

He knows he's more chance of remission than that, though it doesn't stop him from hoping.

"Red Woody's doin' good. Lyla's got talent. A real eye, I hear. They're turning over a lot of cash. Makin' a profit. I hear they got a European distributor interested in one of the Fat Chick movies. The Germans go nuts for that stuff, so I hear."

"That's good."

"I've been checking in with the guys from time to time. I'm sure Chibs has been keeping you in the loop."

Apparently not, going on Jax's face, by the way he changes the subject like he's not ready to go there just yet.

"And the scans? How's the big C?"

"Eh. Not getting any worse. There's no place to go after stage 4 but in the ground. I'm hoping to hold that off for as long as possible but I'm in the hands of the Gods now."

It seems he's been holding on for longer than anyone anticipated. The sentimental side of him thinks that's what's supposed to happen.

Charming is unfinished business.

"You still doin' chemo?"

After Gemma he figured, what's the point?

"I'm bald enough as it is. I want to go out with a bit of hair on my head like my old man did. He held
on to that one strand 'til the day he died."

"I remember. Old Combover Unser. I loved that guy."

"Yeah, he loved you too. Loved all the neighbourhood kids."

It's just like old times. There's a glimpse of what this boy used to be. He was good to talk to, a real conversationalist when his head wasn't full of MC shit. If Unser had any kind of imagination at all he might be able to turn back the clock, take himself out of himself and act like this was a quick talk at the clubhouse. Not here.

The walls are so gray in this place, though, such a hopeless fucking shithole. They're all about rehabilitation for prisoners but how in God's name are they gonna rehabilitate anyone if they're keeping them in breezeblock and iron? This fucking country.

"You been talkin' to your lawyer, son? I hear you got Chapelle. He's nuts but he's good. Wins more than he loses. You're in good hands."

Jax's mood seems to shift with mention of his lawyer, like it's something he's been trying to forget about. There's something in the way he moves. Defensive. Guarded.

"Yeah, I talked to him."

"And?"

And, the guard lifts.

"I'm planning on pleading guilty to all charges. He figures I might avoid the death penalty if we try for a plea bargain to get it down to life without parole but I'm not holdin' my breath. Not after Otto. Not sure I want to. Life in this place?"

Unser looks around, tries to imagine knowing that the only choices available were this place or death. He tries to picture these four walls and those two barred windows, tries to imagine that segregated concrete box for a life.

"I'd rather take my chances with the other side."

Unser figures he'd go with death too, though he himself has gone through trial after medical trial to try to get a few more years out of his clapped out old body. He knows the value of life, even if it's a shitty life.

It's a shame Jax never did.

He looks at Jax, really looks at him, and what he sees in his eyes is a plea for reassurance, like he wants to be told it's the right choice. Deep down, even after everything, he's still a kid that's looking for approval.

"Good for you, son. Saves dragging your kids through all that, y'know? There's a chance Abel would've been called to give evidence against Gemma if your lawyer was going for some kind of diminished responsibility deal. Kid's been through enough."

"Have you seen him? How is he?"

He looks both terrified and hopeful. It's hard to tell which one outweighs the other.

"Doin' good. Still asking where his Daddy is. Wendy's doin' all she can for him but it's tough. At that
age, they see everything. His psychologists say he's gonna be fine, though. What he's got there with Wendy and Nero, it's stable. They got dogs. Cows."

"Yeah, Thomas loved the cows. Loves any fucking animal. And Wendy, she's a good mom. I was shitty to her but she came good."

"Yeah, you were. And, she did."

She managed to earn Jax Teller's seal of approval. How proud she must be.

"Look, I wasn't planning on this. When I took my old man's bike out, that was gonna be it. They wouldn't have been dragged through anything. I'd have been gone and this would've been over."

That's a button Unser doesn't want to be pushed.

"Excuse me for not playing the violins as a dying man. You think that would've solved anything, Jax? Instead of growin' up hating you they'd have grown up wondering why the fuck you abandoned them. It's how you felt about your old man."

"That was different."

"Was it?"

Jax isn't an idiot. Unser remembers telling Jarry the same thing. She labelled him a moderately intelligent sociopath who took after his mother in more ways than one and Unser wasn't able to argue with that.

He sees the shutters falling. Jax knows when he's cornered, verbally. He knows what he tried to do was wrong and he can't justify it any more.

The young man smiles softly. There's love in it, real genuine love, and it surprises Unser because he thought that was all gone.

"You were good to us, Wayne. I'll never forget that. You loved my mother. She needed someone like you. Always there for her, even when I wasn't."

"Except the one time it mattered."

Unser wasn't always there - not synths most important moment when Jax was.

"I was on my way there to stop you. I knew where you'd be. What you'd do. Juice tipped me off."

"Of course he did. They had a pact."

A pact. An agreement. The way he says the word it's as if they had purposely banded together in an attempt to attack him. So bitter. So angry.

"You really believe that, son?"

"Makes sense."
The boy's paranoia knows no bounds. It's sad to see.

"It wasn't like that. Think about it, son. She was your mother. He was your friend."

"She killed my wife."

"You killed her husband."

"That was different."

"How come I keep hearin' that from you, Jax? Why's it always different if you're the one that's responsible? Why is any one death worse than another? When did life get so damn cheap?"

Jax looks like he's about to blow. There's a fuse lit in his eyes and it'll either die down or it'll catch fire.

It fizzles.

It dies.

"Believe what you want, Wayne."

Unser does not believe what he wants to believe. If that were the case he'd believe that Gemma had fled to Mexico with Nero and that she'd be back someday, not murdered in a rose garden by the greatest love of her life.

God, it hurts to think.

"I wanted to stop you. That was for you, Jax, as much as it was for her. I wanted to save you living life knowing you did that to her."

"She deserved it."

The words don't match the tears in his eyes.

Maybe he's not a true demon after all

"I still loved her, but she had to go. There was no other way."

"What happened that make you think this was the only way, son? You think that's what your old man would've wanted?"

What happened but the club? What happened was power; failure of responsibility.

"The gavel happened, Wayne, and we both know that kind of power has screwed better men than me. I'm not a good man."

"But, you're making a good choice. That's all you can do, now. What little choice you have left, you have to make the best of it."

"How are they?"

He's ready to hear it, now. He's mentally prepared.

"How's Chibs holding up? He sounded tense when we last spoke."

"He's doing okay. Trying his best in the circumstances. He's got a lot on his plate."

It's a lot to take on.

"And Juice? He seemed overly concerned about him."

It's a surprising question. Jax looks apprehensive, as if he is afraid to ask and it's right about now that Unser realises.

Jax knows he was wrong.

This is as close as he'll get to enquiring what the fallout was.

"He's not your problem anymore, Jax."

"Seem he's got the whole world fighting his corner. Forget I asked."

Unser sighs. Jax's voice holds something in it that he can't let go, an exhaustion, maybe. A tiredness that indicates he's sick of this ludicrous battle.

"He's...hanging in there. Gettin' over you. Gettin' over all of this. Clearin' his head."

"Yeah, that's good."

"Is it? You were stringing him up with your mother five seconds ago. Are you that changeable?"

Not changeable, Unser thinks, just conflicted. Unser can't help it. He knows he's bear baiting but he just can't help himself. He can't look at Jackson Teller without seeing something that never should've been. He can't help but see someone wildly unaware of just how much damage his hegemony has done.

"Look, I'm not a monster, Wayne. I know what I did to him was..."

"...inhuman? Irrational?"

That gets him.

"You don't know what went on, Unser. You don't know the position he put me in. You don't know what he drove me to."

"I know enough."

“Well, then, you must understand.”

“No. No, son, I don’t. Y’know, I tried to get him away, out of Charming. Wanna know why? Because I saw something worth salvaging. I saw something in him that I know you’d lost. But you just kept on digging. I can't figure out why. I know for sure he can't. Do you even know?"

Jax says nothing. Gives nothing away.

“Gemma, I'll give you that. Begrudgingly. But, Juice? Outta all of you, he was the only one who I felt stood a chance."

Looking at Jax now, he truly doesn't know. He probably never did, just saw a benevolent entity to pour his scorn and hatred into so that it left him free to push forward.
“It just happened.”

That’s all he can say, and in the warped mind of Jax Teller, that makes perfect sense. Things just happen, consequences be damned.

"Look, I'm glad you're doing the right thing, son. Your dad would be proud of you for that. But there's every chance you're gonna get the death penalty. You gotta get right with everything you did or you're gonna die with so many regrets."

"I got plenty of time to get right with my sins, old man, even the senseless ones. I just wanted to let you know I was making' a start on that."

It's a long time coming.

"Yeah, well. Thanks for that. It's good to know."

"Will you come back?"

Will he? Unser looks around one more time. He looks at the shirt buttoned up to the neck, the stark letters marking Jax a prisoner. He tries to see the little boy in the denim dungarees and the bone white sneakers but the memory is fading fast.

He doesn’t want it to die completely.

"I don't know, son. I'm not long for this world. I’d kind of like to remember you as you were before all this. Seeing you in here just reminds me of everything that's happened."

It makes it real. It makes her gone.

He sees Jax reach out. He knows what he's about to say. Part of him wants him to tell him not to say it. Another part of him just wants to hear the words.

"I'm sorry for what I took from you. I know you loved her. I'm happy you loved her. She always knew she could count on you."

Unser smiles from the corner of his mouth. He looks Jax in the eye.

He drives home the pain he feels because of him. Because of this.

"I couldn't save her from you. And I couldn't save Tara from her. I gotta live with that for however long I last."

"Not your cross to carry, Wayne."

But it is, to Wayne.

It always will be.

(*)

Stewart catches Juice in the corridor. He’s in from the yard, has worked up a sweat just kicking the ball, though he’s pretty sure it’s got a lot to do with the fact that Happy’s in reception right now looking at getting to him.

Juice knows the rules about visits for his security level. They have to be approved, first from his doc and then from Juice personally. He knows he can say no if he wants to. He knows he can stay safe if
he needs to.

(‘You need to face your fears head on, baby boy. Only way you’re ever gonna get past them.’)

He knows he won’t.

“Hey, Juice. There’s a guy here to see you. Pretty fuckin’ big guy. Think he’s one of your crew.”

Juice wipes his hands on his pants nervously and his eyes won’t meet Stewart’s. He knows he’s running on nerves here but he’s trying his best to keep afloat.

“Yeah, I saw. Happy,”

“Ironic nickname.”

“It’s actually what he’s called.”

“Seriously? Huh.”

It’s almost like his mother knew, like she was making some great cosmic joke by naming him so. Apparently, he smiled a lot as a small child. Juice can’t even imagine it.

He used to smile a lot once, though…

“Harlow’s clearin’ it, sent me down to see if you were cool with it. You can say no if you want to. I know you like to prepare. You wanna pass?”

(Yes, yes, yes, yes…)

“N-no. No, it’s cool. He made the effort to come here. Least I can do is see what he has to say.”

“You sure about that? You look like you’ve seen a ghost, dude. Sheet-white, for a brown guy. He got something on you? Is that what this is?”

“Really, it’s fine. I swear.”

It might not be. It might not be fine. It might not be good. It might be the very moment Juice looks a brother in the eye and knows this is the end but he has to take that leap of faith. He has to. He owes it to himself and he owes it to Happy.

(‘You don’t owe anything to anybody, Juice. They’re the ones that should be making amends.’)

He clears his throat. Clears his head. Stewart puts a hand on his shoulder to bring him back to wherever he’s going and he knows he’s going there, but he’s able to bring himself to the foreground with a little effort.

He takes a deep breath and holds it.

He counts in his head.

He looks at the colours of the wall and focuses on the scent of this place and it grounds him. It grounds him as Stewart grounds him.

“Go get changed. I’ll walk you up.”

“Sure.”
Juice knows what he’s thinking, what he’s hoping. He’s hoping that if Happy sees him with a big
dude he’ll be less likely to cause a scene. Stewart knows how it works, understands a Hell of a lot
more than his doc does because he’s been there. He’s lived it. He knows a hatchet guy when he sees
one and he’s not going to let Juice go it alone.

“Gimme a minute, okay?” Juice says. “Just gotta, um…just gotta change my shirt.”

It’ll give him those precious few seconds to come to terms.

To figure stuff out.

(*)

They’re not alone, that’s what Juice keeps telling himself. They are not alone and, should anything
go wrong, there are two guys outside this door who would put a stop to it before it gets too heavy.

It kills him to think this way of a brother, to fear for his life from the very man who protected it time
and time again when it was in obvious danger. There’s just something about Happy that’s
intimidating by default. It could be his height. It could be his stance. It could be how black his eyes
are, how empty they can be.

It could just be that Juice knows what he’s capable of, knows that he wouldn’t hold back, not if the
situation warranted his action. How he’s stayed out of jail is beyond anyone’s comprehension and
the guys had all but joked he’d threatened the judge’s wife and children to get his cases thrown out.
Happy has killed more men than Juice even wants to think about and he knows, without a shadow of
a doubt, that he’ll kill more.

That’s a frightening thought for a guy who broke after the first one.

He stands up straight. He has to. Hap has inches on him at the best of times, kilograms of bulk that
Juice will never have. He’s smaller than he’s been since he was a teenager and, without the tats and
the cut he knows how benign he looks.

The only thing he can do is smile. Hope for the best.

“Hey.”

He keeps his head up. He powers his eyes to make contact with Hap’s because he’s big on that,
forced as it is, and it means something to him that’s practiced and cultivated.

“How…how are you?”

Hap just stares at him, those eyes transfixed to his face as if probing for something, looking for
something that Juice cannot identify, searching for something he cannot read. Hap doesn’t move
towards him, nor does he move away. He doesn’t move at all. He just looks at him in that way he
has and it shakes Juice to the core.

His stomach ties in knots and he feels his heart starting to race.

He tries his best to pull it back.

“I, um…I didn’t know you were coming. Usually you have to make an…an appointment.”

(‘Get it together, kid. You sound like a fucking moron when you stutter like that.’)

“Does Chibs know you’re here?” Again, he smiles that nervous smile. “He usually lets me know.”
There’s still nothing, but Juice knows Happy and he sees the slight shift in his posture. It’s tiny, would be unseen to the untrained eye but it’s there. His weight moves to his left foot and his fingers straighten out against his leg.

Juice knows he’s thinking. He’s watching. He’s analysing. It makes him angry, but he holds it back just for now. He’s not ready to blow just yet because he still feels he has something to prove.

(‘They’re all gonna be ogling you like a hawk, waiting for you to slip up. Just like my crew did. That’s why I got out. Sick of walking on eggshells because they didn’t know how to act around me. You prepared for that?’)

It’s only when Happy’s head tilts to the side like a curious dog that Juice loses his carefully maintained patience.

He sighs angrily and it’s new, he knows it is. He knows Happy won’t be expecting it.

“What’s your fucking problem, Hap? You just planning on staring at me for the next thirty minutes or are you gonna say something, ‘cause you know what? I’m tired of being eyed up to be fucked or killed. I’m over that.”

He's not this brave. He just wants Happy to think that way.

He’s not this tough…but, he’s starting to think he’ll have to learn to be.

He gets nothing. Not a God damned thing. He’s tried nice, it didn't work. He's tried calm, that got him nowhere. He's done angry. What is he supposed to do, here? Where is he supposed to go? This feels like Jax all over again.

He realises there’s nowhere he can go.

“Screw this. I'm out of here. Shoot me in the back of the head if you want. I'm done caring. Do what you have to do, but I'm not gonna stand here in silence while you try to figure me out. I don't need that from you.”

He turns to walk away and he’s shaking, he’s shaking so damn hard he can barely keep upright but he said it. He said what he needed to say. He stood up for what he needed to stand up for, that being himself, and if that’s not right for Happy? If that’s not what he wants to hear?

Screw him.

He’s about to leave when he feels it, a hard firm grasp around his upper arm and he thinks, not this, not this again but it’s Happy this time, not that crazy fuck, and he knows him. Still, he freezes where he stands because it’s an invasion of sorts, a presence he wasn’t ready for.

He’ll learn not to flinch one day. He’ll learn that not every touch is a threat, but here? Now? This could well be.

"Hap, please don't -"

Happy grabs him harder and forces him to turn around. Nobody has dared do this in a long, long time. Not Chibs. Not Unser. Nobody. Such a broken teacup, he is, that nobody can bear to touch him at all.

“Please, just – “
Happy drags him close so that they’re eye to eye, as much as their height difference allows and Juice can’t read Happy, not like this, and that scares the Hell out of him.

Still, his voice is even and measured as he looks Happy in the eye and bids him to do as he will.

“- just do what you gotta do.”

It’s then that the mask falls away, that fierce plastic skin that holds no emotion, no truth, no love, no hate, no anything.

It’s then that he lets Juice inside as he pulls him in, harder than necessary, and just holds him there. It’s rigid and uncomfortable, a facsimile of affection that he learned as he went along and, though it feels like very little for Happy he knows it means a lot to its recipient.

“It’s done,” he says, and then again, as if Juice hasn’t heard, “It’s done.”

Is that it? Is that everything?

Did he pass Happy’s sad little test?

Juice hugs back, and the tiny whimper that escapes him is not a sign of weakness but a sign of relief. He sucks it back in and holds it, holds all of the emotion that’s threatening to push out of him as he feels his brother’s tight embrace; as he knows that Happy has come to a conclusion that he will not turn his back on.

Happy follows truth. He rejects lies.

That he’s holding him now means he’s accepted Juice’s truth, even if it’s not been voiced. He wants to tell him “Thank you” but he doesn’t know how.

He knows he doesn’t need to.

They stand like that for a while. Then it starts to ache.

“Hap, my arm - you're hurting my -”

“Sorry, man.”

It’s almost as if he doesn’t know when social etiquette dictates he should let go. He lets his arms fall away and he takes a step back. That’s when he really looks at Juice, really looks at him like his presence alone has been the answer he’s been searching for.

“So…what made you come? Not the best place to visit, I have to say.”

“I figured if I saw you I’d know in my gut. I’d see it.”

Here comes that anger, an anger that was never there before, Juice knows, because if anything has changed in him it’s that his tolerance for bullshit and posturing has lessened substantially.

“You gotta be shittin’ me. You’d see it? Like there's some kind of rape and abuse marker or something like that? How do you see that, Hap? I look like a victim to you?”

Hap looks pissed at the assumption and Juice is instantly repentant. He backs down immediately when it's obvious he's reached the wrong conclusion.

“Jesus. Look, I'm sorry. That wasn't fair. I just…I get so angry sometimes. Like people are looking at
me as if they're trying to see his hands on me. I fucking hate it."

"That’s not what I meant, asshole."

"I know, I know. I don’t want to mess this up, I really don’t, but I can’t stand people acting like I’m some god damned magic eye painting that’s gonna reveal everything if they twist me the right way. It doesn't work like that. It's not fair."

God, how desperate does he sound?

('Reel it in, kid. Take a fucking breath. ’)

"I wasn't going to do that, Juice"

"I know you're looking to get it straight. I know you were lied to. Whether or not you believe me when I tell you I never meant for any of it to happen? That’s another thing entirely. I missed you, Hap, and I'm sorry about everything. It all just got so crazy. I just got so crazy."

('Not crazy, just a little unwell. ’)

Happy shakes his head. He doesn't want to hear that, not right now. He doesn’t seem to want to hear anything. It’s then that Juice remembers how little value Hap puts in words; how much more value he puts in actions and in instincts. In what he sees for himself. In trust. In the faith he has based on what people have proven to him. There is good and there is bad. There are those he respects and there are those he does not. Based on those instincts he is able to catalogue people; push them into boxes based on what they've done. Who they are. Facts. Feelings.

It can make him both the best person to have around and the worst.

“Chibs told me everything.”

Juice nods.

"And, you couldn't take his word for it because you'd already been taken for a ride by Jax. Shook your trust. Yeah, I get that."

"I couldn’t get it straight out of Jax – but I knew I could get it out of a shitty liar like you, Juice. All I’d have to do is look at your dumbass face and I'd know. Do you understand that?"

Of course he does. Of course he knows he did a bad thing and that people are not gonna take his word any more.

Of course he fucking knows.

It doesn’t make it any less frustrating. It doesn’t make it hurt any less.

“Yeah, I get it. But, the club…you…it’s everything to me. I’d never put that in jeopardy, I really wouldn’t. Everything I did, it was just all out of control. Please believe me when I tell you that. I wouldn’t lie, I swear."

Hap nods. He doesn’t smile, he doesn’t reach out, he just agrees.

Juice knows Hap trusts his instincts. He once said he could smell propaganda at 5 metres depth. His gut and his head rarely let him down and, though he requires facts, he always knows before he knows because he’s seen it. He sees the black and white of any scenario and he feels as much as his eyes tell him. They asked him once if he was from Skynet, wondered what software he was packing
that he could see right through a person when barely a word had passed between him and them.

He said it was his special talent, that all the mouthyfuckers were wasting their breath and ignoring
the only thing that mattered, which was their God-given bullshit detector.

Juice knows how much it must mess with his head to know he couldn’t see through Jax; that he
allowed himself to be lied to for all that time.

He knows how much it mess with his head that Juice lied too.

He’s sorry for that.

“I never told Chibs I was coming. I needed to do this on my own. It’s how I work.”

He has to see for himself. He has to reach conclusions off his own bat. He can't be fed. He has to
feed himself.

Juice looks at him softly and with acceptance. With acknowledgement of just what could’ve been at
stake, here.

“Were you gonna kill me if I didn’t give you the right feeling, Hap?”

“I don’t know.”

Juice nods his head in acceptance, in acquiescence.

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For being straight with me."

It’s not cold. It’s not frightening.

It’s about as honest as anything Juice has heard.

(*)

“We could’ve got out. You, too. We talked about it. Bobby and me.”

“Yeah?”

“We talked about going nomad. I spent years doin’ it. It’s a decent life. He needed it. We knew
something was off with you. He figured you needed it too.”

“And, you?”

“I thought we needed to put you in the ground before you blew.”

Juice knows about the nomad thing. Bobby had talked about it with him when he was disillusioned
by Jax’s rampant rages; his endless string of promises that came to nothing. Juice had been hesitant
but he knew it was in Bobby's head.

He was a good guy. He didn’t deserve to die like that.

Jax never would let him express his sorrow..
“Why didn’t you go? You could’ve got out. Got away before it all went down.”

Bobby might still be here if they’d followed their gut and went for it. That’s a sad thought, that he was this close to being saved, but Chibs words ring true in Juice’s mind when he told him “Bobby made his choice just like I did.”

“Jax convinced us it was all for Tara, so we stayed. For her.”

Juice smiles sadly at that, scrapes his nail against his cast the way he used to scrape it against his skin when things got overwhelming.

This is better.

This doesn’t leave a mark.

“He flew off long before Tara. It was all around Clay. That’s when he started losin’ it.”

“It was a dirty fight. He knew it. I didn’t see it. We lost men because of that fight. Good men. Better men than him.“

It was a fight brought on by Juice an Gemma's lie; by his undying loyalty to a woman who let him down. How could he do that? He doesn’t understand.

(‘It’s difficult to understand the choices made in the midst of a break. Clarity and hindsight are a wonderful thing but they’re not particularly helpful in this case.’).

“I’m sorry,” he whispers, and he means it more than anything he’s ever said in his life. “If I hadn’t banded with Gemma – “

“You did what you thought was right at the time.”

“Would you have done the same, Hap?”

“I don’t know. But we move on. We go forward. We don't go there again.”

“Just like that?”

Happy says nothing. He doesn't have to. To him, it's done. It's straight. What more can he say? Moving forward is the only way. He’s not a sentimental guy, nor is he a guy who dwells in the past. It’s part of what makes him who he is, the ability to pull himself upright and stride high.

It’s what makes him such an effective killer.

“I brought something.”

Push away. Move on.

Forward march, soldier.

Don't look back in anger.

When he reaches into his pocket Juice knows they've moved beyond when he doesn’t instantly take on a defensive posture and assume he’s going for a gun or a knife. He just sits there and waits because, with Happy, it could be anything. He’ll always remember the time he pulled out a picture of his sister’s unborn child, a tiny potato on a black screen, and had told the boys “this kid is the fucking future”.
He brings out a deck of cards emblazoned with the Red Woody logo. He sees Lyla’s face on the front, her beautiful eyes and her warming smile.

(‘You okay, honey?’)

Juice smiles, all nerves abated.

“Cool.”

It’s just like old times as Hap shuffles, as he lays them out, as he promises Juice that he’s gonna fucking slaughter him if he’s not careful, that he’s been practicing.

“I made ten grand in Atlantic City a few weeks back. Gave it to Ma.”

“You can make ten grand counting and you’re still re-using condoms?”

“It’s called frugal.”

“It’s called cheap, lunatic.”

He’s brought something else. This time, when he reaches into that pocket, he does pull out a knife, a beautiful silver flick knife that’s small enough to conceal yet lethal enough to kill or seriously maim.

“In case the guy who did that comes near you again,” Hap says, indicating Juice’s arm. “You dig this in him. He won’t be back.”

Juice raises his eyebrows, as alarmed as he is amused.

“Thanks, Hap, but if they catch me with that I’ll lose all of my privileges. I get to go out unsupervised now. No locks on my door. It took me a long while to build up to that and I don’t wanna lose it.”

The thought was there.

Sometimes, Happy just doesn’t think properly. Like turning up here today, for instance. Like grabbing a guy who loses it when he’s touched.

Somehow, it all worked out, though.

Sheer dumb luck.

“I got my cast. This thing’ll knock a guy out if he gets close. I just gotta aim right. By right I mean straight to the forehead or the temple.”

That sick smile is something that brings joy to Juice, even if it shouldn’t, because it’s Happy, because he loves Happy, because that smile means he may be treading water but everything is gonna be okay.

“Hey, remember when I fell off that piece of shit dirt-bike I used to have and busted up my arm? You had to take me to the hospital because you were the only one who hadn’t drank a fuck-ton in the clubhouse because you’d been on watch duty. You filled out the form wrong when I was in X-ray and they thought we were together. Jesus.”

“Yeah.”

“Remember the idiots handed me a flyer about domestic violence and told me to call if I needed to? What the fuck?”
It was the single most bizarre assumption Juice has ever encountered.

“You aint got nearly enough up top for me. Too much cock, not enough pussy. Good times, though, kid.”

“Yeah. Good times.”

Good times sitting in an ER with a snooping prick asking questions. Good times with a broken arm and a shit-eating smirk because chicks dig motorcycle injuries.

Good times long, long gone.

They both sit on that for a while with their cards dealt before them and their newfound agreement on perfect show and Juice wonders what the cards have in store for him, for all of them.

He smiles thoughtfully.

“You wrote a fucking gnarly thing on my cast last time. Drew me a Reaper before I even had mine inked. That was awesome.”

This time, Happy just draws a smiley face.

To some it might be a threat knowing what that means to him, but that ugly grin on his face tells Juice it means nothing of the sort. It means he's just fucking with him, that soot-dark sense of morbid humour overtaking him in the moment.

God, he’s missed that.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

A bit of Asian retaliation and, as requested, a bit of a track back on Happy's part.

Once again, thank you for all your thoughts. Please let me know if there's anything you'd like to read. Or, indeed, just tell me to stop writing.

(Oh and marie-bernard, ending of this chapter is a start for what you said Hap might do!!!)

Just say hello if you wish :)

The boy's always been a liability.

Happy watches him as he flicks through his cards. He does it one handed, his right arm held up by that cumbersome plaster-cast, but there's a half-smile on his face that's so 'him' it practically defines him. Juice was always self-deprecating. Unpretentious. An idiot. Happy wonders how the Hell he's lasted this long; why the Hell Jax chose him to be the scapegoat.

He's answered his own question. It's because he's self-deprecating. Because he's an unpretentious idiot. Because he's a liability. All he needed was a push in the right direction. Or, the wrong direction, whichever way you look at it.

"Aw, man, you're rigging this, aren't you? I haven't won a single deal yet."

Happy says nothing. He learned from 'the best'. Juice used to rig games all the time, fixed it for Clay to win every single hand once upon a time because he knew the old man was struggling and he wanted to perk him up a bit.

Chibs called him soft. Maybe that's what it was.

Could just be he's a nice guy.

Of all of them, it was always going to be Juice who ended up in a place like this. It wasn't just Hap who thought he was bad news on that front. Clay said the boy was a liability, mentally and physically, that if there was a hole to fall into then Juice would go headfirst, a wall to crash into he'd go at it hard. He'd joked time and time again that they needed to take out credit, the amount of times he’d needed patching up, and that Tara was a gift from God in that respect. Juice never complained, though. He'd just get back up, bruised and battered, and laugh it off.

The time he talked about with the dirt bike, that had been real little boy stuff. Happy couldn't figure it out. He'd been on that dirt-bike in TM grounds looking to take on Chibs because he wanted to earn his respect and would do anything to prove himself. They all knew the brakes on that thing were beyond redemption and that letting him ride it after a few drinks was like putting him on a mad bull. He'd been determined.

"I own that thing", he'd said. "It answers to me."
Nobody had been surprised when he’d been thrown off it. They were surprised at the way his arm hung limp when he got up, though, because nobody ever taught this kid how to fall properly.

Hap’s never understood the concept of trying to earn respect. Ever since he started grade school he’s just had it without question. People have just fallen into line for him. Not for this guy, though. Nobody ever fell in line for him and Happy knows he's had to scratch around and dig and claw for every ounce he's ever had. There’s always been something about him, something a little ‘off’ that none of them could put their finger on.

(‘He’s a half-wit, that’s what it is. Who in their right mind feeds crank to a Doberman, for fuck’s sake?’)

If nothing else, though, nobody could doubt his heart. His spirit. His unconditional need to fit into that club the way the rest of them seemed to. Hap had learned just how much it meant to him that night in the ER. Pain and discomfort make Juice laugh, a nervous, edgy, tinny little laugh that sets Hap on edge more than a man’s screams do when he’s poking needles down their fingernails. He does it when he’s anxious too and, though Happy’s well aware of his own inappropriate responses, that kind of thing can piss people off. He’s seen Tig dig him for it, has heard Jax ask him if there’s something wrong with him, but that night, the desperate laughter had been more to do with holding himself together than anything else. Grinning and bearing it with his arm all bruised to hell and fractured in three places.

Hap appreciates that, smiling through pain.

He respects those who endure.

For two hours he’d sat in that ER bay with Juice while they waited to be seen. The triage nurse had given him a shot of Demerol to try to keep his pain levels acceptable and that, mixed with the vodka he’d already consumed yet failed to disclose, had sent him into a state of verbal diarrhoea that Happy found both arduous and hilarious. His main (and repeated) concern had been about the guys. Would this affect him being patched in, if he couldn’t even ride a fucking dirt bike without screwing it up? Would this make him look bad? Would they think he was reckless and stupid? Would they kick him out because of this? He’d trail off, following his own stream of consciousness wherever it took him, but it always came back to that.

“They’re gonna think I’m a fucking shit-for-brains.”

Hap couldn’t imagine being that insecure, didn't get it. He couldn’t understand how Juice peeled back the layers and looked at every tiny little detail, how he blew it out of all proportion and turned it into something it wasn’t.

“Stop thinking,” he’d told him. “Stop talking.”

Juice didn’t. Couldn’t. Couldn’t stop talking. Couldn’t stop laughing. Couldn’t stop pondering just what everything meant and some of it was stupid, stupid, juvenile drivel. Some of it was ridiculous. He’d asked Hap if he’d ever considered wrestling, said that he looks like ‘one of those big motherfuckers on the WWE’. He’d asked if he ever played Xbox because “there’s a character in one of my war games that I swear is you.”

He’d just talked, and laughed, and smiled so hard his face must’ve been hurting. Hap couldn’t comprehend how a guy could be so damn joyful all the time, so much so that maybe he should’ve been christened with this cross-to-bear name.
“I love that your mom called you that,” Juice had smiled. “You were named after a positive emotion. I was named after my mom’s homeless uncle from Dorado. The only memory I have of him is throwing up on our dog.”

His mouth ran away with him when the docs examined him, that bluster kicking up a notch when he said “Oh, this? This kind of thing happens all the time” and “the guys like to put me through my paces. Hurts like a bitch, sometimes but I come out good.” He’d quietened only when Happy had glared at him and pursed his lips as if to bid him silent.

It hadn’t looked suspicious at all.

In those hours, Happy got to know Juice, this street scrap from another state who he had held off from because he’d been absolutely sure he’d be cut loose before being patched in. He learned of his undying loyalty, his absolute and fervent desire to please and how, given the chance, he would literally die for the men who watched his back. In another life he could’ve been a soldier and, Hap had thought, that’s probably what he’d end up being.

A foot soldier.

Someone to do the Club’s grunt work.

The little fuckwit made him laugh, though, and for a man as famously inexpressive as Happy, that was some achievement. And, yet, as much as he bonded with the younger man, as much as he’d seen him for what he was, Happy couldn’t resist messing with him because he’d learned, as he went along, that this is what people do to guys like Juice.

This is what they thrive off, this hazing, this fuckery.

Because they’d given him a shot he needed someone ‘responsible’ to take him home. Hospital policy. They’d patch him up and release him provided someone would be with him while he was under the influence. Hap had been the only option since none of the other guys were sober enough to get here. He’d been given the paperwork so that the ER had no liability should anything happen once he left their care. Under ‘relationship to patient’ Happy ticked the box marked ‘partner’ because that’s what Chibs would’ve done for kicks; because that’s the kind of thing these guys do to each other all the time just so they can witness the fallout. He wanted to see Juice squirm, though if anyone asked him why he wouldn’t be able to tell them. Maybe it was that learned behaviour his childhood psychologists spoke of when his Ma dragged him off to see them.

Maybe it was just a twisted sense of humour.

He wasn’t expecting them to hand Juice that flier, the one that labelled him an abusive partner and called upon Juice to seek help and asylum, though the things he’d said in the exam room probably played a part in that too. The boy’s got a big mouth, doesn’t know when to shut it, but Hap figured he’d learn sooner or later

He never did.

Back then, part of him had wanted to track back in there and kick ten shades of shit out of those doctors for thinking he’d ever hurt a brother but inevitably he’d just accepted it because people always assume that of him. With his stance and his fierceness, he brings a lot of it on himself.

He had taken Juice back to that pathetic little rented apartment he used to live in and that had been the moment he’d seen just how lonely the boy’s life was.

The place was barely furnished, an old couch and a TV, a bookshelf and not much more, though
he’d obviously spent a lot on his sound system and Xbox setup. There were a handful of original comic books in dust covers on a coffee table, a shelf full of DVDs tucked away in the corner. In frames on the walls were posters for Rocky and Star Wars, two films Juice labelled ‘classics’ as Hap dumped him down on the couch.

“You coulda been in Rocky, Hap. You sure you weren’t?”

The ragged little half-breed mutt Juice kept, ironically named Cujo, had circled Hap’s legs as he tended to its owner. Juice appeared to love that stupid dog more than he loved himself if the cupboards were anything to go on, practically bare but for masses of canned and bagged canine food and treats.

If nothing else, the place was spotlessly clean and, though Juice didn’t have a lot, what he did have was maintained to perfection.

Amidst all of it, one single photograph stood out to Hap, a picture of a tiny boy, clearly Juice because he hadn’t changed a bit, sitting on the lap of a dark skinned lady with a beautiful face and Juice’s same bright smile.

“My mom,” the kid had said though half-open eyes as he held that little mutt close. “And, me.”

Happy loves his mother, always will. He’s grateful he got to near fifty with the woman still around for him and, though she’s not in the shape she used to be in, she’s hanging on. Juice’s mother was long gone, though, and it showed. The small cross that sat beside the picture told Happy all he needed to know and, though people think him hard as stone, he had ached for the boy, knowing that she was dead and that there was nobody else but this animal, but the ‘brothers’ who treated him like a problematic child.

“Club’s all I got, Hap. I don’t wanna lose it.”

Something had clicked within Happy and, from then on, made a point to look out for the kid, at least quietly, because not many people would put a dog before themselves and not many fuckers would put their neck on the line for a ‘liability’ and an idiot like Juice.

That’s why he’d protected him in prison, because Chibs wasn’t there to do it and no-one else would.

That’s why he’d kept him safe as much as he could because, in his own carefully structured mind, that’s what was supposed to happen.

That’s why he’d watched him these past years, knowing that something was poisoning him but never knowing what and if he were more introspective he might just kick himself for not asking a question sooner. He knows damn sure If he’d been aware what was going to happen to him in Stockton he’d have rather put a bullet in that boy’s head before he even got there because no man deserves that.

No man deserves to have a loved one put them through that for reasons Happy simply cannot explain.

When time's almost up they realise they've fallen back into a pattern, a pattern where they just play, where they just sit and where Juice knows he doesn’t have to talk to fill the space because Hap doesn’t need him to the way he thinks everyone else does.

It’s just like old times, other than the keypads on the doors and the bars on the windows that keep Juice in and other people out.

“They’re gonna call time soon,” Happy says as he looks at the clock on the wall.
Juice looks sad. Happy gets that. Must be tough being stuck in a place like this while the world goes on around you.

“I wish I could go with you. I just wanna make it right.”

He’s desperate for that.

He deserves the chance.

When Happy’s prepay pings a text through he’s tempted to just ignore it but he knows that the MC wouldn’t call unless it was necessary. He told them he was gonna be off the grid for the day, that he was going to see his Mom up in Bakersfield.

They’d only try to get a hold of him if it was important.

His face turns stern when he reads it and, in turn, Juice’s face falls. When Happy tells him he has to go he panics, because Juice knows that look and he knows that quick-fast sharpness means something has happened. Happy might be a little slow on the uptake when it comes to adequate responses but he knows he needs to calm Juice down.

“It’s fine.”

“I’m not stupid. What’s going on?”

It’s so conflicting to Happy because, though if it were down to him he’d just spill it out, he knows there are certain scenarios where telling a person the black and white truth is more damaging than holding things back. It’s something he picked up over the years, another learned trait that has saved him a Hell of a lot of aggravation and misunderstanding.

He knows that offering Juice the truth will stress him out. He also knows that offering him a lie will defeat him.

What’s the lesser evil?

“Please, just tell me.”

The lesser evil is truth. It’s always truth.

“Something’s going down with Chibs. I need to get out of here.”

“What? What’s going on?”

His voice lowers. This isn’t the kind of talk for places like this. Too many ears. Too many eyes. When Happy whispers, he barely sounds alive.

“The Chinese ordered a hit because of Lin. Tully warned us it was coming. Looks like they’re trying to make good on it.”

He can see how anxious it makes Juice. How fraught.

He can see how he fidgets urgently, his eyes darting all over the room as if searching desperately for an escape, as if looking for some way of running away from his law appointed guardians without being dragged back, held down, forced quiet.

It disturbs him to the point of madness that he’s not allowed to leave until his ‘sentence’ is through.
“Fuck. *Fuck*, this is my fault. This is all my fault.”

“Don’t, Juice.”

It’s a warning. Juice is getting agitated and Happy worries what will become of that. His face is drawn and frustrated. He looks like he’s about to pass out, his eyes too wide, his breathing too shallow.

“I can’t make it right because they won’t let me outta here to fix things. God, Hap, this is killing me. Being in here is killing me when you’re out there cleaning up my fucking mess. It isn’t right.”

Hap can understand that. He can see it. There’s no misidentifying the agony on Juice’s face, no mistaking the absolute hopelessness in his eyes because he’s trapped and he’s cornered, there are invisible ropes around his wrists and his ankles that hold him here, hold him tight and won’t let him go.

Poor kid.

“Just sit tight. Nothing you can do here.”

Juice’s face twists up in distress as he processes that fact that he’s completely helpless.

“Yeah, Hap, that’s the problem.“

Happy feels sorry for him because he’s been there himself. He’s been locked away before knowing that his mother was suffering out there alone and he could do nothing to help her. The guilt he felt in leaving her for those solid fourteen months was unfathomable.

Juice has always been ready to jump straight back in, even before his bones healed, before his mind heals.

Reckless or loyal? Devoted or stupid?

Or, quite simply, just a Son?

“I’ll have him call you. Let you know he’s alright.”

His arms are folded tight across his chest. He's calming into defeated quiet and he can no longer look Happy in the eye.

“Yeah, thanks.”

“Keep it cool. It’ll be fine.”

Happy can only hope but, going on the look on Juice’s face, he’d better make sure of it.

(*)

By the time Hap gets there, the threat has been neutralised – but, Chibs is still lying on the table with his shoulder packed with gauze, the patch of blood that lies underneath him testimony to just what went down in his absence.

When he looks at the haphazard way that Chibs has been patched up (“It was an in and out, I did the best I could”) Happy thinks that they really, really miss Tara around these parts.

“What happened?”
It’s obvious what happened. There’s dead Triad on the ground and another on his way out. Rat’s got his foot on the guy’s chest, a gun pointed right in his face. He looks fierce, fiercer than he has ever been. Happy understands this ‘war’ took away any innocence Rat might’ve retained, though there was precious little to begin with.

It made him a man – though, for all the wrong reasons.

“I got a call from Tully,” Chibs says, voice strained. “Gave me a heads up, told me a few of Lin’s stragglers were on their way over to collect on a task. They wanted to take me in alive to use as leverage to try and get some of the patch back. They’re really clutchin’ at straws, by the sounds of it.”

He glares at the man on the ground.

“The scummy pricks knew me and Rat were alone. Someone must’ve tipped them off.”

Rat presses down hard. Angry. He’s not a prospect any more, nowhere near it. It’s a shame his early years as a full patch have been fraught with such misery.

“Who was it?”

The downed man groans in pain and Happy’s immediate thought is that it’s justified.

“Fuck you.”

“Where are the rest of the guys?” he asks, turning his attention back to Chibs because they’ve got directions about sticking together where necessary just while the dust settles. There’s always a risk of retaliation coming off the back of what they just went through.

“T.O’s got a couple of deals on the horizon that Tig wanted in on. Unser was supposed to be droppin’ by so I thought I’d sit this one out. Tig’s lookin’ at takin’ on more responsibility. I guess this lot are thin on the ground so they figured It was the best time to strike when we were low on numbers.”

Hap glares down at the surviving assailant – and spits on him.

“The rest of his crew took off. They didn’t have much in the way of fire power. Not sure what they were hoping to achieve. Rat popped one in the back of the head. This one thought he’d try his luck with me.”

There’s no luck left for the bastard. Happy doesn’t even wait for the order he knows is coming. He just strolls up to the guy and puts a bullet between his eyes.

“They got nothing worth saying.”

Rat just stares at him, then down at the dead eyes looking up at him now where life and defiance had been only seconds before. There’s bitterness in his voice. The boy’s young. He hasn’t seen anything like this before.

He looks jaded. Spent.

It’s troubling to see.

“The fucking war’s never ending. And, for what? All of this, for what? Jesus Christ.”

For Gemma, he’s thinking. For Juice. For two people who don’t deserve breath nor heartbeat and for
whom too, too many men and women have died.

Rat doesn’t understand it at all. He doesn’t understand it because he doesn’t know.

He doesn’t get it because, like all of them, he followed the wrong lead and he read from the wrong prayer sheet.

Chibs tells him to get the bleach, get the tarpaulin. Get the brushes and the cloths. Happy has lived with this kind of ‘list’ for as long as he can recall, these tools of the trade meant to dispose of thing that cannot and should not be seen. How many men has he buried now? How many has he finished off?

Today, it feels like he resurrected one, though, so he’s pretty sure that counts for something. Balance, in the grand scheme of things. Aren’t people all about that?

“Christ, what a day, eh?” Chibs says. “You go off on your jollies for one second and the shit hits the fan.”

It’s always the way.

Chibs pushes a hand against his wounded shoulder and asks, “How’s your mum?”

Fine, he wants to say. Great. But, Hap’s done with lies. He shakes his head and, just like that, his President reads him. Through his stone-cold face, something gives him away.

“Ah. It wasn’t your mother you were droppin’ in on, was it, Happy?”

He becomes very grave very quick. His voice takes on a hostile tone which sounds all the more threatening with the gruff tinge of pain coming from this throat.

He stands close.

“What did you do?”

It’s a concerned accusation rather than a straight out indictment. Happy understands that. He also understands that there’s no room for showmanship here. There’s no call for pretence. He is appreciated for his directness. He is respected for getting straight to the heart of the issue.

He is valued for his no-holds-barred approach.

He points down, points towards the body on the ground, towards the blood that’s staining the floor even as they speak.

"The boy is done paying for this. We clear? He does his time, we bring him back. All of this gets cleaned up. All of it. No looking back.”

He sounds like a leader, not the follower he is. He’s stepping up.

Chibs knows without asking what he’s referring to. It goes without saying.

It shows in his eyes.

"Right you are, my brother. Right you are."
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

...in which a new venture is suggested and Juice does something very stupid (yet very endearing).

Thank you again to those that commented. It keeps me on my toes :)

Warning: racially sensitive word used in this chapter.

The prospective deal that T.O had set up, it turns out, is lifted motorcycle parts shipped over from the Harley centre in Manaus. Sticky’s got a connection in the warehouse who can shift figures and let a bulk-lot slip through on a rolling basis. For the right price, he can make sure they’re shipped to Lodi, where Sticky can do as he sees fit with them. There steady money in it with the right people on the job.

“I figured we could make a killing just sellin’ raw parts but if we put something together we’d blow the black market away.”

Tig, there as an overseer and Chibs’ ‘ears up top’, listens to his proposal intently because the GB might not have anyone capable of chalkin’ up a bike from scratch but Samcro do. They’re all good with their hands. They all know their way around a motorcycle. They can all make sweet, sweet music with the rev on an engine and a polished wax rag across a steel finish. Teller Morrow wasn’t just a front. It was a good front.

He likes the idea of getting his hands dirty. It’s not exactly going legit but putting together custom rides with Harley steel? There’s something beautiful about that and the only people it’s hurting have cash to burn.

It’s a virtually victimless crime.

“‘You got any interest?’ T.O asks.

“‘Menace has been puttin’ the feelers out. He knows a few guys already who’d take a few off our hands. They’re willing to pay top motherfucking dollar for a good lookin’ bike and we all know how much stolen Harleys go for on the underground. There’s always interest.

T.O nods his head, raises an eyebrow. He’s got a way about him, Tig thinks, that make him a good businessman. Cool-headed. Reasonable. Fair. Tig likes him.

He’s not sure about Sticky, though. Tig’s got nothing against the disabled, had a bit of a fetish for callipers when he was a younger man, but he can’t stop thinking about him strapped to the back of that car throwing up sparks as he went.

It shouldn’t be, not really, but that shit was funny.

“What do you think?” T.O asks, and Tig shrugs his shoulders.

“Sounds legit. Need more details but, on the surface…”
Quinn and Montez follow suit. They’ll go wherever the club leads them; wherever its main men see fit to push it. Tig came to this meet in the hopes of helping to guide things in the right way because he’s seen first-hand what drugs and guns can do and he’s not prepared to walk that route again. Not now that things are the way they are.

The idea of going into porn and motorcycles sounds like everything he ever fantasised about when he joined an MC. That’s how it always felt, like fantasy; an unrealistic, idealistic dream.

It’s in reach. God, it’s in reach and he can touch it. He can see it. He can feel it.

It’s such a far cry to how things were only weeks ago.

“You got guys who can build, T.O. Us? We don’t have that kinda set up here but I figure we can work somethin’ out. Seems like too good a deal to pass up.”

You. Us. It must be hard for Sticky using those pronouns in relation to T.O when it was always ‘we’.

It’s strange watching a Bastard turned Son interact with his old club but T.O walks the line well, balancing both sides with the skill of a natural leader. To some it might seem like he took a step down when he patched across to Samcro but, for the club itself, Tìg sees it as a step in the right direction.

Those antiquated laws were what broke a Son.

The change was a long time coming.

“So, who’s the guy in Brazil? Is it West?”

“Yeah, so you know he’s good on his word.”

“West, as in Lebron West?” Tig asks.

“That’s the guy.”

“Loved that guy. I thought he was dead.”

“Nah, he went where the real cash and trade was.”

Tig bought a bike off him about ten years back, the most beautiful bike he ever rode. He loved it like he would’ve loved a woman and every touch across her perfect body was a caress. He savoured every inch of her - until he crashed her into a wall and totalled her beyond all recognition.

He’d tried to get a hold of West to salvage something of her broken body only to find he’d disappeared off the face of the Earth. He mourned that bike like he mourned his own mother.

He mourned West, too.

“Why isn’t he selling himself?” Quinn asks. He’s a quiet man, a towering hulk not prone to making himself heard, but it’s a legitimate question. “If he’s got the skills and he’s got the figure-rigging capabilities, why doesn’t he just offload first-hand?”

“He got kids, man, two little girls. He’s good to let things slip through but he aint got the time to spend on it. He doesn’t wanna take the risk.”

It makes sense. Family changes everything. Venus, she’s changed so much for Tig already, both she
and Cordelia. When he goes home to those two beautiful girls at the end of the day he feels like there’s no place he’d rather be, money or no money.

Money’s good, though. It’s good to have.

“What are you looking at numbers wise?”

“We’re looking at 40.”

Money’s what make it all go round. It’s all about numbers. It’s all about figures. It’s all about profit. Tig had a talk with Chucky the other morning and the poor guy had looked like was about to tear what little hair he’s got left out with those creepy little fingers of his. The books are down, he’d said. The numbers are dwindling. Fact. He did not accept that. While Red Woody and Diosa were running themselves, they all knew they were in for a long stretch without a steady income if they were looking to go legit. The club was sustainable, they’d each take home a cut, but it wouldn’t be living pretty. Not like it was.

Times would be hard for a long, long while until they got themselves straight.

Sticky looks like he’s thought it through, at least, a good head on those low-down shoulders. His legs might not work but his mind is sharp and clear.

“For 40%, we push the parts through, act as a middle man. We split the profits. You get the edge because you’d be the ones getting’ your hands dirty but we can help shift them once they’re assembled. Amongst other things.”

“– being that you get first refusal on any deals we pass on, am I right?”

Drug deals, cocaine shipments, narcotics straggling through the lines. There are always deals to be made and, through Jax’s dealings in recent years, Samcro always get a sniff at them. So far, Chibby has turned them down despite the chance of a quick and steady profit and has channelled them through associates. He says he’s not willing to drag the club through the narc trade again and so far he’s been true to his word.

“We know you got lines in for coke, T.O. You passed it over to the Niners.”

The Bastards have always been down the pecking order because, despite T.O’s loyalty, he’s well aware they’re bottom feeders until Sticky and Menace build up a tighter unit.

They know that. Or, at least, they should.

“You gotta earn it, Sticky. You know that. You knew that when you took over instead of patching across. You’re a good guy but you’re startin’ from scratch. You know why I tapped out.”

“Because we were losin’ numbers, I get it. But, I’m building. We got a couple of Sabbaths lookin’ to step in. Matthews, James and Jackson. They’re good niggers, man. Ask anyone. I stuck with my boys because I believed in them.”

Tig had respected Sticky’s need to stay, to try to salvage something from the wreckage because he loved his patch and he didn’t want to let it fall away. He didn’t want to see his club die despite its President moving on because he believed in it.

There’s a kind of honour in that.

There’s also a kind of stupidity.
“It’s all about loyalty, T.O. We got a lot of connections. All black. All good. Menace has been runnin’ it hard. Better us than the Oakland punks. Tyler’s not much better off. I’m asking for a leap of faith and, in return, I get you a deal that benefits both our clubs. All of us.”

He doesn’t say “you owe us this” but Tig can tell it’s an undertone. He understands that. T.O owes Sticky in the same way Samcro owes Juice because they left him in the lurch as much as T.O left his crew. T.O knows that and, though business is business and Tig an Chibs would never let him jump in head-first out of sentimentalism and misplaced loyalty, there’s something to be said about maintaining good relationships.

“It’s not my call to make, Stick. You know that. I’m not the boss any more. I’m gonna have to clear it up top.”

“That’s cool.”

The handshake is both intricate and ridiculous. Tig’s never understood it. It seems so middle-school ‘secret code’ to him and he always wondered if they had a secret knock to get into the clubhouse, maybe a password which was probably their mother’s name.

Sometimes, when he looks at T.O, he thinks of how far they’ve come. He tries to imagine how old Piney might’ve got by with Venus behind the counter with those beautiful breasts on show serving up a storm or with T.O pulling on the cut, dead against the ‘no blacks’ rule they wrote in years before. It’s hard to imagine Piney with that kind of narrow-mindedness, that dead-set bigoted view that segregates the world into colour and gender. Maybe he mellowed in his old years. Maybe Tig is too. It’s all change, though. If someone would’ve told him a few years back that this is where he’d be he’d have told them to get the fuck out of here, but here it is. He looks at Montez and Quinn and he wonders if they’re thinking the same.

How things change.

How brave this new world is.

“We’ll be in touch, dude. Keep it real. You’re doin’ good out here.”

“Yes, no thanks to you.”

Sticky’s got a smirk on his face when he says it but at the heart of a joke is always an element of truth. Tig knows it well. He felt it when Jax cut him down to size. He felt it when Clay fell from grace.

He felt abandoned by their failures in the same way Sticky must feel abandoned by T.O’s lack of faith in the Grim Bastards’ future, yet he sucks it up, just like Tig did.

It must be hard seeing an old leader band together with someone else.

It must be even harder trying to live up to his name, but the guy’s determinrd, if nothing else.

it's not a bad thing.

(*)

“It’s always hard going back, y’know? Kinda like revising an old girlfriend. You know the kind, where you loved her more than anything when you were together but you knew in your heart it was time to cut her free? You know you’ll always love her but, every time you see her she reminds you of why you got out in the first place.”
T.O sighs, drumming his gloved hands against his leg.

“Sticky’s a good guy. Tig. Menace too. They’re all good guys. They’ll make good. They’ll come good. But... it just feels different, now.”

“Now that you’re where you’re supposed to be you can’t imagine anything else, right?”

“Yeah, exactly.”

For Tig, he’s supposed to be with Venus. He’s supposed to be standing beside Chibs at a table that’s not drowning in blood and lies and malice. He’s supposed to be stepping up with his brothers to make things better and to crawl out of the hole that Clay Morrow and Jax Teller have been pushing the club into for years and years and years

“Never thought I’d be one of you, though. Never thought this is where I’d fit. Didn’t even cross my mind when I was running with the guys.”

Those antiquated by-laws made it so. The outdated racism that sat itself on paper ruled out a lot of good men who could’ve been Sons over the years and it’s only now that it seems like a fucking travesty.

It feels like a good time for Tig. It feels like the right time. A natural time. It feels like a moment where dropping this in won’t feel like a big deal.

It’s like tearing a band aid off.

“You know you’re not the first, right T.O?”

“First what?”

“You’re not the first ‘man of colour’ to sit at the table. Juice’s dad was black.”

“His old man’s a brother? How the fuck did he get patched in?”

Isn’t that the start of a long, sordid tale?

“He never met the guy. He’s not even named on his birth certificate. As far as Juice is concerned, he’s a Rican, just like his mother, just like I’m a white Irish mutt like my Mama was. Nobody would’ve known if Roosevelt hadn’t found out and started using it as leverage against him.”

T.O knows all about Miles. He knows all about what went on between Juice and the authorities. He knows all about everything that Jax has saw fit to lay out – but, he really doesn’t know anything at all.

“He was convinced we’d off him if we found out because of that fucking by-law.”

What had they done to make him believe that? Tig thinks back on all the times they made casual remarks. All the times Hap or Clay turned their noses up at ‘the coloureds’. Maybe it was said in passing. Maybe there was no deeper meaning to it than a casual distaste, but in passing comment they had cultured a minefield for Juice, one that he wasn’t prepared to navigate like the one he ran through the day Kozic died.

He’d given up by then.

“It makes you wonder, doesn’t it? Makes you wonder why Jax didn’t scrape it off years ago instead of using the fallout from that Roosevelt shit as a cat o’ nine tails to beat the kid with. Could’ve saved
a brother a whole world of pain.”

Put like that, it just sounds wrong.

If nothing else, Tig thinks, it’ll get T.O thinking.

(*)

As per Happy’s promise, Chibs attempts to call Juice to let him know that all is well and, at the very first instance, is met with a resistance he had not been expecting.

His shoulder aches. His head aches.

“He’s not available right now.”

Now his stomach aches, that niggling clench in his gut that makes him feel all is not well.

“I need to speak to the lad. It’s important, can you put him on?”

It’s not that she’s haughty, it’s just that she has a tone.

“May I ask who I’m speaking to?”

Chibs gives his name, his real name, not the fake name he gave that first time before he could trust Juice; before he knew where he was with the law.

“You can talk to me. It’s on his file.”

They are all each other’s point of contact, a loosely-defined Next of Kin. They’ve just learned it works better that way and, though they cannot make medical decisions for each other, it allows for freedom of information.

“Mr Ortiz has had…a difficult afternoon. He’s resting in one of our quiet rooms at the minute.”

“For Christ’s sake, why?”

“Things escalated this afternoon. He was very upset. We thought it best to help him calm down for a little while in a safe place.”

Safe, meaning soft.

Help, meaning force.

“What did he do?”

Chibs can’t even imagine, can’t imagine what could possibly have gone down since Happy left him. Then, it hits him. It hits Chibs hard and, where he’d felt agitated before, now he just feels sick.

Happy told him about the Chinese threat.

He told him about a threat on Chibs’ own life and then he left him to stew on that, knowing he was powerless to do anything about it.

“Things got a little heated after his visit this morning. His mood became very erratic. He was agitated, said there was somewhere he needed to be.”

At Scoops, Chibs thinks, protecting his brothers.
With family.

“He was insistent and got very restless when we tried to calm him down. We managed to convince him to go to the rec area to sit quietly for a little while but...well, we’re not sure how he managed to get the key card but we assume it was somewhere in the tussle when the orderlies were trying to de-escalate the situation.”

She’s quiet for a moment. Ever so quiet.

She sounds almost apologetic.

“He was half way across the parking lot when we got to him. He’d slipped out through the staff entrance.”

Despite the desperation for the situation, the absolute foolhardiness of Juice’s irresponsible actions, Chibs cannot help but smile. He smiles at the thought of Juice going to those lengths to see that he was good, at the thought of him creating a diversion in order to steal that key card when the orderlies were holding him down. On that thread, part of him thinks, “clever boy” whilst the other part remains lodged in the “idiot” camp because he did that all for the club and, in turn, probably lost just about every perk he was proud to have earned over the past months.

That bloody boy, Chibs thinks. What lunatic tries to run from a high security mental health facility just so he could see to it that Chibs was safe? Mary, mother of Christ, Tig would have a field day with that kind of crazy.

“He was worried about me.”

“Yes, I dare say he was very concerned, and as much as I’m glad you sound fine, you might want to warn him that he’s not doing himself any favours running off to your rescue like that.”

“Aye, I will. I will.”

She sighs. She’s not so haughty any more. The tone of her voice indicates she likes Juice, that she truly wants what’s best for him even if he’s behaving like a child.

All women love Juice, mothers especially.

“Look, he’s sleeping right now. He’ll be out for at least another couple of hours. We’re hoping the down time will clear his head a little bit. If he’s more stable when he wakes up I can have him call you?”

“Yeah. Yeah, thanks. That'd be good. Christ, I can’t believe he did that.”

“He won’t be doing it again.”

Chibs can’t believe it - but, at the same time, he would never put it past him. There’s nothing he wouldn’t do for them, Chibs thinks. There’s nothing he wouldn’t do for me.

It’s as worrying as it’s everything the club needs, everything he needs at his side.

Within bloody reason, that is.
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

In which Juicy leaves.

Happy Saturday to anyone who is with me. Come say Hi :)

When Juice wakes up in that so-called ‘quiet room’ he realises he’s crossed the line into full-blown loco.

"Jesus Christ, Ortiz, you're like Homeless Bob down at Floyds, all doom and apocalypse and stuff. Look at yourself."

It was only a matter of time. This ship has been sailing the water for about fifteen years, now, and it’s finally arrived at port.

It’s a strange thing, coming to that conclusion, looking around your surroundings, at the soft white walls that enclose you and thinking: “Yeah, my sister was right. I’m batshit crazy, who’d have thought it?”

He’s a little disorientated at first because it’s always fucking weird going to sleep somewhere and waking up somewhere else but he’s starting to get used to that feeling. His world doesn’t feel his own in here, though thinking back, that seems like the story of his life since he moved to Charming.

This place is quiet, as the name suggests, a room designed for peaceful reflection in a place where a person can't freak out and bash their own head in. He's kind of offended they'd think that of him but, in fairness, he hasn't done himself any favours. He knows what their intentions were when they put him in here, to take him away from everything, to remove all stimulation and let him fall into a sense of peace.

He knows why he's here, what he did. He just can’t find it in himself to give a shit because whatever they forced on him takes all of the pressures away from him.


That scares him more than the rising dread and fear might.

(*)

Estimating the passage of time in this place is a little difficult but he guesses he’s been awake for at least a half hour, though it could be more or less with nothing to gage it. He figures they’re leaving him alone, letting him ‘come to’ in his own time in the hopes of him chilling the fuck out.

"Zen, Juice. Think zen."

He takes advantage of the solitude the way he always does, by filling the space with noise, the sound of his breath, the throb of his heartbeat as it pulsates in his ears. He fills it by focusing his mind on something physical, something tangible, something other than the soundlessness. There’s little point in yelling. That's expected. Nobody will listen. There’s also little point in thinking about his failed
efforts today so when Chibs springs to mind he pleads with him to go away.

(‘Not here. Not now. If you're dead I'll deal with that later.’)

Back in that motel, the only thing that kept him together was the searing pain in his arms as he pressed down and pushed up, the agony in his thighs as he stretched them beyond their limits.

His busted up wrist makes it difficult for him but he’s willing to work through. By the ninth day in motel solitude, he was doing it with a hand behind his back just to add tension. For the first few minutes he can’t steady himself, still under an influence, but he builds on it. Each and every time he crashes to that soft ground he picks himself up and tries again. He’ll do this until his good arm aches beyond its limits, until his chest feels close to caving in, then he’ll press himself against the wall and do it there until his legs feel the same way.

This is Juice’s fortitude.

This is Juice’s mental recovery.

This is his determination, and its only when he has no physical energy left that he will start to focus on the mental side of things, not quite an afterthought but something which he pushes to the side until he's buzzed enough to deal.

(‘What’s the point in building yourself up on the outside if you’re swimming around inside of your own skull?’)

He sits down on the ground, stretches his legs out in front of him. They burn behind the knees and in the thighs and it’s a beautiful burn, a distracting burn, a burn that focuses his mind and stabilises him from the inside out.

His first useful thought is: “What was I thinking?”

He’d tried to run. What the fuck? He’d come close too until that damn bracelet had sent people after him, the closed gate locking him tight where the card had granted him freedom. He could’ve been out. He could’ve been on his way. He could’ve shown without a shadow of a doubt that he’s willing to make amends for the shit that he has pulled. Club comes first. Before life. Before anything.

He didn't show it

This is where he ended up, in a room with soft walls and nothing to show for his efforts.

(‘Ah, Juicy. You mean well but you’re not the brightest crayon in the box, are you, laddie?’)

(*)

After awhile he thinks they’ve got to be fucking kidding him and he goes from synthetic, unnatural calm to something a little more urgent.

He paces. It’s another form of physical motion that keeps his head from caving in. It probably looks manic. He doesn’t care. He just wants out.

His thigh stings where they jammed the needle in and, fuck them, did they have to do it so hard? It hurts like a bitch. This hurts like a bitch. It’s like being in solitary all over again only this place is cleaner, softer, less grey brick and bars and more white, soft, cushioned protection.

Still, when he reaches his hand out and touches the emptiness it throws him back completely even if
it is just a sense memory.

It’s in moments like this that he struggles to keep his boogeymen at bay and he wonders if he ever will, whether that drawling voice will always come back to him when he is isolated and upset. Like this, Tully is a tangible force, so vivid as to be practically touchable. Juice can remember how he felt, the heavy weight of him like pliable rock, can remember how he smelt, like soap and lavender that he insisted would soothe Juice and take him away from the trauma of that place.

(“Lavender has natural calming qualities. It’s why people spray it on their pillow.”)

He can remember how protective Tully was, how he tried to build Juice up from the crumbled thing he had become, how confusing it was to hear those words and to feel those things from the mouth and hands of his abuser.

He can remember just how much he missed him, these first few nights alone in this place and how it made him physically sick, to the point they thought he was ill.

Stockholm Syndrome at its fucking greatest.

Harlow claims that Tully was trying to create positive associations for Juice. The calming voice, the sedate scents, the cocaine provided without question that took him away from himself whilst at the same time, Tully would’ve hoped, forcing a dependence.

That he was so nice amidst it all.

“The fact he never raised his voice,” Juice learns, “that’s telling.”

The fact he never beat Juice, never hurt him, never said a bad word and always, always encouraged him.

The fact he told him he was worth something; that he was important.

“It was all just emotional manipulation.”

Juice knows that Chibs has made some kind of deal with Tully, figures he must form at least part of the deal, but Chibs won’t say a word. It frustrates Juice because he can handle the truth and if Chibs is so big on that then he needs to start practicing what he preaches.

“You don’t have to avoid talking about him,” he’d told Chibs, “I’m learning to work through it.”

“You don’t need to hear that crap, Juicy. Not right now.”

He wonders how he’d react if he saw him again, whether he’d melt at his feet like the good, brainwashed fuck-toy Tully wanted him to be or if he’d curl his hand up into a fist and pound it into his face until there was nothing left.

(‘You wouldn’t, Juan Carlos. You don’t have that in you. You’re too good for that.’)

He can hear him now, that voice in his head, and the worst part of it is that Tully is telling him that he will be okay, that this will all be okay, that all he has to do is hang tight.

Those words should not come in Tully’s voice, not when they used to come in his mother’s.

He hates himself for that.

“Out,” he says. Then, louder, “out!”
Into your box.

You have no fucking power over me.

It listens. Tully leaves him and, Juice thinks at least he’s got that part right, if nothing else.

He’s had enough. He knows they can see him. He asks them: “Are you done, now?”

They’re not cruel in here, not like those fuckers in Stockton who’d hold him down and beat him until his face bled for a pocketful of cash and a story for the evening.

They won’t leave him wallowing in his own crazy for longer than necessary in this place.

They give him a few more minutes.

(*)

“What, you couldn’t come sooner? I’ve been awake for hours.”

He’s a moody, twisted little shit, he knows he is. He knows how he sounds.

He doesn’t care. Not today.

“It’s been less than an hour, Juice. We thought we’d give you an adjustment period before we came to check on you.”

“An hour?”

It truly did feel like a really long time.

“Seriously, an hour?”

“It’s natural to feel a little disorientated. You slept for longer than we thought you would. Why don’t you come and sit down?”

“I’m perfectly fine standing up.”

“Sit down, Juice. Come on. Don’t make this uncomfortable.”

Show some willing, they’re saying, and he does it because he knows he’s being ridiculous and trying to assert control over something meaningless like he always does, only this time it’s more obvious. To him.

He’s learning all of his own tricks.

Still, he’s reminded of Clay physically pushing him into his seat any time he wanted to have words with him when Juice was eager to leave. He’d put that hand on his shoulder and there wouldn’t even be force. There’d just be authority. Clay would push and Juice would fall back in line. Clay would ask, and Juice would do. Even to this day, he cannot bring himself to see that as manipulation because with Clay he never felt used.

With Jax, though, that’s another story.

He surrenders here and now because he knows he will not get what he wants if he doesn’t.

“Can we get this over with? Do what you gotta do, doc. Put me in leg shackles if you need to, just let
me the fuck out of this room.”

He can’t stand it any more.

“You seem threatened. I’m not threatening you here. Nobody is.”

“I never said you were. I just want out.”

Harlow says nothing. He waits for Juice to take a breath. He waits for him to reel himself in and it pisses him off but if he takes himself outside for a second he understands it.

Anger won’t get him anywhere. It will achieve nothing in this scenario. It’s what he’s been learning in those management classes, that there is a time and a place for frustration and, if no benefit will come of it, it’s just a waste of energy.

(‘Of course it’s natural to be angry at times and it’s good to let it out, but it’s how we use that anger that’s important. It’s what we gain from it.’)

He pushes his back against the wall and he meets his doctor’s eyes. He hopes this shows willing, even if its barley fucking there.

"I'm cool. It's fine. Talk to me. I'm listening."

“Before we go anywhere, I just want you to know that your friend Mr Telford? He’s perfectly fine. He called asking after you a few hours ago. We said we’d have you call him back once you were awake.”

Just like that, Juice scales down.

“He’s alright? Thank God.”

His poorly control agitation, which was bordering on frantic animal, subsides to a level he can manage even in here.

“Can I call him? I just wanna make sure.”

It’s not that he doesn’t trust this guy, it’s that he needs to hear for himself. It’s a thing now, this need to second guess, kind of like a double-lock on a front door. The first lock is probably enough but, just to be sure, the additional one is there for security.

He’ll only be secure in Chibs’ safety when he hears it from the man himself.

“We need to talk about what happened first.”

“Can’t we do it later? I’m not going anywhere.”

“No, I think we need to talk about it now, This is serious. “

“I know. I know, I get it. I just - I just – “

(‘You just’ what, Juice? Spit it out.’)

Juice doesn’t know what he’s trying to say. That’s why he stops saying it. His mouth has always had a tendency to run away with him and he wants for that to end, now.

It’s why he looks down at the ground as if maybe, just maybe, that will help him figure it out.
“This isn’t an open programme, Juice. It doesn’t work like that. You’re not cleared for day release and, even if you were, there are strict conditions. You can’t just steal a card and hope for the best. There are rules. It’s the same in here as out there.”

“I know, I was crazy with worry, man. I wanted to help. I couldn’t just sit here knowing that shit was going down and I wasn’t there to try to stop it. Do you have any idea how hard this is for me?”

“Of course I do. Things are out of your control and you find that difficult to cope with. But, it’s not your place to stop anything right now. You’ve got your own shit, as you say, to deal with. Think about yourself for once.”

Jesus Christ, this impossible.

He puts his head in his hands because he’s this close to just losing it yet again and proving beyond a shadow of a doubt that he deserves to be locked up in a quiet room.

“You said to me that you just wanted to keep your head down and get through this programme. Is this what you consider keeping your head down?”

“No. It’s what I consider a desperate situation that called for desperate measures. Haven’t you ever been desperate in your life?”

Of course he has. Who hasn’t?

“There are boundaries, Juice. At this moment in time, you have very strict, court imposed restrictions that you cannot cross. In a few months’ time, they’ll be gone. Lifted. But, until the moment you’re fit for release? This is no different to a prison sentence. Would you stage a break-out if you were doing hard time? For your friends?”

Would he? If he thought it would give him a chance to stop what could’ve gone down today? He's most likely try.

He sighs.

“Yeah, probably.”

He knows it's not the right answer but it's the only one he has.

“And, you think that’s wise?”

“I think that’s just me and we can’t change who we are no matter what.”

Juice knows that’s not true. He knows there are ways and means of behaving within the realms of normality and that he so very often falls outside of that. He knows there are strategies he can put in place to prevent that from happening.

He also knows that everything flies out of the window when it’s one of his brothers; that every last thing he’s learned is undone in a second when he hears Chibby’s name.

He doesn’t know how to fix that, doesn’t think he'd want to.

“This could risk your release date, Juice. You understand that, don’t you? Do you feel it was worth it?”

He does, and that’s the God’s honest truth.
“I’d do another six months in this place. I’d do a fucking year if I thought I could’ve made a difference today. It was family. My family. I know you think that’s fucked up after everything, but it is what it is. Can you imagine knowing that someone you love is in trouble and not being able to help?”

“Of course I can, but I don’t think you’re listening to what I’m saying.”

“I am listening.”

“Well, then, you’ll understand. What you did today, that was unlawful, Juice, not to mention irresponsible. You need to respect the boundaries the courts have placed on you or else we are going to have an issue here when it comes to the end of your programme.”

Juice knows what the old man is thinking, that this is one of his problems, that when it comes to other people, certain people, he has no kill switch. He would walk in front of a train if it meant pushing someone out of the way. He would bleed himself dry if it meant that he could be of benefit to the select few in his life who mean something to him.

He would walk through a minefield just to make sure they were okay, would throw himself off a tree branch and choke on the end of a chain…

“I’m sorry.”

He knows its crazy. He knows he’s crazy. He also knows that he’d do it again, and it’s probably stupid but it’s who he’s always been. His mom used to say he was born to please, a giver in every sense of the word. She used to say she raised him to put others first because that was a beautiful, selfless trait and it’s what our Lord expects of us. Maybe he exaggerated that trait after she left.

Maybe he takes it too far because he wants to prove his worth; that he would literally die for his club. He’s working on it, though. He’s working on putting it into some kind of perspective.

He looks up at Harlow and he tries to read him. He’s looking for something. Forgiveness, maybe. The possibility of a second chance. He used to look for the same thing in Chibs’ eyes, in Jax’s, back when things were tough, but the look he was after never came.

“You’re gonna report this, aren’t you?”

It comes from Harlow, though.

“In theory, I should. Suicide attempts, escape attempts, those things are all covered in the disclosure agreement and transcend the confidentiality I’m able to grant you. Anything which is considered reckless or dangerous behaviour…”

“It wasn’t reckless or dangerous. I wasn’t trying to run and I wasn’t gonna hurt anyone. I was gonna come back, I swear. I just - “

Just ran from a locked ward after stealing from an orderly.

Just pissed all over a Judge’s Order that’s keeping him out of prison.

What the fuck is wrong with him?

“Shit. I don’t know. It seemed like the only option at the time.”

Don’t they always?
“What have we talked about? Thinking before acting. Taking a few moments to look at the consequences before diving in headfirst and gung ho. What were you planning on doing when you got to the gates? Were you planning on asking the security guard to open them up for you? What about when you got into the street? You weren’t even wearing any shoes.”

It was an oversight, he'll admit.

“Like I said, I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“Were you going to walk the 6 miles back to Charming on bare feet or were you planning on hitching a ride?”

The persistence aggravates Juice. He doesn’t snap as much as he niggles a little, his tone a little quick, a little terse. He wonders if Harlow is trying to bring the feelings out, kind of like drawing out poison to the surface of the skin so that it can be drained.

“I really don’t know. I just needed to try, I really did. If anything had happened to him I would’ve felt responsible. I couldn’t sit on that.”

“You’re in here, Juice. They’re out there. Anything that goes on outside these four walls is out of your accountability.”

“It’s not just the man who fires the gun. It’s the guy that arms him. The guy that provides the bullets.”

He heard that once.

It made sense to him.

“People make choices all the time. Nobody has to pull a trigger, Juice. That is their choice, not yours.”

There’s so much power in Juice and Gemma’s lie, though. There’s so much rancid venom in it. So much evil has spanned out from that one choice that Juice can barely believe it, let alone stand it.

His eyes are wide and deploring.

“You ever do something that turned out so bad you can’t even believe it? Sure, you might have had no malicious intentions when you did it, but you’ll always know in the back of your thick skull that people’s lives were destroyed because of something you chose to do. Did you ever do that?”

Did you ever mess up so bad there’s no going back?

“We’ve all made bad choices, Juice, and some have consequences more far reaching than we could ever imagine. But, where do we draw the line? Every human being on this planet has made a mistake. At least once. It's part of our nature.”

“This was more than a mistake, Dr Harlow. This was like, the grand master of mistakes. This was the big boss of mistakes. If we’re talking gaming, this was the Gilgamesh of bad decisions. The shit that’s offset from that? Jesus. What is it they call it? The Butterfly Effect? Let’s just say I killed a thousand butterflies and the shit’s still hitting the fan because of it.”

People are still suffering for those butterflies.

People are still hurting for them and that’s something this old man, with all his diplomas and all of his
self-help mantras and all of his fucking care and attention, does not understand. He cannot understand.

Chibs could’ve died today because of Juice.

“Look, Juice. There’s not a single person alive today who doesn’t wish they could go back and rectify something they’ve done, but you know what? We can’t. The important thing is we learn from them and move on. That’s something you don’t appear able to do.”

Juice looks him in the eye. He has to. He looks him in the eye because he wants to show him how sincere he is, how much this means to him. He wants to show him how this is what drives him through more than anything else, this need and this wish to be one of the good guys.

(‘I used to know how to find some of that.’)

“I want to right my wrongs and I can’t do that in here. If someone would’ve gotten hurt because of what I did, you’d have been setting me up a permanent room in this place because I wouldn’t come back from that. I know I wouldn’t.”

He smiles.

It's more of a knowing smile than he's usually capable of.

“You’re always accusing me of catastrophizing, or whatever the fuck the word is, but, trust me, it really can’t get bigger than this for me.”

“So, get through the programme, Do what you said you were going to do. Head down, push on. If you want to make right on your perceived mistakes then you have to right yourself first. “

It’s the most important life’s lesson Juice has been learning in this place and one of these days it might just stick.

Look after yourself. Only then can you look after everyone else.

“I want to. I’m trying to. I’m making progress, aren’t I? Except for today, I mean. I don’t even feel like the same guy I was. I feel like how I used to be, even before the club, before Tully, before any of it.”

He pleads with his eyes, trying to appeal to the side of this man that he knows is reasonable, the side of him he knows just wants what’s best for him.

It’s taken him a long time to get to a point where he thinks anyone could.

“Please, just let me get through this. Don’t make this harder for me.”

Harlow sighs because he’s a good man, because he’s a smart man, because he’s a man who is not averse to bending regulations where he feels it will be of benefit.

What’s the alternative but something that will set his patient back miles?

“I won’t put this through as an official report. I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt this once. But, if anything like this happens again, and I mean anything, I’m not going to be able to do that.”

“You’d really do that for me?”

“Like I said, we’ve all made bad choices. I’m trusting you’ll learn from this one.”
“You know I will.”

Juice knows that he knows.

He can see it in the way he looks at him. With compassion. With understanding.

With genuine concern.

“Now, you want to make that call before it gets any later? I know it’ll help you settle and God only knows we don’t want any more pandemonium today.”

Fuck, no.

“Yeah. Thanks.”

(*)

"What were you thinking, boy?"

This? This is how Juice wanted Chibs to sound in that diner, this quiet exasperation undercut with such love it can be heard all the way through.

This is what might've just saved him.

"I was thinking about you, brother. I was thinking about what I’d do if I lost you again. It almost killed me the first time."

"You can't just run off, Juice. What did you think was gonna happen?"

He thought he could make a difference.

Or, maybe he didn't think at all.

"I saw it all play out in my head. It went a little differently than I’d hoped. I thought I’d at least make it past the gate."

"Even if you had managed to get here, chances are Rat would’ve put a bullet in your head, the way he's been talking. I told you this was gonna take time."

"I know, I know. But, Chibs, the look on Hap’s face when he left. He looked scared to death. I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

It was the same look he's seen on that face time and time again and nothing good ever came of it. What was he supposed to think?

"You jump in headfirst. When was the last time it didn’t get you into trouble, eh?"

"Never. There was never a time."

"The first sign of madness is repeating the same thing over and over and hoping for a different result, Juicy Boy."

A little like Jax repeating Clay's mistakes, then.

"Yeah, well, we all know I’m a little crazy. Jax used to say it was a good thing."

"Aye. He’s not exactly the best judge of anything, now, is he?"
"Guess not."

Juice sighs and leans into the wall.

"So, you're good?"

"I’m fine. Took a bit of a hit to the shoulder but that’s it. You don’t need to worry yourself about me. I’m a big, ugly bastard. I can look after myself. You need to concentrate on you. Yeah?"

He knows that.

It's just a little hard letting it sit with him.

"How are the guys?"

"I’m layin’ the groundwork. Hap and Tig are already on board. T.O’s started asking questions. By the time you’re ready to go I’ll be able to come down there and bring you home. But, son, this has to stop. If they get wind if this they're gonna think you're a loose canon."

This reckless endangerment.

This fast, furious superhero bullshit.

"I get it. I'm sorry."

"Just…learn from it, aye? The first thing we learn in the army is discipline. The second thing we learn in the army is discipline. Guess what the third thing we learn is?"

"How to jack off without getting caught in a trench?"

Juice smiles.

"We learn how to think when we’re moving, smart-arse. How to make the right decision when there are bullets flying all over the place because you make the wrong decision and your head’s hanging off. You let your brothers down by leaving them a man short."

That’s something Juice would never want to do.

"No more of this doolally shite, Juicy. Use your head."

"Yeah, okay."

"Let it be a bloody turning point."

This? This is something he will learn from. Draw from.

This random act of misguided stupidity is the thing that finally gets through to him.

"I love you, brother. You keep plugin' away in there and I'll carry on out here. Alright?"

"Yeah. Yeah, okay."

(*)

Weeks later, by the time Juice is ready to leave, he’s a much different man, that much is clear. He sees it when he looks in the mirror. He hears it when he opens his mouth in group, in therapy, in any scenario where he needs to speak.
People listen to him and if, in turn, they disagree? He's not gonna back down just to please them because, fuck them, he's entitled to voice an opinion.

He sounds the way he used to sound and while in the back of his mind he is forever wondering whether he’s saying right, doing right or being right, he’s beginning to embrace his own words.

He is not a victim but a survivor.

Juice has been built up and mended, put together, polished like a new bike that’s ready to be broken in. Those words, both from Chibs and from Harlow, they sat right at the foreground of his mind, so valuable.

Think, they told him.

Have foresight.

When things are moving too fast, step back, take a deep breath and visualise what comes next. When things feel overwhelming, divert the mind and come back to it when it feels less stressful.

Look at the big picture without ignoring his place within it.

It’s been six months since Juice left prison, since he was pulled away from Tully’s hands for reasons he still can’t fathom because Unser saw his life as worth something, a man he sees as a friend, now, rather than just a tool to be used when the club needed some screws turning.

It’s been six months since everything fell from the sky and landed on his unprepared shoulders.

It’s been six months since Gemma died and it’s only now he’s starting to realise that he did everything he could; that her death does not fall on him, just like Bobby’s doesn’t because he didn't ask for them to die.

Embrace your part, Harlow has taught him. Take responsibility for your own misdoings.

Don’t take responsibility for everyone else’s.

"We all have freedom of choice, Juice. Even you. Nobody has the right to apply force."

"I know."

This is how it was last time, back when he was a kid. This is how it was when he walked out of that place, this new man ready to take on the world, all of these psychiatrists tips and tricks fresh in his mind. Low level brainwashing, he always used to think. Positive thinking bullshit.

But, he knows, now. He can see it.

The blindfold has been removed and he can accept his life for what it has been.

He has been used.

He has been taken for granted.

He has been hurt.

He’s not going to be any of those things again. Not anymore.

(*)
It feels strange to even breathe the air, let alone walk free, when every indication was that he should
die.

Chibs is there in Unser’s truck. It reminds him of the day he got out of prison. He’s alone, which is
unusual. For a second he worries. What if it all went wrong? What if he’s out? What if, what it, what
if?

“Hey, Chibby.”

The smile on his brothers face tells him he’s worrying for nothing and he catalogues it for later
contemplation.

“Don’t worry. I just didn’t want to overwhelm you. I know how you can be. Skittish fucking mutt,
you are. How you feeling?”

All the things in the world, Juice thinks. He looks back at the building that has been his home for so
long and it almost feels like too much to leave it.

So much has happened in those walls. So many hands of cards with Hap, mending bridges. So many
hours with Tig where cocksucking was not even brought into it. So many days with Chibs just
falling back into place, rectifying what broke down between them.

He loves this man. God only knows how much.

There’s so much safety there.

"Y’alright? You look a little peaky."

“Nervous,” he admits. "Scared.”

He’s surprised when he hears himself say those words, attributing what some may consider
weakness to his own sense of being.

Chibs understands.

“Course you are. It’s always hard when you first get out. You were a wreck after Stockton. You all
were. It’s to be expected, boy.”

“I just wanna get away from this place. Never look back. Half a year of my life spent in a cotton
wool ball, for fuck’s sake.”

“I know.”

There are tears in his eyes and, dammit, Juice, could you stop? This is a good time. This is a good
thing.

“God, why am I like this?”

He quickly reaches up to brush them away, hopes above all things that Chibs did not see but, this is
overwhelming.

“It’s a hard slog, kid, but you’re done, now. It's all over.”

Six month ago, Juice was dead. He truly was. He was dead inside, almost dead on the outside. He
was a the bottom of the pile and he was suffocating alone. There was nothing there. No hope. No
family. No life.
He was nothing.

He was Jax’s fucktoy, Teller’s whipping boy. The club’s scapegoat. He was Juice Ortiz’s broken fucking spirit.

Now he's just Juice. Plain and simple. Idiot kid from Queens.

And, hopefully, Prodigal Son.

“We goin’ home, Juicy Boy?”

(‘The club’s your family. This charter is your home.’)

He smiles, soft and hopeful, as mended as he is broken.

“Yeah.”

(*)
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary


BTW Chibs is Rangers on purpose. Trying to make him as far removed from a typical IRA member as you can get, to the point people would ask "how the Hell were you a member at all?"

Just hated he was involved in all that.

As agreed, Chibs drives them both to Juice's house.

He'd caught onto his nerves during their last visit when he brought up the clubhouse, saw how he'd started tapping his fingers outside of his own conscious knowledge and twisting at his hair. Juice had asked if maybe a night in his own bed before he 'faced the music' might be a good idea and his wording made it sound like he was expecting a blindfold and a firing squad.

"Nobody's gonna fly off, Juice. I promise you that."

Still, it made sense. Juice has been a kept man for the past 7 months, had been excommunicated and isolated for a time before that. It's natural he would need to adjust before jumping back in. Chibs feels the same every time he goes home. Scotland and Ireland feel like other worlds.

This is beyond even that.

The drive home is quiet, as expected. Every so often Chibs glances across just to make sure he's holding on. This much space after those conditions can be overwhelming so it's important to take things slow. He isn't used to a quiet Juice, not when he's alone with him. Part of what he loved about the lad is that he can always fill a space.

He's cautiously leaving it empty right now, as if words could take form and beat the shit out of him.

"You alright?" he asks, and Juice just nods his head as if not quite trusting himself to speak.

"Nearly home now, eh?"

It can't come soon enough.

When they finally get to his place, Juice heaves the hugest sigh of relief because now that he's on the driveway, Chibs thinks, he probably knows it's over. He knows that it's real, not some sick joke designed to ruin him.

('Gemma told me she was driving me to her dad's place. I was dumb enough to believe her.')

His first words are critical, though not of the situation.

"Jesus. Look at the paintwork on the front door. What is that? It was supposed to be weatherproof."

He's attributing his negative feelings onto something benign. Makes sense. It's got to be hard, coming
back to this place after all that went on. It became a hotspot for Roosevelt. The associations can't be good.

For some reason it makes Chibs laugh out loud because, of all the things that could break his silence, it's a peeling door frame.

"False advertising. Clearly didn't do what it said on the tin, as they say back home. You should sue."

"I really should."

It's funny watching him reacclimatise. It reminds Chibs of how his old cat used to carry on when he brought it back from time away, how it would rub itself against every surface and inspect every inch to make sure no other cat had been in and pissed on its territory.

"At least the inside hasn't worn away."

Juice runs his hand against the walls in the living room and raises his eyes to the ceiling as if making sure it's still there. When he moves a cushion on the couch only to move it straight back, straighter and neater than before, Chibs thinks "yeah, my boy is all there."

He's just making sure it's real.

He's just ensuring nothing has changed.

"You good, Juicy?"

It's only now that he smiles, that tactile reassurance apparently all he needed.

"I'm perfect, man. Thank you."

(*)

"Hey look at this."

Juice is rifling through drawers and cupboards, though Chibs can't quite figure out what he's looking for. He can't imagine Juice ever misplacing anything in his perfectly ordered space.

('Who the fuck is that neat, Chibs? The kid's fucking weird. It makes me uncomfortable.')

He holds up a tiny, shiny thing that, from a distance, Chibs cannot see.

"What's that?"

"You gave it to me the day I patched in. St Michael. Patron Saint of Protection. Remember?"

"Aye, I do."

It's something Chibs always did for his prospects, the God-fearing Catholic in him coming to the surface when he 'fathered' a 'Son'. He only had one before Juice, a kid called Haywire who fell out after six months because he could've take the pace.

He's pretty sure Haywire left the medal on the bar in the clubhouse the day he passed it over and never looked at it again.

"You kept that?"
"Sure I did. It meant a lot to me."

It's clear that Juice attaches sentimental and emotional values to things. Of course he does. He values human connections more than he values anything. Offer him ten grand for that medal and he'd hesitate.

"Did you lose it, by any chance? It hasn't done you much good."

"Hey, I'm alive, aren't I?"

There's that bright, wide smile, the one that hasn't been seen in what seems like donkeys years. It catches Chibs where he stands, assails him when he's unprepared for it. His gut clenches, a visceral response, something full on and tangent. Oh, the croweaters loved that smile. Tig used to say the kid was packing a loaded weapon and never even knew it, something akin to gracing Chucky with a nine inch cock.

"You see the way the chicks get all wet when he flashes the pearly whites? Such things are wasted on a shit-for-brains like him. You ever see him get laid?"

Fiona used to smile like that back in the day, so honest and open and fucking pure. It used to give him this same gut feeling.

( Don't even go there, Telford)

He pushes the thought down and fixes it in place, somewhere out of the realms of accessibility. Chibs hasn't 'been there' since the army and has no intention of going there again, not with this lad. Not after the shit he's been through.

He's just grateful the kid is alive.

"I'm alive because of you, brother. I'd have given up in that place if not for your stupid face showin' up all the time."

Christ...

Juice picks out another thing, small and silver. Square.

"I'm a fucking hoarder or something. I still have a lighter Jax gave me for my 25th birthday. See? I didn't have the heart to tell him I was trying to quit. Had all the patches and everything but they didn't do shit for me."

He smiles sadly at the thought of Jax. Chibs can see the penny drop, watches how he fights to compose himself.

His eyes drop to the floor, an obvious tell.

"I still miss him. How fucked up is that?"

To miss a man that did so much damage. It feels so crazy, but it makes perfect sense.

"I miss him as well, Juicy, but that guy left us a long time ago. We have to move on from that."

They have to move on from what he became, from the legacy he left behind and he might well be making up for it now by paying for his crimes, by patiently waiting for the mayhem he cannot, will not prevent - but it doesn't change anything,
"You know, I never named names but I did talk about this stuff."

"Course you did. Don't think you'd be out if you didn't."

He's so eager to let it be known that he didn't 'rat'. He didn't give anything away. It's understandable, that kind of paranoia, but it's so far removed from the naive speck of dust he used to be.

Life lessons. They're harsh, sometimes.

"My therapist thinks the reason Jax punished me was because if someone paid then he would've have to. Kind of like how people hate on other people for something they hate in themselves. He's got it all so messed up in his head he probably wouldn't understand he was doing it. I probably wasn't even human to him at the end."

"Right. Aye, you're probably right."

"Maybe in some ways it wasn't me he really hated. Maybe it was himself."

It makes sense, as disturbing as it is, a masterclass in hypocrisy.

It's also pretty sad that Jax allowed himself to fall so far.

"It doesn't excuse it though, does it, Juicy?"

Nothing excuses it.

Nothing excuses the wilful blindness on any of their parts either.

"He's just a sad guy, Chibs. He's got nothing left. He got so angry and torn up by Clay and it all came from that. It's not his fault. He just had a break, like I did, only his break was more outward than inward. I self-destructed. He just destructed."

He did. But now, at least now, Jax is trying to make amends. He's trying to set a good, if bleak example for his kids.

You do wrong, you pay.

You do bad, you stand up and you own it. You don't run away.

Maybe having his tyres shot out on that country road was the best thing that could've happened to him.

"Unser said he finally gets it," Chibs says. "It's why he came clean. Wiped the shite from his eyes and he could see exactly what had become of him."

"He killed Gemma, Chibby. Can you imagine? He killed his own mom. That's gotta bring it all home to him. You don't get over something like that."

Chibs still has a hard time with it, the idea that Jax hunted down his own mother and took her out execution style.

There is nothing that can be said about that.

"He told Unser to tell me he was sorry. Couldn't do it himself, but he could do it through Unser."

"He's probably afraid to."
Afraid to look into the eyes of a brother who trusted him only to have it all thrown back in his face.

Juice is a tune Jax may never be able to sing, a music he may never face.

"Afraid of me? Seriously?"

"You represent a lot of bad shit to him, most of it his own. Being faced with that? It's difficult. But the boy wasn't right. We both know that. He knows what he did to you was wrong no matter what justification he had."

There just isn't one that would pass.

Juice smiles solemnly. His hands clasp together. He looks down at his interlocking fingers and he watches them as they move.

When he looks up his eyes are clear and bright, awash with sympathy.

"I don't blame him, Chibs. Not any more. I moved past that. Maybe it'd help him to know that."

Juice understands the power of forgiveness.

"It's not much, but it's something, right?"

"Yeah maybe."

Maybe it would give Jax some peace knowing that he was forgiven.

Or maybe he's just locked so far inside that it wouldn't even reach him at all.

(*)

It's only when they sit down that Chibs notices how much barer the place looks.

"What happened to all your stuff? You always dressed like a blind man with no style but you had this place like a 4 star hotel."

It surprised anyone who happened to stop by how plush the place was. Gemma saw it as reason beyond reason the boy was queer because "no straight man matches colour like that."

Juice had only smiled and said "this one does" before offering to decorate her dining room for her.

He deserved the slap round the earhole he got that day, the cocky little shite.

"You're criticising how I dress, Mr Still in Leather at Fifty? Reel it in, old man."

"Mind yourself. If you get to my age with even a fraction of what I got -"

"Yeah, yeah. If I even get to your age."

Throwaway comments like that give away where Juice's mind is.

"Don't even go there, sonny."

"I'm just saying."

He paints on a bright outlook but he's the same scared kid deep down. There's still a long road ahead, Chibs thinks.
He'd be stupid to think otherwise.

Juice just shrugs.

"I gave a lot of my stuff away. Wasn't expecting to be back so I figured someone may as well get some use out of it. Goodwill. St Bernard's."

The homeless shelter.

He looks a little sad when he admits he gave Cujo to a friend in Yosemite because "he practically lived with him anyway after my 14 months inside." He loved that scrap of a thing. He loved all of his things because they were his and because he earned them.

Chibs knows how that can be.

The boy rests against an empty unit that once held all his boxing trophies. He rarely got in the ring with the other guys because he claimed he "didn't want to show them up" but it's more to do with an old shoulder injury that never quite healed right. He still sparred though, took it hard when old Lumpy died because, of all of them, he knew him the most.

Chibs wonders if he gave the trophies away too, little markers of achievements he no longer embraced.

He was so proud of those.

"Feels weird being here. I said goodbye to it already. And now I'm here."

"Yeah, I know."

It's hard coming back from the dead.

It's hard resurrecting like he has.

"There's beer in the fridge, though. Made sure of that. Some of that vegan shite you like as well. I spoke to Michelle at Clear Passages. She sent some of that green stuff over, said it'll build you up. You look like a 13 year old boy."

"Get the fuck outta here, I do not."

"Did you not eat in that place?"

"I'm fine."

"...yeah, for a wee nipper."

Juice was never big at the best of times. Now he just looks small. It doesn't seem to bother him.

Chibs wonders if he'd even know if it did or whether he's been taught to hide it so well he'll never give it away again.

He always wore his heart on his sleeve. Chibs loved him for that.

Will that still be the case, he wonders?

"Did you try some? Of the shakes? They're good."

"The green snot? Christ, no. It'd have me shitting through the eye of a needle. I'd rather be a fat
bastard with high cholesterol. At least my tastebuds aren't gonna suffer for it."

"You're a lunatic"

"This coming from you?"

Touché.

They grab the beers and put on the TV. Juice isn't big on TV but he enjoys sports. He'll watch anything, from bowls to baseball, and when all else fails he'll opt for Animal Planet. Rangers are playing Celtic, though, and that's something close to Chibs' heart. They settle on that because it's good background noise, a better option than fly fishing or whatever the fuck that was.

When Juice passes judgment on the speed of a particular player in blue, Chibs pats him on the leg and consoles him for his cluelessness.

"Such a simple wee boy you are."

"Hey, it's a valid judgment. Your nation isn't exactly renowned for speed."

"No. We're known for our fierce determination. Rangers'll thrash these 6-1. Mark my words."

"Whatever."

It feels like nothing has changed sitting here with the game, with the beer, with the brotherhood. Chibs could leave now and all would be well. He could leave Juice alone to adjust and adapt to freedom but something tells him it wouldn't be what he wanted.

He knows Juice wants him to stay so that he's not alone. He also knows that he would never, ever ask him to.

He offers.

"You want me to crash? I haven't got anywhere I need to be. Pretty poor coming home to an empty house."

"You don't need to babysit me. They would have kept me longer if I couldn't be trusted."

"You want me to go?"

The pause says no even if Juice does not. He shrugs instead because neutral is not refusal and it leaves the door open.

"I know you got Pres duties."

Pres duties. That's changed. That's new. That's something Chibs never imagined, being third in line for the throne at one time. He was Prince Harry, and that ginger prick getting the crown doesn't bear thinking.

"Look, Tig can handle it. He can call me if needs be. Plus, this is Pres duty. Easing you back. Come tomorrow -"

" - Tomorrow."

It's like it's a death sentence.
"God, why am I acting like such a pussy about this?"

Come tomorrow, Juice will be drawn back into the fold.

Come tomorrow, he will face music of his own.

"Why? Because it means so much to you. You're not the same man as you were six months ago, though, Juicy. You don't even look the same."

Tig's taken to calling him Daniel-san because the resemblance is pretty strong. Chibs puts a hand on his head the way he always did. Juice pulls away just like old times, the hard done by little brother who doesn't want to be pawed.

There's affection in it.

There's love.

"We were all takin' bets you'd have a receding hairline, Galen style. We thought that's why you cut the faux-hawk."

"You've seen me with hair."

"Doesn't matter. My old man lost his in less than a year."

"No way. I got enough to share. Grows like a motherfucker. It's why I had to shave it every day."

It's thick, darker than dark and, at this length, is flicking around his ear in a way that indicates it would curl. Chibs imagines a tyke of a wee boy with thick dark waves and a smile that got him out of all kinds of trouble when he was little.

It makes him grin.

"You keeping it? The mop?"

"Yeah. I think so. V says it makes me look like, and I quote, a Latino cabana boy who can do no wrong."

"She's not wrong."

Juice smiles

"Fuck you, bro."

"Alright, it makes you look less like a delinquent. That better for your sensitive self?"

It makes him look like a good guy. A smart guy. A safe guy. It makes him look less gang, more college.

It'll do him good when it comes to the cops, at least. Those tats were a magnet.

"Can't see your ink with that wig though, Juicy."

The tribal symbols defined him in all the wrong ways. He never did tell anyone what they meant. He made it a mystery. Some kind of talking point. People would ask, he would be coy.

He would just smile knowingly and tell them it was for him to know like it was some dangerous
secret that only he was entitled to.

"The tats don't mean anything, Just picked 'em out of a book in some shit joint in Harlem because I thought they looked cool."

The explanation, impromptu and freely given, does not surprise Chibs.

"Got 'em when I turned 18 because I looked about nine years old and I wanted people to be scared of me. It was a pointless exercise. No one ever was."

Not with his baby face and joker grin. Here, now, he looks like an Italian bartender, not a hardened criminal, like someone who would serve cocktails, not point a gun in your mug.

It'll help him start afresh.

Something shifts in him, though, something that Chibs feels in the air between them. He's sick of the small talk. He just wants to get to business.

He puts his bottle of beer down on the carefully placed coaster.

Chibs can see him psyching himself up.

"So...enough about the hair. Are you gonna tell me what you got goin' on with Tully? I think I got a right to know."

Chibs decides that biting the bullet is the only way, like ripping off that plaster again. Building it up or padding it out will only make it harder.

Juice can handle the truth.

"He's holding things back about the Chinese threat, among other things. He wants to use me as leverage to get to you."

He almost feels guilty himself when Juice pales. It's not fair that he has to deal with this, it's really not.

"Why?"

"He wants to see you. To apologise face to face. I'm pretty sure it's one of his power plays but, with him, you never know."

He's not sure what to expect here but he's prepared for any response, be it anger or tears, be it anything. What he gets is stoicism. Bravery that might be skin deep but is admirable all the same.

"If it helps you and the club -"

"No, don't go there, Juicy Boy. Not over something like this. You understand me?"

"Why? He can't hurt me any more. He's got nothing hanging over me."

It's bravado, plain and simple, but it's also strength. Look at it in him, Chibs thinks. Look at it, pouring off him.

It mashes him feel strangely proud, oddly terrified.

It makes him fracture a little to see it on Juice's face, truth be told, because he looks like a little boy
trying to be brave, the way he is right now, and that's just not on. He remembers how Jax, back when his head was right, would joke about that face.

('For just $5 a month, you could make a difference,')

It just makes him sad now.

"Juice, what he did to you -"

"- is done. Not gonna change. But if he does know something?"

"- then, he'll keep using it to get to you and, just like Jax did, he'll keep moving the goalposts. I know men like him."

Chibs knows men like Tully, men who will take until they can take no more but do it with such concern in their eyes that it's almost, almost believable.

Juice, it seems, had made up his mind before the topic even came up. He's been expecting this all along.

"It doesn't matter, brother. He's there. I'm here. I can walk away. I'm not locked up with no place to run, not any more. He has no power over me."

It's such a mantra. Recovery 101.

Chibs wonders if he truly believes it.

"It's a bad idea, lad. He wants to get in your head."

It's the only plausible explanation Chibs can think of and all he knows is the idea of letting that bastard near his things fills him with a rage he cannot define.

He tries not to question when Juice became 'his thing'.

He just knows it to be true.

"Look, reverse the situation here, brother. If my life was in danger you'd do it. Don't tell me it's different. It's not."

"Of course it's different."

"It's really not, Chibby."

There's a weight there that Chibs cannot lift. Tully told him as much.

He can't give him what he needs.

"If nothing else, I can look him in the eye and let him know I'm not his to fuck any more. There's value in that. It's one thing that'll help me to sleep at night."

Chibs finds he can't argue because it's like his doctor said. He has to be allowed to express his own needs. Make his own choices.

He has to be allowed to make his own mistakes.

Chibs just needs to be there to help him with the pieces if it all goes wrong.
He backs down eventually

"Aye, if you think so, Juicy. If you're sure."

"I do. I am. And it scares the shit outta me but I gotta do it."

"Right you are."

Chibs can't help but think he's wrong and it sets his mind ticking overtime as to just what he can do about it but, just like that, Juice moves on. Just like that, he puts that to bed. For now.

Chibs doesn't pretend it means all is well.

He knows better than that.

"You think it's gonna be okay tomorrow?"

Will they be okay, he is asking.

"Yeah, it'll be grand. Just keep it real. And with Rat, just...give him time. You didn't exactly get off on good footing with him."

"I know."

"We've got a good set up going on. I haven't wanted to talk to you about it before because it's not exactly legit."

The bikes are beautiful. The sales are top notch. The work is fucking glorious.

But, the risk is still there.

"How long are we talking if we get caught? Ten years? Life?"

He thinks in terms of final result now. Outcome. Worst case scenario. It allows him to make informed decisions.

Chibs values that.

"We're not gonna get caught, Juice. We've got it covered. Nobody gets hurts with this kind of job."

"Not guns?"

"No."

"Drugs?"

"Christ, boy, what do you take me for? It's nothing like that. There are no victims."

"Then, I'm in."

Just like that. Utter trust.

"You don't wanna hear about it?"

"I'm taking a leap of faith. I believe in you, brother. You were the only one other than Bobby I thought should lead. If you think its a good set up then I'm in."
It's a vote of confidence Chibs wasn't expecting.

It's one he needed all the same.

(*)

It all takes its toll on Juice, this day, this change.

It all just understandably wears him out

He's asleep by 7. He didn't even make it through the game before he was resting his head against the arm of the couch and giving in to the tiredness

He twitches. Jerks.

Every so often his hand flies out as if to keep something, or someone, away.

It's not a peaceful sleep. Chibs wonders when was the last time he could say it was. When was the last time he could close his eyes without seeing dreadful fucking things?

"Ah, Juicy."

He looks at him there, right there, fragile and young and so incredibly alive and it strikes the fear of God into him.

The thought of losing him now isn't something that even registers any more.

"You're a pain in my arse, you know that?"

He places a hand on Juice's shoulder and he stills almost instantly, like the touch alone had shaken him free, but there's this immovable look of distress on his face, even in sleep, that belies everything that's gone before.

When his guard is down, that's when his demons attack. Chibs can only imagine what plagues him in the dead of night, those things he fights to smile through at daybreak.

His body shifts but he still doesn't awaken.

Chibs can only guide him through it.

"Y'alright, Juicy. You're grand, boy. Hush now, lad. C'mon, now."

He runs his hands through Juice's hair in the same motions that used to soothe Kerri when she couldn't get to sleep. It doesn't feel paternal, though. It just feels strange.

After a time he settles, still and quiet, breathing even, but his knuckles are white with tension even in sleep.

This boy gets no peace

"It ain't fucking right."

Chibs feels alarmed by how much this is affecting him; how deeply this boy's prolonged pain and suffering has tore at his insides and left him for dead.

He cannot bear it.
"What am I gonna do with you, eh?"

Chibs might well be asking that question to himself because he honestly cannot answer it

He feels wrong. So wrong. He feels too much. Far too much.

How the fuck can he get through that?

('Paint on a mask, Telford. Push it away. There's no room for that here.')

Chibs is used to solitude. He's spent the last ten years not getting close to anyone at all.

That must not change.

"We go forward, alright lad?" he tells Juice. "We move past this."

What else can they do?

What else can he do but hope for the best?
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Juice finally goes "home".

Randomly, Rat's age has never been revealed but he looks a LOT older than Brooke. The actor himself said he started on a TV show fresh out of Drama Academy and that show ran from 2001-2004 which kind of indicates his age. I'm ageing him and Juice quite near to each other because of this. It will make sense in the kind of sibling-rivalry thing they'll have going on if they're not too far apart.

Thanks for all your words, much appreciated xxx

Boys will stay loyal to a lot of things because of their fathers.

Chibs’ old man was a Rangers fan as had his father been before him, an inherited trait as strong and as vivid as hair colour, weight, build. He’d take him to Ibrox as a boy and Chibs remembers it as the only time he ever felt bonded to his father. They’d get a pork pie on the way in, his dad would grab a beer and if he was in a particularly good mood he’d let him pour some into his lemonade to make shandy. Even now when he goes home, he'll ask for a 'lager top' because the lemon taste reminds him of the good times. Looking back, those Saturday afternoons in the grey muggy cold of Glasgow are some of the best days of Chibs’ life.

Years later when he joined the True IRA, he was surrounded by typical Celtic fans. His affiliation to blue was questioned by fierce guys emblazoned with the shamrock who poured scorn on him for his football views. He wouldn’t back down, not even when the ribbing became fierce and aggressive because Chibs won’t change his loyalties for anyone. His link to that team was in memory of his old man and had nothing to do with The Cause.

He was atypical in a lot of ways.

Still, it makes him wonder why he backed down for Jax; why his principles and his beliefs were so fiercely swayed by the younger man when even a gang of angry drunk terrorists weren’t able to sway him amidst the sectarian passion of the Old Firm Derby.

Luckily, Chibs learns from his mistakes.

Juice never had a father but he has been loyal to many impostors. He never felt the boyish giddiness of going to the game on his dad's shoulders, of chanting from the terraces on a cold afternoon but there was a lot he’d do for the stand-ins he has employed over the years. Chibs knows he sees him in that way, at least on a subliminal level, an older man to look up to, to aspire to and to make proud. Venus might smile at his 'clear as day daddy issues' but Chibs has no intention of abusing them.

He’ll never make him stray from his loyalties or from himself, not like Jax did to him, however that happened.

It’s 6 in the morning when he finally wakes up, 11 hours of sleep and he still looks like he could go another few.
“Mornin’, sunshine.”

“Mmm, good morning.”

He scratches at his head absently, placidly, and in this state he is completely open. Chibs gets the impression he would be malleable like this, would agree to anything.

He knows what Tig would say to that.

“It’s weird, wakin’ up here.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet.”

“What time is it?”

“Time to get up, Juicy Boy.”

He nods, yawns. He gives Chibs a questioning look, all impish face and one raised eyebrow.

“You're still wearing your cut. You even sleep - or, do you wear it to bed now you're President?”

“I got some shut-eye, funny bastard. Fell asleep in the chair after the game.”

“Ah.”

It’s a white lie. He didn’t. Sleep just didn’t come. Things play on his mind at night, always have, ever since that incident with the flash bomb. He excels at night watch because he’s usually awake anyway. It’s why the bags under his eyes are so heavy and deep, why the lines on his face get stronger every day that passes so that they’re catching up with his scars.

It's why he's starting to look so old for his years.

If nothing else, it’s something Jarry was good for. A good, hard shag and Chibs just falls into a coma, but he doesn't get much of that.

He knows Juice doesn't either, maybe as a personal choice as well.

"We'll head over this morning. Let you scope the place out. Sound good?"

"Yeah. Sure."

It was the worry that kept him up last night, the fierce feeling of responsibility he has over this guy who slept beside him, who murmured through the night and who barely looks rested even now.

Still, he rises.

Always.

Juice puts a hand on his shoulder. He looks him in the eye, beguiling, disarming, so grateful for being here, for being alive.

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For staying. For putting up with my shit and not giving up on me.”
(Never again, my brother.)

“It means a lot, Chib.”

“Aye, well. You’ve put up with enough of mine. Get yourself showered, lad. I’ll put the kettle on.”

(*)

For Juice, the day feels tense already. There’s a mounting expectation inside of him and he doesn’t know what to do with it. He popped a couple of Ativan with his chamomile tea and hoped it’d help soothe his anxiety but so far he feels like a thousand maggots are crawling around in his gut waiting to eat their way through him.

It’s a morbid thought but he’s always had one Hell of an imagination.

When he’s exhausted all of his handling techniques and coping mechanisms he reaches a kind of restless acceptance. This is not going to feel good. These nerves, they are not going to shift.

He’s just got to get through them.

“Just take a deep breath. You’re building this up into something it isn’t,” Chibs tells him, but it’s easy for him to say. The last time he set foot in Scoops was the very day it all started falling apart. It’s easy for Chibs to play it down when he doesn’t have a vivid, poignant memory of standing on that kerb outside and being labelled a betrayer with a Judas kiss.

Juice knows for sure it’ll be good when he comes out the other side.

He just has to make the journey.

They arrive early, as suggested. Venus has opened up but the sign on the window still says ‘Closed’ and there are no bikes out front. Juice figures Chibs did this intentionally, kept them away as a way of easing him back in and getting him reacquainted with the place before having to face them. He’s thankful for that and, though he hates the idea of securing escape routes ahead of time, he knows it’ll give him the peace of mind he needs to push on.

It’s not that he doesn’t trust. It’s just that he has a specific way of dealing with the threat of danger now. He can cope with anything as long as he has a contingency plan and a way out.

The façade is the perfect American ice cream store. When open, Chucky serves sundaes with Brooke, brews up coffee in the red-leather booths, a real family friendly joint. It’d be hard to imagine anything untoward going on but that’s always been the club way, the same as it is with any underground criminal enterprise.

They say the mafia walk amongst normal folk and, though Juice could spot them a mile off back in Queens, the normal people of this world would pass by oblivious to their presence.

Up front, Scoops is a Charming Dream.

Out back, that’s where the shit happens.

“We’ve done a lot of work to the place. Venus has been working her arse off getting it up to scratch. Looks bloody good inside. It’s still pretty bare but we’ve got a bar now. Pool table. Couple of video games, figure you’ll be all over those.”
“I know how to work ‘em. I’ll bleed them dry.”

“Aye. Thought as much.”

Venus herself is nowhere to be seen but there’s a prospect in one of the booths plugging away on a laptop. Juice knows him and that flicker of familiarity makes him feel a lot more comfortable.

“You know Jacob, right?” Chibs says. “He’s been prospecting for the past six weeks. He’s in early running a few checks.”

“Yeah, I know Jake. How have you been?”

"I've been good, man."

Juice smiles brightly because it’s been a long time since he saw the guy, knew him from Lumpy’s awhile back. Jake trained there until he busted up his ankle and had to sit it out. By the time he was up and running the old man was dead. Juice figured he’d found some other place to spar.

He’s around Juice’s age, a little older maybe. Good build, fast on his feet. He knows how to take care of himself. Juice always thought he’d make a good prospect, brought it up time and time again at the cage meets but figured his views on crime and punishment would’ve ruled it out.

He’s a straight guy. Smart. Clever.

When he shakes Juice’s hand it feels like old times.

“Where you training now? You look good.”

“A lot of us have moved across to Chompsy’s. You know it?”

“Yeah, I knew one of the guys who set the place up. Phillips. He still there?”

“Yeah, Kevin. He’s semi-pro now.”

“Seriously? Damn. Always figured he’d fall out when his wife got pregnant. He was big on family.”

Juice envied his perfect American dream.

”Where’s money to be made..."

"Yeah. Of course."

Juice grins, genuinely excited to see this guy in a prospect cut.

"I’m really glad you’re here. I knew you’d cave in the end.”

"Yeah, well. Once drugs were off the table I started listening to the calling.”

Jacob holds no grudge, couldn’t possibly. He wasn’t poisoned by the jilted half-truths. He wasn’t tainted by the dark brush Juice was painted with.

“I’ll probably see you later? Just gonna head out back, see what they’ve done with the place.”

“Sure. Good to see you, Juice.”

It’s good to see him too, Juice thinks. It’s good to see a face that doesn’t judge, that has no pre-conceived notions, that knows him as a good guy and not the traitor the rest of them once saw him
as.

It’s good to start off on a positive note.

Chibs wasn’t wrong when he said they’d been doing some work. It’s still neutral. There’s none of the slightly seedy, slightly dirty dive-bar chic of the old clubhouse but it’s comfortable, all slick leather couches and natural colours. The bulbs in the ceilings are bare where the lighting hasn’t been fixed yet but as a work in progress it’s good. It’s homely.

It’s never going to be the same, nor would anyone want it to be.

The old place is too tainted for that.

“Hey,” he says, and his voice comes out surprisingly strong for how he feels. "How you doin'?"

Venus is on her hands and knees scrubbing the floor. She’s dressed up to the nines because she is always immaculate (’you never know when you’re gonna keel over and I ain't dying ugly, baby’) and the candy stripe apron she’s got fastened over her playsuit makes her look like a Stepford Wife.

Standing up, she towers above him, but the look on her face is so joyous that it doesn’t occur to him to feel as inadequate as he normally would.

“I’m so glad to see you. Come here, darlin’. Let me take a look at your sweet face.”

She puts her hand to his jaw and she turns his head to the side as if he were a show dog. He rolls his eyes, knows it’s easier to succumb because he’s learning which battles are better left unfought. If this were anyone else Juice would pull away but this is just who she is. She is tactile. She is demonstrative. She is physical.

“Oh, my beautiful boy. What did Venus tell you? I said everything would be alright, didn’t I?"

“You did.”

“You should always listen to me.”

She leans across to give him a hug and, though the heels are a health hazard, she doesn’t even falter. She walks tall. She stands tall, statuesque and proud.

She is durable.

She is an example, and he loves everything she stands for.

When she whispers in his ear “you’ll be fine”, it sits right in his chest and grows there.

“Thanks,” he whispers in return. “I needed to hear that.”

The look she has in her eyes when she pulls away is one that feels so authentic to Juice. She’s an open book and, no matter what, she will always let herself be read. There may be marks on the pages but there will never be lies or slander. There are no pretences with Venus because what you see is truly what you get.

It’s why Juice feels so comfortable with her, because he knows she’d never try to trip him. She’d never laugh as he fell.

“The Last King of Scotland headed out into the garage. Want me to come with?”
“No, it’s fine. I can find my way.”

“Sure thing”

She puts her hand on her cheek, purses her lips like a henpecked Southern ma'am.

"I’m so glad you’re home, baby. I know how much you wanted this."

She knows.

She talked him through it time and time again when he wavered; when he crumbled. How thankful he is for that.

The garage area itself is pretty small. Last time Juice was here they were using it to store whatever they had salvaged from the Teller Morrow fire. Most of it was flame damaged and worth nothing but the intention was always to go through it, to see what could be saved, what broken, ruined things could be polished back into something worthwhile.

Maybe he belongs in that garage too.

It’s well manned, Juice notices, if the chairs are anything to go on. He’s very interested in the security set-up they’ve got going on out here and wonders if they’re still using his system. It was pretty decent. He got a good deal for the parts and set it up from scratch. Clay was always pleased with his tech work and he built himself up under the old man’s watchful eye.

He finds Chibs unloading some stuff just outside, boxing it off and setting it aside.

“Just makin’ room for the next shipment” he explains. “You been alright?”

“Yeah, just saw Venus.”

“She wasn’t due in until 12. She wanted to get the place all cleaned up for you.”

Juice figured as much.

He remembers Gemma doing the same the day he was finally released from the hospital after all those weeks inside after the Stockton stabbing. When she hugged him she smelt of bleach and cleaning products, those perfect nails chipped and broken. She told him she wanted to make it look pretty for him, had baked him a cake to mark the occasion. It was raspberry and almond, “that organic shit you love so much”, and he’d felt so incredibly loved in that moment that it made all of the pain of the previous weeks feel worthwhile.

He remembers the next time Gemma smelt of bleach. He still had the taste of Oxy on his lips, the knowledge that her fingers down his throat were the only reason he was still alive.

That was just the beginning.

“Let me just get rid of this then I’ll let you in, show you what we’ve got goin’ on.”

“Sure.”

He puts his hands in his pockets and waits patiently. Looking around, it’s unfamiliar. He’s probably grateful for that. He can’t associate things he doesn’t know.

“You’re gonna like this,” Chibs tells him. “Might need you to take a look at the security installations
a little later on just to make sure they’re up to scratch. We’ve got precious cargo in here.”

It’s more than precious.

It’s a thing of true, true beauty, a factory of shiny things that Juice can’t quite wrap his head around at the minute. He’s used to opening up crates and seeing guns, weapons of destruction. Call of Duty shit.

This? This is glorious.

“What the fuck?”

Row upon row of steel. Wheels. Bodies and paint. All of the tools to create and conceive rides of the highest quality, innovative and gorgeous.

There’s thousands of dollars here all set up to perfection, laid out the way Juice himself would lay it out.

“This is your new enterprise? Harleys?”

“Right you are, lad. We’ve got a deal with the Grim Bastards. They import the parts, we manufacture. The underground market is booming, Juicy Boy. The profit margin’s through the fucking roof.”

“We build?”

“You always were good with your hands.”

There’s one already made, crated up and ready for shipment, a red Ultra Low, custom paint job. $30,000 straight up.

“How many of these do you move?”

“Depends on how much stock we get through but you know how much these things can go for. More hands on than guns, more work but it’s beautiful work, Juicy, it really is.”

He touches the bike delicately. He’s afraid of hurting it. He can see the custom paint job, a skull and roses, figures that was Hap because he’s always been the best at design, though Juice himself isn’t far behind. He’s a good artist. If he’d been better at school he might’ve gone into graphic design, something like that.

He can’t wait to get his hands dirty with this stuff.

“She’s really beautiful.”

“That she is. Better than any woman. Less trouble, for one thing.”

“Traceable?”

He’s looking at risk. Chibs told him it was low but he wants to know for himself.

“The numbers are rigged. None of this stuff is marked. Our guy in Brazil, he’s been running this op for a couple of years now out of Fresno. Had a bit of a falling out with his partners so he branched out to Sticky. It’s all unmarked. He’s good at what he does.”

“What about stings? Secret shopper shit?”
Chibs shrugs.

“We vet anyone we sell to. Jacob runs background checks. It’s what he was doing when we first got in. He’ll do one last sweep before we ship her off, just to be sure.”

“Is he using my system?”

Juice doesn’t trust any other.

“Your systems are good, Juicy Boy. We missed you. Jacob’s good but he’s not you.”

He pauses, his hand behind Juice’s neck.

"No-one is you."

The way Chibs says it sits strangely, feels like something Juice thought it never would, something he would fail to define even on his best days.

He finds himself lost for words, floundering helplessly until he is literally saved by the bell.

(*)

He’s alone in the garage when it happens.

Chibs had to take the phone call, something urgent, something club related, something Presidential in importance. Juice couldn’t help himself. He’d wandered back just to take another look because there was something siren-esque in those clean parts, in those bodies yet to be touched, those wheels yet to be applied. He just wants to put his artistry to it, his custom touches, his golden flourishes.

Juice can build a bike as easily as he can assemble a gun but he knows which one he’d rather do, profit be damned.

He’s lost in his thoughts when he feels something prickling at the back of his neck, a ghost walking in his shadow. It grinds on his nerves. It plays on his fears.

Then, it touches him.

It’s a reflex action, nothing more, a bodily response to a perceived threat that’s felt in the periphery and seen out of the corner of his eye. It’s an innate reaction that explains how he comes to have Rat against the wall, arm pressed against his throat as he chokes the living Hell out of him.

His head is screaming "don’t touch me" even though he knows on a conscious level no-one will.

"Juice -"

In another place, in a time not so long ago, Juice’s dissociative state would’ve lingered until the other man was half conscious and gasping for breath. As it is now, he merges himself with reality pretty fast and Rat’s eyes, wide with rage, snap him out of it.

“Get off me. *Fuck.*”

"Shit."

Juice lets his arm fall to the ground and, with it, Rat, too. He’s still as scrawny as he ever was and, though Juice is smaller, he’s more proportionate. Rat is tall, gangly thin, with dry skin that bruises
like a grape. He rarely looks healthy at the best of times.

Now he just looks strung out. Crazed, even, no sign of his deadpan humour to be seen.

“Are you fucking insane? Jesus Christ, Juice.”

And, this is how it comes to be that, yet again, relative first impressions between the two are something that falls a little short of positive.

“You scared the life outta me, Rat.”

“I scared the life out of you? You’re not the one who just got choke held. Are you kidding me?”

“I didn’t hear you come in.”

“So you thought you’d try to break my neck? Real cool, Juice. Maybe they let you out of the crazy ward too soon, huh?”

Juice, his heart still pounding in his chest, his nerves still close to the surface, doesn’t appreciate the low blow.

"Seriously? You're gonna come out with shit like that?"

That just felt personal. Rat knows it, knows he crossed the line with it.

"Sorry, that was a dick thing to say."

“You shouldn’t sneak up on people in the dark. Not when there are guns in reaching distance. That’s basic stuff, man. Haven’t you learned a fucking thing?”

“Apparently not.” Rat indicates towards his neck and the anger is back. “Clearly, neither have you.”

Juice was expecting this on some level. His bridges with Rat are built on unstable, Roosevelt based foundations and were never gonna stand. Now, with just two of them in this small space, it feels like there’s an electric current passing between them and it’s only a matter of time before one of them sparks out.

Juice understands the resentment, he really does. He just wishes they could’ve dealt with it a little better in the first instance.

“Look, I really am sorry. Can we please just start again?”

He holds out his hand, a peace offering, and the look in his eyes asks “truce?”

When Rat just stares back at him, unmoved, it sets the tone for everything else.

“Alright, then.”

Juice stands up taller than he feels because, while they’re not far apart in age, Juice will always have the upper hand when it comes to club standing since he’s been here longer. That counts for something within the hierarchy, though Juice doesn’t know quite where he fits with that right now. Chibs always told him Rat was suited to this life, Jax’s prospect in every which way. Juice hopes that doesn’t ring true anymore but when he looks at him, stone-faced and angry, he sees just how deep his distaste runs.

He knew to expect this.
He’s not going to back down from it.

“I didn’t want it to be this way, Rat, I really didn’t, but you and me? We gotta get everything on the table, here. Lay it all out. If we need to fight it out? So be it. I'm ready. But I’m not gonna walk on eggshells around you because I’m waiting for you to blow up at me. That's just not fair to anyone.”

With his arms out wide, he offers himself to Rat in any which way he needs.

“Do what you gotta do to get right with me. Say what you gotta say. I’ll listen. We can work something out.”

Lay it on me, he’s saying.

Give it all you got, I know I did you wrong.

“Maybe I'll stick a gun against your head. Pull the trigger a few times. Maybe that’ll make us good, Juice.”

Juice knew this was the reason. Chibs had pretty much confirmed it for him. He remembers watching Rat as he struggled with that gun, remembers how for a minute he thought he was going to piss himself there and then. He can picture that day so vividly, the day to end all days for him, his own personal apocalypse. He can remember his own tension as those poor, emotionally battered prospects held that unloaded gun against their heads believing above all else they were going to die.

Because of him.

“Would that make you feel better, Rat?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it would. Maybe watching you squirm with a gun to your head might make us even.”

He says it like Juice hasn't been doing that for years, figuratively.

“Don’t be an asshole.”

“I'm the asshole here? I thought I was dead, Juice. You ever had to do something like that?”

Juice smiles, but the smile is a sigh and the sigh is out of sadness because he really hoped Rat would know better.

Apparently not.

"Are you really asking me that, bro? After everything?"

Juice has empathised over the roulette situation more times than he can remember. He has played it out in his head, over and over, putting himself in their position just to see how it felt. He can picture the fear they felt when they pulled the trigger against their own temple. He imagines it’s similar to the fear he felt when he jumped off that tree branch and felt that chain pressing against his throat, when his will to live kicked in and his life flashed solidly before his eyes because he really didn't want to die.

“Look, I'm really sorry, Rat. The gun wasn’t loaded. I wasn’t gonna let anything happen to you, I swear.”

"We didn't know that."
"I know. And, I tried to stop it, I really did. I tried to put things right."

“That fifteen minutes thing? Put it back and nothing gets said? Can you imagine, Juice? Phil and me, we just stood there not knowing what the fuck to do because we knew it was neither one of us."

"It was a shitty situation. I know that. I never meant for that to happen."

Phil died before he could even apologise.

Juice apologises to him every night before he closes his eyes, right there next to Miles, next to Darvany.

“I know what happened with Miles, that it was an ‘accident’…”

The emphasis is on that one word and the meaning is clear. Juice wonders if he'll ever be believed over that one, whether he even deserves to be.

“You don’t believe that?”

In fairness, why should he? That’s what Juice thinks logically. Emotionally, however, that’s another matter entirely. Emotionally, it still destroys him that anyone would think that of him.

That he was callous.

That he was wilfully murderous.

That he would kill a brother just to save himself when all he'd wanted to do was get away.

Rat falters a little, his shoulders sagging as his anger gives way to something else.

“I don’t know what to believe, man. You were pretty fucking convincing in that warehouse when you were telling us to come clean for your screw-up.”

Juice knows that the only way through this is absolute transparency. He's always know that. It's why he vowed to never lie, to answer any question the guys might have with as much honesty as he possibly can. With Rat, it's different. With Rat, the mistrust runs deep. He needs to see the sincerity. He needs to be able to touch it.

“Look into my eyes,” Juice says, softly. "Ask me if it’s the truth. Look right into my eyes. You’ll know if I’m lying, I swear it."

Quieter, now, barely a whisper.

"Ask me if I meant to kill him."

On those words, his voice breaks. On that sentiment he wanes, but he holds it together. He’s strong and determined, even if his emotions are heightened like this.

He’s not going to let this fall.

“You look me in the face and you call me a murderer, Rat, if it makes you feel better. But, I know what happened, and so does Miles. And I can't make you believe me but I can ask you to."

Juice waits. He braces himself for impact, be it verbal or physical. He will hit back if he needs to. He will grapple on the ground if it’s going to help them get through this but he won’t back down.
He won’t run away.

Rat looks at him deep, those near-black eyes searching for something in his own and Juice knows, now, that this is the final hurdle.

He refuses to look away.

Eventually, Rat does, a heaved sigh the only indication he’s been mentally defeated.

"Jesus."

Juice’s voice is quiet, determined, and in a mirror to Rat’s own he loosens his stance, non-threatening, imploring rather than demanding. It’s necessary. Now that there’s been a breakthrough, he needs to tread carefully.

“We gotta start over, you and me, ‘cause, this? This isn’t gonna work. If you’re not cool with this then you gotta let me know right now because we’re gonna need to find some way of figuring it out.”

If they’re not going to be able to adapt to each other then something is going to have to give and lines are going to need to be drawn.

“You hearin’ me, brother?”

He sees Rat’s mind ticking over, sees how he glances over at Tig, newly present yet opting not to intervene. It’s not his place and Juice imagines his thought processes.

(’I’m letting the pups wrestle out their differences. Wanna watch?’).

Juice used to do the same with Chibs when he was caught in uncertainty. He’d look to him for back-up, for mutual support. He’d look to him for guidance when he felt he could not make a choice.

“It’s gotta come from you, Rat. Tig’s not gonna help you here. This is just you and me. Just the two of us. It’s our call.”

They have to stand alone, can’t rely on their elders to fight their battles for them. There comes a time when ever Son needs to break free.

Juice holds out his hand once more and, when Rat looks down at it, he knows he’s got this.

He takes it, firm and strong, and, in this moment, a fragile ceasefire is forced, a truce laid out on the garage floor.

"I'm good," Rat says. "Yeah, we're good."

In this instance, Juice knows he’s won the first battle, albeit loosely, impromptu as it was.

"Cool."

As rough a ride as it’s been, he knows he has finally arrived home.
Chapter Summary

Jax finds peace (even if he doesn't deserve it). Tully gets an early Christmas gift (and he definitely doesn't deserve it).

Quick note: There are people who may not agree with my portrayal of Jax because he's not going down all guns blazing and taking everyone with him. This Jax killed his mother and survived, has had 6 whole months to sit on the truth and to process it. Surviving the events of S7 fundamentally altered him, as it would anyone. Living with it opened his eyes. They say a lot of criminals reach an epiphany on 'death row' - and that's what's happening with Jax, who is on his own death row as he waits to meet Mr Mayhem.

I can only say that we all have our own thoughts but I hated what was done with his character. This was the only 'redemption' I could give him. To man up and pay for his sins. And if his eyes are opened at least in part by a Nazi scumbag? So be it.

Not sure why I feel the need to justify myself really :)

It was a long time coming, but finally, Jax is able to take responsibility. He has his own terminal diagnosis now and there's nothing quite like the thought of certain death to force a man's epiphany.

With his plea bargain having been accepted, Jax is sitting on multiple life sentences with no chance of parole. Each and every day he lives with the same knowledge; that this is another day spent waiting for the inevitable while he atones for what he has done. It could've been so much worse. At least, that's what he tells himself...

'(How many lies do you convince yourself are truth on a day to day basis, Jackie Boy?)'

He's praying for Mayhem at this point and with the strict isolation of death row, that would no longer have been on the table had he gone to trial and ended up with a sentence like Otto's. There hasn't been a man executed in the state of California in years so he would've found himself lingering on a death wish until there was absolutely nothing of him left.

He couldn't drag his boys through that, through a trial with a lethal injection as the inevitable outcome.

"What would the false hope do to them?"

Patterson had laid out a secondary deal before the first one was signed off but it wasn't worth the paper it was forged on. Instead of life without parole, she offered a way out after 30 years. In return, he’d testify against the club, against the Mayans, against any other group the Sons are known to be affiliated with. There is a filing cabinet full of cold cases committed on Charming land and she’s making it her life’s work to close them.

There was no way.

"You think they give a passing thought to your current predicament? When was the last time you
It’s all changed with Chibs now. He’s his own man. Jax understands his need for distance. He figures it’s to do with the Mayhem vote, that he can’t be seen as supporting Jax’s continued evasion of death. It’s what he prefers to believe because the probable reality is so much more damning; that he stays away because Jax broke every rule there is in Chibs’ Manual of Brotherhood and, even worse, coaxed him to break them too.

He abused his power.

He betrayed his loyal subjects, and he deserves to rot for it.

The only person that’s consistent in his life as it is, now, is Wendy. With all of the others either dead or gone, she’s the only person still left who he didn’t burn his bridges with, though that in itself is a miracle.

She comes every week. She refuses to tell the boys he’s dead and, having had time to come to terms, he’s grateful for that.

"They miss you," she tells him as she hands him their latest photograph; their tiny hand-prints in paint on a piece of white paper. "They love you."

For some reason, so does she.

Jax can’t match the person who forcibly held her against a wall and shot her up with himself, can’t get to grips with the things he did under the guise of it being ‘for his boys’ when deep down he always knew it was for him and him alone. She’s a good mother. He sees it whenever she talks about them, the way her eyes light up, the way her hands start moving in time with her emphatic thoughts. She never deserved any of what he and his mother put her through and he knows she would die before putting the boys through the same.

That’s why he trusts her with them.

"Thomas has started calling me Mommy."

Her eyes are full of guilt and shame because no matter what she does for those children, she never feels worthy of being their mother.

"He has?"

“It almost feels like sacrilege. Like I’m trying to take her place. I’m not. He’s just imitating his brother.”

“It’s fine. It’s what Tara would’ve wanted.”

“You think so?”

She looks so hopeful at the thought it breaks what’s left of Jax’s heart.

"Yeah. Yeah, I do, Wen."

"Oh, thank God. I was cleaning Abel’s room the other day. I found something and it knocked me sideways. I started asking myself: "what would Tara do?" I don't want to second guess myself all the time but I can’t help it."

She hands over the ring, that Samcro heirloom Abel would’ve inherited when the time arrived, had
Jax remained at the helm. He always pictured the day he handed over that token as a joyous day, a day where he could play the proud father John always played for him.

Now, he just feels regret as he looks at it, a symbol of something it wasn't. A promise he broke himself.

"Where did he get it from?"

"Your mom must’ve given it to him. I don’t know when. He never told me. I didn't know he had it until now."

Secrets and manipulation at six years old; it scares the breath out of Jax.

"He know you took it?"

"No. I know he’s been looking for it. He turned his bedroom upside down on Saturday. When I asked what he was doing he said he’d lost Optimus Prime."

She shakes her head, her eyes full of concern. Jax knows what for.

“'It worries me how he can lie to my face, just like y – ‘"

('...just like you could."

There it is, the crux of it.

"You can say it, Wendy. Just like I could."

Like father, like son.

“He’s so wilful. Nero says it’s just a phase and Lucius was the same but he’s just so controlling all the time. He can’t handle it when Lucius takes the lead in anything. He tried to hold Thomas’ hand in the field the other day when they were playing. Abel just lost it. You can't push kids like Lucius, he knows that, but he didn't even care. When I looked him in the eye and asked him why he’d done it he just stared at me."

It reminds him of how he used to be with Thomas, his older yet weaker sibling who couldn't take care of himself, how protective he used to be. It's a good trait in moderation until it becomes something more.

With Jax, there always was that 'something more' because Gemma taught very little about moderation because family is fierce and family is proud and brothers are all that matter to each other.

"I don't know what to do about him, Jax. I'm swimming against the tide here."

“Think of what he’s been through, Wendy. Everyone he loves has left him. He just doesn't want to lose his little brother. He sees Lucius as a threat, that’s all. It's not his fault."

It's the nicest explanation Jax can come up with. He's shutting his mind to the alternatives, one being that he is following Jax's own pattern of behaviours and traits and that he truly is his father's son.

She smiles sadly. She looks tired and sad. It's easy to forget how much she's been through when faced with everything else.

Jax hasn’t been looking at other people for a long, long time.

“It’s just hard. Being a mom is hard. I never knew. It was easier being a junkie.”
"Nobody said it was plain sailing, Wen."

"I know."

(*)

"Have the guys been to visit?"

"No. Only reason they'd visit is to stick a knife in my throat."

It comes out less black humour, more bitter, acid on his lips where there should have been a smile. It's not what he intended but he's finding it hard to express himself these days because it's been years since he was honest with how he felt...

He shrugs.

"Club rules, Wendy. You know how it goes."

"You're still alive, though. That's a good sign, right?"

"Only a matter of time."

"You don't know that."

Thankfully, that's not true.

"Yeah I do, darlin'."

There's no coming back from this. There's no way out of a unanimous vote. He killed a President for no other reason than disagreement. He cut down the head of a charter for little more than a shake of the head. It's only natural they want to avenge. It's the only way of maintaining an order.

Jury was his death sentence, his stamped, sealed fate.

"I'm ready for it. The way I see it, I have two options. Both of them end up with me dead. There's no living in this place, Wendy. I said the same thing to Unser last time I saw him. I'm done."

"Don't say that."

"It's only what I deserve. I got this little voice in the back of my head that's asking me why I don't just end it all now, take the easy way out, but I'm not gonna do that to the boys and I'm not gonna do that to the club. I don't want them growing up knowing their murderous fuck-up of a father shivved himself because he wasn't man enough to face up to what he did. What kind of a lesson would that be? I want them to know that running isn't an option. They have to know that."

He wonders what the Hell he was thinking trying to replicate the last act of his father, a man whose abandonment broke him when he took off on that bike.

His boys deserve better than that.

"I'll take whatever I got coming. The MC get it on their terms. I owe them that, at least. I know that now. And, I owe it to Tara."

Wendy softens at the name. Tara's ghost is something that forever walks between them, probably always will.
Jax can see her in Wendy's eyes as readily as he can see her in his own.

"It’s good, Jax. What you’re doing is good. I know it doesn’t feel like it but you’re thinking of the boys. You’re thinking of the club. We both know you had enough info to take everyone down with you to get yourself a better deal. The fact that you didn’t? That’s gotta count for something."

Jax isn’t so sure, but at least he'll be able to say he stood up when it mattered and it might be too little too late but it's good. For him.

"There was no deal anyway. The best Patterson could offer was 30 years. 30 fucking years. I give her intel, I get out when I’m an old man. The club goes down and the best I get is to live with my back to the wall for the next three decades. I don’t see that as a better option."

"They could’ve offered protection. Ad seg, until the threat dies down."

He smiles at that, at her naivety.

"Thirty years in solitary? I don’t think so. It’s not the kind of threat that has an end date."

It’s not a deal. It's a living death, nothing more, a terminal state with no end in sight. Just silence. Just nothing.

"Besides, what kind legacy would I leave if I took the club along with me? Not only a murderer but a rat who sold out his brothers, too. That’s not who I am."

“I know. It's just hard, Jax. I gotta think of the boys. You said it yourself. They need protecting from you but I’m not gonna murder you for them. They'll know all of it. Good and bad, because hiding the truth? Only telling one side? That's just about the worst thing we could do."

Jax knows how his own father’s death festered inside of him.

Maybe she's right.

"It's been six months, Jax. You're still here. Maybe this is payment. Maybe this is mayhem."

"They took a shot already so I’m just biding my time."

“And if it happens, if, Jax, there’s always a chance. But if it does? I’ll make sure the boys know their father stood up."

When she reaches over to grasp his cuffed hands it feels warm. It’s so hard to feel warm these days because everything he had he has lost.

He doesn’t pretend he doesn’t deserve it.

"You took responsibility."

There are tears in her eyes and Jax feels so entirely unworthy of them. No matter what, this woman loved him. No matter what, she stuck by him knowing precisely what he was, and what did he do but abuse that?

What did he ever do but abuse?

“I don’t want you to die, Jackson."

He smiles. She's beautiful. His beautiful survivor. His Wendy.
"I know you don't."

She might not have been his first love but she'll be his last. She was the one that stayed.

“But, maybe it’s just what needs to happen, darlin'. Take care of our boys. No matter what.”

“You know I will, dumb shit, that goes without saying.”

She's laughing through her tears. For him.

All of a sudden, Tig’s words about Venus ring true.

(‘She sees all of me, and she still loves me.’)

It’s bittersweet and if Jax were not already dead inside he might just fucking perish.

"I love you, Wendy."

"I know you do."

“You’re a better mother than I was a father. Those boys lucky to have you.”

They barely knew their father. He spent so much time trying to lay foundations for their futures he barely spent any time in their present at all.

His inevitable death will only make that absence a literal thing.

(*)

Tully’s leaning on the wall against his cell, a half-eaten apple in his hand, when Jax returns. There's something about the way he lounges, something so blatantly affected and so vividly untoward. Jax hasn't got time for him, not today, not after that.

All he wants to do is sleep it off.

“Something you need, Ron?”

He smiles his demon smile and drops his personal bombshell, holds up the Visiting Order that Jax can't read but doesn't need to.

He already knows what it says.

"Ah."

“Pretty Puerto Rican finally answered the call. He’s coming on Thursday. Quite a list of requirements before he’d come see me. A no-contact visit or its no deal. I think the boy’s finally learning.”

That’ll be Chibs doing, Jax thinks. Juice wouldn’t put those in place by himself.

He’s not smart enough.

“I'm happy for you. I know you haven’t been able to stop thinking about him.”

"He was wasted on you."

(He talked about you all the time. All that boy wanted to do was make you proud. And this is what
you did to him.

"So you keep telling me."

It’s an obsession, one among many. Jax has witnessed first-hand just what happens when Tully digs his claws in. He’s currently ‘exchanging time’ with a carjacker named Christell who came in a couple of months ago on a six year stretch. Jax has watched as he systematically tore down the kid’s defences and built him back up into something that runs when Tully clicks his fingers. He’s barely recognisable as the cocky little shit he was when he first got here.

In hindsight, he probably wouldn’t have offered him Juice if he’d known because he might’ve been through with the guy but he’s not a sadist, no matter what people think. Bad enough he greenlit what went down but to have him end up like that? What was he thinking?

He knows, now, that he did Juice wrong.

He still doesn't know why he did it. Like what he did to Wendy, it's just something he can't rectify in his own mind.

"Something else you wanna say, Tully?"

"Oh, you know me. Just keepin' an eye out for you."

“As much as I appreciate it, brother, I just wanna get some shut-eye.”

He doesn’t appreciate it at all and they both know it, but Jax has got to know Tully a lot over the past months. The more he knew him, the less he wanted to know him. The more he’s witnessed just how much prison has degraded an already twisted mind, the more he realises that Tully is a dangerous man to know. Maybe he knew it before, maybe he didn’t. Maybe he turned a blind eye.

All he knows it they never should’ve made an alliance with the AB, a virtual deal with the devil. He’s warned Chibs to cut ties, to scale back with the brotherhood. He only hopes he’s smart enough to cut back on the pig-headedness and listen.

Maybe the thing with Juice will be key to all that because there's no way that Chibs will stand for Tully fucking with his kid.

He'll never forgive Jax for it.

"I hear on the grapevine the boy's come on leaps and bounds. Patched right up like a new man. Got to keep his cut and everything. Apparently a club vote is reversible in the right circumstances."

"Yeah."

It doesn't even hurt. Jax assumes it's supposed to. Why would the words of a Hitler-loving rapist ever strike a chord with him?

Probably because he's right.

He wonders if Juice is coming back here because he's just like Christell; because Tully’s clicked his fingers and he no longer has a choice but to fall into position. He wonders if those programmed orders and responses will cut through the glass that separates them.

He wonders if Tully plans on buying the guards; getting Juice here on the back of the lie and doing what he does best.
He doesn't feel like going there right now.

“Are we done?”

“Almost. “

They’re never done.

“I’ll ask him if you can be cut loose, Mr Teller. I know that’s what you want. An end to all of this. You want your pie, and I'm the one that's keeping you from it.”

Tully sounds sympathetic and his eyes are so full of sincerity it sickens Jax. This has been a long, drawn-out activity for him because he sees people as chess pieces and, though Jax might've been something once, he's nothing but a pawn to the Nazi.

He still can’t figure out his endgame.

“I'll tell him it's his call to make."

('Empowerment is an aphrodisiac')

“I'll tell him mercy is his to give.”

"Tell him whatever you want, Tully. I'm going to bed."

But, what is mercy here? How would Juice see it, after everything?

Merciful life. Merciful death.

“Your life is in his hands. Everything’s come full circle, pretty boy.”

Things have a habit of doing that, Jax thinks. Evolution has its ways.

Maybe this is karmic justice.

Jax just carries on walking. After everything, there really is just nothing he can say.
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

It's a scary world for brave new boys.

Juice knows why Alvarez hates him.

There’s this thing with browns. He saw it a lot growing up. It’s not segregation, per se, nor is it any specifically defined racism. It’s just that shades stick with shades, unwilling for the most part to ‘taint’ the group with any other colour, light or dark. There’s trust in familiarity, or so they say, so when Alvarez labelled him an ‘embarrassment to Latinos’ it wasn’t just because he let his cut be taken from him. It was because he wore that cut at all.

(‘You white-washin’, hombre?’)

The Mayans are strictly that. Mayan. They will never be anything else. There will be no mixing, no tainting, no watering down and no white-washing, a strictly enforced rule and law that will never be broken. It always struck Juice as funny considering Alvarez’ old lady is white and his dead son Esai was a real pretty boy, all blue eyed and paler skinned and Just Gemma’s Thing.

(‘How a man like Alvarez produced a son like that I have no idea. His old lady’s vagina’s clearly got anti-brown sentiments.’)

When Happy killed Esai it was rumoured to have been a long time coming and that, though Marcus loved his son he could never get past the fact that he looked like his mother and could easily be mistaken for white.

Juice has been running uphill with him since the minute he met him and so, when they arrive at the Mayan’s warehouse, it comes as no surprise that he finds himself on Alvarez’ shit list.

He’s struck with how painfully familiar this feels, this warehouse, these surrounds. He remembers being beaten by these very guys, two holding him while another drove their fist into his gut, remembers how thankful he was for having not eaten that day because if he’d vomited on their shoes he’s pretty sure they’d have put a bullet in his head. He remembers having his cut taken on Jax’s order, remembers thinking how he’d rather they strip him naked because that’s how he feels without it.

He had thought that rock bottom. How wrong he had been.

A couple of those guys are here now and, though it might be his imagination, he’s pretty sure they’re burning holes in the back of his head with their eyes.

Alvarez never looks different. Juice imagines he'll look this way until the day he dies, his slick hair boot-polish black, his skin like an old, worn leather jacket. As Chibs talks business he keeps letting his eyes cross over. Juice makes a point to look back, not threatening but making sure that Alvarez is aware that he knows. That he sees. Tig grabs his wrist and squeezes, a silent gesture of solidarity and, in his ear, he whispers to keep it cool. Juice doesn't flinch, not like he used to, because months of therapy have taught him that not every touch is threatening by default, that not every crowd is
waiting to strike.

Rat just caught him at a bad time.

“I need to speak with your boy,” he hears Alvarez say and there’s no doubt in his mind that means him.

He braces himself.

He’s waiting. He can almost feel them behind him. Happy. Tig. He is happy to have their support, such a far cry from the days when they used to hold him back. Back then, he wasn't allowed to stand up for himself. It felt like every time he started to walk tall Jax would just strike him down again like he needed to be put back in his place, would throw him aside like a disobedient dog that had pissed on the carpet.

Jax led with a firm hand - but only for him.

He's never seen anything but empathic embarrassment in Marcus' eyes before, not in relation to him, but today it's more like disgust and it bleeds from his eyes to his mouth, that top lip curled ever so slightly as if Juice is something he stepped in along the way.

“You got some nerve coming here, boy.”

Chibs had warned him it might be this way because, though Alvarez will accept whatever Chibs puts in front of him unless it affects him personally, he is entitled to his opinions.

(‘Remember, lad. Respect is earned. He might be a Pres but he doesn’t deserve it by default. I’m not gonna talk you down if things get heated but I’m warning you to tread carefully. He knows you had nothing to give him. He’s killed guys for far less than that.’)

Marcus’ opinion of Juice has always been ground-low.

"Let me tell you this, if you were one of my crew, puñeta? You wouldn’t be standing here now. Offering to trade secrets to save your own ass? That's weak."

Juice knows he's not kidding. He had his own son murdered because of a couple of botched jobs and a bad hand.

He wouldn't tolerate a half-breed rat.

“I said you were an embarrassment to brown. I haven’t changed my mind, esé. Not my business if your club chooses to give an asshole like you a pass, but I value trust. I don’t trust you, you understand me?"

His composure rocks a little. He shifts from foot to foot when Alvarez takes a step closer to him because he values personal space more than anything, now, and he's very choosy about who he allows into his. He can feel his blood rising to his face, can feel the burn in his cheeks and the pulsing throb of his heart as it batters his chest, a physical response to a verbal beatdown.

“I understand.”

He knows he's paying into Alvarez's poor opinion of him but there’s nothing he can do.

"You are a disgrace to your club."

It’s hard to stomach but once it’s been verbalised it can be processed for what it is. Alvarez has said
his piece and Juice has heard it. He understands, now, why Chibs had him come along today.

So that a truce can be forged, of sorts.

Juice gets the feeling this is a test and that in order to pass he needs to defend himself. He remembers Alvarez watching as he took part in that vengeful beat-down of Salazar. He remembers how for a second, for one tiny split in time, he’d looked like he might’ve had a little bit of respect for him.

He's practically baiting him here.

He takes a deep breath because if he doesn't get this right he'll miss his chance, will carry on being a speck of dirt to this oily prick and for Juice that’s not acceptable. He won't even pretend he's not bleeding into his chest with apprehension because he's seen this man at work and the only saving grave is that this time, his present brothers are behind him.

He waits until Alvarez has turned his back.

It feels tactical because, if Alvarez eyes him down, he'll lose his nerve.

"I understand what you're saying, Marcus. I tried to fuck you over. I get that. But...let’s not forget that you did sell me out to the club so, uh, I guess that makes us kind of even."

If a change in mood can feel physical, this does because, as soon as those words have left Juice's mouth, something changes. The air becomes thick and coarse. Heavier. More weighted. What pleases Juice is that nobody tells him to be quiet. Nobody pulls him away.

His spirit pounds as he waits for a response, any response, to let him know whether he’s hit his mark or not.

Then, it comes.

Alvarez physically stops and the way he turns is like something out of a spaghetti western. Juice licks his lips and swallows because all of a sudden his throat is like sand and his lips are as dry as a nun's pussy because the other man’s eyes are so black, black and malign and bitterly intense, so much so that he almost regrets speaking. Almost.

"What did you say?"

Juice's carefully manufactured nonchalance takes pride of place on his face. He keeps it there, sets it there. He ties it into place with invisible ribbons and wills for it to remain.

“I was gonna give you false intel on the club because I needed to get away. I wasn't gonna rat. I was just hoping I'd be far away enough before you figured out that what I'd fed you was nothin’ but old newsprint.”

He puts his hands behind his back and sets his position, shoulder width apart, back poker straight. Alvarez isn’t a tall man but he has a kind of stature to him that belies his build. He just seems bigger.

Now, so does Juice.

This is a dance he's learning fast.

"People do crazy shit when they're desperate. But, you? You had me sit in that warehouse with your guys watchin' me while you went out back and called Jax because you wanted to use me as
He's brave to say it, it's not his place, but Alvarez has disrespected him enough times that it doesn't matter anymore. Like Chibs said, respect is earned. It isn’t just a given.

He’s not going to let himself be disrespected any more.

"Let's not talk about trust, here, okay, hombre?"

And, there it is, his own denunciation, his wicked verbal response ended with a lick of the language he doesn't even speak.

Juice takes a deep breath. Even from where he stands Chibs will be able to see what that took out of him, maybe even Tig, but he’s learning to hide things well. It seems he hasn’t given himself away with his adversary because there it is again, that same flicker in the older man’s eyes that asks a question which fades as quickly as it forms.

He knows what he’d been expecting; that he'd lie down and let the sand and dirt be kicked all over him. He did it before. He stood there and took it when Alvarez belittled him in front of the guys.

He won’t do it again.

“Someone knock some sense into you, ese?” Alvarez asks. Even his voice has changed, a lower octave, now, as if this fact is a secret that cannot be spoken aloud.

Juice shrugs dispassionately.

“Lessons learned the hardest way”

"First time I ever look at you and see a man, not a boy. You got a lot to say for yourself."

"Let's keep it real, huh? We fucked each other over that day."

He’s cocky and he knows it and he’s trying hard not to overplay his hand.

This is his facade.

This is the mask he always needed to wear but never could get to fit.

He smiles.

"You knew I had nothing to give you. I’d been outta the loop since Tara died and even before that I’d been kept in a plastic bubble. So you used me. And you're talking to me about trust? C’mon, man."

Something shifts. For the first time in as long as Juice has known him, the look of disgust and empathic embarrassment and negativity leaves Alvarez’ face and, though it’s only just visible at a near distance, his lips curl into something that might just be a smile.

He’s done it, Juice thinks.

Six months of being told he’s worth something might just have had an impact after all.

"You grew some cajones, little man. I can appreciate that. And I'm man enough to hold my hands up and say it. You make a good point. I'm a fair guy. I wouldn't still be here if I wasn't. But you walk a fine line here, ese, you understand me?"
Juice looks him right in the eye. It's animalistic. It's tribal. It's what wild animals do in order to assert dominance and, while he’s under no illusions as to who would stand above between the two of them, he cannot let his dread show.

When he feels he's made himself clear he nods his head.

"So, we good?"

"For now."

It’s fair enough.

He feels Chibs hand on the small of his back as he takes the backline with the other guys. It feels like he’s been tapped out of a game and is being given his rest. He hears Chibs tell Alvarez that he’s good, that he’ll keep him in line and that he’s nothing to be worried about.

Alvarez tells Chibs he’s a better man than he, himself, is, and Juice thinks it’s the biggest understatement of the week so far.

They talk business. Guns. Drugs. The Mayans’ thing with the Irish is going well, almost too well, and a narcotics gig they’ve got going on might just need to be passed across to someone else because the Stockton charter’s swimming in it and the weapons take priority above all else.

“We need to prioritize, Telford. The Irish don’t fuck around. Slippery putas.”

“It’s ingrained in them. Years of double crossin’ will do that to a nation.”

“Can’t argue with the money, man, but we gotta make sure we keep our eyes on the ball. We have to compromise somewhere. The drugs are sweet but there’s more stability in the guns. That has to take precedence.”

Juice listens to him talk and realises just how far Jax was out of his depth with all of that shit. Alvarez is cool and calm, not saddled with false ideals. There is nothing covering his eyes. He is clear and precise and, yeah, he might well be a greasy fuckwit but he’s led that club since Juice was in kindergarten and that’s got to count for something.

It takes a certain kind of person to run trades like those. Juice isn’t that kind of guy and neither was Jax.

“I know you wanted out of drugs but it’s a pretty lucrative deal we got going on here. More money than bikes and tittie movies, that’s for sure.”

Thankfully, Chibs isn’t that kind of guy either.

“Aye, I don’t doubt that for a second, Marcus, but we got out for a reason and the reason still stands.”

“Just thought I’d put the feelers out, hombre. Keep us tight.”

He advises Marcus to link up with the Bastards and that, if you look past the wheelchair and the irony of the term, “Sticky’s a good runner”. He’ll cut in a percentage and it’ll be money for nothing, just a steady flow, effort free.

“He’ll run it for you, you reap the rewards. It’s a sweet little venture if you price it right.”

The way Chibs sells it makes Juice understand just how appealing terrible ideas can be when they’re
peddled by the right man.

Chibs is definitely the right man.

It makes Juice wonder why they backed so many wrong ones.

(*)

When the meet is over, Tig catches Juice with an impromptu show of concern.

“You alright?”

With all adrenaline worn off, Juice just looks tired. He didn't sleep well last night, all thoughts turning to Tully when he just wanted them shut off and, though he’d known he’d have to face other crews sooner or later, it took a lot out of him. Just being around people takes a lot out of him these days. He’s always analysing. Always thinking.

He nods his head.

“Yeah, bro, I’m fine. I just hate that guy.”

“Really? Because, he loves you.”

“Yeah, very funny, jerkoff.”

But, Tig is smiling that smile of his, the one that says that something’s gonna go down, and Juice has to prepare himself for whatever is coming next. He always seemed to be the one on the end of it, that slingshot of a smirk that hit him right between the eyes when one of Tig’s verbal weapons were launched in his direction.

Chibs used to tell him it made him special.

Tig puts his arms around Juice’s shoulders and pulls him close, man to man, a real brotherly hug. It says ”atta boy!” more than it says anything else.

“Seriously, you learn that from a Steven Segal movie?”

“What are you talking about, Trager?”

“That thing with Alvarez. I took a step back, thought you were gonna start sparkin’ glitter or something like that. It was that fucking beautiful.”

This is what happens when Juice acts out of character. It gets called on.

This time, it’s not a bad thing.

“I thought you were gonna pull the crane on him like in Part 1, kept waiting for Mr Miyage to rise from the grave, Daniel-San. Did you see his face? He was expecting you to lay down and fucking die, man, but you puffed that little chest out and threw it all back in his face.”

He kisses him hard on the side of his head.

"Beautiful, baby."

This is Tig’s version of pride in him. It’s always mocking, always ragging, never straightforward and always emboldened with a sarcastic kind of humour that stops him from actually having to voice the
way he feels. It’s how he’d praise his daughters.

(‘You’re alright, for a funny looking thing.’)

(‘You did good, but you still look like your mother.’)

It’s how he gets by.

Juice never thought he’d miss the hazing but here it is. He tries hard to keep the smile off his face but he can feel it creeping in, just like it always does, because if there’s one thing he’s always been good at it’s this.

It’s deflecting.

It’s refracting.

It's taking it on the chin.

“Are you done?” he asks, and there's a chime in his voice. "Are you finished?"

"Is the pope Jewish? No, I’m not finished. I'm keepin’ it in the bank."

"Of course you are. Why wouldn't you?"

"No wonder Venus likes you. You're the spark plug son she'll never get to call her own. You gonna call her mommy? She'd really like that."

“Keep antagonising me, Tiggy, see what happens.”

They keep walking. Tig keeps talking. He’s like a dog with a bone when he gets something in his head like this. He pushes it on and on, can’t let it go at all.

There’s a reason he’s been punched out so many times and this is it.

“Would that make me daddy? “

“Shut up.”

Tig gets close. Too close.

“C’mon. Lemme hear it. Call me daddy, baby boy.”

The only thing Juice can think of is, thank fuck he’s not.

His real dad was problematic enough.

(*)

The clubhouse that night is awash with pussy and it almost feels like it used to.

Juice had a girlfriend for awhile, a woman named Tammy from outside of Charming. He met her at a computer store when he was out picking up motherboards for the shop and they hit it off. She was nothing to do with the club and it was all the better for it, ten years his senior and wiling to patch him up each and every time the club bruised or broke him down. She'd shake her head and ask, "Why do you do this, baby? This isn't healthy."

He's always liked them older.
Maybe it's why the crow eaters and sweet butts did nothing for him. They were too young. Too involved.

There's a strict policy now, drawn up and implemented in new club rules. The girls only come by after hours unless they're working office and there's a one strike and you're out law that keeps away the nasty little bitches out to stir the guys up.

What remains are the hopefuls, the ones on their best behaviour looking to score an old man with a cut or, for those with less ambition, a side-job as dessert. As it stands, it's only Quinn and Montez that take up what's on offer because Hap has to be in the mood and Chibs seems too preoccupied.

It's a prospects dream, though, and Jacob might be a married guy but he's feeling the pull of a Hispanic girl called Maria who, Juice hates to say, has been around pretty much all of them. Jax likened her to a worn Vespa and figured she'd still be getting ridden when she turned forty only her parts would be loose and no amount of tuning up would get her back in shape.

Juice has always hated the vocabulary MCs use for these women, has never bought into the misogyny. The girls said he was 'different' and in Juice's experience that always meant something entirely negative. It's why Cherry cornered him that time and hopped on for a ride back to the clubhouse, because she knew he wouldn't refuse, knew he wouldn't throw her out of the cab when he figured out she'd tricked him. She saw him a mile away, this nice guy with a shitty haircut whose mama taught him to treat women good. They all did.

He learned early on that crow eaters don't want to be treated nicely. That's why he doesn't really go there and why, when the other guys were getting their dicks sucked, he'd be keeping Gemma company or talking shop with Piney, who couldn't have got it up even if he wanted to hit any of it.

They just weren't able to give him what he needed.

"I'd have done away with them altogether but T.O reckons it's the only way to keep a happy clubhouse."

Chibs hands out another beer, which Juice takes with a smile.

Juice has yet to meet T.O. His mom got real sick up in Florida, isn't expected to last out the month so, ever since he got back T.O's been over there saying his goodbyes. He spoke to him on the phone, said they'll talk when he gets back and he's good with that.

He nods his head towards Montez, sucking a lime from between a blonde girl's tits.

"He's got a point. Men love this shit."

"But not you."

"I like it just fine, just...not here. Not like this."

"Daisy's got a real thing for you. She's a nice girl. Got her GED and everything. She's going to college."

He knows.

He's the one who told her to do it, but regardless of the fact his heads not in it right now, he's not even sure he could do it.

Juice hasn't contemplated the thought of intimacy since it all happened because for the first few
weeks just the thought of anyone even touching him left him heaving into a trash can. Intimacy, he has been told, could pose a real problem, and the idea of sex has taken on a whole new meaning to him so there not a chance in Hell he's ever gonna use it as a way of killing time. He's not talking abstinence before marriage but there needs to be something there. Trust. Compassion.

Love, even, if that's not too fucking idealistic.

He needs to be able to trust the person he's with to be patient; not to take it personally if it sends him heaving again.

He needs to know that they'll take it slow; that they'll stop if it gets too much for him and if a flick in the wrong direction sends him shaking with unseen terror.

He needs to feel safe.

It's a lot to ask of a croweater.

"She's...not really what I'm looking for tonight, bro."

Juice doesn't know what he's looking for but he looks at these beautiful girls and he feels...nothing.

"Stuff on your mind?"

"Always."

"Tully?"

The name has taken on a meaning now, like the Holocaust, like 9/11. So many negative and soul-destroying emotions are linked to those two syllables.

The discord invoked is terrifying.

He swallows hard and looks away,

"Yeah."

The couch dips beside him as Chibs sits down and it occurs to Juice that Tully seems that little bit further away when he does it.

It inspires him to shift that little bit closer.

"You can call it off, Juicy. You really can. We're doin' alright. We can take a threat if it comes. It's been months. Haven't heard whiff of the Chinese. We don't need him."

"No. But I do."

Tapping his forehead with his finger, Juice tries to indicate why.

('Because he lives in here and there's nothing i can do to get the fucker to leave.')

"I need to get him out of here, Chibs. This place here. I know he can't touch me. It's not that"

"Aye, made sure of that

"It's just... thing is, it was never that. Not completely. When I have these flashbacks it's not the...y'know...it's not that I'm thinking about that."
He's not gonna say it.
He won't say the word.

('It wasn't rape')

"Then what, lad?"

"It was what he used to say to me. He's got this way about him. I can't explain it. But, there's a reason he's still got top position from the inside, because that man's weapon? It's not a fucking gun, I'm telling you that."

This is hard. He hates that he's sitting in the place he calls home surrounded by everything he could ever ask for and he's biting his fingernails to the quick because he can't relax enough to enjoy it. He hates that he's dragging Chibs down with him.

Above all else, he hates the look of pity in the other man's eyes, like he is a damsel in distress that needs saving and comforting when that's not what he is and not what he wants to be.

He keeps reminding himself that everyone hurts sometimes but it doesn't make it any better to take.

"He just fucks with my mind, he really does. I wake up some mornings and I can't breathe. It's not that I'm thinking about him touching me, it's his voice in my head sayin' all this stuff."

Juice can see it in Chibby's eyes. He thinks he's going crazy again.

He despises that look but he knows how it sounds.

"You speak to your guy about that?"

"Yeah. It's normal, apparently. All just part of this whole PTSD thing. But he's not a normal guy."

"Aye, I know that."

"What he did to me wasn't normal. The Chinese? They just wanted to hurt me. Make me feel like nothing. Sure, I'll never be able to order noodles without wanting to throw up but I was just captive convenience for them. Something to take their frustration out on. Tully? I don't know what he wanted. He never hurt me at all. For him it was something else."

He doesn't want to say he wanted to own him but it's how it feels.

He knows how frightening it sounds,

He can't even put it into words.

"The worst part is, I missed him when he was gone. Can you believe that? First few nights in the hospital and I was just waiting for him to come. I wanted for him to come to read to me and talk to me and tell me how fucking good I was and how none of you deserved me. I wanted to hear all of that shit because it was better than the silence, y'know?"

"You missed him?"

What new horror is that? Of course he was going to fixate on that part.

It's now that Chibs lights up and that just kicks Juice in the teeth because he hasn't smoked in months and he's driving him to it.
"Jesus Christ, Juicy."

"Harlow said it was Stockholm Syndrome or some bullshit. Said he offered a kind of stability in all the crazy, that he, and I quote, 'cultured an environment of positive associations designed to trigger a response.' He gets under your skin. My skin. Hard to get him out."

"Why are you doing this, then?"

For you, Juice thinks. And, for me. It's as selfish as it is selfless.

"Because you might say he's full of bullshit but if there's the slighest chance I could stop something from going down by sitting in front of him and hearing him out? I'm gonna do that, Chibs. If there's a chance I can burn away all of the stuff he put in my head by going up against him like I did Alvarez? I gotta try. That felt good, man."

"And, what if he burrows inside of that skull again? What then?"

If only it were a temporary state, Juice thinks.

"He's never been out, Chibby. That's the thing. But, I got you, don't I? I used to say that nothing could pull me out when shit got too loud but that was a lie. You could. I was drowning after Kozic and Miles, man. I'd have took another cowardly swing if it wasn't for you."

A look crosses Chibs face that's something like regret and the insecure part of Juice thinks it's rejection whereas the logical part thinks its guilt. He pats Juice's leg. He does that a lot, as if the physical contact is something he needs to reassure.

"As long as I got you, brother, I'm okay. Right?"

"Do you even need to ask?"

"Yes?"

He wishes it wasn't the case. He wishes he could have that inherent trust but there's too much water to pass under his bridge right now and it'll take awhile before he can accommodate it.

That's not to say he doesn't want to.

"It's you and me, boy. Bridges are mending with the guys but we're strong here. You don't ever have to question whether or not I've got your bloody back. Right?"

"Right."

"You're with us now."

It's fucked up how much the words mean to Juice, fucked up how much they always meant coming from this man. He's talked about this a lot, scoured over it again and again in therapy as he tried to come to terms with where he'd been, what he'd done and who he was. Time and time again, Chibs came up and time and time again, Harlow tried to pigeon-hole what he meant to him.

For Juice it's never been that simple, but the old man's words did strike a chord with him.

The need to please.
The constant desire for reassurance.

The frequent proclamations of love that go beyond fraternity.

('I love you, my brother.')

Harlow had asked if Juice was looking for a replacement father because the fact is clear, Chibs could be his old man and has often behaved in a way that suggests he felt like it. There are enough years between them for it to be plausible and the way Chibs talks he's been horny since the day his mother squeezed him out. He's probably got a ton of kids, he often says, dating back to the late 1970s because he "sewed the seeds of love all over Glasgow and beyond" before he got wise to himself.

It wasn't that.

Juice had thought back to that telephone call, that strung out act of desperation when he was driving through Charming. When Harlow had asked why he'd made that call his immediate response had been that he just wanted to hear Chibs' voice, that if he heard it he might 'just know' that things would be okay.

It sounded a whole lot less weird when it was in his head and, when Harlow had asked if he would describe his feelings as strong or even romantic, he'd almost choked on his water.

"No way."

"You called him when you needed a friend, when you needed comfort. When you were looking for something to ground you, you dialed his number. You were feeling lonely and frightened and you thought hearing his voice might pull you out of it. You said yourself there is nothing you wouldn't do to earn his forgiveness."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying there is a depth of attachment there that doesn't quite fit in a platonic relationship."

"I'm not that guy, Doc, I'm really not. You're barkin' up the wrong tree, dude."

Juice had shut down then, thrust himself deep into denial and refused to speak of Chibs again - but, it still niggles even to this day.

He wasn't that guy, wasn't any guy. He was a guy who went to Diosa and lay with his head in a girl's lap as she asked about his day. He was the guy who, when asked what his preference was, answered that it was someone nice.

He was a guy who went to a whorehouse looking for someone to stroke his hair and tell him everything was gonna be okay and he didn't even get hard when she took off her clothes.

There's no room for anything else in his head. Not now, because right now there is only Tully and he needs to get him the fuck out before he even thinks about anything else.

Still, when he comes back to himself and remembers that Chibs is still beside him, he can't help but feel like the world is suddenly still again.

Why is that?

What is that?

"You alright?"
(‘Christ, no. Help me.’)

He smiles, hides everything behind those bright, white teeth and hopes that Chibs doesn't see through it.

"Fine. Just thinking."

Chibs places a hand on the back of Juice's neck and nods his head towards him so that their foreheads are touching. He looks straight into his eyes and holds him there.

"All will be well, Juicy. Trust me on that, eh? Whatever happens."

The voice calms him. Just his presence makes it feel like the world is spinning less.

Maybe it's always been this way.

Maybe it's only now that he's noticed.

Pulling away, he sighs.

"It just feels different, Chibs. I feel different."

This time he's not talking about good and bad. Right and wrong.

He doesn't know what he's talking about.

He looks at Chibs, really looks at him, and there's something in his face that tells Juice he understands.

"Aye, lad. I know. So do I."
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Juicy crosses boundaries when he's mentally trashed.

Eek. Scared of this chapter. Throw at me your support or scorn. A bit of a 500mph moving fast thing but...well, Juice is very suggestible when he's stressed out and he's never been able to hold back on the rash actions :)

“How’s your boy doing?”

Chibs is elbow deep in motor-oil when Unser shows up. He's fixing up an old Chevvy for Chucky's aunt Sally up in Pasadena as a favour for all his hard work and, if nothing else, it's keeping his mind occupied. He nods towards a rag that's sitting on the workbench which Unser hands him in what is a microcosm of everything he is to the club; a man who doesn't need to be asked. A dutiful servant.

“He's alright. Jumpier than a Swedish virgin at a prison rodeo but that's to be expected.”

Crawling out from under the body, Chibs feels his age creeping in. His joints aren't what they were and when he stands up, all the knots and kinks make themselves painfully known. A look crosses Unser's face, kind of an old man solidarity thing that Chibs isn't ready for face yet because he's not quite fifty and there's time for that yet.

"Didn't expect him to fit right back in. Not after everything. Had a bit of teething problems with Rat but...well, lads will be lads, eh?"

"It takes time, but think back to the way he was. Never thought I'd ever miss some of the juvenile shit he used to pull to make my job more difficult but there was nothing left of him in that prison, Chibs. Kid had one foot in the grave, and I'd know. I'm pretty much there myself. He's come a long way."

When things are on an even keel, Chibs will dwell on just how low it got for all of them and how they were on the verge of folding entirely. He'll look at the old ruins still in boxes out back and he'll think of the past times those burned up and broken things represent. Then he'll look around at the place they're building and he'll pull himself out of it. It's the same with Juice. He'll cast his eyes across and see him being pushed around by Tig, talking up a storm with Venus, shooting pool with Rat with an absolute determination to win and he'll be struck by the power of it.

Today, he's just struck with the possibility of that fragile progress being halted because even now, Juice can't find it in himself to say no.

“I was just stoppin' by to let him know. Tara’s murder's gone cold case. His statement's on file and, in the event of the new Sheriff takin' an interest in it, he might wanna talk to him again. Until that happens, if it even happens, he doesn't need to think about it anymore."

Chibs knows what Unser did for him after that meet in the hospital. He knows how he worded his statement and took out any shred of doubt. He knows how he built it up and padded it around words he put in Juice's mouth so that anyone reading that statement would see only a poor, coerced victim
rather than a criminal mastermind perverting the course of justice for his own gain.

“He’ll be glad to hear it. One less thing to hang over his head, right?”

"Yeah. Figured it'd be a weight off."

“Speakin' of weight off, he’s gone to see Tully today. Thinks it's gonna help.”

“Yeah, I can see how it would.”

“I’m glad someone can because, for the life of me, I can't see how it's gonna be anything other than a bloody disaster.”

“It’s taking fear head on. First step to overcoming it. Psych 101 stuff. I used to be terrified of death. Been staring it down for so long were practically on first name terms now.”

Chibs' da used to say the same thing. When he was a little kid and he was scared of the thunder he'd force him outside. He wasn't being deliberately cruel, as he'd thought back then when he'd be sobbing and screaming and pissing his underpants. He was showing him it had no power over him.

Of course, there's a not-so-subtle difference between facing a childhood fear of thunder and a man who did what Tully did to Juice but Chibs supposes the principle remains the same. It's taking back power. It's showing the thing that caused such dread and pain that it cannot control.

"You just gotta trust him."

“Yeah, I suppose so.”

“He's not the same as he used to be, Chibs. That aint a bad thing.”

He's stronger, more worldly wise. There's a newfound cynisism in him that's sad but necessary. There's knowledge and wisdom where the innocence used to be and, though it hasn't crowded it out completely, it sits firm.

"I thought you might've gone with. Y'know. Moral support."

"He asked me not to."

“How come?”

Chibs doesn't know, just knows that he'd suddenly gone cold on the idea and had said he'd go it alone. He'd tried to reason with him and remind him of the concerns he'd already voiced himself but the boy shut down completely and told him it was his choice to make. Still, he'd tentatively asked if Chibs would be around when he got back as a “just in case” so the only thing Chibs could think of was that it was a pride thing.

“Please,” he'd whispered, “this is my thing to get through. Just let me do it my way?”

He couldn't argue with that.

“Venus has took him in the car. I convinced him not to go alone and, if not me, she was the best option. I worry about the boy. Never worried about Ope or Jax like this.”

“He's made of different stuff, Chibs, we both know that. He shouldn't be in a club. I always said that. I stick by it even now.”
Chibs has often thought the same thing but, if not them, who? Who would he turn to? He’d float through life a virtual nomad with nothing to tie himself to and Chibs can’t imagine that life for the kid, nor would he want to.

“Can only hope he comes back in one piece.”

"You know he won’t."

As far as realism and brutal honesty goes, that's a hit. He could always count on Unser for that.

“If he doesn't? You put him back together and you move on. Isn't that the club way? You fellas got a couple of things right at least. That, and chilli."

"Come by tonight if you like. Chucky-boy's doing a hog roast."

“Would if I could. I told Wendy I’d take care of the boys for a little while. One of her friends is getting’ married in NYC. Adults only. She and Nero are gonna be away for the whole weekend.”

“She and Nero? They makin’ the beast with two backs now?”

“Are you surprised? Holed up out there with all those kids. They got a lot in common.”

It goes to show just how far the club had fallen when the best choice of parents for Jax's little boys were an ex junkie and a murdering pimp gangbanger. Still, they're good people. If there's something to be learned by running with groups such as this one is that you can't judge a book by its rap sheet and antecedent history can be a stain on an otherwise good person.

Nero was always a good guy and Wendy just got a hard ride in life.

“It's still a bit fuckin' odd if you ask me. He was bangin’ the mother, she was doin’ the son. Bit incestuous.”

“I don’t get involved. As long as they’re happy, y’know?”

It's a good policy to have.

“Wendy was asking about you. Said she's been seeing Jax over at Stockton. She aint too happy with the club for leavin’ him in the lurch. Or me, for that matter."

“Aye, well, it’s a good job she’s not part of the club, then, isn’t it?"

“You really cut him off after you and him were so tight?”

It's a loaded question and it screams at every ounce of loyalty that Chibs ever had towards Jax. It also screams at every broken promise Jax ever made and every last disappointment that has rained down on the club since they've became privy to his deceptions. Still, there's still something in Chibs that is sorry for how it's all turned out because he can't imagine how it must feel being in there alone and knowing above all things that there's nobody left.

Juice could tell him how that feels...

“I'm keepin’ my distance, that’s all. I wish him no ill will, Wayne. Just trying to set things in concrete before I start revising old ground. I’m sure he’d understand.”

“She said he’s given up in there.”
“It was bound to happen. He killed his ma. Prison's not good for a guy with Jax' sensibilities.”

“I guess not. “

He's a leader, not a follower. He's a general, not a soldier. He's not a man who can stand up and take it while these guards on their minimum wage, maximum authority jobs lord over him day in, day out.

He can imagine how powerless he must feel.

There is quiet, now. Jax seems to have that effect. Mention his name and the whole room falls silent, as if they're still trying to process exactly what he represents to them, still trying to put in order all of the things he pulled apart. It's like talking of the dead. There's always that period of time where just the mention of their name is too painful to comprehend because of all that's been lost.

The club isn't lost any more.

Unser smiles that sympathetic smile, the one that says “i know exactly how you are feeling”.

“Life's too short to dwell, Chibs. Both of us need to move on from this. All of it.”

Chibs appreciates it.

“Right you are, Wayne.”

“Anyway, just thought I’d let you know what was going on. Keep you up to scratch. Tell him if he needs to ask me anything to give me a call but, as far as I'm concerned, there's nothing more to be said at this point.”

Out of nowhere, Chibs is struck with this feeling. He can't explain it. It's something that just passes through because this man right there is a good man. This guy right in front of him is a good guy, always was, and when he thinks back over all of the shite these last years have dredged up, he's always been there to help clean it up.

He thinks back to Stahl; how Unser stood and watched as Opie avenged his wife's pointless, senseless death that maybe Tig should've paid for but Chibs finds himself glad that he didn't.

He places a hand on the old man's shoulder and he's so paper-thin it hurts to think about.

"You always were good to us. I just want you to know I appreciate everything you've done."

"Thanks, Chibs, but I'm not dead yet. You don't have to say your goodbyes and thank yous until I'm gone."

“I don't mean it like that. Just...thought you should know.”

It's not a morbid thought or sentiment. It just seems inherently important for Chibs that, when he does go, he has lived out his last days feeling appreciated and knowing without doubt that he wasn't alone.

The old man snorts. Shrugs his shoulders.

“And they call me Uncle Touchy.”

Chibs has to smile at that.

(*)
In her baby blue VW Bug, Venus sticks out like a sore thumb. It's not that she doesn't already, not with how she is, but she makes her presence known on the road, that's for sure. The seats inside are dusted leather and on the dash there's a nodding bulldog with “I love Mardi Gras” emblazoned on a jacket its inexplicably wearing.

The whole cab smells like vanilla and Juice would probably find it relaxing if she didn't drive like her ass was alight and she was trying to fan the flames.

“Watch the si....oh, fuck, never mind.”

“You a backseat driver, Juice? Shame on you.”

Juice is a stickler for road rules, always has been, and though he has a need for speed when he takes his Dyna out onto the open roads, on the streets of Charming and its surrounds there's a change in him. He finds himself staring at the speedometer as she puts her foot down on the peddle that little bit more, nudging it way past where it's supposed to go.

She's an angry driver, that's for sure, as if she's taking out of all of her life's frustrations on the road. If nothing else, the concern for his own life is overtaking the apprehension he feels at the idea of facing the man who has lived inside of him since he first met him. He's hoping to exorcise that demon when he sits across from him in that small, glass partitioned meeting area – but, he has to get there in one piece first.

Each and every time she looks at him she offers a bright red lipstick grin and it just puts him even more on edge. Still, he's smiling softly when he asks her if she's trying to kill them both; when he complains that he's cheated the reaper too much these past years and is too young and beautiful to die.

“I'm just makin' my mark. Letting it be known I'm here.”

“I think you made it. They know you're here alright.”

She opens the window wide when they stop at some traffic lights. There's a guy in his early twenties talking on his phone as he crosses far, far too close to the car and, when the asshole doesn't even look up, she toots her horn loud and hard. The guy almost drops the cell and, in his rage, gives her the finger.

“Hey. Didn't your momma teach you how to cross the street? Jaywalkin’s the biggest killer since the AIDS epidemic, sweet cheeks. Get on the fucking sidewalk if you're talking on the phone.”

”Hey, fuck you, she-man.”

“Some people don't even know they're born,” she says, as she winds up that window again and waits for the lights to turn green. Juice finds himself wishing she'd tore him another one after what he just said.

“I lied about the epidemic. Just thought I'd give him a scare.”

“Does that bother you? Y'know, guys like that?”

“I grew a thick skin over the years, cookie. You live the kinda life I've lived and that kind of asshole just becomes a part of it. I choose to live the way I live. I don't ask for nobody's approval.”

It must be wonderful to live like that, despite the adversity. Must be good to wake up in a body you felt belonged with you knowing above all else that sticks and stones might hurt but, fuck them, they
wouldn't hurt as much as living a lie. Sometimes Juice thinks he's living a lie and he's never quite been able to pinpoint why that is.

It still screws with his pre-conceived notions, how she integrated so fast; how a club with so many antiquated and bigoted views embraced her for who she was. So many things changed while he was away, it seems. So many new rules came in and so many old rules were cast aside. When he'd first heard T.O had been patched in he'd felt immediately bitter about it because, how come things can change for him yet they could never change for Juice? Still, it's difficult to dwell on things like that when his whole mindset these days is moving forward.

Venus smiles when the colour finally changes; when she can put her foot down and spin off away.

"We havin’ fun yet, or what?"

"Sure."

"You'll have to excuse my penchant for vehicular dramatics, Juice. I take after my Nana - before gravity dug her vicious claws in, of course. She was a feisty old whore just like I am. Who do you take after? I'll bet you were a Mama's Boy, weren't you? I bet you were the apple of her big brown eye."

('You are our mother's son, Juan Carlos. She loved you to the moon and back and she's dead because of it.

He doesn't know who he takes after, though his sister would have her own ideas about it. His mom left him so early and, since then, he's been passed around so frequently he never really had a chance to bond with anyone; to learn from anyone. Sometimes when he looks in the mirror he wonders what fabric he is made of. Who was it that put the pieces in to make him who he was? Was it Mom, was it any number of dads he's gone through over the years or did he just make it this way himself?

Juice was a nomad long before he was a Son.

He shrugs.

"I really have no idea, V. Maybe a bit of her and a lot of everyone else."

"I'd love to say there's not a speck of my momma in me but that would be a lie. I'm as wilful as she is. As determined. I get what I want, just like she did, only I don't hurt little children to get there, oh no I don't."

"They say we are our parents, good or bad."

"Aint that right?"

There's a reason why Juice wanted Venus to come with him when Chibs appealed to his sensible side and convinced him he couldn't go it alone. He knows why she offered. It's because she's done this before, has been here before. She has made the journey to a place knowing her abuser was waiting, has travelled with a weight in her chest knowing she was going to look them in the eye with the hopes of not transporting back to the last time when it was all different.

She seems to instinctively know not to ask questions about Tully, instead choosing to dance around other things in effort to keep his mind occupied. It's not a long drive but it's long enough and this is too big a thing for that to pass in silence.

He's been preparing for this for days but, at the same time, there's nothing he can really do to make
himself ready for it. Venus meets his eyes in the mirror and tells him he's doing just fine.

"Chibs looked real sad when you asked me to come with. What you doin', breaking that old boot's heart? Thought you were a nice, sweet boy."

He shrugs.

"I just didn't want him there. I don't know why. Just didn't feel right."

"Didn’t want him to see you crackin’ up, is that right? You're preaching to the choir, angel. I am the mistress of sidesteppin' and the Queen of all things brave face. That dance is my tango and I danced it for a long, long time."

He can't quite put his finger on it because, though he knows there's a fair chance Chibs will be holding him up by the end of the day, he didn't want him seeing the before and after. Maybe the only way he could keep him clean and safe was to leave him behind.

“I guess I didn't want to make any associations.”

Juice knows all about associations, negative or otherwise, knows all about their irrationalities and how we really can't do jack shit about how or when they form. He doesn't want to look at Chibs and think of Tully. He doesn't want to ride in a car with him and immediately flash back to this.

Maybe that's why.

“You know why dogs and cats crawl away to die, honey? It's to protect the pack. They don’t want the living things they belong to suffering because of them. It’s kinda why people hide when they cry or smile through their tears. So our loved ones don't have to see our pain."

“Nobody’s dying here, Venus.”

“Principle’s the same though, isn’t it? You don’t want him to see him at your worst so you opted for the safer choice, which is me, because I know all about smilin' through tears and I know all about how you're feeling right about now.”

She does know that and it is the reason why. They say that women know everything and Juice is starting to think it might be true because, though Venus was born a man, her mind and her soul have always been and will always be this.

“Thing is, he's already seen me at my worst.”

“Uh-huh. But things have changed now, haven’t they?”

“What do you mean?”

There's that knowing smile, that deliberate tone. There's that women's intuition shining through.

“Come now, child, don’t give me any of that silly talk. I see all. World works all mysterious, sweet boy. It don't always make sense to us, but I trust my eyes and I have faith in what my soul tells me. And it tells me things about you. Things about Chibs. Things you might not have always known but you know now.”

Juice says nothing because oblivion is only an option when the eyes are closed and Juice's eyes are wide, wide open, now, and he knows in his heart that his doctor's words were sound words. That old man knew before he knew and part of him wishes he could call him up right now just to ask him
what he's supposed to *do* about this thing he refused to speak of, these feelings he wouldn't acknowledge.

"It scares you half to death, doesn't it, when you suddenly start thinkin' outside of the box? You stray too far and you want to just scurry up on back in and close yourself up again."

Is that what this is, thinking outside of the box?

"Closin' up isn't an option, sweet cheeks."

The truth is, Juice woke up this morning and the only thing that was on his mind was Chibs' forehead pressed against his own, the soft scent of whiskey on his breath as he told Juice that they were solid. That they were firm. That he had nothing to fear from him.

He'd wanted so badly to push that, to see where it would've gone.

"You gonna say anything?" he asks, because he doesn't know how he'd cope if she did. He doesn't know what he'd say.

"I'm a belle that never tells, remember? But you can tell me anything. It won't get past these perfect ruby lips."

And, just like that, another secret is born, a secret shared between two with consequences that could reach further than the mind can stretch.

Juice rubs his temples, feels the pressure starting to build behind his eyes. He could do with a joint right now just to calm his nerves and soothe his head but he wants all of his faculties at his disposal when he faces this prick.

"Can we just...not talk about this right now?"

He doesn't know what else to say. He just knows he's wading in quicksand and it's getting harder and harder to drag himself out of it. He's tired of feeling at a loss, tired of feeling his thoughts and his emotions are not in his control.

He just wants an end.

"I just...I need to think about it. I don't know what I'm feeling. I just know I can't feel it right now."

"Sure thing. I know you got a lot on your mind. But, baby, if there are cogs runnin' round in that pretty little head of yours tellin' you that you and him aint a good thing? Shut them off. We can't pick and choose. When the arrow strikes, we're done for. Ain't nothin' we can do about it."

"Yeah. Yeah, I know."

Juice never did have a choice.

It feels like the story of his life.

(*)

He doesn't want what went on in these walls to be the story of his life. As he goes through the machines which scan him for weapons and holds his arms out for a pat-down, it all just feels too familiar.

The guards are different, thankfully. This is visitor intake, not prisoner, and there are no chains
around his ankles and wrists, no numbers emblazoned on pieces of paper stuck on his clothing so he
could be processed easier because once you're through those doors you are a number and not a man.
It's a different entrance, bright whereas the other entrance is bleak, and room where he signs in looks
more like a doctor's waiting room than anything else. Juice never wants to be in a place like this
again. He never wants to feel the steel weight against his wrists and know that there is no escape.

They don't take his things and put them in a plastic bag for 'safe keeping' and when he signs his
name on the page, they smile at him.

"You're a little early."

"Sorry. My ride was pretty quick."

It's an understatement.

He looks behind him, back at that little blue car, and he knows that this is his last chance to back out.
She's on the phone, probably to Tig judging by the way she's twirling her hair, by the way she's
tilting her head to the side and looking at herself in the mirror.

If she sees his reluctance in that glass fronted building she doesn't let him know it.

"You ready to go?"

It feels strange to be asked that in this place.

"Y-yeah. Sure."

"Right this way."

He's taken to the closed visitor centre and it looks more like a call centre than anything else. There's a
glass partition in the middle of the room and small booths with telephones on either side of the glass.
It strikes him that the place is empty and he figures Tully must've exercised his power in order for it
to be so. He can't get close to Juice but he can make this as intimate and as private as he needs it to be.

The thought sickens Juice – but, it doesn't surprise him.

He's in what they refer to as 'civilian clothing' because he didn't want to antagonize anyone in this
place by wearing a cut. The sweater is long in the sleeve and hangs a little over his wrists. His nails
dig into the fabric as a distraction as he waits for the inevitable. Each and every time he feels the
anxiety building he puts a song in his head and focuses on the words because if someone else is
talking, singing in his ear, then Tully can't.

By the time they finally bring him through, Juice has worked himself up into such a wound up knot
he'll be surprised if he lasts a minute without lashing out.

Tully, it appears, has done the precise opposite of Juice himself and has shaved his head down to
nothing. It breaks the mental bubble because he doesn't even look like the same man. It's so much
easier to distance himself when he barely even recognises him.

He smiles, and slick bald it looks even uglier. There's a swastika etched into the side of his head and
Juice has to wonder if it's always been there or whether this is some grotesque tribute to Juice
himself.

He pales at the thought.
“Tully.”

“Look at you. Less neo-skinhead, more Latino altar boy. I *like* it.”

The voice, that's the same. It brings him back down to Earth with a hard, firm crash. Juice sits up poker straight and he forces himself to look Tully in the eye. He knows how far it is from the hunched over broken thing he was and he wonders if Tully feels the same as he does about the physical changes.

“Lets get this over with. What do you want?”

“I waited six months to hear from you and this is the attitude I have to deal with?”

The way he talks, it's as if nothing ever happened, like they're some long estranged friends that went through a rough patch only to come together after a change of heart. The way he looks, so falsely crestfallen, it forces the bile up into Juice's throat and he's forced to swallow it back.

He hates this man, truly hates him, and yet at the same time he finds it hard to hate him at all.

It's the mental duality that fucks him up more than anything.

“Forget it.”

He's nonchalant, forcibly so, and when he gets to his feet it's with the power and the knowledge that *he* controls this meet, not Tully, and that if he chooses for it to end then that is how it shall be. He can walk away now whereas before he was bolted down.

“I'm outta here.”

There are no bars in his way, no court orders ruling he must stay.

“Hey, come back, I was just throwin’ a hook out. I'll be on my best behaviour. I promise.”

It might be his imagination but Juice swears he can hear a little bit of desperation in Tully's tone. He's not the kind of person who gets off on power, that's not his thing at all. He leaves that to the likes of Tully himself, but there's something fundamentally endowing about the knowledge that he is the one calling the shots.

He sits back down, but he makes sure Tully knows it's because he wants to, not because he has to.

There's that smile again.

“I can only apologise for the facilities but…you asked for it.”

You asked for it. It’s a poor choice of words, one that relates so wholly to what Tully put him through. A rape buzz phrase if you will, and the look on Tully's face makes him wonder if it was completely intentional. He hesitates for a minute because he's trying to read something into it but he comes back blank.

Tully continues to exist and Juice continues to hate him for it.

“Why would I ever want to be alone in a room with you again after what you did to me?”

If a monster can feel, that gets to him, because he leans back in his chair and the stance lacks the usual indifference and laziness that normally shrouds Tully's interactions.
He doesn’t apologise but he does have the decency to look like Juice hit his mark.

“You never read my letters. I said a lot in those letters. Tried to reach out. If you'd read them you might've understood my position when it came to our...dealings, shall we say? There was a lot of ruefulness in those letters, Juice, but they kept coming back to me.”

His words make him sound like a jilted lover.

It disturbs Juice in a way he can't even begin to explain.

“Did you really think I would read them? Any of them?”

He's lying. He read one of them, the first one, felt it in his chest when those elegant scrawls connected. Tully had written that Juice, a "tragic, pathetic little thing," had jerked him into life where he truly had been dead and that it was something nobody had ever managed to do before.

He told Juice he was 'special', that he 'meant something'.

He had to be sedated that night because he couldn't deal with the fallout and he never read another word Tully wrote.

“I hoped you would read them. Thought it might bring you some comfort to know that at least someone was thinking about you when everyone else had walked away. I know what those places can do to a person. Wanted to make sure you knew you weren't alone.”

He wanted to ensure that, in Juice's isolation, he still had some sway over him. He wanted to strengthen his bond of ownership even though there were miles and miles between them.

"I enjoyed your company,” he says. “Take from that what you will.”

All Juice takes from it is a niggling feeling in his stomach and the knowledge he won't be eating tonight.

On a surface level, everything Tully says is encouraging, thoughtful, positive and so, should anyone hear it from the outside there's every chance they'd see it as vested paranoia on Juice's part. He's careful in what he says and his actions often appear well meaning. How can you read threat into words of compassion and concern? How can you look at these deeply connective eyes and see cruelty?

('Manipulators can be emotionally disorientating, Juice. It's how abusive people gaslight their victims. On the surface, they're as charming and supportive as can be, but underneath?')

Underneath, Tully is a charming, convincing degenerate.

“If makes you feel any better, I didn’t get the letters. My mail was screened, same as it would be in prison. Anything seen as potentially disturbing to me was held back. A Stockton stamp would've stood out like a whore at communion, don't you think?”

The words, it seems, amuse Tully.

“Is that what I am? Potentially disturbing?”

“I don’t think the word ‘potentially’ applies, do you?”

Potentially implies there may be a question about it and there's no question in Juice's mind that Tully is as damaging as they get and, though he'd never raise a finger to Juice, the marks he's left on him
are more bright, more vivid and more lasting than any Chibs could possibly have left when he went
town on his face.

Tully looks proud.

It's just another thing to sicken Juice.

“Look at you. You've shown more nerve in the past few minutes than in the hours we spend
together after lockdown. They've made a new man out of you. That's good. It's real good. I always
knew you'd come good.”

He’s really going to town on this, isn’t he, because it's not what he says but how he says it. It's not
the words that come out of his mouth, it's the ones that go unsaid. They didn't 'spend time together',
not the way he's implying. There was no time spent on Juice's part, it was time forced.

There was no togetherness on his part, there was only non-consent.

Tully smiles as he leans forward towards the glass that keeps them apart. Juice knows he can't touch
him but there is such a thing as too close even with something holding Tully back.

“Don’t.”

His hard, firm tone masks his anxiety and silences the voice that repeats the word 'no' over and over
in his head, the way it always did. Tully sees the warning and complies, his hands held up in mock
submission as if to show beyond all doubt that he has received the message and understood.

“I gotta say, you look better. I worried about you when you were in here. You weren’t eating,
weren’t sleeping unless I hooked you up. This place was bad for you, Juan Carlos.”

“Yeah, it was. That’s what constant rape and intimidation will do to a person, Tully.”

"Juice -"

His instinctive response is to bow his head and to say he is sorry because he understands that
dissuasive tone when it comes out of Tully's mouth. That's his go-to; his trigger reaction.

He pushes it away, refuses to let it defeat him.

"I'm not gonna apologise for that."

"I'm not asking you to."

He could be speaking to Tully. He could just be speaking to himself.

“You bet you're not asking me to.”

This is the only way he can get through this. To take control. To deflect. The only emotion he can
feel is anger, the only expression bitterness. He boxes everything else away because he doesn't want
to run the risk of regressing.

Tully seems surprised by it but by no means disappointed. He looks like a proud father might when
seeing just how far his child has come from the helpless baby he helped bring into the world.

('My little boy's all grown up.')

Tully probably sees himself as someone who birthed this new Juice; who pushed him out into the
world whether he was ready and willing for it or not.

“Where is the little lamb I led away from slaughter?”

“You cut his throat last time you fucked him. He's gone. Lost.”

“Oh, I don’t think you’re lost, sweetheart. I think you’re exactly where you need to be right now.”

If blood could run cold, Juice's is at sub-zero temperatures because Tully has said those words before, those exact words. The last time it was when he was on top of him, when Juice was suffocating under the sheer weight of him.

His eyes shoot up expecting to see something in his face: a challenge, something, anything, but there’s nothing there, nothing but affinity. Nothing but unveiled compassion.

('Dont let him manipulate you.‘)

"I think you've come into yourself. Finally. I'm just glad you're well."

“Yeah.”

Seeing Tully doesn’t change anything for Juice. It doesn't enhance his pain, nor does it take it away. It simply is. There are crescents in his palms, tiny red marks from his nails as he tries to regulate himself. Those lyrics are on repeat as he attempts to stop himself from falling months behind and returning to the place he was the last time he was with Tully.

An empty head has too much room to grow in so he tries his hardest to fill every little space.

He just wants this to be over.

“You asked me to come. I came. You said you had intel you’d only give to me. I’m here. We’re not friends. Can we please just get this done? I don't owe you anything.”

“Except your life.”

“Don’t even go there. If you’d done as I asked – “

“ – you wouldn’t be here right now, and the world would be an inferior place.”

That's just funny. That's funny coming from a white supremacist who follows the ethos of a man who would've had Juice worked to his death for being a criminal non-white, as far from Aryan as you could possibly get.

He laughs, bitterly.

“You’re really full of shit, you know that, Tully?”

“I mean it. Until that evening in the cafeteria, you never asked me for a single thing. No matter what I did, you never demanded anything. You just did what you were tasked to do no matter how much of yourself you gave to me.”

“Give. Right. Because that's how it was.”

"You have any idea how hard it is to find your kind of loyalty, Juan Carlos? Teller didn’t know what he had at his disposal. He had no idea how valuable you were."
At his disposal, like Juice is a commodity. A thing to own. A weapon to detonate.

Why does everyone want a piece of him?

Why can't they just let him be?

“He didn’t appreciate the gift he’d been given.”

“Oh, so I’m a gift, now?”

"The best kind. He thinks you’re weak but you’re not that. You were never that. When I look into his eyes and I see the regret there? Part of that’s for you."

Juice doesn’t want to hear this. He doesn’t want to hear how Jax is wallowing in pity and regret; how prison life is forcing to see the error of his ways.

He doesn't want to think of Jax as a guy who is suffering the way that he did with all of these fears and all of these guilts.

"He feels bad, Juan Carlos, and part of that's about you,"

"Stop."

He can’t go there.

He can't go there because every last time he thinks of Jax his chest starts to tighten, his heart starts to race and he's seeing stars before he can even get himself back into check.

"You don't think you deserve his remorse? Oh, Juice. When are you gonna learn?"

Tully moves forward and he presses his hand against the glass and Juice, so rattled by his words, flinches as if it’s made contact. He knows he's lost his edge, hates himself for that because he can see it, the pride in Tully’s eyes, the way he thinks his pet has fallen back into place.

('You'll always be a coward, Juice. Not amount of makin' up is gonna change that.')

"There you are," Tully says, and it makes Juice want to hurt someone, the look on his face. "There's the guy I knew."

(There's my boy.)

"I'm not that guy."

(There's my sweetheart.)

"You were always that guy. There was never anything wrong with that. If they chose to cast you out because of it that was their loss. Their mistake. I embraced you for what you were, black daddy be damned."

There's the proverbial straw and, though his voice is shaking and his resolve is faltering and his heart is about to choke him, Juice takes the reins back.

"I'm. Not. That. Guy. Wanna know why? Because this guy can leave. This guy doesn't have to stay here and listen to your circle talking shit. This guy? Doesn't give a damn about your thoughts and your ideals and your bullshit."
“Now, that's not true, is it?”

“Isn't it? Isn't it?”

He does what he threatened. He gets up. He gathers his stuff. He pulls his jacket closed and, without another word, he turns his back on the shaven headed bastard who he will never, ever let win again.

Chibby was right. This was a mind game. Tully did not want to help him, he just wanted to see him. He didn't want to offer him anything, he just wanted to take him back.

At least, that's how it seems until he utters the name.

"Chen."

"What?"

"The guy putting up the cash. It's Chen. Get rid of him, you get rid of the threat. The rest of them haven't got the nerve to act alone."

Is it genuine or is this just another ploy? What will be in his eyes if Juice were to turn around and look? Would he see a monster or would he see a man that may well be a demon but is capable of showing genuine mercy?

Who is he?

"I didn't ask you here to play with you, Juice. Don't be so quick to judge me,"

Juice doesn't give him the chance to prove himself.

"You said you wanted to apologise. That's funny. Because you're not sorry at all."

"Aren't I?"

He doesn't care what Tully is.

He just wants to get away.

"Goodbye, Tully."

(*)

She drives slowly on the way back, slowly and in silence. She does not cause a scene on the roads, nor does she talk him to the Heavens and back the way she normally does. She senses his need for reflection and she permits it.

Still, she reaches over and squeezes his hand gently just to let him know she's there.

Juice closes his eyes and turns away.

Looking back on the whole exchange there is not a single thing that stood out as threatening. Each and every word that passed Tully’s lips could be interpreted as comfort. Pride. Praise. They tie into his assertion that he meant Juice no harm and that what happened between them was a regretful mistake.

So, how come it feels he's just turned him inside out again?
How come it feels like he's gouged him open and gutted him?

How come *he* feels like the bad guy?

“I don’t know what I’m doing, Venus” he admits when they’re half a mile from home, and it’s with a stark, pleading susceptibility that he isn’t expecting even from himself. “I just...I don't know anything.”

"What do you need, baby? You just do whatever you need."

What he needs becomes decidedly clear when they get to the clubhouse, empty but for Chibs and the dog because everyone else is out back enjoying the fruits of Chucky's labour. He doesn't say a word as he crosses the threshold, moves as if on autopilot and he trusts his body to take it where it needs to be.

"Alright, lad?" Chibs says, as he looks up to greet him.

Still, Juice says nothing, just falls down beside Chibs, boneless and graceless as he leans himself in.

He releases a breath he didn't know he'd been holding and it sounds so painful, even to him.

"Y 'alright, now," he hears, and his whole body folds into itself.

"I got you, my brother. I love you."

It sparks something inside of Juice, something he cannot and will not control. Those words, Venus' words, they resonate.

He looks up, and the spark erupts.

It flares like a match in a forest.

(*)

it's not even a leap of faith. It's a blind jump into God only knows what.

For Chibs, it's an unexpected and terrifying thing because the Juice that comes through those doors is not the Juice that left this afternoon and it's something he's been terrified of.

He's never seen this Juice before, this delirious, urgent thing.

He's never witnessed or felt the utter importunity with which Juice's hands bury themselves in his hair, the way his mouth crashes against his, lip to lip, tongue to tongue, scar to invisible scar. Juice's unravelled despair and confusion transplants itself elsewhere and is replaced with only this.

“What is this, boy?”

Juice cuts him off, steals his breath and his thoughts as skilfully as he steals passcodes and server space and the only thing Chibs can think is “Christ, he's good at this.”

It overtakes the thougth of “this shouldn't be happening like this.”

Chibs has never met this wilful, resolute young man whose fingers dig into his scalp as he engages and whose whole body, rigid with tension, presses itself into Chibs' personal space like the Juice he knows and loves would never dare. Somewhere in the distance he hears Venus excusing herself to a powder room that doesn't exist but she doesn't matter right now. Nothing matters right now because
Chibs' head is as full of this boy as much as his mouth is and that takes up every ounce of mental space he has.

He's not averse to this, not in essence. It feels like so many things that are right or wrong to him, so many things he hasn't yet owned up to. But it's too fast, too fast for Chibs to process, so spectacularly mistimed he feels like he's spinning. He can feel the wetness of the boy's face against his cheek, the rasping, trembling breaths of a drowning man clutching on for whatever life is left of him and, though his head tells him to stop this before it gets started he can't.

He can feel Juice's shoulders hitch and he wonders if he's trying to kiss the pain away because, as Chibs loses breath in the confusion of this sudden, decisive action he starts to feel Juice's tight wound body falling away from itself. It's like the frenzied despair is draining out of him each and every second that passes in Chib's hold.

Still, it feels wrong to pursue this while he's so unpicked.

“Juice,” Chibs whispers as he pulls away, as he tries to meet his eyes just to see what's going on in them, if anything.

The motions stop. The hands stop pulling so desperately and the rigidity begins to further unwind. Juice sighs, and in Chibs' mind, he is finally returning from wherever it is he goes when he leaves this place.

He comes back slowly as if reaching a realisation.

“'You with me, lad?'"

His hands fall down from Chibs' head, and he pulls away with a whispered "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean - "

"' - Shh. It's alright. No harm done."

Except that there is, they both know there is, because there's no going back from something like this. There's no turning around and rubbing out what has happened like one might erase a bad word from a chalkboard; a stain from an otherwise good shirt. No harm but a can of worms that hasn't only been opened but whose contents have been splayed out all over.

"What was that about, Juicy? Did you even know what you were doing? Was that something you wanted?"

Juice wipes his cheeks quickly. His fingers move up to his lips and he touches them briefly as if trying to figure out if what just happened occurred at all. He frowns a little before composing himself with a cleared throat and a hopeless smile.

He looks so casually, acceptingly lost.

"I-I'm sorry. I, uh, I don't know what I was thinking."

"You were thinking it was what you needed and now we're both wondering what the fuck just happened. I'm not complaining, Juicy, really I'm not, but...Jesus Christ, boy."

"I know, I know. That's not who I am and it's not who you are. I'm sorry I let myself go like that. It won't happen again."

He says it like it's so simple. For Chibs its not. It's not that simple and it will never be that simple
again. Who are any of them? What is the right in any of this and why should this feel like the wrong?

"I don't even know who we are any more. Like we've said before, it all feels different."

This feels so far from what he's accustomed to he can't even begin to process it. He knows Juice has a pattern of leaping without thinking when he's overwhelmed and painfully stretched but it never felt like this before.

"I still shouldn't have pushed you into that. Wasn't fair, brother, just me being fucked up and needing..."

Juice pauses, passes a look as if he doesn't know what to say. His eyes jitter just a little. Then they just become far, far away.

"I let it all get the better of me and I'm sorry. You deserve better than me coming back and doing...that."

Chibs can't hear this. Won't hear this. He won't hear him talking himself down and turning himself into the second class subject he's been made to feel. He won't hear him beat himself up over a spontaneous coming together that neither of them expected but both of them clearly wanted on some level if their responses are anything to go on.

He puts a finger across Juice's lips and silences him with a look, a look he hopes gets through to him, a look he hopes explains above all things that this was not something he should be sorry about.

"Did it feel like I was pushin' you away? Did it feel like I was coerced in any way?"

"No,"

"Well, then. It's not that, Juicy. It's not that I wanted you to stop. It's that you needed to."

Now he just looks bewildered.

"I don't know what's happening, Chibs."

"Neither do I, lad. Neither do I. But, we'll figure it out, alright? Whatever it is, we'll figure it out. You and me, we always do."

Chibs isn't going to pretend he knows the precise definition of all of this any more. He's not going to pretend the idea of Juice wanting to reach out and grasp him in a moment of weakness doesn't jolt something inside of him, doesn't want to dwell on the fact that he's feeling desperate at all makes him want to tear up the world and kill someone because of it.

He isn't going to pretend that all of the hurt feelings and bitter betrayals aren't just coming to a head now and explaining themselves in terms of just what they represented.

He's just going to sit here for a second. Here, with Juice, because that's the only thing that's real right now.

That's the only thing that matters.

"I just...I needed something to hold onto. Something that wasn't fucking stained. Something that still meant something to me. That's why I didn't want you coming today. I didn't want to associate you with any of that bullshit."

"S'alright, lad. I understand."
"I wasn't even thinking. I ignored your cardinal rule when I, uh – well, when that happened. I didn't think before I acted. I couldn't think. All I could see was you."

He's so embarrassed he can't even say the word, so messed up that Chibs doesn't think he could consent to anything even if he wanted to. That's why he stopped, because he wanted it to be on even terms where nothing was pushing or forcing things along if it were ever to happen at all.

He wasn't going to force anything on Juice and he wasn't going to take when he didn't know what he was offering.

Too many have done that already.

"My rule didn't apply, boy. Not there."

"What do you mean?"

He means they've gone from zero to ninety in a few seconds flat with no room to think, no room to breathe.

He means that Juice has been taken to a place so deep and so confusing he'll cross his own barriers just to get through it and, as much as Chibs wants to desiccate his own barriers and try to figure this out through touch and taste and Christ knows what else, he's not going to do it now. Not while Juice is vulnerable and in pieces.

He's not going to take advantage while he's not right because that would put him on the same stretch as everyone else. He's not prepared to do that to him because he thinks too much of him.

That's what he tells Juice and he's not surprised at all when the boy is stunned wordless at the assertions.

"I-I don't know what to say."

He never would've believed any of that.

In fairness, Chibs never would've believed it either if someone would've told him weeks ago that this was what was going to happen; that this was how he was going to feel towards a brother he had killed in all but a literal sense.

"Look, we don't have to talk about it right now. Let's just sleep on it, eh? See how we feel about it with clear heads in the morning."

Chibs knows how he'll feel in the morning. He's just trying to do this the right way. For Juice. For the boy who is so frenetic the bed buzzes with it.

"Yeah. Of course."

Juice looks as relieved as Chibs feels because he's pretty sure the boy wouldn't even know where to begin. Chibs knows he doesn't. But, he can't get the taste of Juice off his lips, spearmint and salt, sweet and painful.

Candy and tears.

It jolts him.

"We could head downstairs, show our faces if you'd like. Everyone's here."
"Not sure I'd be much company after today."

"Why don't you get a bit of shut eye then. It's been a long day for you. I'm not even gonna ask how it went because I think it speaks for itself but - when you wanna talk about it, just say the word. I'll listen. I can wait as long as you need provided imminent death isn't on the cards."

"I really just wanna sleep, Chibby. I'm so tired. It all just took it outta me."

He does look tired, like it's only force of will that's keeping his eyes open. He's been awake for days just thinking about what would happen today, with how he'd cope, and no amount of coaxing and pleading would get him to rest.

When he quietly asks for the light to be left on it ignites Chibs. It's not a childish little boy fear of monsters lurking under beds or what might creep in through the window.

It's so that he can see people coming, so that he cannot be caught unawares.

It's why he always positions himself in a room with his back to the wall and his eyes to the door, so that there can be no surprises.

He'd vivisect Tully for what he's done to this boy.

He's wipe Jax's face with it.

Worse still is the hand that snaps out and fastens around the tail of Chibs' cut and Juice, fractured and regressed, asks him to stay because all of a sudden it's clear the thought of him leaving is a bottomless pit for him that he just can't face.

"What is it you need, lad?"

He just wants to be watched over.

Chibs can do that.

"I don't want to be alone. Bad shit happened last time I was alone like this."

More tellingly, he tells Chibs he's scared to be.

"I just - I need you. Here."

Then quieter, a whispered "please."

"I'm not going anywhere. Not now."

Not ever. However this plays out when we're both thinking clearly.

They can hear the party as it goes on outside, the music and the laughter that seemed so long coming but it all seems so far away from them, like its another world, another time, another place. that doesn't belong to them right now.

They belong here.

Chibs sits down on the bed beside Juice and he knows, above all things, that nothing would tear him away.

“Alright, now?”
Juice just stares blankly, more overwhelmed than he's ever been as he tries to neutralise himself. As he tries to pull all of these wildly straying bits to the middle.

"Y-yeah. Thanks, brother."

The "I love you" goes without saying for both of them. It just simply is.
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Talking happens. Thoughts are voiced. Juice is loved.

Thank you so much for all the nice words. It's great and helpful to know you are here :) I'm still having fun so I'm glad some of you are too.

"You seen Juicy?"

Tig is on the couch, his clearly naked body preserved only by a faux fur throw and it’s clear beyond all doubt he’s been there all night. His toes sticking out from the blanket give the whole thing a surreal kind of 70s misfit quality and Chibs finds it breaks through his anxiety, if nothing else.

Judging by the number of bikes still out front, he’s not the only one. Chibs is not entirely sure how he slept through but the fingers of whiskey he downed might have something to do with it. That, and living in Ireland where car bombs and shelling a were a nightly occasion, it seems.

Soldiers learn. So do terrorists.

Chibs had a bomb of his own last night.

“He took off a half hour ago. Made sure everything was squeaky clean before he left. He's well trained, that monkey. Can we keep him?"

Looking around, Chibs gets a better impression of what juice has been up to since he crept out past him this morning.

Everything is in its place, the clean glasses in neat, straight lines on the bar, the chairs all stacked and put away. There’s a line of discarded shoes in the corner near a pile of folded cuts and coats and the floor is so clean you could eat your breakfast from it.

"Christ. Did he start at 5 o’clock?"

"Probably."

This is his magic-remedy. This is his go-to physical therapy when times are tough. The meds usually help with that but they’re not a fix-all. He remembers Juice complaining that one of his coping mechanisms is actually a symptom in itself and he feels he's doing himself a disservice by medicating it out of himself.

His doctor told him to take up something healthier, like stacking Dominos, crossword puzzles or even painting.

Whatever makes him happy, Chibs thinks, though he can see the therapist’s point. He’s watched as Juice counted, counted then counted again and it must be such a stressor to have things need to be perfect all the time.

That he needs it perfect today makes such absolute sense that Chibs cannot even question it.
“Did he look okay to you?”

“If little brown boys are your thing he looked spectacular. Why?”

“No reason. He say where he was going?”

Tig sits up, shamelessly nude though covered at the very least. He yawns and stretches and it's clear from the redness of his eyes it was a late one.

They missed out.

“He said he had a couple of things to take care of before he headed over to Clear Passages. I offered to tag along but that's a strong, independent boy you're raising there, Chief. You try callin’ him?”

“Twice. Just goes through to voicemail.”

He must sound concerned because Tig picks up on it and that switch flips inside of him again.

“Is something wrong?”

“I don’t know. Open up, would you? We got a couple of buyers coming in first thing. I shouldn't be too long.”

“Keep me posted. I’m startin’ to love that little jackass.“

That’s two of them, then.

A little late, but better late than never.

(*)

There are a few places Juice goes off to when he’s feeling overwhelmed. The first is the tree, his mom’s tree as he likes to call it, the place he goes to when he’s looking for some kind of transcendent direction.

He’s not there but it's obvious he's passed through by the small pack of Marlborough and the unopened bottle of beer that sit on the ground. They're leaning against the base of the tree next to what looks like a red lollipop, token gifts for a man who Juice put in the ground. The post-it note on the bottle reads "Cheers" written in bold black marker pen that Juice probably found in the office.

It's a poignant gesture.

Miles was never without his smokes and his love of candy gave way to rumours of an oral fixation because he always, always had something in his mouth. It became an obvious source of jeering entertainment for the rest of the guys.

It says a lot about Juice, the fact he still comes here, that he brings such seemingly pointless gifts to lay at the unmarked grave of a dead brother but he’ll live with that for the rest of his life and Chibs is in no doubt he’ll keep on doing this. He'll keep on trying to atone for his sins. Some might think it pointless but, for Chibs, it's everything Juice is and will always be.

A thoughtful guy, sensitive to a fault.

A good guy.

He sits down, back against the tree, and there’s a little flat patch where he must’ve been sitting,
where he always sits, and this place feels like the scene of a crime that was never how it was painted.

Miles died here but he wasn't murdered. His life wasn't taken in malice.

Chibs remembers how he found the boy in this very spot at night time. He’d been distracted, absent to the point of concern and, though they all knew he was in a bad way about Miles there’d been something more than that. He’d spoken to Hap who’d put it down to how many pain meds he was dosing himself up with for his leg so that he could ride on it and he was probably stoned to Hell and back. Intuition had told Chibs something different.

The minute he saw that chain looped around a broken branch he knew.

When he’d realised what was happening, had looked at Juice, all pleading eyes and desperately trying to bury it, he’d lost it in the same way he lost it with Kerrianne when he found out she’d been picking on another kid at school because he raised her better than that. It occurred to him later on that he always, always made it about him and never paid heed to what the problems may have been for his daughter.

With Juice, it had been everything all mixed together, a virtual amalgamation of emotions. Anger, that he’d thought it was an option. Rage, that he’d do that to the Club when they were already one man down.

Guilt that they’d cultivated such a toxic environment that he felt he couldn’t speak to any of them.

Shame that he’d let the boy down.

He can see it now, that aching, sobbing body lying down on the ground where Chibs had physically thrust him and Chibs himself sitting with his back against this very tree, sulking and snarling because he felt hard done by.

(‘Way to go, you stupid Scottish cunt. Way to treat a brother right in his hour of need.’)

He handled that boy all wrong, he knows that now. Whereas the guys back home would settle their differences with a fistfight and a few rounds against each other, where bruises were answered questions and scrapes were amends readymade, all that did for Juice was subdue him even more. Juice had learned that he was not in a position to fight back and so, any attempt at rectification with him was inevitably little more than abuse. Chibs thinks back to that afternoon in the garage where even his self-preservation instincts were defunct, and it sickens him.

He should’ve known.

Seeing him last night, the way he was, the way he diffused so readily when he was skin-tight against him, that had opened Chibs’ eyes. He realised, at that point, that this had been what Juice needed all along. Tough love doesn’t work on guys like Juice who have had it tough all their lives. He didn’t need a fist in his face to drive a message home. He needed to thrash it out in another way entirely.

There’s that age-old saying of “know your subjects” and it’s imperative for a General; for a man in command. Chibs thought he was good at that. Clearly, he wasn’t good enough.

He knows this subject now. He knows him well.

It’s only now the General is starting to know himself.

(*)
He calls Clear Passages when Juice is not at any of his anticipated places; not the skate park or the coffee shop up near Browns, not the library or the radio shack on 5th Avenue.

It’s not that he doesn’t trust the boy, it’s just that he knows how threadbare he is. He knows how his mind works, knows that there’s every chance Chibs’ well-meaning reservations will have been interpreted as rejection.

That’s the last thing he needs right now.

“He’s out of town,” Michelle tells him. “Said he’ll pass by about 3 o’clock. “

“He happen to say where he was headed?”

“Said he was visiting family which is strange because I didn’t think he had any family. Figured it was his business so I didn’t ask any more questions.”

Juice doesn’t have family, not any he keeps in contact with. That’s the worrying point.

Chibs is silent as he thinks over what that might mean.

“You want me to have him call you when he gets here?”

“No, it’s fine, lass. I’ll catch up with him later.”

He smiles at her as he goes, a good lass, hardworking and dependable. Hap finds her more than appealing and has admitted recently that his colon is as healthy as it’s ever been because of it.

It’s more than any of them need to know.

He looks at his phone, bottom lip worrying between his teeth. A text had come through when he’d been talking and he feels a stab of apprehension in his gut before he opens it up.

It’s from Juice. It says just two words.

"Don't worry."

Somehow, it makes him worry all the more.

(*)

It goes on all day, Chibs trying to call and receiving no response. He doesn’t want to crowd him but the fact remains. Juice looked into the eyes of his own personal devil last night and it’s only natural it shredded him.

“Give him time,” Venus had pleaded. “He took a leap with you and it probably scared him to death. Just let him have his space, alright darlin’?”

“And, if something’s happened to him? If he’s done something?"

“He told you not to worry. You gotta take his word, soldier.”

He gets the second message when he’s part-way through a tyre change. It’s close to 5 and his productivity has been close to zero all day. He can’t work under this kind of anxious pressure and he’s behind with the set-up.

“Michelle said you were looking for me. I’m at the pond. Come if you want.”
It’s an opening, an outstretched hand, an invitation he cannot turn down.

The bike can stay put.

Everything can just bloody wait.

(*)

“Where were you? I was worried.”

"I told you not to."

He’s sitting on the water’s edge in the middle of Charming gardens. He’s not wearing his cut, which says to Chibs that he wanted to escape because that's the only time he’d be without it. It’s the equivalent of going out in sunglasses and a long leather coat and trying to blend in only instead of putting clothes on he's taken them off.

Looking at him now in a loose fit denim jacket and a black baseball cap, he could be anyone. He could be a college student, a bartender and anything in between.

He doesn’t look like a Son and maybe that’s all he needed this morning.

To simply not be.

He looks up and Chibs is struck with how much older his eyes look, like ancient things on a too-young face. They’re eyes that have seen too much, that carry too much, and the only thing Chibs wants is to share the load.

He smiles though, and that lifts him. He's glad to see him. He's happy he's here. It's a smile that stirs people, always has been. Christ knows how many scrapes have been averted by it.

“I went to see my sister.”

“Your sister? I thought she lived in Queens?”

“She does, usually. Her husband’s on a construction job up near Death Valley, an 18 month contract. She’s pregnant. The baby’s due in a few week.”

“That’s great.”

He doesn’t look convinced.

“Yeah, we’ll see about that.”

Juice hasn’t said a lot about his sister, not to anyone, but Gemma knew for sure they didn’t get along. He’s mentioned her in passing a few times but Chibs always got the impression she was a sores subject; something of a source of pain to him. He learned not to push him on family but the assertion always was that it was less than idyllic.

“Any reason why you went up there?”

“I needed to get away for a while and she kept on texting about the baby. My doc was all about building bridges and keepin’ a hold of family ties so I figured I’d see what she was about. Thought maybe it’d be different this time.”

“How was it?”
He shrugs his shoulders.

“‘It was.’

“‘That bad?’

“‘It wasn't terrible. That's about as good as it gets with my sister.’”

Chibs’ own brother has always been a source of disappointment to him. They say blood’s thicker than water but he is living, breathing proof that it’s not the case whatsoever. Apparently, so is Juice. Chibs gave up even trying to connect with Patrick. Juice, it seems, keeps on trying, though it seems this time it was her that held up the white flag.

”"How is she?"

“‘She’s about to drop. Thirty-five weeks. She must weigh, like, 200lbs at least. She says she’s off the junk, which I find hard to believe but she swore on our mother’s grave so I guess I have to give her the benefit of the doubt.’”

“‘She was a user?’

“‘Hardcore. Spent three weeks detoxing on my couch before I moved to Charming. Woke up one morning and she’d taken the TV, the stereo and the Playstation. Probably sold it for fifty bucks so she could score. I was more pissed off that it had my game in it. I’d built up all kinds of points on that thing. Had to start from scratch.’"

Trust him to be more concerned about a computer game than the fact his sister had just robbed him blind and took off with all his stuff. Typical, deflective Juice. Chibs imagines he made excuses for her to a certain point before realising it only made things worse.

“‘Her husband’s a good guy. Pete. Clearly, she’s been giving him the whole one-sided history because he hates me already.

"His loss."

“‘She never did have much sense when it came to guys but at least this one stuck around after he knocked her up. She’ll probably keep me on a leash until the kid drops, see how it goes. She if she likes being a Mom or not. If it all goes to shit she’ll probably leave it in a basket on my doorstep. I'm guessing she wants to keep me sweet just in case.’"

“‘You think she’d do that?’

He sighs.

"Yes?"

"Christ."

“I don’t know, Chibs. Maybe I'm being an asshole but I barely know her. We were tight when we were little but after Mom died it all just turned to shit. I just don’t buy anything with her. There’s only so many times you can try to fix things without looking like a pushover, y’know?”

Chibs knows just how many times Juice will try, just how many rejections and stonewalling he’ll put up with if he thinks there’s the slightest chance. It must be hard living that way, Chibs thinks, caring so much about people who care so little in return.
“She keeps tellin’ me that our shit needs to be put aside before the baby comes; that he needs his uncle. But I never had a problem with her. She’s so damaged, Chibby. So much worse than I am. I worry for the kid. If she hadn’t told me she was pregnant I never would’ve gone. I learned from my mistakes with her. But, that kid? He hasn’t done anything wrong.”

"And, you want to be there for it even if you can't stand it's mother. You’re a good guy, Juice."

"By good you mean dumb, right?"

"No, by good I mean good, shithead."

“Yeah?”

He smiles.

“Well, I try.”

"God loves a trier."

Chibs finds it sad that the words mean so much to him; that he rarely got to hear them at all. He remembers Gemma saying he needed good feedback every once in a while or else he’d develop a complex but none of them listened. They all just kept piling on him and pushing him down.

Tully gave him good feedback.

That just sits wrong with Chibs.

The boy's face changes suddenly, shifts from sad and reflective to something more hangdog. More sheepish. He looks at Chibs out of the corner of his eye as if he can't quite bring himself to face him. He’s embarrassed. Shamefaced.

He thinks he’s overstepped a mark.

“Speaking of damaged, the last thing you needed last night was some weepy fuck pawin’ all over you when you could’ve been down with the guys. So...yeah, I'm sorry."

He’s expecting Chibs to brush it off, that much is clear. He’s expecting him to push it away and bury it under the carpet, to make good, to move on and to absolve him of responsibility by pretending it never happened.

Chibs doesn’t want to forget. He doesn’t want to bury anything, not now its here at the surface.

He lowers his voice and, to himself, he sounds solemn and serious.

“I’m not sorry, Juicy.”

It feels strange to say it aloud after all this time but, now that he’s voiced it, he feels lighter. He’s gone over it in his head time and time again and each and every time he comes back with the same conclusion. It’s a weighty conclusion, one with ramifications even he’s not able to process at this point, but it’s the reality of the situation.

The reality is that his feelings for Juice are and have always been different to the feelings he has towards the other lads.

He always cared just that little bit more.
“Aye, it was a bit unexpected, I'll admit that. Probably not the best timing either but it got things out in the open. I thought about it a lot when you were away. When I woke up this morning and you were gone it just brought it all home.”

Juice looks away.

“I just needed to clear my head. I’m sorry. I didn't mean to worry you.”

“S’alright, Juice, I’m not giving you a tellin’ off for it. I’m just saying. I thought you might’ve gone off to Yosemite, tried all your usual nooks and crannies. I swear, you’re like a woman. Fiona used to go out to her mother’s every time we had an incident. If she wasn’t there I knew she was gonna be on some park bench watching the kids. I went up to the tree and you weren’t there. Tried the video arcade, you weren’t their either. Called Clear Passages. I was frantic, lad. Thought you’d gone off to do something stupid because you didn’t want to face me this morning.”

“I kind of didn’t.”

“Because you thought I was gonna cut you down about last night, am I right? Aye, I'm right. But you're wrong.”

“What are you talkin’ about, Chibby? I don’t understand.”

It’s a product of Juice’s history. He doesn’t understand family because for so long he didn’t have one. He doesn’t understand relationships because he only ever learned that love hurt.

He doesn’t understand how to be with people when things taken on unexpected turns and he sure as Hell doesn’t know how to deal with feelings that may well have been building for years but he’s never quite been able to comprehend.

This kid is the very product of a broken home and the only life he’s known since he joined the MC has been something along the same lines.

They’ve reinforced every negative view of family he has.

That's abominable.

“You and me, we’ve always had a complicated relationship. You were my kid, Juice. My prospect. And, then? I never knew what you were to me but it was different. I was harder on you than anyone else because I knew you had something in you. When it all went downhill after Roosevelt, I felt like I’d been slapped in the face. “

“I didn’t mean for that to happen.”

“I know that, Juice. Of course I know that. I never should’ve made it all about me. When I found you with that bloody chain I just lost it and, thinkin’ back, it wasn’t that I was angry with you for trying to take the easy way out. It was that I was scared shitless that I’d almost lost you. I was sittin’ there thinking about how it would affect me if you’d followed through that night. I should’ve been thinking about how it was affecting you. I'm a selfish prick, laddie. It's my worst trait.”

"No, you're -"

" - I know I am. No getting away from it."

Juice looked so startled when Chibs first found him by that tree. Now, he just looks mortified.
“I didn’t want you to know what I’d done. I knew you’d be pissed at me for being a fucking idiot.”

“Pissed? I was more than pissed. If I’d found you swingin’ that night? Christ, boy. It doesn’t even bear thinking about.”

Chibs can hear the emotion in his own voice, like cracked glass, like this the first time he’s really dealt with these feelings.

It’s the first time he’s spoke them aloud and, with it, the first time he’s truly acknowledged them.

It’s like opening a door in his head and realising that so much stuff had been hidden behind it.

“I don’t know,” Chibs says. “I wanted to explode, but it came from a place of love, you understand? I’m not good at expressin’ all that shite. It’s partly why me and Fi didn’t work out. Minute I start feelin’ something like that, I lash out.”

“Yeah, I know.”

It's common knowledge that Chibs is shitty relationship material and always has been. He couldn’t keep a gold digger in a bank vault.

It's a defence mechanism.

“I’ve lost a lot of brothers, Juicy. I’ve seen a lot of good men die. Good soldiers. Good friends. There’s a reason I’ve kept my distance from anyone.”

“Because if you don’t care, it won’t hurt so bad. I tried to be that way for years. Never worked out for me. Just couldn’t do it.”

“Your trouble was you always cared too much.”

Juice laughs at that. He used to have such a ready smile, always the quickest of the boys to crack up at a joke. That all changed. It’s a fucking tragedy that it changed.

Chibs feels it an important thing to try to change it back.

“Maybe we’ll balance each other out then, huh? Your too little, my too much.”

“Yeah. Maybe.”

Chibs understand, now, just what Juice needs. He understands that he can never, ever be swayed by violence or force. It’s only now that Chibs wonders why anyone should be, that knowledge in itself groundbreaking stuff for a man who always fought his battles, both mental and physical, with a closed punch.

He leans up and he touches Juice's hair softly, almost distractedly. The younger man stills instantly, cautious and vigilant as he waits to see how things will play out because he has learned a lot of things about raised hands in recent years and it’s going to take a long while to unteach those lessons.

Chibs hand falls away.

He laughs, incredulously.

"I don’t know what I’m doing here, lad. You’re not even my bloody type. That’s the kicker. You’re a man, for one thing, at least a decade and a half too young. Certainly not a good Catholic girl."
"I was once. A good Catholic, I mean, not a girl. I was never a girl."

"You were not a good Catholic."

And, yet, something in Chibs tells Juice that it’s the absolute truth.

"I still go to church sometimes."

"You? With the skull tats? Come on."

"Don't look so fucking surprised. I own hats. I was an altar boy in training. I sang in the choir at Christmas. My mom said I had the most beautiful voice she'd ever heard. Does that make it better?"

"Still not my type."

"Too much cock, not enough tits. Hap said the same thing. Seems I'm nobody's type."

Chibs smiles at that.

"Aye. When it speaks it speaks the truth."

"Right? He's a dick."

There’s a shift, blithe and light-hearted and it seems this is the way through. To make light, to make ease, to put things into a kind of perspective that both of them can handle at this point in time. There’ll be time later for serious discussions but right now, here now, this is how it needs to be.

"For the record, you're exactly my type, Chibs. Older. Taller. Not as pretty as me. Always went for women but I figured I was a bit of both, growin’ up. I never put a label on it, not plannin’ on it now. I just am what I am. I’d never been with a guy until Tully but that’s not to say I didn’t think about it sometimes. Never admitted that out loud until now."

“"You weren’t 'with him', Juice. Don’t put it that way.”

“"You know what I mean.”

Yeah, he knows. That's the problem.

"Tig thinks you've still got your cherry. We all put bets on you coming out as Amish or something like that. Figured that's why the sweetbutts did nothing for you, cause they weren't pure enough."

"You knew I had a girlfriend a couple of years back."

"Aye, but nobody saw her. We didn't actually believe she was real."

" Seriously?"

This, all of this, it breaks the ice. It melts until the barriers have fallen and the solid denials evaporate into nothing. Still, when it all boils down to it, Juice is scared. If he’s honest, so is Chibs, but he’s older and wiser and has been here before, albeit not in the same circumstances.

He was here with Fiona, once upon a time, and it might have degraded as the time passed but that’s not to say it wasn’t terrifying and uncertain and amazing in the beginning. The fact she was black was only an issue to his parents and, yeah, it worried him, living with a club, but it became a non-issue.
It's so much more liberal now.

Venus is testimony to that.

Juice leans back on his elbows and raises his eyes to the sky.

"What are we doing, Chibby? This is all kinds of crazy. I'm crazy enough as it is."

“You’re not crazy. I know crazy. Hap’s crazy. What you are is something else.”

What he is, Chibs can’t put a label on. He can’t mark it, can’t categorize it.

What he is is special and that’s the adjective that describes it right at this time.

“What are the other guys gonna think?”

“They don’t need to know. Not right away.”

“What about your girls?”

“You ask a lot of questions, boy. I don’t know all the answers.”

Juice whines playfully but that smile is still playing about his lips and it’s as good a sign as any.

"Guess we're just blind assholes leading each other, then, aren't we?"

His eyebrows raise, cocky, tantalising, and Chibs hates to silence the boy but it seems like the only way. With a hand on his chest he leans in and he swears something pulls him closer, some tangible force, some kind of pseudo-magnetic pull.

There is nobody here, no one to see.

“It's just the two of them.

“Yeah,” he whispers, his words breathing into Juice's mouth, "Just two fucking arseholes together right here."

It's just a kiss, less frenetic than last night but no less confusing.

It’s just a kiss...but it’s so much more than that for both of them.

Juice's mind kicks in, apprehension taking over spontaneity, and Chibs can feel the shift as he comes to the realisation that this is happening. He makes a tiny sound, a whimper that dies before it is born but it's enough.

Chibs breaks the kiss and, if anything, Juice looks crestfallen.

He runs his hands over the younger man's head and quietens him, looks him in the eye and, where he looked old and wise before, now he looks younger than ever.

"It’s all good. No more running. Alright?"

Just take it as it comes. Nothing to be afraid of.

Let's do this crazy thing together. No pressure. No fear. No harm.

Juice swallows hard as he nods and, finally, he relaxes.
“Okay. Yeah, okay.”

“Alright, then.”

(*)

They lie on the grass for what feels like a long time alternating between talking and comfortable quiet and, by the time the sky is turning dark, Chibs feels like he knows the boy inside and out. He knows his thoughts. His driving forces. He knows his fears and his flights of fancy.

He knows the taste of him, mint and sweet.

He knows the feel of him, firm and compact.

He's always known the heart and spirit of him.

Always.

He knows he’s probably as close to loving the kid as anything he’s ever been in recent years. He also knows he’s terrified of what will come of that.

Chibs is acutely aware of the fact he hasn’t been back to Scoops and that, inevitably, he has taken to lying to cover for it. He called Tig a couple of hours ago and told him something had cropped up, a family issue, and that he needed to get on Skype to speak with Fiona about it. Part of it was true, a family issue had arisen, but it had nothing to do with his wife and their child.

He feels like he’s having an affair; that he’s carrying on behind the back of his loved ones. He’s analysed the pros and cons of that and has come up positive that it’s the right thing to do.

"We can head back soon, just...not yet."

They share a joint, some of the good quality weed that Juice has a permit for, and it feels like old times when they’d sit out back and get stoned under the light of the moon.

That was before the world turned, before the cracks started showing in the MC’s armour.

Now, it’s all good.

Now it's all healing.

(*)

Out of nowhere, Juice comes out with a name.

“Chen.”

He’s clearly been going over it in his head for the past few minutes because he hasn’t uttered a word.

“What?”

“That’s who you need to take out. Tully said. He’s the one callin’ the shots. He stepped up after Ryu was put down. He was in Stockton on a drugs charge, got out a few months back. Guess he’s been busy ever since. Get rid of him and that should be it.”

Tully kept his word. That's one thing, at least.
“Right you are, lad. You did good.”

There’s more, though. Chibs can see it. He can feel it. There’s a coldness and a chill that can be felt between them and, as he turns his head and looks over a Juice, he can see it in his melancholic face; in his firm, tight jaw.

“He was one of them, Chibs.”

Of course he was, and suddenly it all makes sense.

As much as Chibs hates the very notion of Ron Tully, he is a man after his own mind and heart.

“I think Tully was saving him for me. That’s why he wouldn’t give you the name, because he wanted me to have it to do with what I wanted. Some kind of gift, I suppose, at least in his perverted fucking head. “

It makes it all the more imperative because how on Earth can Juice feel safe knowing he’s not only out there but is purposely and wilfully threatening to attack?

“Let’s just say that he had some serious anger management and control issues and for that reason, I wanna be there when it goes down. Make sure the asshole gets his.”

"You do?"

"Oh, yeah."

It comes as a surprise. Juice, sensitive pacifist that he is and has always been, shies away from violence as much as he can. He suffers for it. He bleeds for it. He will avoid it if there is another way. Chibs can’t even imagine what must’ve gone down between him and Chen for him to want to break all of his personal boundaries and watch him as he bows out of this world.

“You sure, Juicy?"

He looks so sternly fixated; disturbingly uncompromising.

Chibs has never seen him like this.

“It’s gonna happen anyway. It has to. I wanna see. I want him to look at me before he goes and know that I’m still here and he’s not. What he did to me – “

He shakes his head and somehow, the fact he doesn’t extend on that makes it all the worse in Chibs’ mind.

“Aye, I understand.”

Other men would want to do it themselves. They’d want to drill that message home. They’d want to be the very last thing their abuser saw before he died. Chibs knows Juice is not a killer and, whilst the might want to see that it’s done, he won’t want to be the one to take the decisive strike.

Chibs wouldn’t expect him to, wouldn’t allow him to.

He’ll allow him this, though, the satisfaction of watching the guy bleed before he dies.

“If that’s what you want.”

“Yeah. It is. It has to be done.”
Chibs is not a man who feels joy in killing but he’s pretty sure he’ll take pleasure in this one.

He rests his hand on Juice's face.

The promise is unspoken, that all will be well, that Chibs will make sure of it.

It might be unspoken but it reaches him.

It resonates.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Juice re-establishes himself as Tekkie King and meets with an old friend. Thoughts run amok.

If anyone has any ideas as to how good old Chen should be dealt with, please let me know. He was...not nice, lets say, to our beloved boy.

As Juice sits in a plush leather chair in front of the club's laptop he has one resounding and resolute thought.

God, he’s missed this grind.

Programming, searching, scamming, they all took a back seat when the club got into guns and drugs. Sure, he was asked to run background searches, hack into adversary’s comms systems every so often or shadow himself in court and police records but it mainly got put aside. He felt like his hands had been cut off, a virtual Chucky. He wasn’t comms guy any more. He was gopher. He was babysitter. He was odd job guy and menial taskmaster and, where he’d been considered valuable before, he often felt kind of worthless.

Now, as he scours through his contacts list and starts putting out the feelers to try to reel them back in as associates and suppliers, it feels just like old times, back when members were family, the charter was home and everything tech related was Juice's baby.

Juice has a lot of skill. This is his playground because he flunked out of most things at school but sports and computers were totally his thing. Give him a screwdriver and a wrench and he can build a pretty decent bike. Give him a laptop and an internet connection and he can set the fucking world alight. His very initiation into the club was a hack job, getting into a local police database and wiping clean one of Clay’s charges to avoid the three-strikes rule. He’d been proud of himself with that one and, for the first time in a long while, he’d felt like he’d found his place when the guys shook him by the hand and told him “Good job, kid.”

To this day, he still remembers Clay’s face as he’d walked through those gates a free man, asked where they’d found him and if he’d be interested taking a prospect position. He remembers thinking that this was it; that, no matter how bad things got, he’d never be alone again.

Of course, his ‘expertise’ are why he was on the run from home in the first place. The guy he fucked over was mafia linked on his wife's side and that put him at real risk. He’d ran, hadn’t looked back since. It's why he won’t set foot back in Queens because, not only is there nothing left for him there, there’s an outstanding price on his head because he messed with the wrong guy.

Juice has messed with a lot of the wrong guys.

Still, there’s nothing quite like getting inside a place he’s got no business being in using his own unique skills. It’s a buzz that not even riding open roads can equal, the closest thing to sex he can think of, as weird as that would sound to most.
As well as cultivating old friendships he’s looking at system upgrades because, like Chibby said, Jacob’s good but he’s not Juice. All of the drivers are out of date, all of the security settings about a year behind. The set-up on the garage could be made better and, instead of having a chair out front for manual guard, Juice wants to put in a remote surveillance system that links in to the existing camera set-up. It’s all basic stuff, stuff he would’ve already implemented had he not been under-utilized, but it feels good to be having a crack at it again.

He sits back and he waits for his uploads to complete, waits for his contacts to respond, waits to pull on that second skin that he’s worn so well since the day he left High School and picked up the keyboard.

He feels like he’s waited a lifetime for all of this to turn around.

It feels kind of worth it.

(*)

He’s having a difficult time thinking straight at the minute.

Between Tully and Chen and this new thing with Chibs, it’s chaotic for a kid who appreciates order yet can rarely find it in his chosen life. As he puts the system through defrag and space management he tries to imagine doing that with his own headspace, taking away some of the clutter and re-connecting old pathways that broke down through corruption, faulty memory or system overload. It’d be nice to be a machine, he thinks, and for things to fall into place at the click of a button instead of recovery being a work in progress rather than an instantaneous thing. Sometimes, though, he finds himself wishing things would slow down to a halt just so he could catch up with his own racing thoughts.

Chibs must’ve sensed he was overawed last night because he spent a good thirty minutes just telling him how much he appreciated everything he was doing for the club, for the business, for the future and, more importantly, for Chibs himself.

(“Didn’t think I’d find a corner pew to rest my legs, lad, but here it is.”)

They’d drank beers together, watched Kings vs Bruins on the big screen in Chibs’ living room and, while neither of them are particular hockey fans, it had been good just to switch off with something masculine and competitive. Juice had fallen asleep with his head in Chib’s lap, the Scotsman’s beer resting on his shoulder, and there’s something to be said about that kind of contentment. It sounds comfortable, even to Juice’s own reflective mind, and it was.

Still, the closeness, the warmth, the smell of the other man, all leather and whiskey and cigarettes, the *feel* of him, firm in places and soft in others, it had awoken something in Juice that he hadn’t felt in a long, long while to the point that Juice had been tempted to turn his face inward and take that next step. It’s a step Chibs has made clear is on his terms, a step he will not push or force. It was only the blind fear of leaping too hard and too fast that had held Juice back from using that ‘smart mouth’ of his for better pleasures than talking.

He’s horny as fuck but his mind hasn’t caught up. His body is in reactionary mode but his head can’t quite deal with the thought of anyone getting him off.

Yet.

Still, whenever he hears Chibs’ rugged voice he loses his shit and he wonders how that can be. How can it be that, after so many years of knowing the guy, of hearing him, it’s only now he has this
effect on him?

Maybe Juice was blind and deaf as well as dumb.

The truth is, he’s never been this way before. He’s never had his head full of someone else in a way that wasn’t invasive or Machiavellian and fuck, doesn’t that word reverberate with him now that he’s known Jax Teller?

But Jax doesn’t matter, not right now, so Juice pushes him out of his head and replaces him with Chibs, just like they’ve pushed him out of the top spot and put the old Scot there to lead them.

It’s a nice change. A good thing. It’s a crow from the God damned ashes because the phoenix didn’t show, but that's fine.

It’s progress, and not just for him but for all of them.

(*)

Thirty minutes into the system upgrades, Juice grows bored because immediacy is a preference and, when it’s not available to him, his thoughts start to wander. He’s learned that’s not an option of late and so, in an effort to occupy himself, he scours his favourite websites. NFL, UFC. Rottentomatoes. He signs up for a programme with Men’s Health, knowing he needs to get his strength and fitness up because his muscle mass upped and left him since he was ‘inside’ and he’d worked hard on himself up until that point. He plays a quick game of classic Tetris before daring to broach his email account because he held out his hand a few days back and he’s still waiting to see if it’s going to be shaken or if his fingers are going to be bitten off and spat out in disgust.

The guys were discouraged from social media. Facebook and Twitter, those were out of the question until Juice proved to Clay that both were good for business and they’d make a whole lot more cash at Teller Morrow if they reached out online. He’d begrudgingly allowed it under the notion that, should anything bad come of it, he would hold Juice solely responsible and punish him accordingly for his carelessness.

That seemed to be a theme at the club, looking back.

Caution was a Clay thing. He didn’t like the idea of photographs being online for all to see and it may well have been an old man mentality but he had this persistent idea that it was dangerous.

(‘All that personal stuff out there for everyone to see. Give me a hidden box any day of the week.’)

Of course, he was of a different era. Jax used to roll his eyes and remind his stepfather that telegrams went out of fashion years ago and the old pager he still had sitting in the office belonged in a museum. There’s a reason Chucky spends so much time on ‘the books’, the reason being that’s how the club has historically kept records.

That’s all gonna change now that the old man’s gone and they're getting themselves good again.

When he sees the little envelope icon flashing in the corner of his screen it makes Juice feel nervous because, as expected, it’s bearing Wendy’s name and he knows that clicking on it could either make or break his day.

Ever since it all went down, Juice has had this resounding need to thank her for her help. He doesn’t know why, just figures that as a woman who was forever mistreated by the club she’d appreciate the gesture and the solidarity and the knowledge that not everyone has forgotten what she did.
He’d sent the message about three days ago asking how everything was going with the farm and the boys and cautiously, tentatively, asking if she’d like to meet for coffee to talk a few things over. She agrees to meet him the following day, says she’s got a few bits in Charming to take care of so she could tie it in with that and, though Juice can’t read much into her limited words, she seems happy to hear from him.

It’s her signature that warms him, though, a coloured, decorative sign-off. Beside it is a tiny picture of Abel and Thomas sitting side by side on a swing-set wearing the biggest smiles he’s ever seen. He can feel the love in that picture, such a far cry from the damaged, broken little boy that Jax portrayed his eldest son as when he spoke with Juice in Stockton.

That little boy is the reason Juice came clean to Jax that day, the very reason he lay it all out on the table in front of him. If there was the slightest chance he could save Abel from following in their footsteps, he’d do it. If his confession would save a little boy from the kind of life he’s had then he was more than willing to die for that.

It looks like he’s turned a corner, Abel and Juice both.

(*)

At the 45 minute mark, he starts picking at the wound because he's always been a masochistic jerkoff who can't leave things alone.

It’s one of his biggest flaws and, in essence, one of the reasons he keeps his world so frenetic. If he stops he thinks and he really doesn’t want to think. He’d rather run himself until he can’t run anymore and fill his life with things that give him meaning and pleasure and avert him from the bad stuff. Still, he can’t help himself. Not when there’s downtime.

Google has always been his friend and his enemy and, putting that name into a search engine is like a virtual version of taking a scalpel to his own arm.

It's so easy.

He does this, did it with Tully, did it with anyone who has messed with him in the past. He looks up Gavin Chen and, way too simply, finds his mugshot with the headline “Drugs bust in Hunters Point, SF”. He doesn’t read the article, doesn’t need to. He doesn’t care about what the guy did on the outside. It’s what he did on the inside that matters to Juice.

(‘Jackie Chan? I'll show you Jackie Chan, asshole.’)

(‘That hurt? Want me to go a little harder?’)

(‘Squirmy little shit, ain't you, half-breed?’)

(‘Oh, now he’s gonna cry...’)

He stares at the image. It takes him back, of course it does. Of course he hears that voice in his head, same tone and timbre, same words striking through the same feeling. He’s never forgot those words. They’ve never left him. He never forgot any of it.

The fucker deserves to die.

Seeing his face is something else, though, a visual memory to go along with the auditory, and it’s not fear or shame that he feels. It’s rage, sickening and forceful and he can build on that. He can work with that. When he watches that sadistic bastard take his last breath it will invigorate him, he knows
that, but right now, all it does is unsettle him and he’s sorry he looked him up at all.

('I can see why that Hitler loving psycho keeps you so close.')

('Fuck. You."

He minimises the screen quickly when he hears people coming and, in spite of everything, he finds himself grinning at Chucky’s screensaver, a Photoshop manipulation of his head on the body of Edward Scissorhands. It’s crudely done. The lines aren’t smooth and the colour doesn’t match at all but it’s funny all the same.

Trust Chucky to lighten his thoughts.

He feels like he’s sneaking around and, when he paints a smile on his face, that just feels like cheating.

It’s Happy, and though he doesn't have to say anything, Juice knows he’s caught on to his shifty behaviour. He confided in him recently that he'd known for a long while that something was up with him and he'd kicked himself for not shaking it out of him before it got as far as it did. He hopes the smile suffices but Juice knows he can't lie, even now his life has depended on it.

“I, um...I was just updating the security settings. Plannin' on having a look into an upgrade. It’d save the need for the chairs out front, at least.”

That distracts him. Juice isn’t dumb at all.

“How much is it gonna cost the club?”

It’s always about money. Tig, casually buying into stereotypes but falling short of actual racism, is convinced Hap's a Jew; that he's got millions stashed away in a mattress somewhere in his Ma's retirement home.

Chibs is just glad one of them thinks about saving.

"If it's gonna cost a fortune I'll sit on those chairs myself, Brewster."

“I have my sources, Mr Fucking Tightass. Besides, if you’re spendin’ all of your cash at Clear Passages just so you can get a look at my girl Michelle you’ve got no place talkin’ to me about upping club systems.”

“I like to look at her.”

That he looks so completely inexpressive when he says that goes a long way in explaining how people view him. Juice laughs, and his mock despair is lost in the sound.

“Would you stop freakin’ her out? I don’t want her on my ass about harassment or some shit. She was asking me how your mother was the other day. Your mother. What the Hell?”

“She appreciates my company.”

“Whatever. Just…don’t lose the spa a good worker ‘cause you’re horny. That’s what Red Woody’s for.”

“She doesn’t work at Red Woody.”

Hap gives him that blank look that could mean anything and nothing and Juice realises he’s flogging
a dead horse.

“Forget it.”

“We’re leaving in five for Rat. You almost done with your money wasting?”

“Yeah. Just…gimme a sec, okay?”

“I’ll give you thirty.”

Rat, to Juice, is more of an idiot than he ever was. He got a 15 day sentence for smoking a joint in the street but his lawyer got it downgraded to suspended by arguing he’d left his permit at home. It took Juice and his guys this long to forge the damn thing and hack into the database to make sure it shows on the check.

Things with Rat are still terse, still territorial. There seems to be a kind of grudging, halting dominance thing playing out that Juice thinks is juvenile but Rat pins his life on. In clubs, it happens. Rat used to wind Miles up the wrong way as well so it’s clearly a security thing with the younger guys. Juice asked him if he was planning on pissing all over the clubhouse just to mark it as ‘his’ and he was only half joking. It’s getting easier but the guy holds grudges like nobody Juice has ever known and so, until it settles, he’s taken to just avoiding him.

Still, he’ll go along because it’s expected. As is customary, the guys are all heading out on their bikes to greet their brother and bring him home, a club tradition of sorts. He just needs to set the computer to power off when it’s done.

His painted on smile fades when he maximises that screen again, when Chen’s eyes, so full of disdain and spite, look back at him. How he’d tried to wipe that smirk off, tried not to let him see he’d got to him.

How pathetic he’d sounded with his throat full of gravel and his eyes full of pain.

(I’ve seen bigger dicks on a midget, dude. You think you hurt me? That’s really sad.)

He looks at it one more time before he shuts the window down and it’s like picking the scab off, like desensitising himself. It’s exposure therapy, like people do for fear or spiders and snakes and that kind of thing.

For Juice it’s just prep work.

He won’t let that prick see what he’s done to him. He wants to be able to look him in the eye and appear indifferent, unaffected by his impending death.

Looking at his picture is the first step.

(*)

A few days in the tank seem to have worked wonders on Rat. He looks at Juice and says “Man, it was worth it. That’s some good weed.”

He thanks Juice for scoring him a permit, fake or otherwise, says he knows how much work that must’ve been for him hacking local databases just to link it all together.

"You didn't have to do that. I know I've been an asshole."

He’s genuinely appreciative, as if Juice’s help in this matter has ticked a box in his head that had
previously been unchecked.

He shakes his hand and it seems like progress, at least.

It also ties into the notion that he’s very much Jax’s boy and that a person’s value to him, and his acceptance of them, is measured only by what they can give him.

It's fucking sad, really.

(*)

Juice always felt bad for Wendy, even before this all came to be.

She’s a good person. Strong, moral, reasonable. A good mother. A firm, fair human being. She just fell in with the wrong crowd and Jax never took responsibility for her. Hanging 'round the guys is what got her involved in drugs. They were young. Stupid. They went to too many parties with too much blow on offer. Jax hasn’t got an addictive personality, not like Wendy, but she was so intent on impressing him.

Juice remembers how she used to be, even back when he was prospecting. She was happy to be considered one of them and, while they were at the bar, she’d try her best to keep up. She’d succeed for the most part. Then she couldn't keep up any more. She's from his part of the country, a typical New York girl with a lot of brashness and a lot of bravado. Jax thought it was awesome, having a girl who was one of the guys.

Then it wasn't awesome anymore.

When she floundered, nobody helped her. They just watched her sink, wiped their hands of her, left her in the gutter to fend for herself. It was hard watching her go from a beautiful, vibrant woman to a junkie with broken veins vomiting all over herself in one of the back rooms.

Juice remembers one night after a particularly loud fight with Jax. She’d turned up at the clubhouse out of her head and looking for money. She’d given it all of the usual lines addicts throw out: that this will be the last time, that she only needed enough to get her through the weekend, that she was seeing a doctor on Monday to talk about detox. The other guys had turned a blind eye because it wasn’t their place to jump in but she reminded Juice so much of his sister that he couldn't ignore it, not even when Jax warned them not to go near her; that giving in to her was only going to encourage her to keep turning up. The way he spoke of her was as if she was a stray cat looking for food, not the woman he loved enough to marry once.

She was sitting on the sidewalk when Juice found her, mascara running all the way down her face. He’d held his hand out to her much like he had with Gemma because he never could see the gaping wound of a woman in distress. She’d told him thank you again and again, grateful just to be cared for.

Juice took her home, her home, put her in her own bed with a glass of water and two Tylenol because he knew she’d need them when she woke up. She was so out of it she thought he was Jax and, through her tears, thanked him again with all her heart for taking care of her.

She told him how sorry she was, how she didn’t mean to be such an embarrassment to him.

She told him she'd try really, really hard.

For him.
Juice didn’t have the heart to correct her.

She looks like a mother now, that’s Juice’s first thought. Her hair is neatly tied up and she’s in a dress blouse and a pair of fitted pants. She used to be so concerned with her looks but, ironically, she looks more beautiful now than she ever did.

She’s got Thomas in a stroller carrying a toy train in one hand and a popup book in the other. She smiles brightly when she sees him.

So does Thomas.

“Hey, Juice.”

“Hey, Wendy.”

(*)

It's just her and the baby.

Abel and Lucius are at school so during the day there's only Thomas. He's grown like a weed, twice the size Juice remembers him being and talking up a storm that makes perfect sense to him but not much to anyone else.

('Just like his old man.')

The kid's got crazy hair, like a little mad professor, and his mother's beautiful eyes.

“Nero calls him Einstein but I think it's kinda cute. I don’t wanna cut it. They’re only little for so long. Besides, there's a lot of crazy hair in Norco.”

"Seems like that kinda place."

She looks Juice up and down. It doesn't feel like scrutiny, reminds him of how his mother looked at him.

('You're such a beautiful boy, You take after your mama. ')

"You look good, speakin’ of crazy hair. Not quite Tommy standard but it’s cute."

Juice nods his head.

“You only told me to grow it like a thousand times. Besides, it stops a lot of moms packing their kids away when they see me coming.”

The thing about Wendy is she has always felt genuine to Juice. She is the epitome of women back home who will straight talk 'til the cows come home and call you out on all your bullshit but will always, always be there if you need them.

She always gave that impression.

“I'm happy for you, Juice. I really wanted things to be okay for you. When we got you outta Charming I thought that was it. I thought that was it.”

She looks exasperated now. She gets this way sometimes. Her accent gets thicker when she does, that real Italian snap tone to it, and to some it looks like aggression but Juice knows it's not that at all.
"Why the Hell did you come back, huh? You could've been killed."

If she was any closer she'd slap him round the back of the head.

"Are you really that stupid?"

Because of Chibs, he thinks. Because of that phone call. Because there was something pulling him back every time he tried to leave.

Because what else does he have but this charmless Charming life?

"I don't know, Wendy. I just didn't wanna run."

"We did everything we could for you. That day I found you. I didn't know what to think. I wanted Unser to figure it out, I really did. I knew he'd find your bag in the closet."

Her face is so full of guilt it's painful for him to see. He knows that's been eating away at her.

"I didn't realise how bad it was, Juice. I'm sorry. I never would've done that if I'd known."

"Hey, hey, it's okay. It turned out good at the time, alright?"

"Yeah, I know, I just – God, what was I thinking after you told me they wanted you dead? I just didn't believe it, y'know? Why? Why would he want that? Fuck."

"You and Unser were the only ones I could've trusted. You're the only ones who didn't screw me over, Wendy."

He looks at her, poignant and sincere, as he places a hand over hers.

"I wanted to say thanks. For that. For trying. That really means tons to me."

"You'd have done the same for me. Way back when it was all going to Hell you were sweet to me. Everyone else treated me like a junkie whore...which I was, I hold my hands up to that, but you were different."

There's that word again. Different.

It feels like a good thing on this occasion.

"My sister was an addict. She can't stand me. That shit really did a number on her. To have her crying her eyes out and begging for my help? A guy she hates? That's what it can do to people. I've seen it. I saw what it did to you."

He can't see it anymore. He knows she probably sees it every time she looks in a mirror, every time she sees the faint scars left from needles in her elbow joints

Every time she looks at her son...

"I know some of the stuff you did for me back then, Juice. I might've been out of it and I might not have thanked you but I knew. I guess I felt I was repaying some of the favour by helping you get away. You didn't deserve what went down, Juice. Neither did I."

"No."

No, they really didn't.
We loved Jax and we both saw the worst of him, and maybe it's karma or whatever else you wanna call it. Maybe it was karma for the times we fucked up.”

“Maybe. “

"But I got Nero now and you got the MC and it's all come good."

Juice tenses at the mention of Nero.

('Nero would never help me.')

He thinks what pissed him off the most is that he’d been kind to Juice. He’d taken care of him. He’d shown him compassion and understanding. Then, he’d handed him gift-wrapped to Jax. They remained on good terms, at least for the most part, while Juice was exiled under threat of death.

Why was that?

Why was he once again the scapegoat and Jax was wholly forgiven?

Why was his life worth so little?

“He’s a good guy, Juice.”

“Yeah, maybe. Forgive me if I don’t see it so clearly.”

“He treats me well. The boys love him. He’s stable. Dependable. I can’t ask for anything more. He’s talked about what happened with you and Jax. It was never personal. It was just business.”

“Yeah, glad to know that my life or death was just business.”

"Hey!"

Maybe he’s being unfair. He didn’t come here to talk about Nero and he can see in Wendy’s face that he’s everything she’s been looking for. Maybe she should cut he guy some slack, if only for her sake. She doesn’t need to hear him raggin’ all over her guy.

"I'm sorry, I'm being a dick."

He looks at her and he smiles pleasantly. It’s forced at first but he settles into it.

“I’m really glad you’re happy, Wendy. After everything. A lot of things turned bad in a very short space of time. I know that getting’ back in with Jax and the club was probably one of the worst things you could’ve done – “

“ – I thought so. When I was sittin’ in rehab mourning my sobriety, I thought it was the worst thing I ever could’ve done, but you know why it isn’t? Because I got to see my son. I got to see Abel. I get to sleep at night knowing he’s tucked up safe in bed next to his brother and his father’s locked away where he can’t touch him. I love Jax, I always will, but he’s not like Nero. He’s not a good man.”

“No. No, he’s not.”

He's about as far from a good man as Juice has ever known but he loved him once.

"He wasn’t good for you or the boys."

Juice has made a living out of loving the wrong people so he understands entirely. She still sees light,
though. Even after everything, she pins her hope on his redemption. Juice knows there is no redemption for Jax. There can never be redemption for a child who murders his mother. If there truly is a God then none of them are getting into Heaven, least of all Jax Teller.

“How’s he doing?” he asks cautiously, tentatively, and he’s not sure he wants to hear the answer.

“He’s all alone in there. I hate thinking of him like that. I know you guys have your rules and your fucking politics but you were his family. I gotta say that. It’s been playin’ on my mind.”

Juice feels that flash of bitterness where he thinks it’s karma and that Jax deserves everything that’s coming to him but he pushes it away because how useful is that, really? How much could he possibly get out of that kind of acrimony?

He doesn’t want to be eaten up by malicious thoughts and misplaced resentment.

“He’s doing the right thing, Juice. He knows there’s no way back after what he did but he’s taking his punishment. He’s not resisting. He’ll probably die in that place because of the club but he knows if that’s what needs to happen it’ll happen.”

Even looking at her now it’s clear to Juice she’s still in love with him. It’s also clear how wrong she knows that is because Jax will never love anyone the way he loved Tara and the way he loved Tara left a lot to be desired at the best of times. The way he loved Tara left her fearing her life and the lives of the children she inevitably left behind.

Juice thinks Wendy dodged a bullet but he knows it’s not something she’d want to hear right now. Not when she looks so achingly concerned.

“I’ve been thinkin’ about going to see him. I just don’t how that’d go. Don’t know what it would achieve. Maybe it’d help him or maybe I’d just remind him of what happened with Tara”.

“Yeah.”

“It wasn’t how he thought it was, Wendy. It all just built up.”

It all just built up, fell down and crushed everyone in it's wake.

"I know he thinks I was trying to hurt him. I don't know why." 

“He wasn’t there, Juice. He didn’t see how it was for you. We talked about it awhile back. I told him I’d been helping you hide. I know it won’t mean much to you now but when I told him what he put you through, he barely even recognised it as something he’d do. His head was so full of club shit and anger, Juice, he didn’t even know himself.”

That was the thing that hurt Juice the most, looking into Jax's eyes and simply not recognising him.

“I know why you helped Gemma. I saw the state he put you in. Christ, I’d have probably done the same myself if I were being hounded the way you were. But…that was his wife. Above all else, that’s the only thing that matters to Jax.”

“I know that.”

He understands it too. He just wishes Jax had shown more understanding towards him.

She laughs. It’s not a happy laugh. It’s one that’s full of regret. It’s one that doesn’t belong to her, shouldn’t belong to her.
“You know, for a long time I thought it should’ve been me. I almost died on that floor once myself. Why did I survive? Why me, when she died? I was a counsellor. I know all about survivor guilt, Juice.”

He knows too. He feels it over Miles. Bobby. Hell, he even feels it over Lin...

“It’s still hard when I look at Abel, my own flesh and blood, and know he’s thinkin’ of her because she was everything to him from the minute he was born and I was nowhere to be seen. I can never get that time back, Juice. The only thing I can do is look to the future and make something out of it now. The only way I can make it up to him is by forgiving and forgetting. “

That's all any of them can do. Look forward and make it count. Forget about everything that cannot be changed.

“Go see him. He’s had a long, long time to think things through in there. I think you’d both get something out of it and, if nothing else? You can say you tried. You did what you thought was right. If he turns that down? Screw him. He doesn't deserve you.”

“You think so?”

“I don’t know anything for sure, Juice. I'm just a junkie whore, remember? What do I know? But it’s what I'd do.”

(*)

They talk for awhile about everything and nothing. The boys. Life. The club. Unser and his rapidly declining health. They both express concern over the old guy because he means a lot to both of them and Wendy, dear, sassy Wendy, is still trying to find him a woman.

Neither of them really touch the coffee.

When she’s leaving she does what she always used to do. She holds his face and kisses him on the cheek like an old Italian grandmother would. It’s so traditionally Wendy that it takes him back. She used to call him the club pet. She said he was little more than a puppy dog in training for them and she might’ve meant it in an endearing way but it turned out to be true.

He was the puppy that pissed on the carpet; the little dog that jumped up at the heels of its owners and waited to be patted or kicked.

She knew it before any of them.

“Take care, okay honey?”

In his head he imagines it's how she kisses Abel goodbye when he goes off to school because, where he feels he was always supposed to be a Son, she was always supposed to be a mother. She looks at him like she's proud of him.

He wonders if it's because of Jax.

He doesn't really know why.

“I'll talk to you soon And thanks. It’s nice to know I still exist in some people’s heads.”

He smiles softly.

He knows how that feels.
"Don’t tell Jax. Okay? That you saw me, I mean."

(‘Please don’t say anything. To Jax’)

“I won’t. But think about what I said.”

“I will”

He’ll think about it. He hasn’t stopped thinking about it.

Maybe seeing Jax would lay it all to rest once and for all, or maybe it’d just rake over old sins that he’ll never be able to atone for.

He feels compelled to give it a chance, though, see what happens.

Juice is making a mission out of seeing what happens these days.
Juice always did like T.O.

There’s something genuine about him, something old school and straight talking. What you see is what you get and what you get is loyalty, respect and absolute fairness. He’s the kind of guy that would maintain order in a street fight and impart his wisdom on those involved. He knew a lot of guys in NY, scrappy little fucks who wanted to make names for themselves and thought brawling was the only way. There was always an even voiced older guy like T.O on hand to reel them in.

It’s strange seeing him in a SAMCRO cut when he’s so used to seeing him patched otherwise.

“Looks good on you,” he says, smiling, and though he’s expecting just a handshake, T.O pulls him into a tight, firm hug.

There’s a lot to be said for warm introductions.

(*)

They spend five minutes exchanging small-talk before the inevitable comes up. It’s to be expected. They share a common thread.

“It’s pretty fucked up, that stuff that went down with the Sheriff, right? It was shitty for him to hold the race card over your head.”

T.O is the only person at the table who could possibly get what Juice was put through back then and, through him, there’s this strange kind of relief. Finally someone can look at what was held over him and understand how hard it was for him because, as much as he loves his brothers, they were never directly affected by that outmoded law. Chibs might’ve passed it off as none of them knowing their old men but they all knew their old men were white, at least.

"My bad. I thought he was a decent guy."

“He was a decent guy, T.O. Thing is, he was getting’ played as much as I was by some sociopath hippy Fed. I just got the shitty end of it."“

He realises how guiltless that makes Roosevelt sound and, even to his own ears, it’s painful.

“Still, a brother who knows what it’s like to be a black fish among whites? He should’ve known better than to push that on someone else. That’s not cool. I’m not good with that.”

Neither is Juice but it’s not something Roosevelt deserved to die for and, though that’s not entirely what happened, there’s still part of Juice that remembers feeling like it had finally bit him on the ass. He doesn’t feel justified now, wonders if that was just his own mind trying to reason with him that
Roosevelt somehow got what was coming to him.

He shrugs.

“It’s done. We move on. It doesn’t matter now the by-laws have changed. I’m completely legit. Nobody can hold that over me again.”

“It’s the only attitude we can have, man. Look to the future. Fuck the past.”

Yeah, Juice thinks.

Fuck it.

“Hey, I’m sorry about your mom. I lost mine when I was a little kid. It’s not something you ever get over no matter what age, I imagine.”

“Thanks, man. My mom was 43 years old when I was born. I was blessed to get this long out her. World’s a different place without them, right? We might be outlaw one percenters on paper but we’re all our mother’s sons deep down.”

“Yeah. We are that. Even if we don’t know it.”

Juice often thinks that was the trouble with Jax, too little of his dad, too much of his mom and her chosen father figure for him. He remembers catching her in a moment of rare vulnerability at a club meet. The rest of the guys were drunk as Hell but Juice was on antibiotics so he spent the night stone-cold sober stuffing envelopes for TM marketing with Gemma. She thanked him for keeping her company at one of her ‘low ebbs’ and apologised for her ‘melancholic fucking hag mood’. He’d listened as she pondered Jax aloud, absently and vocally hoping he ‘learned from his mother and followed the right father’, the right father being Clay.

Unsurprisingly, she got her wish.

Jax never had her eyes or her smile but, God, he had her spirit and he might not have been Clay’s blood but he took a step over him when following in his footsteps and left the dead man in the dust.

“Clay always spoke highly of you,” T.O says, taking the old man out of Juice’s head. “The way he talked about you, it was always in good spirit. He appreciated you. He liked you.”

Those words strike Juice right in the gut because no matter how many times he tells himself that things went how they were meant to, he can’t shake the idea that if he’d just come clean sooner, Clay might’ve been saved. Often times he tells Clay that very same thing, that if he could rewind time he’d go back to that point. He’d get there sooner. He’d look Clay in the eye and say “I did you wrong but let me make this up to you.”

He’d leave the fucking gun.

He thinks that until he remembers Miles, until he remembers Roosevelt.

Then he just thinks, shit, what am I?

“Clay trusted me and I betrayed him with his own gun. How fucked up is that?”

“Club rule, kid. You did what you had to do. He won’t have thought less of you for it. He knew how it was. If all that’s true, that stuff about Jax and how he played you? Clay will have known that.”
“Yeah, he did.”

“He asked his guys to do some pretty heinous stuff for the good of the club. Jax put that on you. You followed the order just like you’d have followed it if Clay put it on you. It had the table behind it.”

“Doesn’t make it right when the table got behind a personal crusade.”

Juice still believes that. He still believes that each and every stone Jax cast in Clay’s direction was personal. It’s hard convincing a stubborn mind that’s so encroached with guilt it can’t come to any kind of terms. Juice still struggles with it. He remembers bringing it up with Bobby because he was hoping more than anything he would give him something, anything, that would convince Juice they did the right thing.

To this day, he still wishes they’d given Clay a chance.

T.O nods his head.

“We were tight for a while, me and Clay. I thought he was a decent dude. He had a vision for the MC. Guess it went a little sideways somewhere along the way.”

He is respectful towards Clay, even after everything that happened. It’s the old way. He has history with the old man, knew him well back in the day. T.O wasn’t emotionally invested in Donna, nor did he know Tara all that well. He only knows what Jax and the boys told him. He’s old enough and ugly enough to make up his own mind, Juice realises, and is objective about all of it.

Opie, to T.O, is the only thing that makes it legit.

“Orderin’ the death of a member without consulting the table? That’s instant Mayhem in my book. He’d have known that. He went too far.”

“What about what he did with Tara?”

That was the very first hit in the nail in his coffin. That was the thing that brought death knocking at his door instead of just circling him like a vulture waiting for the inevitable.

That was what had Mr Mayhem break in, just like those staged home invasions that Clay put in place to fall back on Jax.

“We do a lot of shit for the good of our clubs, Juice, and it’s not always what the other guys wanna hear about. Going after Tara wasn’t cool but I knew Clay.”

Juice thought he knew him too.

“If he thought she was gonna do wrong by the club? She had to go, don’t matter whose baby mama she was. It’s not something I would’ve said to Jax but I could see where Clay was coming from. You think if Marcella was causin’ trouble like that Jax would’ve thought twice about puttin’ a bullet in her head?”

It’s the truth.

It’s also evidence of the visionless duplicity that was at work with Jax at the helm.

“You gotta have some consistency in leadership. Tara was a good girl, I aint saying anything different, but at the end of the day she was an old lady just like Marcella’s my old lady, just like you’ll have your own old lady when you pull your finger outta your ass and find one.”
Juice smiles at that. If only T.O knew…

“Look, I’m not saying Clay was a good guy. He was ruthless when he needed to be, but he’d have justified every last decision he made in his own mind as being for the good of the club.”

Juice knows all about that. He wonders whether that’s why he followed Clay so closely, because that’s precisely what he does even to this day.

“Yeah. Yeah, you’re right, T.O.”

It’s food for thought, as if Juice's thoughts need feeding.

It’s Chibs who interrupts the reverie.

“Alright, lads?”

T.O nods towards Chibs, holding his hand out. It’s not an intricate handshake they partake in but it’s clearly something Chibs has had to accustom himself to. Juice puts it in the bank for later and figures he’ll tease Chibs about old dogs learning new tricks after all.

He’s a troll like that.

“Hey, Pres.”

“Good to see you back, fella. How are you holdin’ up?”

“I’m getting’ there. Takin’ it day by day.”

Chibs smiles at that, sober and sympathetic because, at their age, losing a parent forces them to face the reality of just how fast time has passed.

“Good lad. I just need a quick word with my boy here away from pryin’ ears.”

“Sounds ominous.”

“You got a minute, Juicy?”

“I’ll leave you guys to it. Gonna go take a look at the stock before church.”

“Yeah, see you in five.”

Juice gives Chibs a knowing smile because last time they talked ‘away from prying ears’ they said a handful of words to each other before wasting breath in a less productive but more pleasing way.

He could handle some of that right now.

“What’s up, Chibby?”

“Can we take this outside?”

Juice looks at the expression Chibs wears, paranoid and distracted, and just like that his jovial thoughts fall flat.

“What’s wrong? Did something happen?”

“Nothing to worry about, boy, I just need a word with you before church.”
There’s a small space outside the building where the boxes are taken at the end of the day. It’s tiny, just about big enough to fit a couple of people but despite its tight quality it’s become the go-to space for one-to-one chats and things that need to be said away from prying eyes and flapping ears. Chucky calls it “The Principal’s Office” and hopes aloud he is never taken in there because “there’s no room to swing a chinchilla in that place” and he does not accept its claustrophobic nature.

Juice leans against the wall, one foot pressed against.

He tries his best to look casual but he knows he’s not doing a very good job of it.

“So, what’s up?”

He doesn’t like the way Chibs looks back at him. He recognises this expression on him because he’s seen it many times before, a haunting image of bad news yet to be told. This is the look of a man who has something to say that Juice will not like and he’s trying to think of the right way to put it across.

“Just spit it out, man, you’re making me nervous.”

“I, uh, I should’ve told you this sooner but I was waiting for the right time. With this whole Chen thing I need to get it out in the open with you before I give it to the table.”

“What are you talking about?”

And then, right then, Chibs lays it all out in front of him, raw as anything. Still bleeding, in fact.

It starts with a name; a name that strikes Juice right where it hurts.

“You know Matthew Yung.”

(*)

There’s something otherworldly about hearing a man was castrated in your name, something shocking and mind-altering about listening as a very human man talks about a very inhuman act committed as revenge for something that you went through.

There’s something nauseating about learning it was ordered by a man who even now, even now, is digging his claws in from afar and ensuring that Juice will never be free of him.

That it was a personal favour makes it even worse.

“We told him Tully sent his regards. None of this was on the club at all.”

When Chibs is through telling him, Juice doesn’t know what’s to be said at all. All he knows is that this morning’s oatmeal is threatening to revisit him and he’s not sure he’ll be able to hold it down. Not after that. He can feel it burning in his throat and he has to fight to stop himself from spilling over.

His voice is quiet and strained when he asks Chibs “You seriously did that?”

“I’ve been meaning to tell you, honestly I have. I wanted to make sure you were ready to hear it.”

Rising, rising, that anger, building up and up...

“Maybe a bit of a heads up might’ve been an idea at the time, y’know? A man might like to know someone’s dick’s gonna be cut off in his name.”
“You weren’t well, Juice. You think if I’d bounced into that place and laid this on you it would’ve gone down well? Would’ve sent you straight into the rubber room, swear on my mother’s fuckin’ grave. I saw you, Juicy. I knew. It was some heavy shit. Tig and me—”

...rising even more.

“— wait a second, Tig knew? Jesus Christ.”

“I couldn’t go it alone, Juice, you know that. Tully had been stringin’ us along. Said there was a Chinese threat and that, if we wanted details, we’d have to carry out some favours for him. Yung was one of them.”

“For me, I gather?”

A gift, Juice thinks. Another one of Tully’s could-be-well-meaning-but-could-be-psychotic presents designed to make Juice question everything he represents to him. Is he a demon? Is he a guardian angel?

“He wanted a message sending. I didn’t kill him, Juice, I knew you wouldn’t want that. But, I did what Tully asked.”

“And, you didn’t think to see if that would be what I wanted, y’know, considering it was supposed to be for me?”

It’s not often Juice raises his voice or loses his temper but, when he does, it’s often a flash in the pan. It never lasts long before he softens.

He always softens.

“I’m sorry. I know you had no choice. I don’t mean to be a whiny bitch—”

“You’re not. You’re a guy who was treated badly and you hate the idea of someone you care about doing something so fucking—”

“- so fucking brutal, Chibby?”

“You didn’t have an issue with the clown.”

“He didn’t have to live with it.”

“But you have to live with it, Juice. You have to live with what he did. Now? He never gets to do that to anyone again and he never gets to forget doing it to you. It’s brutal but tell me you don’t find some comfort in knowing he can’t hurt anyone else.”

Chibs sighs as he reaches out to Juice, looks momentarily hurt when he cringes away and that’s subconscious more than anything. Juice isn’t purposely trying to avoid his touch and he hasn’t the mental capacity to feel guilty about it right now either.

He just feels sick.

He wants to run away.

“Tully made good on his promise after Yung. He passed on info when he got it. If they’d caught us unawares that day me and Rat would be dead now. If nothing else, he’s a man of his word.”

“Good old Tully. What a hero, huh?”
What a saviour.

What a piece of shit.

“O’course, he used his knowledge to bargain for what he wanted. He said he had intel on the ringleader and he’d give to you and you alone. It’s good leverage, knowing the name of a guy who wants the club to burn, and I hate to say it but, for Tully? You’re the golden prize. I didn’t want you anywhere near him. I was prepared to go it alone and take our chances but I thought you had a right to make that decision for yourself.”

“You gave me an out, Chibs. You weren’t forcing that on me. I’m glad I went. Certain good things came of that meet.”

Certain good things that go without saying.

Certain good things that might’ve been rash and impulsive but have calmed themselves into something hopeful. Should he thank Tully for that? Fucked if he knows.

“I’m not gonna lie here, Juicy. When he told me Yung was one of the guys who hurt you? Part of me was fucking thankful to him for handing me the job.”

And, isn’t that just the quintessential Tully way? Isn’t it his way to twist a person so tightly and so fully that he makes them believe he’s doing them a favour? He’s like one of those high-ranking SS members who not only convinced soldiers to act out of character but made them believe that what they were doing was justified, even glorious.

“He’s good at making things feel like good ideas. It’s why we need to get away from the AB we’ve talked about.”

“And, we will. But, this thing with Chen? I don’t know how that’s gonna work. Being in a room with that guy’s gonna be bloody hard. What he did to you – “

“ – you don’t even want to know what he did to me, Chibs. I’m never gonna go there, especially not with you. I plan on you fucking me one day soon and I don’t want that to be on your mind when it happens.”

In the midst of all seriousness, the look on Chibs’ face is a thing of beauty.

“C’mon, don’t look so surprised, asshole. You only have to look at me half the time and I’m practically there. There’s not a chance in Hell I’m gonna jeopardise that by putting images in your head. I don’t wanna be seen as a victim, Chibs, it’s not who I am.”

“I never thought you were. But, lookin’ at him and knowing he touched you at all? It’s gonna take me everything I’ve got not to pull a Jax on him and rub the salt in.”

Juice shakes his head.

This is what he's afraid of.

“Don’t go there, Chibby. That there’s a dangerous path.”

“I know. But, it’s eatin’ away at me.”

“I know, but...l..."

Suddenly tired, emotionally drawn, Juice leans in and places his forehead on Chibs’ shoulder.
"...shit, man, I don’t know."

He knows people could see if they peeped their head around but it doesn’t matter, not right now.

“What are we gonna do, huh? This feels never ending.”

“It’ll all be over soon, lad.”

When Chibs wraps a hand around his neck and kisses him gently in the spot next to his ear he feels some of the tension leaving him, as if Chibs is taking it all away from him and directing it elsewhere.

“It’s all your call, Juicy. I’m not putting it on you if you don’t want it but – whatever happens with that guy is your choice.”

It’s not a choice Juice wants to make, nor is it a choice he feels capable of making. How can he go into that with a clear head? How can he call shots when the necessary actions go so dead against everything he believes in?

“I’m not exactly best placed to make that kind of decision. Not with a clear head.”

“You’re the only one who has the right to, Juice, and that’s the truth.”

Maybe it is, maybe it’s not.

One thing’s for certain, he’s not going to cross his own lines.

“We don’t go the Yung way with Chen. Seriously. I’m not standing by and watching that.”

“Like I said, how he goes out is your call. But he goes out. That’s a given.”

There’s no question that Chen needs to die, that goes without saying, but putting the metaphorical gun in the hand of a man so taken and so abused by him is neither safe nor smart, at least in Juice’s books, and he doesn’t feel capable of carrying that responsibility.

“I’m not looking for vengeance, Chibs. I’m not that kinda guy.”

“I know you’re not. That’s why we need you in the club. Because Tig? He’d cut him a minge and sell him to the circus. Hap? He’d fucking wear the guy. But, you? You’re not interested in that. You’re not a sick fuck and that’s what I love about you, brother.”

That he’s not sick.

That he’s not twisted.

All the things that Jax saw as weakness - compassion, humility, remorse - are seen as strengths.

“I just wanna look him in the eye, that’s all. After that I don’t care what happens. Shoot him in the head. Stab him. I don’t give a fuck. But, I’m not gonna bring myself down to his asshole level just because I feel he deserves to suffer for what he did to me. “

“Well, you’re a better man than me, that’s for sure, because I want to rip his head off.”

Juice knows that Chibs will find it hard to hold back and, though Chibs loves him for his leniency, Juice has always loved Chibs for his need to seek justice for his brothers. He’s seen it happen time and time again, has watched as the older man went the extra mile just to show what they meant to him.
It’s a beautiful, yet treacherous thing because Juice knows how that kind of love can be corrupted. He folds his arms around his body, suddenly cold in the chill of early Winter.

“C’mon, lad. Let’s get back inside, eh? Two guys in an alley’s worse than two guys in a bloody bathroom.”

“I know, right? Talk about foreshadowing.”

Chibs flings an arm around his shoulder and this time, Juice doesn’t pull away. That anxiety has evaporated between them.

“Big words, little man.”

Juice smiles at that.

“Fuck you. “

(*)

At the table, Chibs outlines it all for the rest of them, first up being the most important issue.

Ron Tully.

Just his name spoken aloud in front of the group reduces Juice to an irrational feeling of indignity because survivor’s guilt and shame are part of his daily life and, though he fights hard to keep it down, it still rears its ugly head when that man becomes the focus of conversation.

Juice feels Tig’s hand on the back of his neck squeezing gently as if to bring him back to the room and, once again, Venus’ influence is shining through.

He’s grateful for that.

“As of now, according to our esteemed AB associates, Tully will only deal with Juice. That’s what’s been sent through to them from the inside. Apparently, Tully’s appointed him our middle-man for club business.”

Tig’s anger is so fierce Juice can practically taste it.

“Uh-uh. Not gonna happen, Chief. “

“Hear me out, Tig. As far as I’m concerned, we needn’t have any further dealings with the AB. We don’t have anything that’s of any interested to them and vice versa. We don’t live by their ideals, let’s say.”

“You mean we’re not racist scumbags,” T.O says.

“We don’t need their assistance or their protection and we certainly don’t need our names to be tarnished by association.”

“Well, lets face it, Pres, we’re not exactly ethnically pure.”

Tig, it seems, wants the stage.

"According to their esteemed standards we should all be sent to the gas chambers without passing go or collecting our twenty bucks. I’m a tranny-fucker. Juice is half black, T.O’s all the way there. Rat,
no offense but, with that face and that nose you gotta be at least part Israeli -"

“Skogstrom’s Scandinavian, dipshit.”

“Whatever. Montez, I don’t know what he is but it certainly isn't Aryan and the Scots are all half-breeds, as far as I know. There’s only Quinn out of all of us that might make the cut and even that’s a stretch. The name Trager’s of German descent so I might get a pass if I cut Venus loose but I’ve already been tainted by her manhood so you might as well throw me on the pyre.”

The thing that’s fascinating about Tig is that he barely even pauses for breath. This stuff just comes to him and, even in the midst of a topic that started out so humiliating for Juice, he’s managed to bring a smile to his face.

“That’s…impressive,” Quinn pipes up. “You just condemned us all in one breath.”

“Not you, Quinny. You’re the lone survivor.”

“I’m a Jew.”

“You’re a Jew? Fuck me, really? I didn’t know. We’re all screwed, then. Stick a fork in the whole club.”

As far as supporting statements go, it’s pretty solid.

“I propose we thank Tully for his time and his intel and wish him a happy life sentence,” Chibs says, finally. "We part ways with the AB on decent terms. Done and dusted. All in favour?"

It’s a unanimous yay and, when that final vote is passed, Juice feels he could float away because that asshole can’t own him if his brothers say it is not so. He never need speak or hear of him again if he doesn’t choose to.

“You and Tully? It’s all over, brother.”

For Juice it was over when he told him goodbye.

Juice watches as Chibs moves effortlessly through the club’s issues with a sense of directive and order that harks back to Clay but skipped Jax entirely. There’s no tension in this room. There are only facts, some without feeling, some riddled with it.

Everything feels fair.

Everything feels…solid.

When they move onto the Chen issue, Juice can feel himself zoning out. He doesn’t want to, it’s just what happens. He thinks back to what he learned over the months inside and he grasps his hands together as a child might. It’s not juvenile, it’s a way of bringing thoughts to the centre, a common tactic in psych therapies to balance each and every part of the mind so that it’s straight and even and easily grasped.

When he taps his finger against his thumb, that’s just a nerves thing.

That’s just his compulsion, a lifelong companion.

“Now, we all know the Chinese threat’s been a little cold of late but we’re well aware it’s not entirely dead in the water. I understand where they’re coming from. A lot of bollocks went down between the club and the Chinese and it’s fairly understandable they’re out for blood. We ground
them down. But they’ve got a lot of compatriots over here and they’re looking to build their way back up. According to Tully, they see us as a weak link. They see us as an obvious target for notoriety."

“Weak? Huh. They probably want in on the bike deal, think we’re sellin’ Kawasaki. Treading their turf or something.”

Montez smiles, only for Tigs to inform him that Kawasaki’s Japanese.

“Wrong nation, Moron. That’s like me mistaking you for Venezuelan ‘cause you’re all brown.”

“Says the person who just mistook a Swede for a Jew.”

Ever a good parent, Chibs carries on without paying heed and giving attention to negative behaviours and Juice has to admire his patience. Montez doesn’t know the story behind Chen. He doesn’t know the pain he caused.

Juice doesn’t know much but he knows he wouldn’t be making jokes if he did.

“Now, according to Tully, the ringleader’s a guy named Gavin Chen. He passed that info onto Juice when he went to see him recently.”

“I know that asshole”, TO says. “Real skeevy motherfucker. He was harassing one of Repo’s daughters when he was last in town. He’s a real no good dude.”

“In the interest of full disclosure”, Juice says, trying to be casual, “he was one of Lin’s guys in Stockton. Just so you know. And, yeah, he’s a real skeevy motherfucker. Let’s just leave it at that.”

He tries to keep it as off-the-cuff as he can, as if he’s just throwing that in there in passing. It’s the only way he can do this.

“Shit,” T.O says.

“It doesn’t change anything. “

“Yeah it does, brother.”

It’s kind of nice that it does in a way, kind of pleasing to Juice that the idea of Chen laying a finger on him takes him from club threat to Mayhem candidate, especially knowing that Jax laughed at the very same scenario only a few months ago when he was in charge.

Juice doesn’t miss the look Chibs gives him, that prolonged eye-to-eye connection that says “See how far we’ve come?”

“While we’re talking full disclosure, you may have heard on the grapevine that another of Lin’s guys was found with his man parts no longer in-situ quite recently. It’s not something they’re advertising. Understandably, they don’t want people to get wind they’ve got a eunuch on their books, but Matthew Yung was another of Lin’s crew who took things too far in prison. “

Again, Juice finds himself backing out of the room mentally, shutting himself up in a box until it’s all done with.

Again he pulls himself back.

He’s getting so good at that.
"Tig and I took care of him at Ron Tully's request. Not an AB matter but a personal favour. No fallout for the club. There were no cuts. We were trying to protect Juice by not running it by you all. It was before we took him to the table."

From the looks on the guys faces, they understand the logic.

“Chen was Lin’s favoured boy. He’s all about honour and avenging the death of his great Grand Master. The attempted hit that gave me a new scar to add to my vast collection, that was on Chen’s order. The theft at the garage when we lost all that stock? Him too. Word has it he’s got an ongoing feud with a crew in Calgary so it may well be his time’s been taken up with them, which is why we’ve had no movement, but he’s not a guy who gives up easily. According to Tully, he’s got half a mill on my head alone.”

He lets that sink in. Half a million. It’s a lot of money and there are a lot of Chinese. They’re the largest nation in the world after all. There’s got to be a fair few who’d be willing to join a crew and kill for that kind of cash.

“If we take him out, the money’s off the table. None of the rest of them have got the guts to come after us but there’s nothing quite like a dog protecting its master. Especially a Chinese dog, I hear they’re particularly loyal. So, we decide what to do with him here and now.”

“He deserves to die for what he did to Juice alone. I got no mercy for people like that."

It’s Rat, surprisingly forthright, but he’s looking directly at Juice when he says it. It comes as a surprise but Juice doesn’t question it. He just accepts it with a quiet nod and saves it for later. Maybe he underestimated the guy. Maybe there’s less of Jax in him than he thought.

Maybe there's hope yet,

“Seconded.”

That’s Hap, and by the look on his face he’d gladly do it himself. He’d make it hurt too because there’s pleasure in that for him and, no doubt, the smiley face he had inked on his abdomen would take up a special significance.

“Aye. Well. He’s in Hong Kong at the minute visiting family but I have word he’s going to be Stateside sometime next week. It might be our only window of opportunity. I know we said we were out of the business of offin’ people left and right, sorry Hap, but we let it slide and he’ll just go off, get himself a fuckin’ army then come in here for a second crack at us. We need to nip this in the bud.”

"Goes without sayin', Chief."

The vote, again, is unanimous, and there’s no force, no threat and no pushing behind any man’s decision. Still, when it gets to Juice, he’s the same reluctant executioner he’s always been even in these circumstances.

He shrugs his shoulders but there’s no mistaking the reluctance in his voice.

“Has to be done.”

Even though the fucker deserves to die, Juice can’t bring himself to rejoice it. He hopes to God that never changes because the minute he can take pleasure in ending another man’s life he’ll be halfway to dead already.
Juice is not that guy.

He doesn't even want to be any more.

(*)
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

And, we have liftoff.

Note: I'm not the biggest porn-writer there is. I'm not really good with bodily fluids and repeating the words cock, dick and ass ten billion times. I've always been pretty uncomfortable writing that kind of scene so I often just write around it, dipping in as and when. It may be terrible, its never particularly descriptive but it's all I got (btw nothing against PWP!!!)

Sorry if it's shite :)

Juice is a bossy little shit, randomly...

November 5th has always been a special night for Chibs. Guy Fawkes Night, the strange British traditional anomoly where a plot to commit treason is celebrated by way of 'never forgetting'. That night, colours rip through the skies and giant fires burn brightly. Children in thick woolen gloves and hats clutch their father's hands as they marvel at the spectacle.

For Chibs it was always a bonding experience. His family would gather together all of the combustible materials they needed rid of and set it alight in the garden. The kids from the estate would come in and watch as the flames licked the sky and Chibs would proudly smile and tell them “My da did that.” They'd end the night roasting chestnuts on that fire, eating cooked apples and singing old Scottish songs as the charred remains of what they'd set alight singed down to red, crackling ashes.

He still celebrates, even now, because some traditions are hard to set aside and each and every year since he's been a Son he's bought the biggest and best fireworks he could find and no matter what state the club had been in at the time the lads, fuelled by beer and brotherhood, had set the world alight for one single night.

It took Chibs back to simpler times.

It took the club back, too.

Since he was put away Jax has his own traditions, his own rituals, born from a need to find emotional balance in the midst of profound hopelessness.

He’s not a religious guy, never has been. He never bought into the idea of a higher being because what God would take a little boy like his brother before his life had even began? What kind of grand Maker would allow an child to be born with a hole in his heart and his guts half outside of his body like Abel was? He's never been particularly moved by the TV commercials highlighting the poor and the starving of this world but he's had enough shit happen in his own life to question the value and validity of a Heavenly Father.

The only Gods for Jax are the Gods of his own making and the only bible he’s ever had faith in is the manuscript of his own dead dad's hopes, fears and guilts. Like good religious folk he had every
intention of following those teachings to the letter only to fall short when the reality of life and choice kicked in. The choices he made are blasphemous to those scriptures and, as he sits alone in his cell he finds himself envying the faithful, wishing he had some kind of faith to see him through this. Faith is the substance of all things, they say, but for Jax it is an anchor that never grounded him and left him to fly off into the ether.

If he’d had more conviction in his own morals he might not be here and if he’d had more belief in the vision he had it might not have become so corrupted.

He has to live with that, though as he traces the scars on his side from that failed attempt on his life, he wonders if he's been living since then at all.

Jax performs his rituals to get through the passage of every hour in which his failures are what define him. The perfectly made bed with hospital corners, the neatly kept hair, the carefully trimmed beard and prison loafers kept as white as his sneakers used to be when they weren’t stained red by his own mother’s blood. All of those things are gospel to him. Now that he has nothing else to preach. He preaches to himself because he's all he has left now.

He never used to need this. Dominance used to come naturally to him. Respect wasn't earned as much as demanded.

Years ago, Jax's dad used to tell him that men who take a pride are the best leaders and the greatest commanders of people. That’s why you never have a dishevelled president, why soldiers cut their hair with such precision it can be measured with a ruler, why even in the middle of war, beds are checked and uniforms are as pristine as they day they were worn for the very first time. Soldiers are taught rituals as discipline because to rule over the tiniest aspect of one's life is to rule over it in its entirety. He was just trying to get his son to comb his hair and tidy his room but John Teller had a way with words, a way of making tiny little things seem like the most important things in the world.

Jax inherited that trait.

Maybe if he'd cared more before things would not have turned out the way they did. Maybe if he'd implemented these rituals and disciplines back when everything was spinning out of control he'd have remembered the quiet authority his father had tried to teach him when he was a mouthy little son of a bitch with no respect for order.

Maintaining order makes Jax feel like more of a man as this place and it’s inhabitants strive to make him feel less of one. Outside, his life was endless sea of possibilities. Now he’s swimming against that tide, a captive in every which way. There’s blood on his hands but at least they’re clean.

He feels the vibrate of his phone and it shakes him from his thoughts. People rarely call him anymore, usually Wendy to let him listen to her reading the boys to sleep. He looks forward to those nights, a reminder of how passive a role he plays in his children's lives and has always played in their lives. He'll hear Abel giggle, will hear Thomas babble and shreik and he'll be able to forget about where he is and what he has done. He hears Abel saying his prayers and wonders when Wendy became religious. Listening to Abel pray for his mother in Heaven is something that breaks through every wall Jax has built because Tara's blood is on his hands as much as it's on his mother's and that's something he will never forget.

Those are the best moments in his life, moments he'll live for and will inevitably die for if he continues with the notion that every last thing he did was for the good of his children. Even he knows that's not true now but he's become very versed in lying to himself.

It's not Wendy's name that flashes up on that pre-paid, illegally owned cell that Jax has come to see
as a lifeline. It's Chibs, and that gives him another kind of pang, one that starts in his naval and works its way into his throat, a visceral kind of pain that makes him realise that life goes on without him and, though he felt like the centre of Samcro's Universe, it's spinning on its own axis now.

He longs for the sodality and, fuck, he'd even take the bad times if it meant he still had the club.

This will be the first time in months he's heard his successor's voice and, when he answers, he tries to pull some of the old fire and steel and rigid confidence back into his voice because he doesn't want Chibs to know he's given up. He's not sure why it matters so much to him but there's always something sad and pathetic in men who have fallen from grace.

He tries not to show he's waning.

“Hey, Chibs. What's up?”

“I'm gonna make this brief, Jackie Boy.”

There's such a sharp chill to his voice. Jax has never heard him sound like this before. It's worryingly distant, frighteningly cut off.

He realises he does not know this man and never will.

“What is it?”

“We're done with the AB so whatever deal you've got going on with Tully's probably gonna end when he finds out. Just giving you a heads up out of courtesy for old time’s sake. Do with the information what you will.”

For old time's sake. For the years spent relishing friendship that wasn't corroded by power and principality.

Jax has a lot of thought of old times these days.

“Juice made his choice, then?”

“What choice?”

“Tully had my back because of him, wanted to give him the chance to make or break me. A thumbs up or thumbs down kind of deal. I know they had a meeting recently that Juice skipped out on - “

“ This has nothing to do with the boy. He's done with Tully and that Nazi cunt can suck my fat Scottish prick if he tries anything to change that. As far as I know, your life and death is of little interest to Juice.”

“But, his life is of great interest to Tully and, since I'm the closest thing to the club in here....”

“....aye, you should expect some fallback over it. Nothin' I can do about it. You know that. I just couldn't let it go without at least givin' you a heads up.”

“For old time's sake. Right. I didn’t know you still cared, brother.”

When Chibs doesn't provide a response Jax is put firmly in his place. It's a chilling tell of just how far he has fallen out of favour and, though he doesn't think for one second he doesn't deserve it, it still burns him deep because the leader in Jax wants to knock Chibs down but the realist in him knows he hasn't the right.
“Whatever Indian Hills has planned, it’ll probably come quick. Either prepare for it or take comfort in it, lad”

(‘I’ll make sure it’s quick.’)

“Yeah. Thanks.”

There are no formalities, no niceties, no familiarity whatsoever. Chibs has put across what he needed to, rightly or wrongly, and there is nothing more to be said.

He hangs up the phone feeling a sense of relief, that this charade will all be at an end, soon, and that his duty to the club will be fulfilled. He'll go out in the only way that could bring him any peace.

Crouching down, he puts that phone back in its spot underneath his mattress, a small plastic lifeline, and he takes that little bit of ammo that Chibs has given him, that little bit of power he has so craved, and takes it where it needs to be.

He'll take aim and he'll fire.

He'll slay Tully with rejection because it's the only thing he has to strike with.

When he finds him he’s acting out Shakespeare with Cristell from a tattered old book he's probably kept with him for months. The kid doesn’t look half as shellshocked as he used to. Gone are the drawn features and in their place a kind of casual acceptance that this is the way it's supposed to be. He’s falling into his way of life, now, and he knows what’s expected of him, a beta among alphas just like Juice used to be.

(‘The meek shall inherit the Earth, Teller, didn't you know?’)

He remembers telling Tully he would never be that man, that he would rather die than be underneath someone. Tully told him self preservation and the promise of life can be more valuable than anything; that stronger men than him have succumbed to the wills and graces and needs of people like Tully on the inside.

(‘The need for life is often stronger than the need to prove oneself as a man.’)

It seems that's what gets Tully off, turning meek little boys into playthings that would cut off their own arm and believe it was necessary. Tully had told him to open his eyes and realise he was describing himself with those 'cruel, callous words'.

Jax thinks he's wrong.

“You hear?” he asks, before Tully can deliver his next line, something about a cuckold and a coward, he imagines.

“Hear what?”

Jax just smiles because this may be a tiny victory but it gives him a sense of who he used to be.

“Clearly not.”

“What are you talking about, sweet thing?”

“Ask your guys.”

“C’mon, sweetheart, cryptic and evasive's not your thing. You're not smart enough for it. Spit it out.”
“Looks like the little Rican's done with you. Your little middle-man idea fell at the first hurdle.”

He knew of Tully's ploy to reel him back in.

He also knew how, while he might've taken the deal himself, it would never have washed with Chibs in charge.

“Never underestimate the power of the Scots, Tully. Hitler would've done well to get them onside.”

There's not a lot of satisfaction to be had inside and Jax, a man who thrived on it, will take it where he can get it. When he lies down tonight, not knowing if it will be his last time and not caring either way, he will be satisfied in the knowledge that he had that moment, at least, before he went.

That he knew something Tully didn't.

It's food for a starving man.

(*)

There's a buzz at the clubhouse tonight, a kind of thick-coated vibrancy that's been missing for so long it almost felt unreachable and, as the smoke fills the air from those long-gone sparks of colour, something ignites.

It feels like a home.

Venus made little pastry cases filled with almond jam and sponge and, somewhat reminiscent of Gemma, has taken to calling herself Martha Stewart. She worked in a bar in San Francisco a long time ago and knows how to shake a cocktail and her Long Island Iced Tea would knock the habit off a nun. Two of her friends are here, a girl named Francesca who Montez may or may not have fallen in love with and a guy she refers to as her ‘brother’ – a female to male transgender ambiguously named Riley. When Chibs looks at Riley he can see what a pretty girl he would’ve been if his mind hadn’t been something else.

Venus argues it makes him the prettiest boy there ever was, even prettier than angel faced Teller, the devil with the face of a Boticcelli original.

Chibs takes in this brave new world as it literally dances in front of him. He knows it will put them at a disadvantage, respect wise, would be naïve to think otherwise, but isn't change and evolution something every group undergoes when the ways of the world change? What good is living in the past?

He hasn't always been liberal.

The army taught him what it meant, so did the cause.

He pictures the racists and the xenophobes with their by-laws and their rigid ideas and thinks, fuck them. Screw the lot of them. This is what a club’s all about; not violence, not hatred, not bigotry. Leave the rest of them to their guns and their casual racism. Leave them to their evils, Chibs just wants to ride.

“And, ride you will,” Venus says, her arm flung haphazardly around his shoulders. “Fresh off into the sunset like John Fucking Wayne. You just gotta finish your drink first. You might wanna hold your boy off from drinkin’ his, though.”

Juice is a cocksure, confident drunk. He always has been. Clay used to say it about him. Give that
kid a telling off and he’ll slink away like a kicked puppy. Give him a shot of whiskey and he’ll rule the God damned world.

There’s always a danger in that. There’s always a danger in using it as a crutch, a life raft for a man who would drown without it.

Tonight, Juice is using it as armour. It’s his battlewear. It’s his protective gear.

A day may come when he no longer needs it but today he's wearing it proud.

It hadn't taken much. Juice has been out of the game so long he's a cheap drunk. Chibs understands his need to dissociate via Mr Daniels' special brand of medication tonight, so many revelations all at once, so many issues brought to a head in that decisive club meeting. Chibs just wants him to let go, be a young guy with no worries for once, lighten up those newly cautious eyes of his.

“Believe me, I speak from experience. I know what alcohol and crazy pills do to a person. Makes ‘em feel like they can party all night. No more of Mama's magic potions for the little one.”

Juice just looks happy to Chibs, happy and comfortable and alive as he laughs so hard his eyes tear up at something Quinn is telling him.

“See that? That’s a real buzz. He’s lettin’ go after months of pent up nastiness and evil, Chibby. You wanna watch him. He will fall into you like wilted thing if he's not careful.”

“He looks good to me.”

“Yeah, he’s perfect. On top of the world. Just don’t let him fall from the liquid high, honey pie. That crash, if it happens? That'll be just plain awful. He'll fall so hard he'll break the damn floor. You just give him what he needs, alright?”

As if she needs to ask.

“Goes without saying, V.”

“I am glad to hear it. Cause, if it wasn't? You'd feel the wrath of this Southern angel, I kid thee not.”

(*)

“Hey Chibby. Where did you go? Turned around and you were gone. Hap said he thought he saw you going off with Mercedes but I knew that was a lie. She's not your type.”

This is the kid he used to know, all big smiles and eyes full of life and wonder and fucking joy.

“I had to make a couple of phone calls, Juicy. Had a little chat with Venus, that's all.”

“Yeah, well, you missed a lot of stuff.”

“Did I, now? What did I miss?”

“You’ll never know.”

He teases, and the way he tilts his head makes Chibs realise just how much his inhibitions have waned.

“Can’t have been that important then.”
Juice laughs, inadvertently irresistible, and Chibs holds him steady to keep him from swaying away. Maybe he shouldn’t have drank so much, not after so long, but Chibs remembers the first time he was ready to let himself go after his strongest taste of the Spoils of War. He remembers how it had felt to break free from the self imposed boundaries of over-contemplation and throw himself back into the real world.

It had felt like the very first time.

"A little tipsy, are you, lad?"

"Wasted as Hell, dude. Haven’t had this much fun in a long, long time. Never thought I would again. It’s been years, Chibby. Years. How is that right?"

"It’s not."

Juice looks round with new eyes, eyes free from caution and restraint, eyes that see all because they’re too inebriated to shield themselves. He is exposed like this, Chibs thinks, but he doesn’t look uneasy, not the way he commonly does when he’s thinking about his thinking and the things that have gone before.

He just looks mildly confused, as if he’s finally realising just how much things have changed, not quite believing it before.

"Jeez, it all got fucked up, didn’t it, brother?"

"Aye, it did, lad."

"S’all good, now. We broke the curse."

In as much as they could, that’s what they did. They broke a curse. They pulled the club away from some hex the Teller family had spat upon it. Chibs wonders if this may be the first time since the club was conceived, nurtured and birthed that it fulfilled the template of how it was envisioned.

"You’re the King of this shitty little ice cream castle. And we are all your loyal, serving men."

He touches Chibs’ face and the reaction is all too familiar because Chibs used to get the same feeling with Fi did the same, a kind of clench in the gut that heated him up and down. This time it feels more urgent. It’s a pressure inside of him that will not be relieved by thoughts alone and it’s only a matter of time before he seeks to relieve it himself.

This powerless, powerful man who is touching him has so much pull over him.

He doesn’t even know it.

“I missed you,” Juice says, and it takes him down entirely. Chibs wonders if he is Juice’s kryptonite as much as the boy is his, whether his every word and exclamation is enough to reduce him to this.

“When you were gone, when I was gone. You were in my fucking head. All the time.”

“I know, lad.”

“All I thought about was making you hear me. If I could just get you to hear me then everything would be okay."

“I didn’t listen. I’m sorry.”
A condemned man has a right to represent himself at a fair trial and yet Juice was hung, drawn and quartered without ever saying a word. Chibs is as guilty as the next man, maybe more so.

He lives with that.

“I wanted to hear you say my name. Juicy boy. Laddie. Kid. Son. Asshole. Shithead. I would’ve taken anything if only you’d talk to me.”

“I’m talking now, laddie.”

Bring him back to the present, Chibs thinks, because dwelling only causes him pain. Get him in the here and now where nobody hates him and everyone wants him to live.

Everyone listens, now.

Nobody will gag him or push him away.

Chibs thinks he’s the lucky one. He looks up at the night sky and it’s uncanny. Same sky, different part of the world. Same stars. Same scent of gunpowder in the air. Same look of fog from the Catherine Wheel that spun on the fence and the rockets that had Chucky bouncing like a four year old child.

It takes him back.

“I used to love all this. Watchin’ the fireworks. Lightin’ bonfires and roasting chestnuts. All that shite.”

“You guys are fucked up, celebrating that kind of stuff. A guy trying to blow shit up years ago?”

“Don’t even get me started on it, not when you lot celebrate Thanksgiving and forget all about the bloody Indians.”

“We all have our skeletons, Chibby.”

He kisses Chibs’ jaw without invitation, soft lips against unshaven skin, against scars, rough against Juice’s smooth. He’s never this open but now he’s singing proudly, singing Chibs’ name with his actions, his praises and his affections.

Killing him softly.

“Wanted to do that all day,” he smiles. “I don’t even care who sees. Tig fucks dead people. And cattle. And probably Republicans.”

“You're not wrong there.”

“I just kiss old Scottish guys with gnarly scars who make me feel like not fucking dying.”

It's as raw, as ugly and as base as a compliment can be but it's Juice's way with words and there's something to be said for his unequivocal honesty. There are no flourishes because that's not how they live. It's oily and rugged and everything they both exist for.

"I wanna do a lot with this old guy."

Judging by the look on his face, lax and calm and half-aroused already, that much is clear.

“C’mon, lad, lets get you home, eh? You’re a bit worse for wear.”
“I’m exactly where I need to be. With you. Here. At the club.”

“There’s time for this later, boy. When you’re not so hammered, eh?”

“I love you, brother.”

There it is, his go-to phrase, the words he utters when he hopes he can salvage something from nothing. Chibs doesn't know what the ‘nothing’ is here but he's certain he can salvage something anyhow.

“The club’ll still be here in the morning, boy. So will I.”

“You will?”

“I swear.”

That wistful look reappears on Juice's face, a look that never used to be in his repertoire but seems constant, now. Chibs would do anything to take that look away.

“Really thought it’d all be burned to the ground by now. Thought it’d be all ashes and dust. Might as well have thrown us all on that fire, Chibby. Your crazy Fawkes guy would've liked that. I thought that’s where we were headed.”

“You thought wrong.”

“I’m glad I was wrong. I’m glad you heard me out, Chibby. That's all I ever wanted. I wouldn't be here if you hadn't.”

Thank God you’re still here, Chibs thinks, and this is all too little too late but at least he's trying. Mother of Christ, he'll try for as long as it takes.

He'll die trying if he has to.

(*)

Nature has her ways of dealing with stress, resolved or otherwise.

She builds up weight.

She gathers pressure.

When the thunder roars and the lightning strikes it's always followed by an unearthly calm that washes over the atmosphere because the tension is spent and the anger has been screamed and blinded away.

Chibs has lived with his own thunder ever since Juice walked back into his life, that building, pulsating tightness that cannot be relieved.

He wonders if that too can be screamed and blinded away.

Juice seems to think that's going to happen here: that, if Chibs would only oblige him it'd fuck the demons right out of him, tension gone, fear silenced. He wants Chibs to sign his name over his old wounds, to take the ugly and replace it with something that means something to him because he doesn’t want their hands to be the last that touched him, their bodies to be the last that moved inside of him.
You can make this better, he is saying.
You can wipe away every last thing those fuckers did to me.

“I want it to be you.”

Juice's hand on his shoulder, urgent and imploring, weakens his resolve a little, the look on his face pushing him more in one direction than anything could. Chibs is a weak old man, all things boiled down and peeled away, and the pull of this is strong.

He doesn't want to take advantage but, Christ, this is difficult.

'C'mon, Chibs."

"No."

Venus had warned him there was every chance he would wilt in his arms tonight, all inhibitions succumbing to the depressive influence of alcohol. Be a good guy, she'd warned him. Be a gentleman. Don't think about what he wants, think about what he needs.

('Make sure his head is where his wiener is at because that boy has been anglin' for it for days, now, and he'll jump right in without thinkin' it through.')

Chibs needs to be sure. He will not risk destroying Juice's fragile progress by allowing him to spring too soon.

“It has to be now.”

“It can’t be now.”

“This is the first time in forever that nobody else’s face is in my head. You gonna make me waste that just 'cause I’m wasted?”

This is why it's so hard. This is why each and ever fibre of Chibs tells him he must be sure. This is why he won't just throw him down on the ground and fuck him as hard as he'd like to, because that might be what Juice wants but is it what he needs? Is this Dutch courage or is it something more?

“I’m trying to do right by you, lad.”

“This is right. There’s nobody forcing me. There’s nobody holding me down. There's nobody with a scalpel against my throat telling me I have no choice. There’s only you.”

“You’re drunk.”

“I’m not so drunk. I’m horny, but I’m not so drunk. I don't need to beg, do I? I've had my head in your lap, old man. You think I didn't feel it?”

“You that sure of yourself, eh?”

Juice is never sure of himself. He exists primarily in a state of indecision but there's something about the way he moves tonight that leads Chibs to believe he's finally arrived.

“Don’t look at me like I’m broken, Chibby. I’m not. Not now. I’m together and whole and I’m everything I’m supposed to be. Cos of you.”

Chibs looks into his eyes. He can see there’s less haze, more clarity. The ride home has sobered him
up. It’s been a couple of hours since his last drink. Now, all he knows is what he wants and all he wants is Chibs and, Jesus, if that’s not something to sweep away the cobwebs then he doesn’t know what is.

Juice leans in. He tilts his head and coaxes what he wants out of the older man.

His mouth tastes like lime, the remnants of the alcohol that still warms him, even now.

“Soon, you said, not now.”

“I meant now.”

His eyes are intense.


“I want you to fuck me, Chibby. I'm not sure of anything in my life but I am sure of that.”

He smiles. Chibs has never seen him look so determined.

“Don’t treat me like I’m made of glass. I want to fucking feel something from you.”

How can he refuse when he's so precise in what he desires?

How can he deny when he's making such a convincing argument?

“I know you’ll stop if I need you to.”

“I will.”

“You’ll give me what I want.”

“You know it, lad.”

“Then, I want this.”

He pushes forward, resting his forehead against Chibs's as if in silent prayer.

“You’re nothing like them,” Juice whispers. “Don't ever think that you are.”

There’s a spanner in Filip Telford's works; or it could be a wrench. It goes by the moniker of Juice and he’s pretty sure that it’s dividing him internally. Thank Christ the other lads haven’t got a hold of that little gem of information yet, even if the lad's uncharacteristically display, certainly tequila fueled, was leading them that way before Chibs led him away.

It's not that he doesn't want them to know. It's that he's not prepared to share just yet. He wants this for himself so that he can enjoy it without it being scrutinised; so he can figure out what it is without being told.

Regardless of what lies between their thick thighs or the number of notches on their criminal record, Chibs will be gentle and sensitive. He will not push and he will not pull. He will ignore the stirrings until explicit consent is given to take them take what they both know they are,

The embers are starting to catch aflame. They're both kindling and wood and this night seems to be the catalyst that is helping them set to flames.
Chibs' instincts tell him that if he were to grab Juice then Juice would grab him back. If he were to reach down and wrap his hands around, Juice wouldn't reel away but buck into the touch. He tries to compose himself so as not to get hard off the thought because Juice is more than suggestible and he doesn't want to put words into his mouth, though that mouth is something else that ruins Chibs' resolve, truth be told.

There's a lot on Chibs' mind, most or it unclean.

"Come here," he says, as he pulls Juice into him.

They're not tied together, but they might as well be.

Chibs shifts where he stands, his body not as strong as is used to be, no longer the pillar of his own youth. He’s not as contoured as he once was, the quick shift of gravity having settled in his skin pulling his muscles down with it. Juice is hard and taut, no spare fat to speak of, his dark skin stretched tight over a body that Chibs knew he mirrored once yet cannot remember when.

When he strips himself down to nothing the pull of him, virile and young and taut and strong, it stretches Chibs hard. The need of him digs its teeth into him.

Chibs enjoys being bitten.

Scars are what make a man.

"This is the best time, Chibby. The best place. Your place."

The view around them isn’t anything grand or luxurious. It’s a simple room in the simple house of a not so simple man but it’s everything and nothing at once. There need be no special place for this because that’s not the world they live in. It is not golden and it is not beautiful and it is not luxuriant. It is not the space but the people, not the place but the men that fill it. That’s where the beauty comes from, a little more perfect, the inexorable blend of men and men alike.

He knows the moment will pass if he waits any longer.

Juice's resolve is tangent at best.

"I'm gonna last about fifteen seconds, I swear."

It makes him smile and his smile is so much older than he is, his eyes so much more ancient than they should be at less than fifty years, but Juice makes him feel young again, as though the very feel of him peels back the layers and reverts him back to his former self, the guy he was before all of this, the man he was when the burdens had not yet took him.

Juice doesn’t realise the power he has, this passive boy, this submissive kid.

“You tell me to stop if you need to,” he whispers, “and, if I don't hear you, punch my lights out. You got that?”

“I'm not gonna tell you to stop.”

Well, then.

"Gonna tell you to hurry up, though."

Chibs slowly moves his mouth over Juice’s lips, pulling gently, sucking softly. Juice moans and his knees buckle. He sags against Chibs, a deadweight, His arms come up around Chibs' neck, steadying
himself. Those arms, lithe and strong, are a tumble of eager vines around his neck, kisses flavored with lime, tequila and salt, the salt of his skin. The salt of the fucking Earth and, this time, not the salt of his tears but something else that might eke from him.

Some other thing.

Chibs feels the welcome pressure of hands against the small of his back, and Juice's eyes open...open...

“No turning back now.”

...seeing all. Feeling all.

He'll give him what he wants tonight, be it slow, gentle or whether it be raw, urgent, primal with blisters on his skin from the burn of the friction.

The club took so much from the boy.

It's only fitting that it gives something back.

(*)

Juice told Chibs that Tully was his first but that wasn't entirely true, not on every level at least.

He chalks it all down to experimentation because teenage dabbling doesn't count, will never count, and you'd be hard pressed to find a guy who didn't at least think about it at some point or another. Juice never took it all the way...but that doesn't mean he didn't take it somewherer, however tentative.

There was just the one, just one guy among a small handful of girls. They kept it so secret and unspoken it was like it never happened at all and when Juice thinks back to how lonely it was, how pathetically inadequate, he's almost able to tell himself it didn't because it's better that way.

His first times have always been extreme, to say the least. His first day at school, scared of his own shadow, he lasted fourteen minutes before he vomited all over himself and cried for his mother who hadn't even left the building, she was so upset to leave him.

He'd have been picked on for that only the toughest looking kid in the class, went one further and wet himself. He never quite recovered, not like Juan Carlos, who was given a new pair of shorts and a lollipop and told that Mommy would be back later.

Point one to Juan Carlos.

Five years old, and he was already building up "scores."

The first time he got in trouble at school it was for a gang fight at recess with his best friend at his side, that very same kid who pissed his pants on the same day, who cried for his mother on the same day and who had drawn the exact same Thundercat as he did in their art project.

Their parents called them two peas in a pod. Such determined little boys, they said. So eager to prove themselves.

One of the other kids had called their friend Mikey a "retard", punched him in the nose, left him crying in pain and ruined his brand new Yankees Jersey. In his very first gang related crime, Juice had helped form a posse and had scared the living shit out of the snot nosed brat ensuring he would
never push around a weak kid again.

He'd been grounded for a month when his mother found out.

He was eight.

"I was just sticking up for Mikey," he'd argued, but not for the first time, his excuses were ignored.

"He's my friend."

Juice made a habit of standing up for his friends. His mother, sad eyed and poignant, would ask him: "Sweetheart, would they stand up for you?"

It became a pattern; the story and the thread of his life. He would fight someone's corner if they needed him to but very few people would fight his.

The first time he kissed anyone he was fourteen and it was that same little bully he befriended years before only five years in foster care had thrown a little disorder into his world by then. He was good at soccer and the guy, Jonah, chose him to be his training partner. They signed up for the local Under 14 team, met twice a week after school.

Jonah became the only constant in Juice's life, a red faced tough guy who would glare at anyone that got too close.

In between beating each other over the heads with the mock goalposts one Thursday evening, Jonah threw him to the ground and kissed him hard enough it took his breath away and when he was done he'd told him he'd kill him if anyone found out. They said it was "gay" and vowed it would never happen again, spat on the grass like proper little men, swearing like troopers, because that's what fourteen year old boys do.

The second time they did it, they said "Fuck it" and accepted it for what it was, a shared secret that was theirs and theirs alone, that meant nothing but was a way of letting of steam; a show of affection between two loveless boys who had no other way of expressing it. They never put a label on what it was. They never questioned it, it simply was.

The first time he was with a guy in any capacity he was fifteen, hyped up on stolen speed and ecstasy, a virtual ball of energy that just wouldn't give in. Jonah had sucked him so hard and so fierce there was no love in it, just pure teenage lust, all teeth and nails and no technique and it had felt so good but hurt so bad. It came under the heading of "stupidity" when he found himself tender for days and chewing his own gums for some jaw movement and he swore he'd never get high with Jonah again. They never understood what they were doing. They never should've been doing it at all.

The first time he got off on porn, it was a hardcore German import he'd found in a video store in Harlem. He'd been jerking off to it when his foster mother came in to put his clean clothes in the closet. She beat him with the rolled up magazine that flopped as she swung it and told him not to bring that filth into her house ever again.

He told her she wasn't his mother; that she could kick him out if she wanted to because he hated her anyway.

Juan Carlos wasn't always a nice kid.

It was at age fifteen when he first realised he was fucking his own life up, that this little renegade attitude he'd taken upon himself since his mother died was sending him on that downwards spiral to
hell that'd either leave him deadbeat and living off porn and Burger King or, worse still, dead. He was the same age when he realised that his love of computers and sports and bikes might just be a better option than the fighter pilot ambitions that he'd unrealistically harboured for fucking years because he didn't have 20/20 vision and never would have.

Before he was old enough to ride and didn't have access to a computer, his first love was skateboarding, which he found he was exceptionally good at - and he was coming up to his sixteenth birthday when he realised that people were actually taking note of that.

"I'm shit-hot," he'd told his foster-brother, "Dee at the skatepark said I could go semi-pro. He got contacts. He's gonna send over my tape."

The asshole had laughed at him and told him to stick to his fucking but he was eating his shorts, Bart style, when he came home with a freestyle medal from a tournament he entered but never thought he'd win.

His hopes of a professional contract came crashing down when they threw him in that juvie psych ward. Everything that came before that was erased, to Juice. Now, everything was just 'after'.

Dee disappeared, never can't back.

The first door closed.

The first time he joined a crew his initiation involved a beatdown. He took it, because he's always known how to take it, growing up the way he did, and at sixteen he was more than capable. He was bleeding from his obviously broken nose when they told him he was in and hugged him like he was family. He ran home to tell Jonah, still his biggest secret, his greatest denial and still his only constant. Jonah was fucking a loose Jewish girl called Maria at the time and had barely had time to hang at all. Juice had thought he'd be happy for him but he was wrong, so wrong. Jonah glared at him, back to that same tough kid he'd been when they first met, and told him he'd better have a nice fucking life because he wasn't hanging with a gangbanger.

The first time Juice realised his best friend was an asshole who didn't give a shit about him was just after the happiest moment of his life so far.

Juice never thought he'd experience first time feelings a second time around, but when he first kissed Chibs, all of that confusion had come crashing back to him and he realised, in that moment, he'd never really loved anyone at all. Not Jonah, who filled a space but whom he could never accept and who he denies even to this day. Not anyone.

Juice has been alone his whole life.

It's another secret but this one is better. It means more and, in time, it will be accepted as fact and truth, an untouchable reality that nobody would mess with. He'd consigned Jonah to a box in his head, never to be opened again. He'd been in there so long Juice could barely remember his face.

Chibs would never fit in one of his boxes, Juice knows that. No matter what happened.

He'd never put him in one.

His first encounter with the Scot doesn't leave him tarred and dirtied like he thought it might after what those bastards in Stockton did to him. Chibs tells him quietly in his ear, a growl more than a whisper, that "This will be the first of many, Juicy Boy. You hear me?"

He asks him if that's okay and for the first time, Juice knows it truly, truly is.
He stumbles over his words. His breath. His everything.

"Fuck...yeah, yeah, that's fine, Chibs that's fine..."

He can feel Chibs' breath on his shoulder as he prepares him and this isn't going to hurt.

Love isn't supposed to hurt.

(*)

Chibs can't remember the last time he'd felt so awake, practically humming with unused energy, a sense of anticipation that he couldn't possibly have explain. He knows Juice can feel it too, can see the soft light flashing in his eyes as he peers at him over his shoulder through dark lashes. The eyes are almost primal, burning with unspent desire.

There's no mistaking the permission here.

There's no misunderstanding the consent.

The first time Chibs and Juice come together there is no pain but that rigid burn of accommodation, that fierce, deep agony that is gone quickfast and replaced with a kind of keening, filling pressure that cannot be underestimated.

The first time they fuck, the sky turns from blue to black, a gigantic cosmic bruise that doesn’t hurt but presses hard, and deep, vast and omnipresent. He fucks him gently, if that's at all possible with the amount of pressure between them, all hands and mouths and teeth and lip and firm, rigid cocks that battle and duel. He scratches without the blood, burns without scar-tissue, bruises without the pain and it’s enough to feel, but not enough to hurt. The taste of Juice as it floods across Chibs's tongue--rich, metallic, strong…is full of love and hope, and something dark and hot and old, the low unmistakable note of lust.

“Oh, Christ.”

Chibs’ touch is electric against the younger man's skin, like lightning, like the sparks that illuminated the sky on this strange Brit celebration day and, when he pushes Juice down and holds him, his body practically seizes with expectation. He doesn't flinch, nor does he break. He whimpers not from apprehension but from genuine expectation and when Chibs asks him if he is okay he practically growls at him as he pushes back against him, dominant in his submissive stance. Passive yet demanding.

“Stop. Talking.”

“Aye, lad.”

Juice’s reciprocation is the beginning of a flame, that light, bright orange that dances into life when a match touches a candlewick. Chibs is the passion yet Juice is the warmth.

Together they are an integration of all things, a combustible entity that could light the world, given half the chance, and will certainly light the club. There's more to this than a hard cock and aching arousal.

This is a coming together. This is a new chapter; a union of old and new, past and present.

This is the very future and, as they move in time with each other, there is a kind of ritualistic exorcism of all of the shit they've endured.
When they fuck it's earth, wind, rain and fire all at once, an elemental impossibility that just happens to work.

Chibs builds up the pace and Juice, Juice just moves with it, squeezes his thighs, mimicking the spasms his lips form as his moans fail to become words, those breathless sounds never quite make it into fruition, simply dying in the silence of his own near orgasm. The keening choke coupled with Chibs' strained groans are a symphony, of sorts, the score of all things that had gone unsaid and undone between them.

It all comes fast, as fast Juice expected, but there's no shame in that. Not when this has been accumulating for so long. Not when the final realisation has come after weeks, months, years of silent buildup that both of them compartmentalised. Ignored.

Chibs follows suit, raining down inside of Juice's perfect body, speaking for him in his silence as he tells him it was everything.

It's like an answer to a question long asked; a solution to a problem that was never voiced or aired and the only thing that either of them can think is: What took us so long?

Sometimes, something golden can rise from filthy ashes. This is one of those times.

Breathing deeply, Chibs rests his forehead against Juice's chest as he turns, so smooth, heart beating underneath him at a thousand beats per minute, or so it seems. It sounds strong and healthy and spirited and, Chibs thinks, he's so grateful it's beating at all. Juice's hands caress his hairline and he leans down, hands trailing over him until Chibs can't stand to look away any more and he raises his eyes to meet him.

Juice is asking him “Okay?” in words that don't make it to air.

“I've been wanting to do that,” Chibs whispers, ‘since you came back to the clubhouse in that fucking nappy and a big stupid grin on your face.’

Juice smiles as he nudges him and calls him a dirty old man.

Perhaps that was the start of all of this; mocking, playful exchanges born on a summer's day.

Perhaps they were always destined for this but people led them on paths that did not allow for it; that did not place them on the roads they were meant to travel for it all come together.

Perhaps they made the earth move for each other like the thunder is moving the sky tonight. Perhaps they rained down fucking sulphur like the rockets and screamers that split the sky. Maybe they painted the sky red and brought forth the storms that wrack it.

Sex is like a rebirth of sorts, Chibs, thinks, and 49 years after the last time he's been born again.

Tonight, he knows without doubt he will not have to face it all alone and that the future is full and rich and young again. Tomorrow when he rolls over, his arm won't be flung across an empty bed when his dreams feel too real and vivid and his reality only disappoints him.

There will be no disappointment after this.

There can only be anticipation of what comes next for them and, God, it's good to value the future instead of fearing what will become of it.
They lie in bed together, naked apart from the shroud of unspoken promises and proclamations that cover them like a second skin, like the cut they wear on their backs that promises a life that makes sense to them, now. Chibs' body and mind ache but it's offset by Juice's presence lying quietly beside him.

He looks content. Quiet. Satisfied. For the first time in too, too long, he looks at peace.

Chibs knows that Juice thinks he's in love and maybe he is. Maybe they both are.

He knows that things could be worse because Juice is not broken again. He is worn out and tired and all the more complete for it because the damage he wore for a long time no longer fits him and he cannot get it fastened over the growth of him. Nothing can touch him. Not now, Chibs thinks, and not ever.

Outside, the storm still swirls fierce, though he's sure it will break soon as rain pelts down in the streets of Charming, washing away all of the shit with it.

Chibs washed away a lot of shit tonight. They say that trust comes before a fall, and that's why they're going to fall for each other, though not like the Mills and Boon crap his wife used to go for. They are men, after all. Still, he wanted to be sensitive to the boy's unique needs. He waited until he was given permission…and then fall he did. Hard. He doesn't think he'll recover, doesn't think he wants to.

Chibs winds back time. Lives.

Juice regenerates. Reverberates.

Just like that.

It's a beautiful fucking thing, it really is.
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Jax and Tully discuss how things are, Juice gives Chibs a nice awakening and Venus is the goddess of all things.

Very conversational, I do apologise.

*confidenceissues*

Chibs was shaped by his short time in the army. Programmed. Debriefed. Brainwashed, in a sense, because aren’t all young men that are soldiers taught to act against their very human morals? To kill. To maim. To wipe out.

To protect, Chibs prefers to think.

A soldier is a form forged out of rigorous physical training and strict discipline consisting of nothing but hard lines and lean muscle. That's just the physical side of them.

Their minds are lined and lean, too.

Their order is absolute.

He remembers basic training, the angry roars of his sergeants (“you are a soldier, boy! You do not think, you act!”), and he didn’t think, he acted. He acted and acted and acted, with the army, with IRA, with the club. He acted until there was a sea of corpses below him and he was still alive in the crow’s nest peering down at the graveyard below.

His training kicked in and told him it was for the good of his country, the good of the cause, the good of the club.

It wasn't good.

Chibs is done with killing. Between all of his factions, he’s taken enough from this world to last a lifetime. In his own mind, he saw himself in every last person he killed and he wonders, is that when he stopped being himself?

When he took his first life, is that when Filip Telford ceased to be?

He dreams about them, the people he has killed, the lives he has ruined. Brother’s lives. Stranger’s lives. He dreams about the bodies he has put in the ground by order of the army, the Irish and the Club. He dreams of watching the light go out of men’s eyes and knowing he’s the one that dimmed it. He dreams of sons growing up without fathers, fathers growing up without sons, all because he learned not to disobey an order.

He dreams about Juice slowly walking across a Diner car park before falling to his knees, the red patch spreading across his back like bloody armistice poppies because Unser had not stopped Chibs and he’d grabbed that gun knowing he’d end him.
('He has to go.')

He would've done it. That’s how tightly he was following orders. That’s how brainwashed he was by his ‘commanding officer’, little more than a man-child himself with a power complex so strong and hard he’d put a dictator to shame.

It’s also how much he wanted an end for the boy, an end to a madness of the club’s making and his own. A mercy kill.

Juice could’ve died.

Chibs could’ve killed him and, without a shadow of a doubt, his last words would’ve been to tell him how much he loved him.

Does the army prepare you for that? Does anything?

He wakes up panting from the dream, his body tense and riddled with sweat, his muscles shaking where they’d been coiled for so long. It takes him awhile to orientate himself to where he is, who he is with.

“Juice – “

Juice is there at the foot of the bed very much alive, very much smiling and there is no blood to be seen. There are no holes in his back other than the scarred up patches where the shiv went in back in Stockton.

There is now sorrow, no bloodstained last words.

There was no mercy kill.

“Morning, sunshine.”

“I’m sorry, lad, did I wake you? Fucking dreams, clear as day. You were – “

Dying. Dead. Killed by my own hand.

He shakes his head as he runs his hands over Juice’s, fingers through his hair, thumbs digging into his temples so as to feel him.

“ – Christ.”

“Shhhh, I’m fine. I’m okay. I’m right here. See? You can even touch me.”

“Aye, you are.”

Chibs is glad he’s here. More than anything, he's happy for that.

He wasn’t anticipating this. Not this. Not him and Juice here together. He was not anticipating bringing him home and writing his name across the boy’s back with fingernails instead of bullets, offering him vibrant life instead of death. All the boy wanted was his family back; for things not to hurt any more. All Chibs wanted, deep down, was for him to be at peace, even if that meant him being gone.

Is this peace?

He never thought it could be this way because he’s a hollow old man and Juice is….well, Juice is
Juice.

It certainly feels like amity.

He’s not anticipating Juice’s mouth pressed against his hip bone, those perfect teeth biting the hair and pulling just enough to feel but not enough to cause pain. He’s not expecting the small hands on his thighs, stroking and kneading by way of distraction.

“Don’t worry,” Juice whispers. “I’m right here. It was just a dream. I didn’t die.”

“But it could’ve. Christ, don’t you realise?”

“Doesn’t matter. That was then. This is now.”

"And what is this, lad?"

"Nothing," he smiles. “Just playing. Wanted you to know you weren’t some drunk fuck. I figured this was the best way since I’m not too good with words.”

When Juice moves upwards, stealth-like, and bites across Chibs’s collarbone, it hurts. It hurts, but it’s that good hurt, the kind that grounds him in the present like a rubber band to a wrist might. His dark eyes are imploring, asking for permission, and Chibs finds the longer he looks into them, the more his dreams start to scatter. How alive does he look? How confident? How self-assured?”

(‘He doesn’t know his ass from his elbow, Chibs. That boy’s trouble.’)

He's not the boy he was before. Unser told Chibs that was a good thing.

He's starting to see just how true that is.

“Go on, lad.”

Chibs doesn’t need to coax anything from Juice. It’s all here. They mesh. He might not ‘click’ with everyone but with Juice that is always, always there. Chibs need not ‘unlock’ him because the boy is an open book: no secrets, not any more, only this honesty. This beautiful body, cheetah-like lithe and strong, a smile that always made Chibs feel there was something right in the world.

Chibs looks down at him but not upon him, and when Juice whispers “tell me what you need” as he bites his earlobe, Chibs chooses to ask for nothing at all.

“What can I do to make it better?”

“Nothin’, lad. You’re all good.”

He’s alive. That’s all he can ask for. That’s all that matters.

“You’re all good boy, Juicy.”

“A real catch. I know. Gemma said I’d make a great old lady one day.”

He is energy, and he is honesty, and he is the fucking antithesis of every last bastard that ever got inside of Chibs’ head and pushed him like a puppet master.

"She spoke the truth."

Juice will never ask of him things that go against him. He will never push him where he does not
want to be. In Chibs’s seemingly schizophrenic existence, these little moments of pure, open humanity are what keep him on the straight and narrow - or, simply on the narrow, because there’s nothing straight about him. Not since Juice. Not anymore.

Juice did push him that way, though he went readily, willingly, capably and knowingly.

“She got twenty minutes before we need to get up,” Juice whispers. “Do whatever you want with me, Pres. Lord over me.”

As far as invitations go, it’s one he can’t quite turn down.

“Anything? Bit of a dangerous offer, that, lad.”

“I trust you.”

They’re powerful words coming from this new Juice, whose naivety has given way to a kind of mental sophistication that doesn’t quite fit him but he’ll grow into.

He’ll grow.

(*)

Long eyelashes curling skyward, skin that tans gold in the sun. Blue irises. Hair that curls around the ears when it gets too long. The very epitome of angelic.

Jax's touch could melt ice. His face could stop traffic.

Even now.

Now, his head is bullet-shaven almost down to the bone and only a shadow of gold remains over a tight, perfect skull. His eyes are full of darkness, brimming with testosterone, muscular arms rounded near the shoulders, veins in his forearms throbbing and ripe with blood. His manner could strip the paint from walls and there's no sunshine in him, not even a drop.

For Tully he is the opposite of Juice; ‘live’ to the boy’s ‘neutral’ – blue to his brown.

He intrigues him in wholly different ways.

Tully watches as Jax flicks his cigarette onto the floor, a red ember on the end of a paper filter. He’s given up on the electronic variety because he lies to himself enough already as it is, Tully thinks, so he might as well have the real thing when it comes to an achievable vice. The ash reminds him of another time in another place. Planned arson. Burning evidence. A crime erased by fire.

It surprises Tully that his first thought doesn’t conjure up Holocaust jokes the way it used to.

('How many Jews can you fit in a car?)

How far he’s come.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Jax asks, and Tully tilts his head to the side as if to take in the whole of him because he's learned that makes Teller boil. "You got something to say, say it."

“You cut your hair.”

“You don’t say.”
“Is that to stop people from grabbing it in the showers? Schoolboy error. They’ll just grab you by the throat instead.”

“Is that why you did it? Actually, forget I said that. We both know you’re the one likely to come up from behind.”

Tully knows quite well Jax would fight tooth and nail before he would succumb to predators that way.

It doesn’t hurt to remind him he could, though.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you, to see me on my knees for someone?”

“Actually, no. I have no interest in you in that way. I thought I made that perfectly clear.”

"I guess I'm not your type. You seem to appreciate guys you can push around."

He's in a glass house and he's throwing stones. They're not hitting their mark. They're rolling back and hitting Jax himself. There'll be no glass left soon, nothing left to protect him from his own failures.

Tully eyes him curiously.

"You don't think I could push you around, Jax?"

"Wanna try it? See what happens?"

"Brave guy. I bruised your face up pretty bad, if you'll remember. I didn't see you coming back at me."

He couldn't. Not in a room full of AB allies and scared shitless neutrals but Tully's always been a fan of the revisionist movement.

He's often sparse with the fluid truth.

"One punch doesn't make you a victor, Tully, just like fighting one guy’s corner doesn’t make you less of a scumbag. Remember that."

“I'll consider myself well and truly told.”

Look at him, Tully thinks, aggressive to the point of pathetic, chest puffed out like it’s going to make a difference. He thinks his reputation will go before him and that each and every assault he has carried out in the name of his club will serve as a warning to those that look to get close to him.

He thinks he looks less pretty with his head buzzed down, less appealing. He thinks he looks like a thug, unapproachable, unfuckable, undone.

He is none of those things. It just makes his eyes look wider.

Juice was the same.

"Look, are we really going to do this again?"

There’s a raw, aggressive look on his face. Despite himself, Tully imagines him to be rough during sex then wonders why he's thinking of sex at all; whether the male pheromone that's so rife in the air is penetrating the pseudo-professional stance he's got going on here.
He's not Tully's type, but he thinks about sex a lot, natural in a place like this and in the same way he used to think "would she dirty herself with a black man?" of the women he encountered he now asks "would he scream against supremacy?"

He imagines Teller with pumped up muscles and a stomach made of steel, super-charged static electric. Live. Dangerous.

He imagines Jax would claw his eyes out...

"I'm not looking for a fight," Tully says, “nor am I looking for a fuck. I brought you here to talk to you. We are capable of conversing like adults, right?"

"I don't know. You gonna start talking about German shepherds again? I'm not in the mood for puzzles."

"That's cool. I mean you no enmity."

Tully tries to diffuse the bomb without it going off yet he cannot deny he feels a thrill at brushing the wires because each and every time Jax tenses like this it’s a victory; each and every time he makes himself tall and tries to look imposing, it’s a triumph.

Tully could crush him so easily, he knows that much, because while there’s no mistaking the power in Teller’s body it’s nothing compared to the power of Tully’s words.

It's nothing compared to the power of Juice's words either, when Tully puts it to him.

“Look, I said everything I needed to say yesterday. The club is done with you. I assume you’ve been given confirmation of that from the AB?”

“I have.”

“Then, we’re through. I know Juice cut you off. You’re not gonna get to him through me. I assume that's what we're still doing here?”

To assume is to make an ass of you and me but Teller isn't wrong. There's a brain in that perfectly shaped skull of his even if he suppresses it with his shameful lack of common sense.

“He's a very suggestible boy. You used that to your advantage. I'll use it to mine. My offer to him still stands. I was going to put it to -”

“ – let me just stop you right there. Save your breath. I know you’ll need it for when you’re trying to sweet-talk that little thief you got underneath you. Whether I live or die? It's totally inconsequential to Juice. He has everything he wants now.”

His level of denial would put Ernst Zundel to shame.

He's a proud man, too proud to admit that it burns. Tully wonders how proud he'll be when Mr Mayhem finally comes for him. He also wonders just how deep rooted his 'change' has been, skin deep or bone deep, because despite everything he still harbours such ill thought.

There’s no real difference at all.

“You still think this was a game to him, He had no interest in getting one over you. You keep telling yourself he came from a malicious place but you don’t believe that at all, do you? You know that boy would show clemency to you even now, whether you deserve it or not."
"You seem to be operating under the assumption I want to live. I’m ready to do my duty. He gives you the thumbs up to pull the shields away? I'd thank him for it."

“And, what is your duty? To die for the sins of the club? To martyr yourself? It's only martyrdom if you’re repentant, Jax, and Dismas you are not. Your death will mean absolutely nothing. I doubt they’d even collect your body at this point. Were you planning on collecting his?"

Silence.

"Didn't think so."

Of course they weren’t. Why would they? Those who are dishonourably discharged are not given the gun salutes when they're laid in the ground.

Who would've claimed him at all?

“So, what are you thinking? You’re gonna let him give my life or death some meaning? You think I’m worth that much to him?”

“Yes. I assume he has things he'd like to say to you, pieces he'd like to tie up.”

“If he’s got this unfinished business with me, where is he? I haven't had a visit request. I don't see him breaking the door down.”

“Biding his time, I imagine. Waiting for the right moment. You know the worst thing you ever did to him? Sent him in here to die thinking everyone hated him. He'd do anything to stop that happening to someone else. Even you. And, you say he has no interest in you?”

Jax looks like he's holding in a response, physically more than verbally. Tully can only imagine how it feels to be called out like that.

“You really are a provocative son of a bitch, aren’t you?”

"Maybe. But, at least I'm consistent."

(*)

It continues.

The tiny camera in the corner of the room films a battle of wills as one man tries to take down his opposition with words. Some viewing it might be. Some movie. Thriller or drama, that is yet to be decided. Violent bludgeoning bloodbath or the taming of the wolf, that has yet to be established but Tully’s soothing voice often works miracles on the strongest of adversaries, his presence alone a strange miracle in de-escalating even the most implosive or explosive of human beings.

He hasn’t de-escalated Teller yet.

He’s not sure he wants to.

"What made you this way?" he asks. "Man to man. I’ve been meaning to ask."

When he utters the words “My mother made me what I am” it’s not with the loving tone of a son thankful to her for giving him the world but the anger and frustration of a child that blames his parent for the battles he has to face in life and the problems he has encountered.

"A mother's only masterpiece is her child."
"My mother clearly wasn't an artist."

Tully wonders if Jax has ever had to take responsibility for anything in his life or if he learned from the minute he was born how privileged and perfect he was.

He came into this world sucking on a silver spoon. He'll go out of it choking on his own hypocrisy.

“So, who’s it gonna be? Whose gonna take me out?”

“Spicks, blacks, chinks, take your pick. Anything goes.”

Jax nods his head.

“Bring it on.”

The words are like a true hero only the sentiment couldn't be more hollow. Maybe it’s just Jax that’s hollow. Maybe he feels nothing at all.

“You don’t mean that, Jackson.”

“What would you know?”

“A lot more than you think. I know a coward when I see one. You're all talk. You spend enough time in here, you learn how people tick. It makes you a master at getting inside people’s heads.”

"Nothing for you inside by head, man."

Tully doubts there’s anything in there for anybody.

“Let me take a shot at it. You say you wanna do the right thing by your club. I think you convince yourself of that but, is it really true? You want to atone for your sins, but you won't take responsibility for them so that's not gonna work either. You'd like to be a good guy because you haven’t quite realised you’re as much the devil’s spawn as I am. You say you love your brothers but you’d throw them under incoming traffic if it meant saving your own ass.”

"That what your boy told you? Fed all of me in your ear when you had him cornered?”

“No. It’s what you told me yourself. In everything you do. In his higher moments, all he told me was how much he loved you and your guys..”

(I just want him to hear me out. I never meant to hurt the club..’)

“And, you think doin’ good by him’s gonna help absolve you from all the shit you’ve pulled?”

“No, but it’s a start. Save one man and you save the world. Isn’t that what they said about Neeson in that Speilberg propaganda flick?”

“You’re a real piece of work, you know that?”

“So they tell me.”

They tell Tully a lot of things. They tell him he's onto something with his thoughts and his politics. They call him a true visionary. Alternately, tell him he's a disgusting example of whites in the States. Christell calls him a saviour...
“Chibs got himself strong papa wolf sentiments. You won’t get near. He’ll protect Juice at all costs, rat or not.”

He'll never let go of the notion that Juice is a traitor.

Maybe the kid needs to show him just how loyal he is.

(*)

They stay like this for a while. Jax paces, Tully allows it. He doesn’t call him back. He flexes his muscles every so often as if proving to anyone that watches how strong he is; how primed and ready for a fight he is. In the end, he can no longer contain it, this thought he keeps having, this lie he’s convinced himself is truth. The thoughts in his head, those thoughts not meant for Tully, must be deadening.

But, there is one query that’s his and his alone, a life mystery that makes no sense to anyone.

"Why the hard-on for him, man? Why him? I don't get it."

"No, I dare say you wouldn't."

In truth, Tully doesn't get it either. All he knows is that, no matter how well Christell reads Shakespeare or how tight his body is, no matter how blond his hair and how sky blue his eyes, he'll never even come close to that lost, brave boy who is everything wrong in Tully's waning ideals.

They say we can't help how we fall. Amon Goeth fell for a Jew after all.

For the first time in a long time, the cracks in Teller's armour begin to show and the desperation inside of him forces its way through. There’s only so long a man can hold up audacity before the pressure of it starts to get to him.

“It wasn’t personal, me and him. If it'd been Tig? Chibs? It would've been the same.”

“*It wasn't personal.* That’s the funniest thing you’ve said since I met you. You were Giupetto and he was your Pinnochio. The lies you had him tell, Jax. The things you had him do. So brutal.”

"And you're the voice of moral reason? A neo-nazi race traitor?"

"I'm just telling you how it is."

When Jax kicks the wall it serves well to establish his frustration and Tully knows he has him. That fragile control, it never lasted long. The wall trembles but doesn’t break. It shudders, but nothing cracks. If Tully could see Jax’s face, now, he’d see that it was twisted. No longer handsome.

"What I did," he growls, head pressed against the wall, feet tucked tight into it, "you couldn't even begin to understand."

"Why, because I appreciate a different order to you? You know what your problem is? You can't see any other perspective but your own. A good King can always hear his subjects. Guess that's why you weren’t a good king."

“I did my best in a bad situation. I did what I thought was right.”

Jax isn’t going to acknowledge what’s wrong because doing that would be admitting that HE is wrong and his whole world revolves around the fact that he never is.
It's no wonder they call it chapel. Church.

Jax was a religion unto himself.

"Are you done with me?" he asks, and he's fading, now. "Cause, I'm done with you."

"I'll be done when I'm done. I may well be the difference between life and death for you, Jax. You'd do well to remember that when you're speaking to me."

It sounds so farfetched. So fanatical.

It is what it is.

“Listen to you,” Jax smirk. “You sound like Hitler himself. Which line are you hoping he chooses for me? The one that consigns me to this for the next fifty years or the one that sends me straight to the gas chambers?”

The good line or the bad line? Which one is which?

He shrugs.

"Not my choice to make."

(*)

Juice is rubbing up his girl when the call comes.

She’s beautiful, full bodied and gleaming and whoever wraps their thighs around her will be a lucky man indeed. He’s spent six days on her, feeling her up from top to bottom, tuning her every inch, caressing every part of her with a loving hand. She’s flush-red, thick up top and she purrs like kitten when she’s toed in the right way.

He calls her Ruby.

Juice would keep Ruby for himself if only he could but she’s meant for another, a buyer from the other side of the country who is flying in just to collect her. Juice painted a classic lady on her mainframe, big busted and blonde, and the overall effect is so retro, so classic, so sophisticated that he’s pretty sure the guy will be jizzing all over her when he finally gets to ride her.

Tig calls her a work of true art, real boner material, and tells Juice he’s wasted on computers.

“You’re gonna make one man's penis very, very happy, Jerkoff.”

Isn’t he already?

He’s lost in her body entirely when that phone rings and, with his hands covered in wax and his head full of polish fumes, he doesn’t even check the display.

“Hey,” he says, energetic and jovial. “What’s up?”

“Warm welcome for an old friend.”

And, just like that, the energy fades. The happiness scatters and, in its place, the annoyance bleeds in.

He doesn’t say a single word before releasing the call.
“Damn it.”

There is a beat, a pulse, and the phone rings again because Ron Tully is the most persistent motherfucker Juice has ever met and, if nothing else, he always follows through on a thought. It might not be a wanted thought but that doesn’t matter to him.

He releases the call before it has a chance to connect.

This happens more five times before Juice finally loses his resolve and a smarter man may have switched off the phone, a more aggressive man smashing it beneath his foot, but Juice is neither smart nor aggressive.

He just can’t stand the aggravation.

“What?”

“I need to talk to you.”

“I got nothing to say to you. We’re done.”

“And, what about Teller? Is he done too, in your eyes?”

“He’s got nothing to do with me.”

It’s not entirely true. Juice has got that visit request sitting in his bedroom drawer and he’s this close, this close, to putting it in at Stockton.

“I’ve been keeping him close. I was meaning to tell you but you skipped out on me before I had the chance.”

“I never asked you to.”

“No. But, nevertheless, I took it upon myself to keep him safe. So many people out to kill him, Juice. You wouldn’t believe how difficult it’s been.”

“And, why would I care, again?”

“Because you’re all about closure and making right with the world. You never got that with Jax. You just got a hollow thanks and a threat to kill before he wiped his hands of you. How do you sleep at night when that’s so…raw? I know I couldn’t.”

(‘Don’t say you’re sorry. Don’t say anything. Thank you for telling me the truth. I’ll make sure it’s quick.’)

Juice swallows hard. In years to come, those words will still haunt him, the very moment a man he loved and looked up to literally condemned him to death when all he wanted from him was understanding. Forgiveness. He can hear them so clearly, even now.

He’ll never stop hearing them.

“Whatever happens to him,” he says, “is nothing to do with me.”

“His life or death? All yours, sweetheart.”

“No, it isn't. Club vote. What I want doesn’t matter.”
“Would you have voted yes? “

Yes. No. He doesn’t know. It’s unfair to even ask that question. It was taken out of his hands because of his excommunication.

He wasn’t even a son then.

He feels the beginnings of a headache as it scratches behind his eyes, only Tully’s scratches aren’t pleasurable like Chibs’.

They just hurt.

“Look, can we please just stop this? He’d be better off dead than living in that place anyway. Anyone offs him? That’d be the kindest thing.”

“I know you have a lot to say to him. I can make it happen. No guards, no cameras, just you and him. But time’s runnin’ out. You gotta do it soon.”

No guards. No cameras. So much room for error. For violence. With Juice’s brittle courage, he can’t think of anything worse.

"Just give the word and I’ll make sure he keeps on breathing until you’ve had your say. Balance the scales again.”

Balance. What is this?

What is he saying?

“Think of it as a gift, from me to you. A thank you.”

“What the Hell are you thanking me for?”

“Opening my eyes.”

“I don’t want your thanks.”

“Take something good from all of this. Kill him or save him. But, make the choice. Have at that. You earned it, sweetheart.”

Juice wonders how this could be considered ‘something good’; how playing a game of roulette with Jax Teller could possibly give him any pleasure at all.

Tully doesn’t know him in the slightest.

“Just...stop fucking with my head. It’s wasting both of our times. I know Jax well enough to know he’d rather be shivved in the skull than live in there with guys like you. I would’ve rather died. Remember?”

Juice shoots. He feels like he’s scored with that one.

It’s a flimsy triumph but it’s there.

“Juice - ”

Tully’s voice has a hitch to it. It’s not something Juice has ever heard before. It’s not something he ever expected to hear and it gives him a slight jolt.
"Are you listening to what I'm saying?"

Juice smiles.

“These are desperate measures from a desperate man. It’s pretty sad, playing off one guy against another.”

"Who's playing?"

"Just…let me go, Ron. I was never yours to begin with. I’m not yours now."

He hangs up the phone, wipes his hands on his trousers.

He takes a deep breath, then another, and then he gets back to polishing his work as if nothing has happened at all. That’s how he knows he’s in control now.

It niggles at him, though, that much is true. Jax Teller, he squirms inside of his head.

He’ll think about that later.

He’ll box him off until he's ready to deal.

(*)

“You were right. Your life and death are of no significance to him. Oh, how the mighty have fallen.”

Maybe Tully was wrong about him because the look on Teller’s face is of gratitude. Of pride, even, like the boy has finally done him good.

“I taught him well.”

“You’d like to think so, wouldn’t you?”

“He’s a slow learner but he finally got there. Me living? That would be the biggest form of punishment there is. Juice wouldn’t want that. He’s too much of a nice guy.”

“Oh? I thought he was the devil?"

Jax says nothing.

Tully smiles.

Gotchya.

“Isn’t it ironic? You sent him in here to die for you and now you’re dying for him.”

“I’m not dying for him.”

“He opted not to save you.”

“He opted not to go against the club. There’s a subtle difference. I would've done the same.”

“So you think he’s loyal, now? A loyal, nice guy. I thought he was a traitor and a rat?”

Again, Jax says nothing.

Those were his own words.
“How wrong you were.”

And, as if it’s finally struck home, Teller says “yeah.”

(*)

Juice is never sure what to do with choice. Big choices have often drowned him, little choices leaving him second-guessing. It got to the point where expressing an opinion left him open-mouthed and frozen because he was terrified of saying the wrong thing.

He made himself helpless, in effect.

In the hospital, they gave him a notebook and a pen, told him to write how he felt, what he thought, triggers and fears and things that kept him awake at night. Note down anything that leaves you stranded and frozen, they said, and he’d scratched his head and wondered “Why?” He was reluctant until they called it a therapy requirement and made it more command than request. Juice has always responded to commands. He’s always been more inclined to act when he was told, not when he was given a choice.

He realised it was helpful; that they weren’t just yanking his chain and wasting his time with pointless therapy he could’ve got from a book if they’d only let him go. He filled empty pages with thoughts that only meant something to him, scrawlings that would be arbitrary and random if anyone else were to look at them.

Choices. Consequences. All of the things he got wrong. All of the things he wished he’d chosen differently over.

All of the wrongs he’d carried out in the name of someone else, all of the immoralities and all of the sins.

He took great pleasure in taking that pencil and angrily scribbling them out, erasing them from existence like some literary casting out. He knew it wouldn’t change anything because the past can’t be revised or erased but, as an exercise of pure catharsis, it made him feel good for a few seconds.

He keeps it up to this day, a small black leather notebook next to his bed with an italic pen and in it he writes all of the things that play on his mind, though he doesn’t scribble them out any more.

He writes Jax Teller’s name all over it because Jax is a raw, open wound and every so often, Juice feels he has to poke his fingers in it.

He draws sometimes too, little sketches that only scratch the surface of the memory they relate to. A face with large eyes and a doe smile, his mother’s face before she left him, still smiling the way only a mother can at her little boy. It’s his last memory of her, kissing him on the cheek and telling him that he’d score ten goals and the other boys would hoist him on their shoulders and love him for it.

He treasures that memory.

Lately, he’s been drawing a large eye, lined at the corners with a pupil as small as a pinprick. It’s fierce and angry and he knows it belongs to Jax.

There’s never anything in that eye he draws, no thought or expression, no condemnation or clemency.

He wonders what he’d see in them now. Would they ask for forgiveness? Would they plead for an out or, worse yet, would they still be as empty as they always were but for the subtle hint of scorn
that coloured them by default?

“If you had someone’s life and death in your hands,” he asks Venus, the Goddess of all things right and just, “what would you do?”

He asks her because he knows her. He puts the question to her because she has not been darkened by as many kills as Chibs and has more respect for human life than Hap. She’s less crazy than Tig and less vengeful than Rat.

She is a keeper of all things and will ask no further questions.

That’s the main thing right now.

“It all depends what kinda life they’re livin’ and if they’d thank me for savin’ it or takin’ it. It’s all about lookin’ at the good and the bad. . . .”

“What do you mean?”

"I mean, is it better to live or is it better to die, ‘cause there’s a difference between living and existing. We put kitties and horses outta their misery if their life aint worth living. We oughtta do the same for people. If I thought I was savin’ someone from a life of pain? Gimme the gun and I’ll shoot ‘em myself.”

That’s justification, to Venus. To relieve a person’s pain. That’s worth killing them for.

Maybe it’s mercy to Juice, too.

It gives him all he needs to know. He files it away with all his other thoughts to weigh against and to clarify because what he’s learned is that looking at all sides is the basis of good decision making. The choices that come from that are solid. Trustworthy.

He flashes her a grin in the hopes it evades curiosity.

“Thanks, V.”

“Something on your mind, darlin’?”

“Just a rhetorical question. No biggie. Don’t worry about it.”

“Alrighty, then. You go clean up, now. Your buyer’s gonna be here any minute. Don’t wanna shake his hand with all that ugly grease all over it.”

“Sure, Mom.”

Juice has no interest in carrying the weight of Jax Teller’s life on his shoulders. He’s carried enough for him already; the weight of Darvany’s murder, the weight of Clay’s death, the weight of Gemma’s. He’s not prepared to make the choice as to whether Jax martyrs himself in a grey-walled cell in Stockton.

What will be will be. Juice is not God. None of them are.

Juice’s very foundations are paper-thin at best. He’s building up on the layers as the days go by but he’d still buckle under a heavy load, he knows that, but he also knows that Jax would rather die than live like that, a caged animal with no place to go but down. He felt that way himself. A shiv to the neck would be a momentary pain weighed against a lifetime of the same walls, the same threats, the same crushing emptiness.
Is a mercy-killing acceptable to God?

Would He forgive?

It is welcome relief. It’s what he’d tell Jax if he saw him, would look him in the eye and tell him “I couldn’t save you. I knew you wouldn’t want me to.” He’d tell him “I don’t hate you, but I’m glad you’re going.”

He knows Jax would understand. It’s in the rules after all.

That night, he goes home and he takes that request out of his drawer.

He signs his name in the bottom will file it in the morning and hope that Jax gives him the time he’s asking for.

it's nothing to do with Tully.

Going through official channels means he'll cut him out entirely.
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Unser hears but does not see, Chibs and Juice realise they cannot contain each other.

Many thanks for your nice words. So helpful. Come say hello if you get the chance!!!
We all love that on here.

For those who know choose to know him, Juice is so many things.

He’s kind, charming, endearingly stressed out. He’s sometimes lonely, sometimes neurotic, sometimes timid and post-traumatic. He’s unbalanced and bold and strong and trepid. He knows what he wants and at times, flinching and tentative at others. His needs are so very simple and so highly sophisticated all at once.

He has wayward eyes, mischievous eyes and yet soft eyes, beautiful and warm.

He has a thoughtful brow and a curious one, is a criminal and an innocent. He wants something new, something different, something naughty and subversive, but he also wants to be held until he sleeps, embraced in another man’s arms.

He wants hours of guiltless, exclusive attention yet he wants silence, too, wants quiet solitude, all different all at any given time.

He knows his limits, yet he exceeds them.

If one thing is certain, he’ll keep Chibs on his toes.

Like a wagging dog, that’s how he arrives tonight, exuberant and excited as he enters the clubhouse yet he pauses at the threshold in comic deliberation.

That moment of hesitation is Juice at his most endearing.

“You wanna….in here? Seriously?”

He points.

“I thought we were goin’ back to your place?”

“Is that all you think about, boy? Just get in, will you? I got a few things I need to tie up.”

Juice smiles at the words and asks “Me included?” before pulling it together and saying “Yes, sir.”

Chibs has learned a lot about Juice, the two sides that make him up, the good and the challenging.

When he’s on his game, Juice has a wicked sense of humour, is entertaining as fuck when the mood takes him and the kid notices absolutely everything. A discussion with him about a half remembered film is pointless. He picks up on every little thing, every little quirk, every little error.

(‘Terminator makes no sense whatsoever, and I’ll tell you why.’)
He sees endings before they happen, sees love affairs before the people even realise they're in love, no mean feat for a man who was often called out for his lack of social skills.

(‘The boy’s clueless. Has he even spoke to a woman before?’)

He reads well, though.

“I knew Tig’d end up with V. I just knew.”

“How d’you know, Juicy Boy?”

“Just the way he looked at her. Couldn’t believe it at first but…c’mon, she’s everything he looks for. If you were to ask him to play The Sims and create his perfect partner, are you tellin’ me it wouldn’t have been her? Boobs and dick and all?”

“Aye, right you are. It would’ve been her.”

Chibs learns that, as a child, Juice was fond of collecting strange things. Rocks. Coins. Seashells. Each and every thing had a meaning and each and every object had a firm place on his shelf, a very specific order that he’d know had been fucked with if anyone were to dare to shove something out of its chosen spot.

“It’s OCD, totally. I’ve always had it. I collected that shit because it meant something to me. I’ve always been a sentimental dick. I got home one day and one of my foster brothers, Enrique, had moved it all. He shoved it in the garbage because he needed the space for his console. I could’ve killed that guy. To him it was junk. But, to me?”

To him they were memories. Thoughts. They were order in the bloody bedlam.

Juice collects people in much the same way, people who mean something to him, people with a story behind them. They’re all placed on a shelf too, only that shelf is in his head and nobody can misplace them.

“You’re in my front spot,” Juice tells Chibs. “But, I guess you’ve always been there. Might’ve fallen off for about twenty-four seconds but you're holding tight.”

Chibs learns that Juice was made to grow up before his time and that may be why he seems so childlike even now, like he’s lost in time somewhere and making up for it in the safe arms of his family. There’s something so boyish about the kid once you get down to the core of him, always has been, young enough on the outside, younger underneath it all. Maybe it’s that he wears his heart on his sleeve. Maybe it’s his awkwardness with people. Gemma wondered how the Hell he even got patched in (‘You scourin’ Special Ed now, boys? Where the Hell is he from, Pluto?’)

When faced with something as simple and natural as human relations he is often at a loss. You can often see it in his eyes. Chibs still sees it even now. He’s not hesitant, he’s forthcoming, but he still looks for permission, as if he’s not quite sure this is something he should be doing.

It’s winning. It gets him.

It’s 10.30 and the rest of the lads have all gone home. They’re ran off their feet this week with four orders going out and a new set of Red Woody auditions to get through this coming Monday. The Chen thing’s still on the horizon so that’s causing a bit of tension and for those reasons they’ve been keeping it low, no stay-behinds, no call for late night drinking. He and Juice went off on their own at the end of the day looking at a few vintage bike prospects just out of town and the plan had been to head back to Chibs’ place to put the world to rights. Chibs remembered he’d left his house keys back
at Scoops and he wasn’t planning on getting arrested for breaking and entering at his own property.

It had been Hap who’d teased earlier on that they were going at it alone so they could find some field to fuck each other in. As far as educated guesses go, it was a good one, not taking into account the field.

Juice had given him the middle finger. Hap had grinned and told him he’d snap it if he saw it again.

They haven’t come clean to the guys, not yet. They’re under wraps, under sheets, under blankets, under each other. It’s not that they’re being deceptive, nor is it that they are shamed. There’s no shame in what they are to each other, but there is the caution of the new, the attentiveness of something in its infancy that still isn’t as defined as it might like to be. The club has had enough change, enough revelations and surprises. Each chapter at a time, they say. Let them come to terms with one thing before throwing another at them.

Underneath it all, it’s that they want to have something that is just theirs for the time being, something exclusive that isn’t touched by the club. They want to grow into this ‘thing’ they’re building without the inevitable hazing they know is coming, the well-meaning jokes, the barrage of questions that neither of them would even know how to answer at this point.

Venus told them to take their time; that it’s still fragile. Teeny baby steps, then it’ll all fall into place.

She said her ruby reds will be sealed for as long as they need them to be and, if Tig starts to pry, she’ll tell him to mind his own beeswax and distract him with something that’ll keep his mind way, way away from it.

Chibs knows Juice can’t hide things from his therapist. It defeats the purpose entirely. Juice knows the only way of keeping his head in order and his neuroses contained is to give the old man what he wants at the weekly sessions he admits he’ll probably need for a long time to come. It kills him to say it aloud but they’re doing him good. They’re holding the nightmares off and they’re helping him keep himself away from the same negative thought processes that bury him, if he lets them.

Chibs wonders how he catalogues the two of them, how he puts into words exactly what in the name of Christ they are. Does he call him a lover? A boyfriend? A partner? An old fuck? Does he call him anything at all?

He asks him when they’re settled at the bar.

“Just out of curiosity, do you talk about me with your mind-fucker, Juicy?”

“My ‘mind-fucker’? Is that a PC term for a therapist?”

“Aye.”

Juice takes a sip of his drink. He’s keeping it real tonight with an iced tea with mint and lemon because he wants something sweet and he wants something fresh and he wants to make Chibs as hard as he’s curious. He licks the tang away from his lips and that smirk is the very contradiction he’s so good at.

Innocence. Provocation.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

He wipes his bottom lip with his thumb, that merciless little arsehole, then grins.
Chibs clears his throat as he glares at Juice who seems perpetually amused with the world today, as if it’s all there for his entertainment, Chibs and all.

“C’mon. Do I…come up? I don’t mind you talkin’ about me, lad. You can tell me.”

“You fishin’ for compliments, Chibby?”

“I’m nearly fifty years old. I’ve got a beer gut that probably rivals your sister’s unborn sprog. I’m what Venus lovingly refers to as ‘craggy’. I’ll take a compliment anywhere I can get it.”

Fifty years old and screwing a guy who could be his kid. He doesn't know if he should see it as a pat on the back job or the opposite.

Juice puts his arm around him, hand on his shoulder. He squeezes at that knotted point where it meets his neck, the place where old age is starting to show, and Chibs groans pleasurably as he applies the tension.

Aye, he's good...

“Put it this way, Chibby, my psych files used to be filled with Mommy and Daddy issues. Self-esteem issues. Club issues. It used to be real fucking sad, sad stuff, I swear. But now? They’re full of Chibs issues, too. I call you by that name and everything. You’d burn beet red if you read some of the stuff I say about you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Real, real hardcore stuff, dude.”

“And, what does your guy think of this hardcore shite you’re spoutin’ off about?”

Juice kisses him, quick and sharp. Chibs can taste the mint. The lemon.

“He thinks I should be wary of the likes of you.”

“I need to give the old bastard a kickin’?”

“I’m kidding.”

Chibs can't imagine it. He can't imagine sitting in a room with a carriage clock ticking and fucking whale music playing in the background talking about how there's nothing better in his life than putting his hand on the back of Juicy's neck and screwing him like it's their last night on this God-forsaken planet.

He can't imagine anyone understanding just how strong his feelings run, just how deep his thoughts are and how, if there was one thing and one thing only he could do in this lifetime it'd be to make it up to him.

He imagines he'd come across as possessive and fatalistic and hyperbolic.

That's why he wonders how it comes across from Juice.

"He always knew I was goin’ somewhere with you, even before I did. I shut him down every time he mentioned it when I was in that place, but…yeah. You come up. A lot. He thinks it’s a good thing. Says I need someone lookin’ out for me. Making sure I stick to the plan and all that.”

Christ.
“And, are you? Stickin’ to the plan?”

“What do you think?”

What does Chibs think? He thinks the Juice sitting beside him is everything he was supposed to be and everything that was pummelled out of him. He thinks he's been reborn and is taking those newborn foal steps that put human beings to shame.

He thinks he's fucking beautiful.

“I see a change.”

“Yeah?”

“Aye.”

“Aye.”

“You mockin’ me, boy?”

A smile. A poorly restrained laugh as he leans in and bites Chibs' bottom lip.

A fucking revelation.

“Aye.”

(*)

For Unser, the days are getting longer. He's not one for morbid contemplation but when the fuck is he gonna die?

He tries to busy himself because it's the only way. Lunch with his niece Sarah was good except the diner's started replacing its menu with healthy option crap that looks like rabbit food and he had to ask, sweet potato fries? Is nothing sacred anymore?

Christ. He’s leavin’ at the right time.

Sarah's going off to college soon and he hates the thought he might go before he sees her again but he watched her grow and saw what she made of herself. He got to tell her he was proud of her and it's more than some guys get to do.

The new Sheriff, Jim Slade, checked in on him this afternoon at the trailer because he's keeping him at a safe distance while he finds his feet but he's no fool and he knows Unser's got this place covered. He's still got him consulting, only it feels like more of a handing over than anything else.

Perhaps intelligently, perhaps learning from Jarry's mistake, he's steered clear of the MC since he got here.

"Until it's brought to my attention they're breaking law," he said, "I have no interest in them."

It's just about the best the club could've hoped for.

Thing is, it all just feels...pointless. He wants to keep the time passing now, fill his hours with pleasure and all that shit, a real Go Get It Life. The truth? The reality? He's just getting tired. All he wants to do is sit on his ass and smoke until The Lord takes him. When the fuck did he get so defeated?
He knows exactly when.

He lived for that woman; that beautiful woman who never loved him in the way she should've.

"Up and at it, old man," he tells himself, when he starts to dwell a little too much and falls at risk of being a drag. He figures he'll head over, check in with Chibs. There's a couple of things he wants to run by him that have come up in passing with the Sheriff, a couple of whispers that don't sit right in this rickety old head of his. Could be nothing, could be something. Wouldn't hurt to get a second opinion.

If he were being honest with himself he'd admit he was just lonely. Bored. Sick of spending time without an ear to chew and a joint to share.

He doesn't want to head back to his trailer, not tonight, because a man shouldn't spend his 60th birthday alone and if he can't find a friend to toast to then he might as well put himself in the ground.

Sixty God damned years.

Christ, who'd have thought?

He does this a lot. He and Chibs have gotten close since Gemma tied, Trager too, if he's honest, though he's got his hands full with his lady-friend. She was a common thread between the whole bunch of them and, say what you like about her but Gemma knew how to bond with people.

She left a huge gap in a lot of lives, that's for sure.

Chucky hasn't been around much since she went away, has gone from his whole life with the club to a few hours here and there balancing books, serving up ice cream. He can't stand the office without her bitching and moaning at him.

God bless him, fingers and all. He got himself a girlfriend now, the guys tell him, and he's wise enough to keep her away.

The door's locked at Scoops but the lights are on. Unser uses his key to gain entry because Chibs is paranoid at night and locks up the minute the shop closes just to be sure. Unser tells him it's old age creeping in, that the first thing to go is a sense of security, the second a tolerance of youth.

The third is generally eyesight, though in Unser's case it was kidneys, liver, prostate, in that precise order.

He never did to things by halves.

The guys trust him with a key. It's always been a club thing. Unser isn't retarded, he knows about the bikes but the way he sees it, better illegal rides than wads of heroin and crank and grenade launchers running out of his hometown. If a guy gets away with some steel between his legs, rather this than a gun in his hand or a needle in his arm? Have at it.

“It’s me,” he calls out. “Hold your fire.”

He can see the touch of a woman in this place these says, can smell the scent of a woman but there's no woman here. Not in view, anyhow. There is just the taste of one, like a drink that uses lemon juice but not lemons so that the flavour remains but the bitterness doesn't bite your tongue.

“You in here, Telford?”
The place is deserted but, from the sound of music out back he knows there's someone here. It's quiet, but it's there.

"Hello? Anybody back there?"

He figures Chibs must have a woman back there, lucky for him the old dog. The music, the two empty glasses on the bar, whiskey in one and tall glass with remnants of what look like an iced tea. They're all signs of something going on.

He stops for a second.

Something pings inside of him when he sees the tea, something of an Uncle Touchy Old Man sense, and it jolts him a little. Then, he sees Juice's cut, his boots, his keys on the table with that ridiculous Darth Vader keyring and the silver token with his name engraved in graffiti lettering.

The jolt builds, turns into more of a jerk.

It's only when he hears the gravel voiced groan and the boyish yelp that it all comes together. The context is pretty clear.

"You're impossible, lad, you know that?"

"Ah...y-you got that...r-right. Oh..f-f...."

"Too much?"

"No. No, not too much..."

"Good lad."

Oh

Oh.

Well, fuck me. Alright, then.

"Guess I'll, uh, guess I'll leave you to it," Unser says under his breath, more for his own benefit than anyone else's and he's rolling his eyes because he doesn't think anything could surprise him anymore, not a God damned thing.

He thinks it's a shame to leave a perfectly good drink to go to waste, that he needs something stiff and sharp just to get his head round whatever this is.

When he picks up the glass and downs it in one he tells himself he's earned it.

"Happy Birthday, old man," he whispers, a face full of confusion and a head full of images he'd rather not have. "You've well and truly arrived in the 21st Century. And you're about to leave it. Murphy's fuckin' Law."

He turns around to leave and he's torn between shaking his head and laughing out loud because, Christ, a VP with a ladyboy and a President with a guy young enough to be his son? Old Piney would be turning in his grave.

Unser is 60 years old.

Officially over the God damned hill.
He's too old to be dealing with this shit tonight of all nights.

(*)

He knows he must've hit rock bottom when he follows Tig Trager's advice and takes a late night trip to Red Woody.

He says nothing of what he just...saw. He just nods his head uncomfortably as Lyla takes him into one of the side rooms and tells him someone will be in soon to see to him.

He offers his preference as someone who doesn't know him.

The girl, Jacqueline, she's mixed race. Beautiful. Kind. Patient. Everything that makes him feel like a dirty old man. She's about his niece's age, a little older maybe, and he wonders what happened in her life to make this her best choice.

Instead of anything 'untoward' he asks her where she grew up.

"Chicago," she tells him. "But, I moved around a lot. This good?"

"Perfect, sweetheart."

"Why don't you close your eyes? You'll enjoy it more."

As she's working the knots out of his shoulders he finds himself drifting away. There's no way he could get it up, not with the amount of meds he's on, doesn't think he'd want to, but he's just like any other man, his age or otherwise.

He enjoys the company of a beautiful woman.

It's been a long time and, though this may well be as good as it gets for the remainder of his time on this Earth, that's fine with him.

He speaks with Lyla afterwards. She looks as beautiful as ever, as calm and as unsuited to this life as Unser could ever imagine.

He asks her how things are going.

"Feels pretty strange around here without Jax. I miss him. The girls miss him."

"Yeah. Yeah, I know."

He doesn't shatter her illusions. He lets it be. He knows better than anyone how blocking out the bad is sometimes the only way.

"You miss Gemma."

"I do. That obvious, huh?"

"What she did was horrible but it doesn't change what she meant to you. You loved her. We all knew it."

He never hid it. He guessed he always hoped she would see. Know. Maybe feel it too. He knows how pathetic that sounds but he’s past the point of dignity now.

Part of him just wants to go, now, be wherever she is. He’s used to being in her periphery so it
wouldn’t even matter that he had Clay and John to compete with.

How fucking sad is that?

Lyla, it seems, feels his sadness. Senses his poorly hidden moroseness that overcomes him every time he pictures Gemma’s face.

"It'll get better. Trust me. I know."

"How many times have you said that recently? Since you got in with the club, how many guys you patched up? How many guys you took into one of those rooms to screw away the dirt?"

"Too many. Blind drunk? ODing? Crying into a bottle of beer? Check. Check. Check. There hasn't been a lot of happiness since Ope, but...it's lookin' up."

She smiles.

"I'm doing good. I'm learning German."

"Porn industry’s good over there, right? You always were a smart girl. Ope was lucky to have you. How are the kids?"

Like any mother, she lights up when anyone asks. Gemma used to do that. It hid a very dark, unhealthy bond. Not Lyla, though. She’s got her head on straight.

"I take them over to the farm sometimes. It's a bit of a way out but it's good to see Nero. He's...different. Changed. Whole new outlook on life. Now that he's got Wendy and the kids..."

"Yeah it can change you alright. Love. Family."

He smiles sadly.

"You? You got a lotta love to give, I know that. Pretty girl like you? You shouldn’t be alone."

"I got 3 kids, Wayne. 2 of them aren't mine. I buried my husband at 34. I'm in no hurry to find someone else. I figure I got some time yet."

"Yeah, you do."

Isn't she the lucky one?

She takes his hand in hers, gentle and comforting. Those really are blessed children she got back home.

"We're the ones that got left behind, Wayne. That's our blessing and our curse, honey. "

She got that right.

He finishes his beer, puts the bottle down on the bar and he thinks to himself, no matter what, it's been a good day.

Strange, but good.

"It's gettin' late. I should head home. Feed my cat. Can't get rid of it. Turned up a couple of weeks back and won't get lost."
"It knows you're a good guy."

"Wendy says I need some pussy. I think the Gods got it wrong somehow."

She laughs, though he knows she doesn’t think it’s that funny. In truth, neither does he, but fuck it.

"Your girl? Tell her I said thank you. Y'know, for bein' so patient with a sick old fart like me."

Lyla smiles and nods her head.

"Don't tell Trager I was here, okay, sweetheart? I wouldn't hear the end of it."

"Sure, honey."

She asks if he needs a ride home. Her boy Ethan’s finishing it fifteen minutes and he goes that way. He’s a good kid, twenty years old and built like a brick shithouse. He keeps the girls feelin’ safe. It’s minimum wage but, Christ, at 20, what guy wouldn’t want to work on the door at a porn studio?

"Nah, I'm good. I'm okay to drive. I only had the one. I try not to drink but...y'know, special occasion."

"Yeah?"

The big one. The final turn of a decade for so many. A cause for a celebration.

"Another year older. Another birthday the cancer didn't get me. You don't think of 'em when you get to my age, but it feels kinda important."

Lyla leans in towards him and kisses him on the cheek. She smells of citrus perfume and her lips are soft as pillows.

God, if he were thirty years younger, not chemically impotent, not bald, not dying...

"Happy Birthday, sweetheart," she says.” I hope for many more to come."

Unser smiles.

Thanks her for the sentiment because he’s not sure he does.

(*)

They're lying side by side on one of the pull-out couches when Juice drops the bomb.

“Tully called.”

He says it in passing, like it's the most normal thing in the world. It's what he does sometimes ('Y'know, Tully sang to me sometimes, during. Folk songs or some shit. That was fucking weird.') ('I cried myself half dead when you blew up that time').

It's as if he's trying to make it as casual as possible so as it doesn't break him down, throws it out there like he did when he told the guys about Chen.

Chibs is sure there's a name for it.

Right now, he chokes on his beer.

“What? Did you just say -"
"Yeah. Last night. I was finishin’ up on Ruby. Did you see her, by the way? She was gorgeous. I love what we do. It's awesome."

"Aye. Yeah, yeah, I saw her. But...how in the name of Christ did he get your number, Juicy?"

"I don’t know. Contacts, I guess? Bribed one of the guys in the office to give it to him from when I saw him? Who knows? Gonna change it, obviously."

It's obvious he's trying to keep him calm but it's not within Chibs' capabilities. Not where Juice is concerned. Not with Tully.

The words escape gritted teeth and tight scars.

"He was warned."

Chibs is a sentinel, a statue, a Beefeater, a prison guard. He is security. He is a steel cage around Juice and nothing will penetrate him.

Stay away, Tully was told.

The boy isn’t yours to fuck.

"Just forget about it, bro. It’s cool. I told him to go fuck himself. I'm hoping he got the message."

Juice is naive if he believes that.

It's deeper than Chibs ever envisioned It's hard to imagine a lifer being able to get to a guy on the outside but there's no underestimating Tully. His influence, it seems, is more substantial than he recognised.

“What did the twisted bastard want?”

“To buzz in my ear about Jax. Says he’s been keeping him close for me. Wants to give me a chance to play God, I think. Choose if he lives or dies. It’s bullshit.”

“You sound surprisingly calm, Juicy. You alright?"

“He was on the phone. I’m past the point of punching walls because of a phone call, Chibs. You know that.”

He's continuing with the throwaway comments and it worries Chibs. He often worries about Juice’s ability to look at himself through second-hand eyes, feels is too close to the dissociative behaviours he used to show, still shows to a lesser level. He tells him again and again it’s just his way of dealing with things but it doesn’t seem right.

It’s better than the alternative, though, that being the suicidal, flayed thing looking for pills, knives, bike chains...

“So, what are you gonna do about Jax?”

"Not gonna go against the vote, man, but I filed the visitation request. Should hear back in a day or 2 if he wants to see me."

That he's so blasé about it gets right under Chibs' skin, a poisoned worm that works its way in and spreads.
“Juice – “

“What? You don’t think it’s a good idea?”

How could he even ask that question?

"I think I’ve spent time and fucking energy trying to get you away from both of them, that's what I think. Jesus Christ, boy, are you some kind of masochist? Can't they give you some kind of pill to add to your lot for this complex you've got?"

Sometimes it feels like Juice wants to stretch himself so thin just to fill the holes and the gaps in his life and he'll push and push so hard that his limbs pop.

Sometimes Chibs remembers why he had to shake him just to shock some sense in because there's a lot of it that's been displaced and is jumping around that head of his.

"You can't keep me in a cage, Chibby. You gotta let me do what I need to do. Even if I fuck shit up."

“He doesn’t deserve it,” Chibs whispers, under his breath. “That therapist's doped you up on fucking lunacy, Juice. I’m telling you. You want me to watch you hurt yourself? Screw yourself up on pointless fucking crusades? What are you hoping to achieve from it, eh? You’ve said all you need to say to him, Juicy."

“Have I?"

He's so emotional, it gets to Chibs. There's so much he hadn't processed, hasn't let go of. How much does he have inside of him? How much does he need to get through before he's whole again?

"I forgave you, didn't I? And you meant a whole lot more to me than he ever did. You screwed me up bad, Chibs, and I talked things through with you, didn’t i?"

That stings.

It's a low blow and Juice knows it.

"Shit, I'm sorry, Chibby. That was uncalled for. I didn't need to say that."

Maybe he did.

He turns himself around and there's a real pull about him, something raw and exposing, a real nerve spliced to press. He stands in front of Chibs and he twists himself inside out.

If he does this with Jax he'll have his guts for garters.

"There's a lot I gotta say. A lot. I need him to know that I'm sorry about Tara. I need to look at him and tell him why I'm not saving him. I don't want him to go out thinking I didn't give a shit."

"Well, do you? Give a shit?"

In spite of everything…

"Of course I do. Don't tell me you don't."

He does. He wouldn't have given Jax the heads up if he didn't.
Christ. What's gonna become of them, eh?

"Ah, Juicy. You can’t take on every man’s burden, lad. It’s not your job to absolve him. Whatever Tully’s told you – “

“– this has nothing to do with Tully. I know Jax has to go. I know that. He probably wants to go. But I don’t want to get to, like, 40 years old and wish I’d gone see him. Jax and me? We got bad blood between us.”

“Aye – “

“Wendy thinks it’d do us both good if we could clear the air. He knows he’s gonna go but if he could go with a tiny little shred of peace? If I could give him that? Me? The guy who he saw as a worthless piece of shit? Fuck, Chibby, that'd mean something to me.”

It's an impassioned plea. He’s asking for permission.

Even now, he wants for Chibs to let him go. He wants him to take him by the hand and tell him, yes, if it's what he wants, what he needs...

“God, I know what it’s like, Chibs. That complete loneliness. It’s a killer. I handed Tully that shiv myself and you know what I was thinking? You know the only thing that was going round my head? That everyone hated me and I would never live to see that change.”

It hits hard.

Chibs remembers going home at night after being with the guys, remembers the conflict he felt when he thought of Juice as he swayed between hatred, sorrow, disappointment and broken-heartedness. He barely thought about Juice in that prison. He couldn’t. He couldn’t think of him in the same way as he couldn’t think of anyone who happened to be walking past a car bomb in Ireland when it was set to go off, in the same way a soldier blocks out the thought of the school that sits beside the weapons manufacture space that’s going to be hit from above.

He had to think of Juice as collateral damage.

It kills him to admit that.

For Chibs, Jax is the worst kind of leader, a man in denial who destroys the lives of others and then blames it on them; who takes, takes and takes some more only to claim that he deserved what he took, and that they were so willing to give.

He told Chibs "This is what you voted for, it's as much your doing as mine..."

Juice sees his pain. He tries his best to ease it and, for some reason, it just makes it dig even harder.

“I’m sorry. I’m not trying to make you feel bad. It’s done. We move on. But, that’s Jax’s reality right now and I owe it to the guy I used to care about to not let that happen. Nobody deserves that, Chibby.”

"Not even the guy who put you through it?"

He wants to ask "where's your backbone, lad? Why aren't you burning him to the ground?" but this isn't a lack of courage. It's exactly the opposite.

This is fucking brave.
Juice shrugs his shoulders, smiles that sad little smile that breaks Chibs' heart and the only thing he wants to do is fucking hold the kid.

"Rise above, right?"

Juice never deserved it, any of it, and yet that’s what they subjected him to - so to see him rise above? To see him try to take that pain away?

Christ, the boy’s something.

“He doesn’t deserve you, Juicy. None of us do."

“Maybe not, but this is something I gotta do.”

If it’s something he’s got to do then Chibs will support it, albeit reluctantly. He may never understand it from his own perspective, but from Juice’s it makes perfect sense.

It's the only thing he can do.

"Let this be an end, Juicy. You got me? No more after this."

"This is it. Then, I'm done. I swear."

He hopes Jax sees the change in him. He hopes he can look beyond his blackened, hatred-bled vision and really look at the boy for what he is, for who he is, for who he has always been and for who he wants to be.

He hopes he doesn’t piss on his white flag; spit in the face of his forgiveness and repentance. He hopes he doesn't wreak havoc on the debris of the earthquake he already caused.

That he can’t call it either way?

That just saddens him.

(*)

His knuckles hurt from blows he doesn’t remember inflicting; stinging, crushing blows that must’ve done some damage if the force of his pain is anything to go on. There’s a taste of blood in his mouth, a slight pain in his right shoulder when he twists to the left, bruising to his chest. He took a blow to the head at some point because it throbs along with his heartbeat and he can feel it behind his eyes like fucking pinpricks that stab and stab and stab.

“You played a good hand, Teller,” the guard tells him. “He looks even worse than you do. Wouldn’t want to be on the end of the fallout though, you stupid son of a bitch.”

Jax knows he lost it with Tully, though he can’t quite pinpoint the precise words that flipped him over the edge. The asshole had been chipping away at him for hours on end and finally, inevitably, Jax had just blown.

That Tully had laughed made Jax realise he’d played right into his hands. After that first punch, he doesn’t know what happened.

He just knows it was persistent and sustained.

He’s exhausted.
Jax might not remember the past forty minutes of his life but there’s blood on his shirt that isn’t his
and he’s pretty sure he’s just signed his name on his own execution.

It’s a funny thing.

None of that pains him as much as the visit request that’s landed on his pillow as he’s thrust back into
solitary to be alone with the thought of it.

That piece of paper drives into his skull harder than Tully’s fists did.
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

This is a pretty short filler by my standards but I just brought home 2 x 8 week kittens (currently snoozing on my lap) that are taking up a lot of my free time. I usually wrote on the work commute and lunch hour so normal service will resume when I'm back at work tomorrow :)

In this chapter, Hap reaches a passing conclusion and Jax makes a decision.

Hope you are still with me xx

EDIT: bloody typos

“I had a pet, once,” Tully says, and he's not talking about one of his boys. Not directly. "It withered away and died."

As a metaphorical story there’s enough threat to be read into it if Christell would wake up enough to read it. The boy can't really read, though, not between the lines anyhow. It's what makes him so dispensable to Tully; a plaything he can take or leave that will never take the place of the sewn-eared rabbit he loved so much, despite it's flaws.

"Dog?" he asks. "Cat?"

"No, it was one of those fancy goldfish. I named him Nomad because that's what he was. He belonged to no-one and everyone all at once. Everywhere was his kingdom. He was a free spirit."

"Freedom in a glass bowl?"

"You can find freedom everywhere, Phillip. Just like I find freedom with you."

Tully smiles at his captive audience as he runs his fingers through wiry blond hair. Christell would be a beautiful boy if not for the shaven lines in his eyebrow; the tattoo of pretentious lyrics on the inside of his wrist. He would be a beautiful boy if he stopped ensuring he wasn't one.

Maybe that's intentional.

Maybe he doesn't want to be a beautiful boy.

“There were no bars. Not like here. He could see the uninterrupted horizon for miles and miles if you put him in front of a window.”

That’s how he died, inevitably, one hot Summer’s day. He died because his water grew too hot. He couldn’t stand the heat. The pressure. He succumbed in his little glass tomb just like Tully's prison fish do when they're entombed among with him, just like Christell will, inevitably.

They succumb to the heat.

They can't stand the pressure either. They're not mean, just disposable pets that are good while they
last before their remains are flushed down the toilet.

“What I’d give to see endless horizon in this place.”

Christell is tending Tully's wounds with gentle fingers, fixing those butterfly stitches so as to avoid a scar. Neither of them know why it really matters, whether or not Jax Teller's handiwork will leave a permanent mark.

Tully would say it has already.

"I missed seeing him swimming around in his own little universe. Looked so fucking mercurial when he did it."

"It was just a fish," Christell shrugs. "It's not like they have feelings."

"Sweetheart, you of all people should know there's no such thing as 'just a fish'."

"Huh?"

Tully laughs.

"I miss my fish. I'll even miss you."

"I'm not going anywhere. And, I'm not a fish."

"You sure about that, newbie?"

The newbies or first timers or, less common, the pretty little victims like Juan Carlos who are not meant for this place, *they're* fish. Tully misses them too, so many lost to his whims, to early release. So many gone, driven mad by the expectations he placed on them.

Juice never did. Maybe that's why Tully can't get him out of his head.

Maybe that's why he misses him the most, like Nomad, a fish among many.

The one that stood out.

(*)

Jax could play it in his head over and over from start to finish and it would still leave him shaking with rage.

*The cell's entranceway bulb burns out, its crackle and pop so like distant lightning that Jax stares from Abel's painting to the darkness now veiling the space outside of his cage. He opens his mouth to demand a replacement because solitary is one thing but pitch black goes against his human rights but the cell door opens wide before he gets a chance.*

*Framed by hallway light, Tully appears briefly as an avenging angel, backlit and glowing, then as a fucking demon grinning from ear to ear like the cat that got the cream.*

"Do I have to repeat myself? I got nothing to say to you."

"Words mean nothing, Teller. But, actions? Well..."

*Words aren't the issue here, that much is clear.*
Jax snaps his lips together as Tully advances. He's primed and ready to come to blows. Tully veers around the solitary cell bars and hauls Jax against him. It's too fast for even Jax's mind to comprehend. Tully's mouth is tearing at his own, his tongue searing the inside and stealing his breath.

Jax sees red, vivid red, blood red, and instead of freezing like Christell might or turning boneless the way he imagines Juice did, he bites down, sharp teeth grasping the flesh of a bottom lip as it cuts halfway through.

Tully doesn't scream but he does release and Jax is no lockjaw bull terrier. He loosens his grasp, the taste metallic in his throat as he swallows Tully's blood.

He wonders if it makes them brothers, if this means they own each other in a way because Tully might throw people away like toys but when this kind of exchange takes place he forms a connection. Jax doesn't want a connection. Not one like that, especially not one formed out of malice and spite.

He comes at Jax once more, aggressively barraging him with bruising pushes while simultaneously backing him up against the wall. Jax pulls from him, his stance confrontational and predatory.

He doesn't know what this is.

"I mean it -"

"...you don't like my efforts to satisfy you?" Tully cuts off the words, spitting blood, sucking it through his bright white Nazi teeth that hiss sarcasm and spit sardonic viciousness. "This not what you want?"

"Say one more word, Tully. I dare you."

Tully smiles.

"What are you gonna do? Kill me? Cut my heart out with a cafeteria spoon? Come on, Teller. Lighten up. I was just having a little fun with you."

The air rushes past Jax as Tully's hand reaches up towards his face.

"I only wanted a taste of life. That was a disappointment. Tastes...sour."

That's when the grenade unpins, just as Tully wants.

That's when the fireworks go off.

"Here you are," Tully growls. "I've been waiting for you."

Jax lies on his bunk staring at the ceiling. He wonders how many nights Juice spent doing the same and wishing above all things for an end with the taste of Ron Tully on his lips, condescending, bad, ferocious, the effect of his mind games playing havoc with an already damaged psyche.

There was nothing sexual in Tully's advance. There was never going to be. It was all about power and dominance. When Tully pushed Jax against that wall it was to show he could, not because he wanted to, and the reason he stopped was not only because Jax made him stop but because he never planned on going further in the first place. There's no reading the guy. There's no getting through. Every time you think you have a hold on him he skips away. He will not be labelled or quantified. He will just chip away until there is nothing left; until all that's there is a shell waiting to be filled with his special brand of bullshit.
Jax's first line of defence has always been to attack. He took that method away from Juice, conditioned it away with punishment so that all was left was obedience and submission. He sent him into this place devoid of weapon and riding on false hope because Juice was never supposed to survive this.

('Give him enough rope and he'll hang himself.')

Only Jax knows why he made the choices he made but his mind's not talking and he can't figure himself out at all. He wonders, though, if this is his purgatory, this taste on his lips, these bruises on his mind and his body. This knowledge; knowledge that this is all there is. Is this retribution?

('You get from this life what you put in it, Jackie Boy. Nothing more, nothing less')

He thinks about Juice, thinks about how the decision to take his life by-proxy has changed his own. He thinks about how that one insignificant man has had such an impact on everything he is now. Alone. Attached. Obsessed over.

Nothing.

He signs that visiting request because it's the only thing he can think of that might help this all make sense. Maybe Juice can do that. It wouldn't be the first time.

Jax tells himself he's not taking from the kid one last time but he can't even lie to himself any more. What's the point?

(*)

"You're fucking Chibs."

The words hit like three fast moving bullets that cut the air between them. Juice, with his hands on the steering wheel, turns as white as the paint job on the custom bike they're delivering out of town. Happy can practically see the impact and if he were drinking he'd have sprayed the dash by now.

"Excuse me?"

"It wasn't a question, Juice. Just making a casual statement."

Happy puts it as a simple statement, as if he were talking about the weather or the soccer results from last night's games. It's only what the kid himself does, drops grenades like silent farts then walks away like he's said and done nothing at all so that he doesn't need to deal with the aftermath. They're in a car. There's no place for him to hide from this, nowhere to run.

Hap can see how the words rip right through Juice, scattering his wits to the wind. He misses their turn-off, scrambles at the steering wheel as if he can undo it somehow before slapping his hand down in frustration.

"Damn it, Hap, you had to say it now of all times? You know my sense of direction's like Quinn's sense of humour. A little thin on the ground."

Happy tries his best not to smile. Juice has always been this way: open, easily flustered. Capable of being tied in knots with very little effort to speak of.

It's what made him such a target.

"Now we gotta backtrack. It's gonna take even longer. I know this dude. He's gonna be so mad."
They're delivering a bike to one of Alvarez' associates. Hap knows the guy too, did time with him back in '93 when Juice was a slip of a thing still collecting Pokemon cards. He can handle the guy.

"You worry too much."

About that. About Chibs. Hap says nothing about that. He just sits on his statement like a hen sitting on an egg waiting for it to hatch. With Juice it's only a matter of time. His statement will grow wings and it will fly away with Juice.

It takes all of thirty seconds.

"Look, is this another one of those mind tricks things you like to pull? You look inside my head or something?"

"No."

"That was a rhetorical question. Seriously, how did you know?"

How did he know? Because Chibs told him without telling him. Because Juice told them all without uttering a single word. Because he sees such a change in both men he could practically pinpoint the day, home, hour it happened.

He offers Juice a rare, disarming smile.

"I can see it in your faces, kid. You might as well take out an article in the Charming Chronicle."

Juice looks crestfallen, as if all his efforts have been for nothing. Happy almost pities him for it.

"Aw, man."

"Look, it's cool. None of the other guys have figured it out yet. The way you look at him like he's your fucking life's breath? Only a matter of time."

"Hey, it’s not some kind of unhealthy attachment I have," Juice insists. When he shrugs his shoulders its with nonchalance and relaxation rather than nerves or dismissive behaviour. "I just...don't know what I'd do without him. But he's the MC Pres. Do any of us?"

Hap can’t argue with that logic but for Juice it seems there has always been a fine line between love and obsession, co-dependence and merely enjoying a person’s company. He seems to understand the difference, now, whereas before he used to drown in it. How many times did he claim that he'd rather die than be without the MC; that he'd dive headfirst into oblivion if they ever 'took his family away from him.'

Maybe seeing the dark side of brotherhood opened his eyes and, like a kid who finally realised his father was fallible and his mother sometimes wasn't right, he evolved. Hap evolved in the same way. He realised his old man wasn't Superman at a real young age, figured his ex-girlfriends weren't with putting a ring on when they let him down again and again.

There's less room in this world for naïveté than there is vulnerability.

The boy got wise.

"Does it bother you?" Juice asks, and he's trying to look like it's nothing but it's everything and more. "Are you gonna make it a club issue?"

"Tig fucks stiffs. I don't give a shit. There's no specific by-law. The old guys figured it wouldn't
happen."

Juice smiles at that.

"You really believe he did that?"

"You don't?"

No-one believes he did that. Sadly for Hap, he knows he did.

"I don't give a fuck if you're doing each other, Juicy. Just don't let it distract him. Or you."

"I'm not an idiot, Hap. I know the club comes first."

He still truly believes that. Maybe he always did. Hap understands Juice on some level. On some other level he wonders if Juice has ever come first for anyone in his life since his mother died and he simply can't remember what that means.

"You're a bigger idiot than I thought if you think that's true."

"What do you mean?"

"He would burnt his club to the ground of it made you happy."

"I would never let him do that."

That's key, even if Juice doesn't know it.

"Exactly."

"What do you mean, 'exactly'?"

It's why Chibs 'chose' him, because his loyalty is bone, blood and sinew deep. Because he would never expect Chibs to turn his back on his own loyalties just to please him.

The fact Chibs would do all that and more is an aside.

He'll figure it out soon enough. They both will.

"Just drive, kid. We're gonna be late."

(*)

On very rare occasions, Ron Tully finds himself questioning his actions. It's not a common state of mind for him, insecurity, but when it hits it hits hard.

"Do you believe in vengeance, Phillip?"

"Huh?"

"Do you believe that God gave us free will so that we could judge on his behalf?"

He's fully patched up now, though the patching has nothing to do with club honour or accolade. It's to do with broken skin; the marks of rage painted vivid red, yellow, blue and black on his face.

It's no surprise that none of the colours of pain are white.
"Do you think he forgives sins committed out of love or concern of another?"

"Don't believe in no God, Ron. Not the way my life is? Ain't no maker would make a guy like me."

Tully sees the flaw in this, in asking this question of a kid pressed so hard under this thumb he can't move. Christell is always so unquestioning in his cooperation.

He asks because he's curious. Because he can.

"If someone fucked you up, would you want me to make them pay?"

In a move of great boldness, Christell tells Tully he's the one who fucks him up; that he's the one who makes him bite down on his pillow to stop him from screaming about the injustice of the American justice system.

"Can't exactly make yourself pay, can you, Tully?"

Tully appreciates the honesty.

It doesn't really answer his question but it's impressive nonetheless.

"Get out of here," he says. "Go play with your fellow thieves. I have some...adult contemplation to embark upon."

Tully knows that one time not long ago Christell would've laughed like an adolescent and asked it that was code for slapping his monkey. Now he's too cushioned. Too dulled. It's kind of sad he doesn't dare.

Tully's power is flawed after all.

(*)

Juice doesn't dare hope when he gets the text from Stockton telling him the visit is a go.

That's kind of sad, too.

"You sure you wanna do that?" Hap asks, but there's no judgement there. There is only concern, the concern of an older brother for a younger sibling, the look of man who doesn't want anyone to be hurt.

To have that back? It pleases Juice more than he could ever describe.

"It's cool. I'm big enough and ugly enough to be able to deal with the fallout, Hap."

In other words, he's got a bigger and uglier man to deal with it for him.

Thank God for Chibs. He might be the heart and the centre of Juice's world but at least he has one.

It's more than Jax can say.
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

Prelude to the Meet

While Juice hopes for acceptance and Chibs hopes for a peaceful end, Jax just hopes for absolution when it all comes down to it.

He gazes skyward out of the window in that empty cafeteria, dirtied around the edges, cracked at the top and bottom. He could be speaking of the window but he could also be speaking of himself. This very same window was cracked during their fourteen month sentence and Jax is left wondering if anything is ever fixed in this place or whether it all ends up dirty and broken for good.

Chibs doesn't sound broken. Hap isn't broken either. Juice and Tig, they were never really whole to begin with, not to Jax, and Bobby Elvis has left the building, taken away in a mess of blood and pain,

Maybe he's the only one.

That should really tell him something.

He remembers being in here with the guys. They were two to a cell back then. He was in with Hap, which was a challenge in itself since he's a man of few words and fierce opinion. Bobby was with Tig with Juice and Clay in another a little further down the wing. Jax assumes the bond between the two of them formed there away from the other guys, Clay claiming an unlikely son while his own 'son' looked to overturn him and, if he's being honest, he resented that, though he can't explain why.

They all built bonds on the inside, relationships between brothers that might not have been possible without enforced time together.

He remembers talking business on the yard while the guys played basketball against the Mexicans and the other browns. The whites kept their distance but the club never really considered their allies to be on one clear shade. Kind of lays waste to the by-law, looking back.

Half the time the games turned into brawls because Juice is exceptionally good at sports, the most surprisingly competitive guy Jax knows, and Hap doesn't play by the rules. Prison makes guys poor losers so there were a few black eyes, a few sprained wrists, a couple of fractures but, looking back, things were good. They survived that time by pulling together.

These are the bad times that Jax misses, the times when they served out their punishment in solidarity. He looks over to the far corner of this very room and remembers an incident between Clay and one of the blacks that ended in a night on the grey block for all of them. He can still hear Clay laughing his old man's ass off when he broke that stupid shit's nose for calling Jax a queer.

It was one of the last times he felt like the guy's son.

Now, for the first time in his life, Jax Teller feels like an outsider and the underlying threat of Ron Tully is a stark reminder of just how insane life can be. He was never a sentimental guy, that goes without saying, but what he's give to ride in the hills right now, the sun burning down on him, the
wide open sky and the horizon all free to him. What would he hand over for just one more kiss from his boys, one little high-five from Abel and a high pitched laugh from Thomas.

It's only time away that makes you appreciate what you had and lost. He stole the brightness of so many with his crimes.

So many fucking crimes.

“Such a cunt,” the guards say. “Such an unrepentant asshole. Deserves everything he gets. Killed his own fucking mother.”

("His mother was a whore.")

Coward, they call him.

Scumbag.

Worthless piece of motorcycle shit.

Look at him now, with his golden halo stripped away with his shaven head, those bright, bright eyes now dulled by life and sin. His whole life has been Jesus fucking blasphemy.

"Heads up in five, Teller," the guard tells him. "You get your hour in the sun."

Thank Christ for that.

(*)

He meets with an old friend in the exercise cage, his first contact since Tully. They're separated by a mesh fence but seeing a friendly face is a relief to Jax.

('You got no friends. Not anymore."

Troy was always a decent guy. The Niners were lucky to have one kid with his head screwed on instead of the wannabe tough guys they peopled their ranks with.

Part of their downfall was their LA street gang bullshit dragged down from the big league Bloods.

"What's up, Jax?" he asks, and it's now that Jax notices he has two missing teeth and a scar on his face not entirely unlike the one Chibs wears with the pride only a Scot could.

Troy doesn't look proud.

He looks as alone as Jax feels.

"Hey, man. What are you in for?"

"Three months. Possession. I had a decent lawyer. Could've been worse."

"Why are you in solitary?"

A fight, by the looks of his knuckles. His own guys, by the expression on his face.

"Couple of the guys turned on me. I was screwing LeBron's bitch before I got busted. You know how it is. You fuck with your boys, you're on your own."

Jax knows how that goes.
"Hear your guys went legit. That true?"

"So I hear."

"Chibs, man. Always hated that guy."

Even now, Jax finds it hard to hear.

"He's a good guy, Troy. He just has...a different vision."

"Ain't no money goin' legit. He's undoing all your groundwork, dude. How you dealin' with that?"

It's a loaded question. It highlights each and every failure on Jax's part. Each and every promise made and not kept.

The only thing he can take from it is that he lined it up. He put the wheels in place that Chibs set to motion.

"I'm dealing."

"You got back-up in here?"

"I'm ready for whatever happens, dude. You wanna link in with the Mexicans if you're lookin' for someone to watch your back. I got nothing, bro."

That silences Troy, as if Jax's acceptance of whatever is to come is something that doesn't compute.

He nods his head in agreement for something he doesn't understand and Jax finds that kind of pathetic, in a way.

"I was sorry to hear about your wife. Nobody deserves that."

Honour amongst criminals.

Respect amongst thieves.

"Thanks, man. I appreciate that."

They'd shake hands if the grate wasn't in the way. They might even hug.

As it stands all they can do is this, two caged tigers, declawed and de-fanged with no circus leaders to guide their tricks.

Abandoned into the wild.

"Look, I got 2 more days in the hole. Come find me when I get out. I think we could both use a friend in this place. Maybe we could work something out."

Jax smiles.

"Yeah, okay. I'll think about it."

"Cool."

Troy's scared, that much is clear. He's looking for solidarity, a friend amongst enemies. Jax is no man's friend. Not any more. He has no intention of seeking Troy out. He's not here to make alliances between outcasts, a patchwork of the incommunicado. Building bonds isn't something he's laid out
on his agenda, that's for sure.

He just walks, leans against the wall. Squats and thrusts, anything to keep him active. To keep his blood pumping. Come tomorrow it'll be running fast and free in his veins.

Come tomorrow it could all be different. He may have his absolution. He may be ready to leave this world absolved and forgiven. Then again, he might not. If nothing else, he'll be able to purge himself, to confess his sins to a guy who used to be an altar boy and prayed before every meal, as close to holy as he'll ever get.

At least, that's what he *hopes* for...

(*)

Chibs, on the other hand, just hopes for the best.

Things hit Juice hard, years of ill-treatment leaving him high-strung and easily spooked and Chibs has watched the light disappear from those eyes with such frightening regularity that he’s always, always on guard for it. Usually he can bring him down pretty fast and, if he can't, Venus can.

"He seems good on the surface," Venus had told him, "but, so does gold plated jewellery and McDonalds fries."

He wears it well, she said, but like a clown, there's a lot hiding underneath that painted-on smile and Chibs needs to be careful.

"He'll come good, darlin'. Took me years to get to the place he's in now. He's got you, but ain't no miracles goin' on here. Keep those wise old eyes peeled."

These are the ails of a soldier, a spoil of the war they have come to know. PTSD, shellshock, it's a debilitating condition, but Juice has his therapies. He has his techniques, painstakingly put together by doctors and friends, and he has long strings of good days where he seems like the guy he used to be.

Today was just a bad day.

The cops have been snooping around the new clubhouse, anonymous tip-off, Chibs expects, and though everything is under lock and key and Juice has forged paperwork to back up their trade should it be found, the cop car out front had sent him into a panic. He can't go back to prison, he's adamant about that, and the thought of it leaves him sparking out.

"Shit," he had whispered, then more desperately, "shit, shit, shit..."

Tig'd had to grab him by the arm and pull him away just to ground him, to stop him from drawing attention to himself.

"You want a flashing light?" he'd asked. "What about a banner, shit for brains?"

"I'm sorry..."

It was one of Chibs' fears for Juice, one of the sticking points he had in opening the club doors back up for him. Maybe the trauma runs too deep. Maybe the fear is too deeply flavoured and he'll never get the taste away. Juice keeps promising he's getting better and Tig keeps reminding Chibs to give the kid some time but, with all that's going on, it's a worry. How could it not be? How is he going to handle Jax like this? How is he going to get through Chen?
How is Chibs going to hold him together if a routine visit from the law does this to him?

"This?" Tig had said, waving his hand in Juice's direction, "is because of that damned text. He's been a wreck since he got it. Fucking Teller, man."

That was then...

Looking at him now though, shirtless, straight backed and oozing a kind of bubbling confidence that doesn't seem natural at all? It would be easy to forget he had lost it.

He smirks as he runs a finger up Chibs' thigh.

"I thought we were gonna go over your designs, Juice. Isn't that why you invited me round?"

"Of course it wasn't. C'mon, you know me better than that, Chibby. Work in work time."

He's overcompensating, slightly manic and clearly disinhibited, that's clear to anyone who would happen to see it, but it's something, that's for sure. It's something, when he moves like this. When he smiles like that.

"This isn't work time."

Chibs wonders if he ever smiled like this for anyone before or if it's just him. All for him. An exclusive, for his eyes only.

"Y'know," Juice whispers as he pushes himself closer to Chibs, unbroken, unbridled, "you smell good today. I tell you that already?"

"No, you haven't, lad."

"Consider yourself told."

It's as if nothing has happened, as if Chucky didn't have to take him outside to stop him from passing out the minute he saw the uniform, as if Hap didn't call him out on the ride home.

It's as if he never got the go-ahead for tomorrow from Stockton, a game changer if ever there was one.

He twists his fingers in Chibs' hair and there's no mistaking what he wants.

"Juicy, c'mon..."

"What? What's up?"

"You know what."

Juice wants Chibs to take it all away.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

When he runs his tongue along Chibs' jaw-line and it sends conflicting signals to Chibs' head because part of him wants to pull back and snap him out of this and the otter just wants to go with it because Juice is good with his mouth and Chibs is appreciative of that.

"Shitty day, Chibby. Let's just forget about it."
"Doesn't work that way."

"Aw, why?"

He sends not unwanted but unexpected tremors through Chibs' body when he takes his wrist and brings it to his lips, when he bites into the pulsepoint with such promise, with such ravenous desire.

“I want us to feel good tonight,” he continues, as he blinks, as he runs his lips against chibs collarbone, as the softness of his hair brushes his unshaven cheek and bristles. "After the cops, before Jax. Screw the world except you and me, Pres. It can all go to Hell."

"Ah, Juicy."

"What?"

He breathes in Chibs' ear, grazing pressure against him.

"What?"

Those hands, hands capable of sculpting a beautiful ride, those fingers capable of typing a line of flawless code, they are in every place at once and Chibs can't keep up with it, can't keep up with the sensory assault that Juice is carrying out over his yielding body, traitorous to his own mixed thoughts.

That this is a symptom keeps playing on Chibs' mind.

The devil on his shoulder doesn't give a fuck.

"You want me to stop?"

“You're not right, lad,” Chibs whispers, barely able to speak, yet Juice shushes him with a kiss. "You're not right."

“I'm never right. You gonna be a responsible adult and put me in my place?”

He smiles, bites Chibs' lip and Chibs forgets himself, allows himself to be bitten. Tasted. He allows himself to be manipulated. Distracted.

"Put me in my place, Chibs. I dare you."

He knows that's what Juice is aiming for. Distraction, if not manipulation. Juice would not manipulate. He would twist things to his liking, however, take a scenario and mould it into something he can lead.

("He's an imperious motherfucker when he wants to be, that boy.")

Maybe Chibs isn't such a good guy after all because if this helps? If it takes them away from it for awhile? Where's the harm?

Where's the issue?

"Jesus Christ, boy."

"You say that so often," Juice smirks. "Same initials, wrong guy."

"Just...stop talking, aye?"
"Aye."

(*)

One of Juice's quirks has always been whispering song. There's always a line in his head. Eminem. Dre. Nirvana. Rihanna, even. One of his tattoos refers to the many sub-genres within the 'metal' scene, ink he got after he and a friend saw Metallica at an old rock hall back when he was a kid.

He just wanted to commemorate.

"...although people always think the 'cheese' part refers to me."

The compulsion is a quiet one. Under his breath he will repeat a line from a verse or tap out it's beat. He's always doing it, barely even notices himself.

It changes when he's anxious. Those words become less English, more the Latino language he doesn't understand because in his head he's always taken himself home when he felt he needed to be safe. He told Chibs that these were his mother's songs, the records she used to play when he was a little boy and, because of this, his favourites

("They just get stuck in my head when something's fucked up and I'm trying to fix it. I never knew why until now.")

When Juice wants to make a place or a time feel safer, he will open up the doors and invite the old place in. He'll play his old songs and he'll take himself back. Chibs doesn’t question it, allows Juice his escape. He revels in it sometimes when he slips a disc into the player and allows it to fill the room.

It's like welcoming the blue skies after a storm has been and gone.

Tonight, the music plays in a gentle tone; soft Hispanic chants overlaying Latin guitar that’s different to anything Chibs heard back in Spain when he used to go there as a child. Here, the Rican influence runs so much thicker and deeper within the dusty, dusky lyrics and melodies. There’s something so overtly sexual about the woman’s voice.

Juice breathes along Chibs' collarbone as he whispers words he does not understand in time with music that brings him peace. Chibs is searching for a crack in the façade; a little sign that all is not well but it’s not there. It’s not coming, at least not yet.

This may be the quiet at the centre of a storm but its calm, at least.

"I pulled myself out", Juice is saying without speaking the words "Reward me."

Juice has not folded in on himself. He’s smiling that special smile that tells Chibs all is good. All is fine.

He hopes it lasts.

He knows it won't, but he'll take it where he can get it.

(*)

"Tell me it's all gonna be okay. Tell me he's not gonna fuck everything up for all of us. You tell me that."

Venus strokes her hand over her sweet Alexander's head and sighs. He reminds her of how she used
to be, so desperate for someone to reassure her that things would be better tomorrow; that everything would be fine and fairy-dandy.

She never believed it even when they told her what she wanted to hear, a cynical Southern Belle to her last breath.

"The oracles aren't speaking to me, baby. We just gotta wait and see."

He'd never admit it aloud but Jax took so many pieces out of Tig it was a wonder he walked upright these past years so the thought of what's to come? It fills him with such abject horror it's kept him awake for days.

"You got me," she tells him. "Anything else is just filler, baby, remember that. It'll all wash off."

She hopes he knows that's true.

There are so many casualties of that dirty, ugly war.

So many.
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

Juice sits before Jax and is counted.

This may be completely unsatisfying. I'm sorry if it is, eek.

Thanks to those nice enough to say hello, yet again. Helps to know you are there.

Juice’s torrid relationship with Ron Tully has moved on since he left prison. He’s left it behind. He’s destroyed the bond that held them together. He’s turned his back on the older man, but even now, even in this scenario, Tully cannot keep his hands to himself.

He’s organised a private room for Juice’s visit and, while not present himself, he’s made sure the cameras are switched off. The note handed to Juice explains it in simple terms.

_Eyes are blind, sweetheart. Say what you need to say._”

He'd wanted to go through official channels, do this right.

He's hoping this is as far as Tully’s involvement goes.

Juice hadn’t been aware, at the time of speaking with Jax, that the cameras had been switched off. He’d confessed to killing Roosevelt thinking that everyone could see, everyone could hear, never intended to live out the rest of that week and figured it didn’t matter who knew what a monster he was. He knew he had his shiv back in solitary, knew he had his willing executioner in Tully.

He knew he was going out good.

It was only when he’d seen Unser’s face that he realised there had been no tape at all and that nobody knew of his crimes. At that moment in time it had felt like something had changed; that maybe fate was on his side and God didn’t _want_ him to confess.

His faith had only lasted a few moments.

When Jax is brought in, wrists cuffed, head shaven, Juice feels his heart stop in his chest for just a second, feels his breath catch in his throat as he looks at the drawn face, the harsh skull, the rings of dark around dull blue eyes.

He sees a shadow of a man so like the shadow he used to be that it’s almost like looking in the mirror of his own past.

He feels like his own ghost just walked in the room.

Jax’s eyes are fixed firmly on him, canine, dog-like, unwilling to break the contact. He’s trying to assert dominance over Juice and perhaps it’s subconscious, perhaps not, but Juice is not going to look away. Jax is at a safe distance across the other side of the table and he appreciates that, in turn letting his guard drop for just a second to allow him a welcome smile.
It’s not in Juice’s nature to be cold and, no matter how the conversation goes, he doesn’t want to start out that way. He wants to start off strong and get stronger, go in on top and stay there. He wants to keep his back straight and his thoughts straighter.

Even now, he wants to make the right impression.


“Don’t say I look good, Juice. We both know that’s not true. I probably look the way I feel.”

“Like shit?”

“Yeah, Juice. Like shit. You look different, though. Wasn’t expecting that.”

“Yeah, better. Healthier. Stronger.”

The underlying words are ‘no thanks to you’ and Juice knows Jax hears them loud and clear, sees it in his eyes when he nods his head in assent. There’s a quiet kind of contemplation about him that Juice isn’t all that familiar with, a low voice and a steady gaze. If Juice knew no better he’d think Jax was drugged but he knows it’s something else. It’s something Jax rarely exhibited but pulled on at times, a subtle flaw right before he cinched in the armour and stood himself up again.

It’s defeat, rarely seen, hardly worn and, just like that, it’s gone again.

“So, not to be an asshole but, what’s this all about? You. Here. I thought you’d said all you needed to say. I thought we were done with each other.”

“People keep telling me that. I don’t know where that idea came from.”

“We didn’t finish things on a good note, Juice. I get that.”

“No, we finished things with you signing my death warrant.”

There’s no anger in his voice when he speaks those words, just a kind of despondency, as if to say “How did we get here?” “How did it come to this?” There’s a distinct sadness about his tone that he hears in himself and wishes he didn’t.

Jax raises an eyebrow.

“I guess I deserved that.”

“Yeah, you kind of did.”

Juice had every intention of rising above but the feeling was so strong he couldn't hold it down.

He doesn't think he wanted to.

“I’m glad you came.”

“You are?”

“Yeah. I just wasn’t expecting it. Wendy said you were thinking about coming but I never thought you would. Not after everything.”

After what I did, is what he doesn’t say. After how I behaved.
Juice had asked her not to say anything, just as he had when he found her in that apartment what feels like years ago, now. It’s not that he wanted the element of surprise, just that he wanted to keep his options open. He should’ve known she couldn’t hold her own water where Jax is concerned. He’s her Achilles Heel, her blind spot. He always was and always will be. No matter what he did to her she will always love him as the father of her son, will always revere him as the first and last person she ever loved.

Juice feels sad for her because Nero will never live up to that, will forever be dancing in the shadow of a lesser man that lied and lied and lied again.

“I asked her not to say anything. I guess that was a little optimistic."

“It’s Wendy. She talks, things come out. She likes you. It’s why she helped you back when we were on your tail. She thinks you’re a good guy.”

"And you still think I’m not?"

"I never said you weren’t a good guy, Juice."

“Actions speak so much louder, Jax. You know that.”

“Yeah, well, my actions of late haven’t really been carried out with a clear head.”

Maybe part of that is Juice’s fault. Maybe the part of him that banded together with the only person left on Earth who he felt he could trust was the very thing that set off the bomb in Jax’s head, but that doesn’t explain what came before. What came before was just a maniacal power-trip that nobody could’ve anticipated and no man could’ve contained.

Maybe Gemma and Juice were the catalyst but that fire had been burning long, long before.

He shrugs, though it’s not nonchalance. It’s something else.

“I came here because I wanted from you what you wanted from me. The truth. Just...the truth. I guess I wanted you to be a good guy too.”

“I’m not a good guy, Juice. And I never gave you any lies.”

He lies so easily, wears mistruths on his face as though there is nothing amiss whatsoever, but when you look into his eyes you can see it, just there, that subtle indication that he’s lying to himself.

“You really believe that, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

He falters, breaking eye contact, a rare sign of submission in the face of what he’s always considered a subordinate; a lesser man. Juice knows that kind of thing always made Jax feel powerful but the reverse isn’t true for Juice. He doesn’t feel powerful at all. It just feels kind of inevitable.

“No. No, I don’t believe that.”

And, there it is, the first truth, the very indication that perhaps he’s willing to atone after all and that maybe, just maybe, this visit won’t be a waste of both of their times.

“Thank you,” Juice says, and he truly means it.

"For what?"
"For being honest with yourself. Fuck knows it’s a long time coming."

(*)

“You’re different.”

It’s funny how many people have said that to Juice because it’s not just a physical change but a mental one, too. You put something through a wringer that many times and it’ll come out different. It can’t be the same. Send a soldier to war and what comes back isn’t always what boarded that plane.

“That amount of shit to go through? Changes a guy, Jax.”

He’s happy with the change.

(‘Fitter, happier, more productive, comfortable, not drinking too much, regular exercise at the gym three days a week...’)

“It’s not a bad thing. You cut the bad things outta your life and all of a sudden things look better. I get that. I’m not an idiot, Juice. These walls give you time to think things through away from all the shit. You know that. My eyes are open, now.”

He looks happy to be telling it like it is, grateful to be able to finally say it aloud, this truth, consequences be damned. Maybe Juice wasn’t expecting humility but he remembers Jax was capable of that once, back in the day, in the same way as he was once capable of blind stupidity.

He got wise. Jax got harsh.

“Club’s doing okay. Thought you should know. Some of the stuff you laid out came good. We’re out of the madness now. Runnin’ smooth.”

“I hear you’re into bikes now, on the downlow. That’s cool. Money good?”

“We get by.”

“And, Diosa? Red Woody?”

“All cool.”

He pauses to take that in. Maybe there’s a faint glint of disappointment in his eyes, the kind that people get when they find out an old adversary is doing well despite everything; that an ex-girlfriend moved on and got herself a husband, a couple of kids, a white picket fence in the front yard…

He shakes it off, moves on.

Juice has perfected that look, that stance.

“I really didn’t expect them to take you back. I thought it’d be excommunication for sure.”

“Letting people think for themselves with all the relevant info to hand? It changes the outcome, sometimes. I guess I’m lucky.”

Jax will never be so lucky. They both know that. He has no explanation for the things he did, no mitigation and no saving grace. Even if Mayhem wasn’t on the table, a favourable alternative to life in prison, he’s done too much to ever be considered a Son again.

Maybe it’s resentment he sees in Jax’ face, maybe it’s something else.
"Chibs' word will have had some push, I guess. I know you guys are tight again."

“Chibs is a good leader, Jax. He’s fair. He listens.”

“He’s everything I wasn’t, right?”

“I didn’t say that, but, y’know – “

If the shoe fits…

"I know."

“He tell you he met me at the diner a few days before I shot at those cops?"

It’s clear from Jax’ face that Chibs said nothing and that pings something inside of Juice, a thought that even with the seeming depth of hatred that Chibs expressed towards him that day in the diner he was still holding back.

Jax sees it too.

“He probably told you he had to see his P.O. Seemed like the cover-of-choice for all of us.”

"Yeah, I kinda figured he’d want to warn you off. Get you outta town. Why did you want to see him?"

Because he was my friend, Juice wants to say. Because he meant the world to me. Because when each and everything was crashing down around me all I wanted was for him to take me by the hand and lead me away.

“I wanted to know whether the Mayhem vote had been taken to the table or if it was just you that wanted me dead.”

“And, what did he say?"

“He told me it was none of my business, that I should put a gun in my mouth and pull the trigger. He didn't tell me to run, Jax, he told me to kill myself.”

He pauses for a moment, lets that sink in. There’s a sour taste in his mouth when he says those words because that’s not the Chibs he knows now, isn’t the Chibs he knew before. The man in that diner was not a man he knew before and he remembers quite clearly feeling he was looking at a stranger.

“I didn’t need to ask anything more. I knew you’d really done a number on me and him. Then the thing with the Mayans happened, and jail, Tully, Lin and...well, y'know. It all just went to Hell from there.”

“And, did Chibs tell you how it came around, the idea of you being our inside man?”

“I was the obvious choice. That’s what you told me.”

"Did he tell you what he thought?"

Juice says nothing.

This is the Jax he knows well, the guy who will deflect with accusations of his own; who will tear a man down because he cannot bear to be placed alone in the wrong. If he’s going he will take
someone with him. It’s not malicious. It’s juvenile. It’s the asshole he always was and the child he’ll never stop being.

His humility didn’t last all that long.

“He felt it was a good idea.”

“Of course he did, after what you told him. I was dispensable. A fucking rat bastard.”

“He knew there was nothing you wouldn’t do for the club, told us you’d do as you were told if it meant a way back in. I had my reservations, Juice, but he put his neck on the line for you.”

It was Chibs’ idea, he’s saying, not mine.

He was the mastermind behind your downfall, not me, but there’s something in the way he speaks that really makes Juice angry. There’s compassion in his voice, just like there is with Tully and he wonders for a split second if he’s been spending too much time with him. He delivers these blows in a way that sounds distinctly like he’s doing Juice a favour by telling him.

“I figured he knew you better than anyone so I went with it.”

“He barely knew me at all by then, Jax. You made sure of that. After he beat me down in the garage he barely even looked at me again. I can count on one hand the number of conversations we had. It wasn’t how it used to be.”

“That’s your leader, Juice. Did he even give you a chance to explain yourself?”

“Did you? I seem to remember you shutting me down every time I tried.”

“I told him he’d fucked up with you. Gave him a choice, you or the VP patch. That’s why he turned cold. I guess he didn’t tell you that part either.”

“What do you mean, ‘fucked up with me’?”

“After you tried to hang yourself, it should’ve been brought to the table. You should’ve been out, no questions asked, no way back in. Sons don’t kill themselves.”

“…except Presidents, right?”

Jax bypasses the comment, sidesteps it like a true politician and, Christ, he’s good at whitewashing his own issues so he can carry on ploughing someone else’s.

“He said he’d watch you, make sure you stayed in line. You just got more and more screwed up. He thought there was something wrong with you. That you had something you were hiding. You just kept getting worse.”


Juice collected all of them.

“Why do you think that was, huh, Jax? You think it might’ve had something to do with the fact you were riding my ass day in, day out?”

Unbelievably, unthinkably, it would appear that was something that hadn’t even crossed Jax’ mind judging by the look on his face.
“How could I get better? Roosevelt might’ve stopped but you stepped right in where he left off. I lived every day with the threat of mayhem hangin’ over my head and every single time I thought I’d paid my dues, you moved the finish post.”

“I pushed you hard. I accept that.”

“Hard? You pushed me hard? That’s all you can say?”

“What more do you want me to say? You asked for the truth and I’m giving it to you.”

"Your truth."

"It's all I got."

“What did you say to Chibs? What made him turn like that?”

A lot hinges on what he said to Chibs. A lot that’s sitting pretty in Juice’s head could be dislodged by the very choices Chibs made. It’s why he’s been scared to bring it up with him, not with any great depth, because he knows the truth is going to hurt him.

He knows it’s not going to set him free and maybe holding back was a cowardly option, maybe it wasn’t, but this is where Jax is taking him an there’s no way back from here.

“I told him what had happened with Miles, with the cops. That you killed him to save yourself. That you sold us all out despite him talking you down. I said he’d screwed up by not keeping you in line and that he’d done wrong by the club because of it. He had to make a choice, you or the club. Watching you or keeping his VP patch.”

“Did you tell him why I was so messed up?”

“I told him enough. He knew he couldn’t do anything more for you. You were a lost cause and it was only a matter of time before you had enough rope to hang yourself with again. He started to wonder if you’d hang all of us among with you.”

The words ‘hang yourself again’ are pointed, and it hurts, but Juice has dwelled on what he did for a long, long while and he’s at the point now where he can see it for what it was. An act of desperation. A cry for help that never came.

“You told him he had to give up on me. Leave me behind. You told him I wasn’t worth saving. And, he believed you.”

“I made him aware it was time to put it right. He’s a soldier. He’s done it before. You were deadwood, Juice. A danger to the club. To yourself. To all of us.”

That’s one way of putting it.

"Deadwood."

"You were a loose cannon. We couldn't trust you. I had to get that through to Chibs."

“- so, you told him I was a traitor and a coward. You never leave the wounded behind but traitors can find their own way. Is that right?”

“Right.”

It’s so simple when it’s put in those terms and, on paper, Juice can see how Jax would’ve put it
across. The guys have told him something similar. He hasn’t asked for details and has pointedly turned the conversation whenever it was brought up. His therapist thinks it’s an avoidance technique. He got a bad report card once and he hid it under his mattress and refused to read it. He knew it was shitty. He knew it was pathetic.

He just didn’t want to face it until he was ready to hear what had been said. But, wasn’t he injured in some way here? Wasn’t he beaten down and bleeding mentally? Wasn’t he standing in front of moving cars without even knowing it, only to be chasised for being a maverick and a cowboy hours later?

“Wasn’t I wounded, Jax, and, who was it that wounded me in the first place?”

He smiles, and it feels bitter even to him.

“Chibs didn’t have all of the cards to hand when he made his choice, did he? You gave him the bare minimum, just like you always did. You streamlined your truth to fit in with what you wanted it to be, not what it actually was.”

He was working on limited resources, Juice is saying, a computer started up in restricted mode. Of course some of its faculties are going to be out of commission.

“He had enough. He didn’t want any more. Given the choice, he didn’t choose you, and I know how much that’s gotta hurt.”

“Then, why does it feel like you’re taking so much pleasure in it?”

“I got no pleasure at all. Not any more.”

It does hurt. It hurts more than he could ever describe. Chibs will never know what a physical blow he dealt him when he turned away from him on that roadside, a lost man looking for one final connection, a tiny shred of reassurance in the midst of panic, only to be offered the back of Chibs’ head.

“It fucked with his head. He was never the same without you. I knew making that choice would change him but I stand by my decision. It was the right thing to do.”

“Right. Of course. Because that's what brothers do.”

It’s a quiet pain that will resonate for a long, long while. Chibs chose Jax’s lies over Juice’s gagged, restrained, beaten truth, and maybe it was because he didn’t want to hear it. Maybe it’s because he didn’t want to carry on knowing that what he was doing was wrong.

Maybe, just like Juice’s reports card, it was easier to just bury it.

“He really didn’t tell you any of this?”

“I never asked. I didn't want to know.”

“You think he would've?”

“I don’t know.

“You know he wanted you dead, right?”

That, Juice knows. That’s something Chibs has told him, that there came a point when just the thought of him made Chibs want to pick up that gun and put the bullet in him personally.
He didn’t quite call it a mercy kill but it’s what he was thinking.

“He couldn’t understand how I could give you a pass after Miles. Beating you in that garage was the only way he could move forward. It’s the military way. Guys fight it out and all is good.”

“Yeah.”

“You didn’t fight back. He got nothing from it. No satisfaction. No resolution. I assume he just felt like an asshole kicking a cowering dog. What was that all about, Juice? You just took it?”

Juice had tried to be brave. That’s what it had been. He stood up again and again wanting Chibs to see he could take it, that he’d take anything, would do anything if it would make things good again. He can’t understand his own mindset, not now. He can’t imagine ever being so broken that he would lay down and take a beating without ever raising a hand; that his defensive instinct would be suppressed to such an extent he didn’t even try to cover his head.

He hurt so badly that night, bled all over his pillow.

The worst part was he was still alone.

“The thing is, Jax, you all had me believe I deserved it. I didn’t fight back because I didn’t think I had the right.”

“Gemma had to bleach the floor just to get the blood stains out of it. Your blood. I had to warn him not to do it again when I saw your face.”

“Figures. You were protecting your patsy. Who else could you pin stuff on if he killed me?”

“That’s not how it was, bro.”

“That’s exactly how it was.”

“He really lost it for a while. He blamed it on problems with Fiona and his kid but I knew it was because of you. I swear, you almost took him down with you.”

It’s hard to hear and, though he asked for the truth, it’s a low blow. He remembers just how hard Chibs had shook him down by that tree, just how fiercely he’d screamed in his face. He can’t imagine his actions taking Chibs down but it scares him more than he’d care to admit.

Jax seems to be expecting something from him: a response, maybe. He’s expecting some kind of kickback from the words he’s putting out there and Juice wonders when he let him start controlling the conversation when his every intention had been to lead it himself.

His Achilles heel is Chibs just like Wendy’s is Jax.

It’s clear everyone knows that.

“Why are you saying all this to me, Jax? What are you getting out of it?”

Jax reels it in, the barbed tongue, the quiet assault.

Maybe he knows he’s pushing Juice away.

“Just telling it like it is,” he says. “There are no angels and devils here. They’re all just fucking each other.”
He just needs to know, now. He wants that door opened and then closed. He remembers telling Unser that his condemnation had been the result of ‘old sins’ but what left him shaking and sweating and digging his fingernails so hard into his palms he broke the skin was the fact that he didn’t know which sin.

He’s asked Chibs.

The honest response was that there was so much mud thrown he doesn’t even know for sure any more.

(‘You were dead already in his eyes.’)

“What was it that signed my death warrant for you? Just out of curiosity. What did you take to the table?”

“You already know this. I’m sure the guys have told you what we talked about – “

“- I’m not asking them, I’m asking you. I wanna hear it from you.”

“Why? Because hearing it from them might shatter the illusion that they got your back, now?”

“They walk on eggshells with me, Jax. They don't wanna break me.”

“I don't know, Juice. You don't seem all that fragile to me. Seems like you finally grew a pair.”

The funny thing is, he doesn’t mean it as an insult, nor does Juice take it as one.

He knows how far he’s come, how far removed from the little kid he used to be, smiling blindly and believing everything he was told.

"Was it Miles? Because, y’know, Tig tried to kill Opie and that wasn’t an accident, and I hear you were pretty trigger happy when it came to Jury. What about Darvany? Was it because of her? Was it because of what I said to Nero?"

“Juice – “

He sounds jaded. Tired.

Juice pushes on, doesn't care.

“C’mon, I’m curious. What exactly did I do wrong that put my crimes above all of your own? Was it because I was the gullible idiot who loved you too much to question it?"

The line of questioning leaves Jax looking exhausted, like he’s been through this a thousand times, only not with Juice, with himself.

“You broke the rules. You ratted. You betrayed me. That’s the truth.”

Spoken like a true mantra.

“Is that your truth or the actual truth? We both know there’s a subtle difference. Nero went from wiping up my puke from the God damned floor to washing his hands of me. Why was that? Was that your truth, too?”
"It was a truth that worked. He bought it."

Those words are reminiscent of what his mother said, that Juice had offered her a truth that worked, such a gentle way of describing a lie because hasn’t that always been their way? They’ve always cushioned their evils with a smile and a gentle wink; with a blanket to soften the blow.

Jax really is Gemma’s son.

"Jesus Christ."

"Let’s not get too caught up in honesty here, Juice. Not after the lie you told."

The Chinese lie, the biggest shame of Juice’s life, the greatest misjudgement he has ever made, bypassing Potter and Roosvelt, bypassing just about everything, but Gemma had been persuasive and Juice had been distraught and the rest hasn’t just spoken for itself but screamed.

“I paid for that mistake, Jax. More than you will ever know."

He paid with his body and his mind.

He’ll pay for the rest of his life.

"I told Nero you killed Darvany, said I had nothing to do with it. Nothing more dangerous than a junkie rat. Didn’t you prove that with Nero? You were already a mess. Figured it’d be plausible deniability. I laid that on the table. I’m sure you already know that."

“How d’you get them to believe? What would I have to gain from killing her, Jax?"

“You weren’t exactly stable at the time, Juice. I blamed it on your paranoia. Put yourself in their position. Wouldn’t you believe it?"

Juice sighs.

Sometimes he’s his own worst enemy.

“Bobby said I was making everyone nervous."

"You were."

"I’d never would’ve killed anyone. I'm not a killer. They should’ve known that. They would’ve known that, if not for you."

“You put that pillow over her face. There’s no getting away from that."

"On your order."

"You could've said no. We all have a choice, bro."

Only the privileged have a choice, only those in positions such as Jax’ where everything they say goes, everything they need is met, where wrongs are swept under the carpet and punishment never comes. It’s so easy for him to talk about choice when he was born into this world, never had to make his way because he was heir to the throne by default, a leader without having earned the right.

“We both know that’s not true. Besides, what would've happened? She’d have died anyway, and you would’ve killed me. You think I couldn’t feel the invisible gun you had pointed at my head? At least I let her go out with as much peace as I could give her. Would you have done the same, Jax?”
“I couldn’t kill her. You know that.”

“You did kill her. You just used me as your weapon. Nero and me, we were sitting there in that little Mayan prison and I could see it in his eyes. He thought I was capable of that because of you.”

He used to sit there in solitary and wonder if everything that happened was divine retribution for Miles, for Darvany, for whatever shitty little sin he’d committed in his youth. The one thing that filled him with rage was the idea that even just one person would think him capable of choosing to take a mother’s life.

“It was better for the club. You weren’t in a position to deny it. I saw an opportunity.”

“Well, it was my opportunity.”

“No. No, they weren’t.

John Teller never would’ve approved of what his son became, a hateful, vengeful monster who would turn on his own and would chip away at his weakest link because he needed someone to blame.

Juice feels the tears pricking the back of his eyes but he fights them hard. He forces them back down. He blinks them away.

He’s not going to break in front of Jax, not again.

He’s not going to show him he beat him, even if he’s the one in control, now.

“What did you see in me that made you hate me so much, Jax? What did I do to deserve that? I need to know. It’s the one thing that keeps me awake at night to this day.”

The search for solace is hidden beneath a mask of inquisitiveness because it’s better to be curious than scared to death. It’s better to be probing than lonely.

It’s only fair he knows.

“Above all else, why me?”

“I’ve asked myself that question time and time again. I keep asking myself and I can’t come up with a simple answer. I didn’t hate you. You were just - ”

“- I was just easy?”

“You made yourself easy. But, that’s not it. You were just everything I wasn’t.”

“Seriously? What does that even mean?”

Jax doesn’t even know and the look on his face, blank and helpless, it confirms that.

There are some answers that just cannot be given.

Some mysteries are destined to remain that way.

(*)
“Did you resent me for Clay?”

“Resent you? What do you mean?”

It was something Clay said a long time ago, a passing comment designed to built Juice up into something more than the simmering, fading shadow he had become. They were playing a game of cards at the table in Clay’s sad little house and the topic of Jax had come around.

"It was Clay that brought it up. You were being shitty with me and I let it get to me. He said you were on my ass all the time because of him, because him and me got close in Stockton. I know he was trying to play me off against you, I’m not an idiot, but was there something in that? It always felt that way after doin’ the time. It felt different."

“Did I resent him treating you like a son? Yeah, I guess. He never acted like a father to me, not in the way I needed. But bro, by then? By that time? He was poison. I wanted him out of the way. I told you that.”

Juice remembers him saying it, remembers the strange, vindictive look he had in his eye when he was laying it all out. He remembers how pleased he’d been when Juice told him about the gun, how it felt like it had been gift-wrapped for him and laid in his lap.

He’d spat at Juice’s reservations, littered his fears with threats of his own.

(‘What’s gonna happen to him? Same thing that’ll happen to you if you don’t do what I tell you.’)

He’d called Clay his old man, his buddy, his good friend and always, always with a layer of spite, words so hateful in their conception that Juice had almost choked on them.

"When you made me get that gun? You took away the only relationship I had that you hadn’t already fucked up."

"You were the best choice for - "

“ - I swear, if you say ‘for the club’ one more time..."

“It’s all I got, bro. A lot of the shit you pulled was for the club. I thought you of all people would understand that. We do a lot of bad things for the cut but that’s what it is. It’s for the cut. You were a way in with Clay. He trusted you. I needed that."

"And you made me break that trust under the threat of fucking personal mayhem. Was I the best choice or the easiest, Jax? Which was it?”

Jax leans back. Christ, Juice hates that. He hates that complacency, hates that he thinks he’s ‘got him’ here.

“Like I said, you made yourself easy."

“And, if Chibs had killed Miles? What about Bobby? Would you have used them in the same way, or was it just me? Was it just the guy you knew had everything to lose?”

Did you play on my weakness, he’s asking?

Did you see my fatal flaw?

"It wasn’t personal."
“Of course it was. You took everything from me. Everything I loved. Everything I cared about. Each and every relationship I had, you dirtied it up with your lies and your manipulation, and, for what? Domination? Overthrowing the table? What did you get out of it?”

“I got nothing. It wasn’t like that. Like I said, it wasn’t personal.”

“So, you didn’t laugh when Tully told you what he was doing to me? You didn’t nod your head and tell him I deserved him holding me down and raping me every night?”

It’s almost a shock to Juice’s own senses that he said the word. It’s certainly a shock to Jax.

Silence.

Tense jaw.

A twitch in the left eye that Juice knows means he is about to put the barriers up.

He says nothing.

“See, this is your problem, Jax. You’re so used to being told you’re right that when someone points out how wrong you are you just shut down. You got no other answer but to lash out and hurt them. It’s real Wrath of the Almighty shit, Jax. You really should ask yourself what that means.”

“It means nothing.”

“And, isn’t that just the saddest part of it?”

He looks away, can’t bear the intensity any more.

“It all meant nothing.”

(*)

“You’re right.”

“Huh?”

He’s been silent for a couple of minutes, to the point that Juice wondered if they were done. He didn’t want to be the first to break down, didn’t want to be the first to speak.

He doesn’t know why that is.

“About what you said. I knew what was going on with Tully. I gave him my blessing.”

“Why?”

“Seemed like the only way of keeping him sweet.”

It’s chilling, just how careless he sounds, just how detached he is from the words he’s saying. Juice wonders if he’s vacated his body entirely, if this person sitting in front of him died a long, long time ago and his soul is already where it is supposed to be. He doesn’t know where that is for Jax but he knows he’s been in purgatory since this all went down.

The nonchalance, the indifference, it crushes Juice. What he suffered on that flat bed, his mind out of his body and his body used regardless, is worth more than this.
It means more than this.

“That’s all I was? Currency?”

“That’s all any of us are, Juice. We are only what we are worth to the next man.”

“And, I was worth nothing, wasn’t I?”

“Not to Tully. You were worth a lot to him. You still are.”

Juice feels sick at the thought of that, at the thought of meaning something to a man who systematically broke him down in such a short space of time, who built him up as something else entirely.

He can still feel Tully’s hands on him sometimes, can still smell the sweetness of his breath, the lavender scent of his wrists as he held Juice by his shaven head and gently kissed his forehead.

It takes a lot to pull himself back into the room when thoughts like that hit him, those tangible, olfactory memories that are so real, so very real...

“He tried it with me. That’s where the bruises came from. This? Was my refusal. This was me saying no.”

Juice never said no. What would’ve been the point?

('The absence of no is not a yes.')

"I figured he was trying to even the score for you. In his warped vision of justice and fairness, I think he feels putting his hands on me was karma."

“Jesus.”

“The guy's obsessed with the thought of you. I don’t know what you did, Juice, but – “

“- don’t… say another word. Don’t say anything at all, Jax.”

Not here. Not now. Not ever. I don’t know what you did, he says, as if Juice did anything at all, as if he was the one who orchestrated Tully’s ministrations; as if he was the one that caused it all.

Even now, Jax is still laying blame at Juice’s feet and, that? That’s crossing a line.

Jax silences, knows he can’t go there, and Juice fights his hardest to stop himself from throwing up the chicken soup he forced on himself before he left this afternoon because he hadn’t been able to stop shaking and it was the only thing he could stomach.

('You need to start eating, baby. There are things they can do in places like this to people who won’t eat. ’

“Just…stop.”

He doesn’t know if he’s talking to Jax or to Tully, vivid in his head, a noise in his ear.

A wretched, thrashing beast of a thought.

Jax nods his head.
“Okay.”

“Thank you.”

“Alright.”

He doesn’t say he’s sorry, though maybe he was about to. There are no words that would cover that.

Jax knows a lifetime of apologies would not compensate for what he did.

(*)

"Would anything I did ever have been good enough for you, Jax?"

"No. I never intended on letting you keep the cut."

It’s confirmation of something that deep down Juice already knew, that all those nights sitting alone in his cell trying to psyche himself up to doing something that went so far against himself it was practically alien to him was all for nothing.

He was always so good at burying his head in the fucking desert.

"There was never a way back. I’m sorry I told you there was. That was wrong of me."

Of all the things Jax could admit to, all the wrongs he has done unto Juice, this is so far the only one he will freely acknowledge. It might just be the one that hurts him the most, though, more than Chibs, more than Tully, more than anything,

This is clarification he was dead all along, played again by Samcro just as the Chinese were.

“IT’s there in black and white, bro. You kill a brother, there’s no way back from that.”

“No, Jax, the rule is if you murder a brother there’s no way back. Could you honestly say that what happened with Miles was murder?”

“I only have your word for it, Juice.”

“C’mon, man, you knew me.”

“I thought I knew you.”

Juice won’t stand for that. He won’t. Of all the things Jax can question about him, loyalty, worth, value, this is not one of them.

“No. You knew me, Jax.”

“I lost all trust I had in you when I found out you’d been talking to the cops. “

“How many times did you speak to the cops? Were your intentions always so pure? I explained what happened. I was trying to save the club. You know that.”

“And, so was I. But, with you? That was different.”

"You sure about that?"

Yes.
Juice smiles, and again, it’s not malicious, because Juice might be demanding answers but he’s not a spiteful guy. It’s just that the truth is finally coming out and it feels so good to hear it. To feel it. To know it.

“Y’know, I talk about you sometimes with my therapist. Not sure why I’m telling you this but I guess, since we’re all about honesty today, I might as well go there. His theory is simple. You punished me for your own crimes. I was your scapegoat. Seeing me hurt meant you didn’t have to be.”

“Is that what he said?”

“It’s the truth, isn’t it? You punished me because you couldn’t punish yourself. You took each and every thing you hated about yourself and you applied it to me. I was your little voodoo doll. I was the little toy you could wind up and let go just to see how many knots I’d tie myself into.”

He became so twisted up he could barely even stand, walk, function.

It wasn’t just Jax that did that to him but he never let him get himself straight.

“I told you, I didn’t hate you. You were like a brother to me.”

“Come on, Jax, we both know that’s bullshit.”

“It’s true. I loved you, man.”

“That’s how you treat someone you love? You weren’t a leader. You were a tyrant, and I’m so sorry if that hurts you to hear but it’s the truth.”

The word 'sorry' sets Jax off.

Maybe it’s because it’s the hardest word for him.

“This was always your issue. Saying you’re sorry. Bowing down. Why are you apologising, Juice? If this is what you believe, why are you sorry for it?”

“Because I know this isn’t who you always were and I pity the man you used to be. You think guilt and compassion are problematic?”

"I think there’s a time and a place for submission, warranted or not."

Juice has to laugh at that.

"I think that's the dumbest thing I've ever heard."

(*)

“You always looked up to me.”

“Yeah, I did.”

“Maybe you chose the wrong guy to put on a pedestal. I was only human, Juice.”

“Yeah. Sometimes, you weren’t even that.”

If anything, Jax looks impressed, not insulted, as if Juice's words are something he's been waiting
for, the proud older sibling who finally gets to see his kid brother score a home run.

"I barely recognise you, talking like this. Y'know? I never knew you to stand up for yourself, not unless one of us made you. You were always a pacifist."

"Yeah. The ideal choice to commit murder, right? I am who I have always been."

"No, you're not. This guy? I could've -"

"- could've what, Jax? This guy you could've respected? Treated better?"

"I was gonna say I could've used a guy like you at my side."

"Not a good choice of words, Jax. All you ever did was use me."

“I know. And, I was wrong.”

Look at that. Fallibility.

"That's twice you've said that now. I must he special."

"I mean it."

Juice just feels saddened by his own cynicism when he tells Jax he wishes with all his heart he believed it.

(*)

When it all comes down to it, there’s only one thing Juice can say. There’s only one thing he can do. He has but one power in this scenario and that is the power to forgive. He cannot take back what has gone before. He cannot re-tread old ground and lay new foundations that are more stable, less destructive.

He cannot take back what they are to each other and what they have done to each other, but he can liberate in the only way that matters.

"I loved you, brother," Juice says, without malice, without condescension, "and you betrayed me in the worst way possible."


Sanctioned sexual assault....

“You took every last bit of love and trust I had and you nailed me to the cross with it. I’m sorry you felt you had to do that.”

He’s sorry Jax Teller’s life was so shitty, so empty, so devoid and so insecure that he had to destroy someone else’s

It’s not meant as a blow or a threat because Juice is better than kicking a man while he’s down or baiting him when he can’t, won’t, fight back. He's not Jax and, as painful it is to even think, he's not Chibs either. He’s only telling it like it is.

Juice will never be that guy again, that painfully naive, problematic burden he once was and part of that is thanks to Jax, thanks to the jagged, rough and agonising lessons he taught him.
"I mean no ill will when I say I hope you don't have to live with this for much longer."

For his sake. For both of their sakes.

"I know, Juice."

"Thank you for telling me some truths," Juice whispers, and the almost-mirror to the words Jax condemned him with is obvious. There's hope in Jax's eyes that's different to the hope Juice had back then. Jax isn't hoping for a second chance because he knows he has not earned it. He's hoping for that elusive way out.

In some ways, he's looking for permission to go.

Juice doesn't tell him he'll make sure it's quick, a lie that still haunts him to this very day and quite possibly the cruellest lie Jax ever fed him. Instead, he tells him:

"I hope you find peace."

He means it sincerely, with every part of him, every growing branch and thread that hasn’t been snapped or destroyed.

It's not meant to break Jax, is not designed to shatter the fragile illusion of courage and borderline contempt that he has filled himself with for so long. It’s not meant to, but it does, a sentiment aiming at one thing yet birthing another. Jax looks crestfallen, almost as shattered as Juice did when the club left him to die.

But, Juice, he rises above all of the chaos, all of the sadness and all of the bitter truth and he does what they both need for him to do.

In five words, compassionate words, encouraging words, he grasps all of all the ugliness he took away with him on that fateful day with Jax and he drains it away. It dies between them, just as the trauma bond that has held them together with invisible ropes and chains shatters, just as the door slams closed on all of the rejection, all the confusion and all the unfairness.

I hope you find peace.

He is the better man, and he knows Jax can see that, now.

"Jesus Christ, Juice."

"I didn’t want you to go out thinking you were hated. I wanted to give you a chance to get it all off your chest."

"I know."

"You know I can’t stop it, the mayhem. I wouldn’t even if I could. It’s nothing personal. It's not some vengeful bullshit, 'cause I'm not that guy. I just know you wouldn’t want to live like this and I wouldn’t want you to either."

"No, I wouldn’t."

Juice sighs. He looks wistful, and he feels very small.

He wonders how small Jax feels.

"It’s a shitty life, being alone. I wouldn’t condemn anyone to that if I could help it. But, like you said,
there’s no way back when you kill a brother, not when it’s murder. There’s no saving yourself from that.”

He smiles softly as he reaches across, as he places a hand on Jax’s wrist as if trying to make that final connection. Physical. Mental. Spiritual. They were always so tactile. Always so physically close.

In this moment they are brothers again. Briefly. Fleetingly. After, they will still be guys who disappointed each other and drove each other to depths no men should be driven but this is here. This is now.

“You’re almost done,” he whispers, and it’s filled with a kindness Jax clearly hadn’t been expecting because it gets through those carefully constructed barriers and it hits him.

He blinks hard.

Juice doesn't feel satisfied when he sees what looks to be unshed tears wetting Jax's eyes, the look of warranted shame turning the blue a murky grey.

He doesn't feel like a victor when Jax tells him "Jesus, Juice, I'm sorry. For everything. I'm so fucking sorry."

He doesn't feel righteous when Jax buries his face in Juice's hand and sobs like a broken child for things he probably doesn't know himself.

He does feel justified, though.

He does feel worthy of his guilt, long past it's due. So long.

He says it again.

He's sorry. So sorry.

"I know, Jax. I see that, now. And, I forgive you. But, for all the shit you did to me and to all of us, can you forgive yourself?"

Now that he knows he did wrong, can he absolve himself?

"I can't do that for you, Jax. No-one can."

It's no longer in Juice’s hands. It never should've been to begin with.

(*)

He says his goodbyes with the knowledge he stood up and was counted, that he sat before the man who degraded him and beat him down and came out on top. He offered Jax what was never offered to him.

There's value in that.

His mother would he proud.

When he looks into Jax' eyes for what he knows will be the last time, he sees something that might be respect.

That's all he ever asked for.
Love and respect, it's all he ever wanted.
Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

All is out in the open. All can be forgiven.

Sorry if this is dreadful. There's a lot of discussion. This is the aftermath of the Jax visit and Juice's inherent confusion. Poor baby has it all clear now. Kind of.

He's loved and comforted and Chibs will do anything his boy wants to make it up to him.

After a few hours searching, Tig finds Juice on top of the world, though not in the colloquial sense. It's a more literal thing, a tiny speck on a wide open roof backlit by a greying sky.

“You might wanna look out for your boy,” Jax had told Chibs. “He came a little undone.”

Chibs had demanded to know what Jax had done to him but he'd been adamant it wasn’t his problem.

“I didn’t do anything. I just told it like it is.”

His tone hadn’t been smug, nor had it been provocative. It was just fact put forth by a man with nothing else to lose and nothing to gain. The talk had gone a certain way and Juice had left it with certain knowledge of past events that maybe he hadn’t had before. He’d had his foundations shaken, the fragile grasp he had on things torn from him as Jax laid out everything he had been burying away.

“I gave him the truth,” he’d said, “and, he handled it as well as he could, but I know him. We all do. He'll be crushed.”

When he hadn’t returned, Jax’ words had struck chords in all of them. Chibs had put a hold on production to send them all out looking for him. Rat had questioned it at first, queried whether Chibs was an overprotective parent who might need to give ‘his kid’ some space, but then he’d seen the look on his face. They’d all seen the look on his face.

It wasn’t the look of a man who can be reasoned with, nor was it the look of a person who may well be guilty of over-caution.

It was the look of a man who was genuinely concerned.

For the first time since he took the helm, Chibs had looked undone himself.

“We'll find him,” Tig had promised. “Drag the little shit back by his ears if we need to.”

Something in Chibs' demeanour, more than just concern, had resonated with him but he couldn't put his finger on precisely what it meant. He’s seen that look before in Venus when she’s concerned for his wellbeing; when she’s scared something’s going to go wrong and he’s not going to come back to her.
The fact that Chibs had that look for Juice sits strangely with him.

(*)

He doesn’t know why he thought to come here, doesn’t know why it stood out as a possibility because Juice is a creature of habit and as far as he knows it’s not a place he regulates. The truth is, it’s a place Tig himself would go if he wanted to Lord over his own existence and if there’s one thing he’s learning about Juice these days is that they have a lot in common.

He sees himself in those wide eyes and it scares him a little.

The kid’s sitting on the ledge, his bare feet hanging over the side. There’s a sheer drop underneath him but he doesn’t seem to be considering being swallowed by it just yet. That’s a good thing, at least. Tig isn’t ready to physically manoeuvre someone from a literal edge, not right now.

At his age, he doesn’t think he’d be fast enough.

“You’re not planning on jumping, are you? I’m not really in the mood to scrape pulled pork off the sidewalk, kid.”

Tig tries not to frighten him but still, he startles. For a second Tig’s worried he’s going to fall but he pulls himself together. He shifts back, gets himself into a position of safety.

Tig is grateful the instinct is intact, at least. He’s watched him stand in front of cars before, no flinch, no instinctive dive to get away. He’s seen his quest for death first-hand and it scared the shit out of him.

“Shit. You scared me, bro.”

“Sorry about that. Didn’t realise you were still a jumpy little peckerwood.”

"I'm on a roof, shithead. You shouldn’t sneak up on people like that."

"Who was sneaking?"

Tig gets a good look at him, tries to read something into his body language. Is he open or closed? Is he tense or lax? Is he drunk? The half empty bottle suggests so, the orientated state implying he’s clear and present, at least, if a little jilted.

He doesn’t look suicidal.

“I came up here for a reason, Tiggy. I wanted to be alone.”

“Yeah, well, I want a 12 inch cock and a Ferrari. ‘I wants’ don’t get.”

Juice has died so many deaths these recent years and Tig has been privy to some of them, at least. He has seen the frantic terror in those too-big eyes and he has bitten his lip and silenced himself so as not to speak out about it.

He has watched this guy fall a thousand times over and it pains him to think he did nothing about it for fear of himself and for what might come of it.

He’s not planning on doing that again.

"Wanna tell me what you're doing up here?"
“I’m just thinking, that’s all.”

“You didn’t think you could let us know you were okay before you set about brooding? Chibs is riding the streets looking for you.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“That’s all you gotta say?”

It would seem so.

He turns away, resumes his vigil. He’s staring out into the horizon, hands underneath his knees, crazy dark hair falling in tiny curls across his forehead where the wind’s swept it. His cut is lying on the ground a few feet away, neatly tucked in alongside his shoes.

Tig doesn’t want to know why that is.

He doesn’t look as though Chibs is on the cards and Tig knows better than to push him, not with him sitting both physically and metaphysically on the edge.

He tries another entry route.

“So, how was it? Was it everything you hoped for and more? I take it from your radio silence it didn’t go as well as you’d hoped.”

It’s almost a surprise when he engages, when he turns back from the wall and comes down from it. He’s wearing comedy socks, Tig notices, Kermit the Frog doing Miss Piggy, by the looks of it. He’s pretty sure they were a gag gift from Hap a couple of Christmasses ago.

He wonders if that was to set the tone of his day.

“It went fine.”

"If this is fine I’d hate to see problematic."

He looks bad. Real, real bad. It was pretty hard.

There’s a vindictive part of Tig that feels happy about that because karma is the biggest bitch there ever was and, like a bitter ex-wife, she never strays far away enough from someone who has fucked with her. Of course, there’s another part that feels bad for the kid because he remembers him at fifteen years old riding on Clay’s shirt-tails, so desperate for the cut he’d have died for it there and then.

You can’t teach that kind of passion.

You can screw it up, though.

“I barely even recognised him, Tig. He looked...done.”

“He was always gonna look that way. He’s lost everything. There’s nothing left.”

“I know. But, isn’t that fucking sad?”

For Tig, it’s not the same way as a bike is sad when it’s totalled, nor is it the same way a woman is sad when her tits head south and her eyes don’t shine like they used to. It’s sad in the same way Bill Cosby is sad, a childhood hero of so many being shown up as a demon who abused those who fell
under his spell. It's self-inflicted. It's a bitter shame.

Jax abused his power over Tig, over Juice

Maybe Tig needs to be angry enough for both of them.

“Of course it’s sad, Juice, but it didn’t have to be that way. We’re not to blame for the position he finds himself in. We’re not responsible for his fall from fucking grace. Let’s not forget that.”

“I know. It just all feels wrong.”

The look on his face doesn’t match the words that are coming out of his mouth. There’s a distinct gulf between the two things, a conflict that can only mean Juice is lying to himself. Maybe he does feel responsible in the same way he feels responsible for Clay, the same way he feels responsible for everyone who has fallen. Tig never got to know Juice all that well over the years but it would take a blind man not to see the weight of responsibility he bears on those broad shoulders, the light of a million guilty thoughts hanging bright in those haunted eyes.

He takes on too much.

It’s a fatal flaw.

“So, what’s got you so rattled, huh? What’d he say to you?”

“He said it was Chibs’ idea, the whole Lin thing in Stockton.”

“I thought you already knew that?”

He shakes his head. It’s clear by the look of absolute dejection on his face that Chibs hadn’t quite made him aware of that just yet, but he knows himself how Juice shuts them down at the first opportunity. There’s a stubborn streak in him that none of them knew was there before or nobody had cared to see.

It could’ve been useful.

“Jax said he tried to talk him down but Chibs was insistent. Said I’d do anything I was told if it meant getting my cut back. Did Jax tell you he had no intention of letting me keep it?”

“If he had? There’s no way we would’ve gone along with that. It’s one thing to excommunicate; it’s another to dangle a fucking carrot in front of someone’s nose. We’re not that cruel.”

“No? We were that cruel to Kyle, weren’t we? We let him believe he was forgiven only to take a God damned blowtorch to his back.”

“That was different. That was before your time. You don’t know what happened with that guy.”

“I know enough.”

“He left Opie to rot. He lost five years of his life and Kyle just walked away.”

“Doesn’t matter. It was cruel, Tig. You know it.”

Tig tries to envisage how it must’ve felt for Kyle, the heat against his skin pale in comparison to the humiliation he must’ve felt at falling into the trap. It’s the fire that triggers the memory, the idea of burnt flesh bringing up images of Dawn in her last moments. He remembers his daughter flailing around, her body aflame, her skin turning black as it licked away at her. He remembers her
screaming so loud his ears nearly burst.

He can still see her beautiful face melting away as the Pope’s guys laughed at how she danced, how beautifully she sang for them but it’s the smell he remembers more than anything. He’ll never forget that smell, the smell of his daughter leaving this Earth in a gulp of smoke and ash, so opposed to how she’d entered, in a rush of love as she fell into her mother’s arms along with her sister.

He’ll never forget her screams just as he’ll never forget her crying for him not to leave her when he went on yet another job, screaming that she loved him when he told her he and her mother were not getting along and he was giving her some time to breathe.

She and her sister were the most beautiful mistakes he ever made.

Maybe some of what he’s done for this club have been the ugliest.

“Yeah,” he concedes, “Yeah, I guess it was cruel. But, Juice, we didn’t know what was going to happen with Lin. You can’t judge these things before they happen. You just can’t.”

“It was obvious what was gonna happen to me in there. Remember Dion? Remember how you were happy to crack my ribs to get me in position for him?”

“That was different.”

“Was it?”

Tig didn’t even feel guilty about it. Maybe he saw it as revenge for Juice’s stupidity; payment for the scar he wears on his ass from that dog biting through layers of fat and skin.

Maybe he was just an asshole back then.

“Did he think I’d go in there unprotected and people were gonna leave me alone? You said it yourself. There are some guys that are sharks and some are fish and no matter how tough we think we are, we can’t break free of that. I’m a fish, Tig. I’ll always be a fish no matter what.”

“You were supposed to be in ad-seg. Nobody was supposed to be able to get to you there. That was the point, Juice. If Lin hadn't been in solitary there's no way we'd have sent you inside. He thought you'd be safe.”

“We both know that means shit. Chibs would’ve known it meant shit too, especially with Ron Tully in the mix. The guy practically runs the place. You know he got me in a blind room with Jax? I wanted to go legit. He had to stick his fucking fingers in, didn’t he?”

“Sorry, man, I know you were trying to do the right thing.”

“Yeah. Some chance, huh, with that guy.”

He looks so lost, so confused as to why he would be the subject of such flagrant infatuation. It’s bewildering for all of them but there’s no reasoning with guys like that. There’s no pattern to their behaviour. There can be no preparation, only damage control. There’s tiredness in Juice’s eyes and seeing it, feeling it, Tig finds he wants to make the call himself, to personally throw himself to the dogs and have Tully killed even if it means punishment on his part. He’d put a bullet in that guy’s head no problem whatsoever, would take pleasure in the fact the last face that guy saw was a tranny fucking ancestral German like he is.

An insult to the race.
All he can do is reassure.

“Don’t worry about him anymore, Juice. Nothing he can do to you. He can’t touch you. There are bars and miles between you and him, and that’s not even counting the rest of us. You think we’d let him get near you?”

Not a chance.

It's not cold, so when Juice wraps his arms around himself it’s a vulnerability thing. Protective. Defensive, even. When Tig does this himself, Venus pries his arms open and invites herself inside. He's never felt more secure.

“You ever get the feeling you’ve been pushed in a cage with someone and they’re never gonna unlock the chains, Tiggy? That’s Tully and me. That’s what Chibs convinced Jax was the way forward for me.”

“You think Chibs wanted any of that for you? He didn’t like it. Bobby didn't like it, neither did I.”

“Yeah, well, Bobby thought I was crazy.”

“We all thought you were crazy. You were acting like you were out of your mind. When you make me and Hap look stable? It's a problem, Juice. We knew something was wrong..”

“You didn’t ask.”

“Would you have told? You think I told anyone he had my balls in a vice?”

Tig said nothing. That had been the warning. You sit in my pocket, Jax had said, and you say nothing. You nod your head like a fucking puppy every time I open my mouth and under no circumstances do you ever go against me.

He wonders how long it would’ve been before he’d cornered them all and tried to call democracy.

“No,” Juice whispers, “No, I guess not.”

They’d all seen Juice’s mind shattering. They’d all watched nervously as he stood in front of loaded weapons, deadpan and cocky, as he’d flung himself into moving vehicles. They’d all watched as he gradually turned into something and someone he never used to be but were too far down the rabbit hole to do anything about it. Tig had watched closely, his own demons keeping him on a tight leash, but he could see that one of those days Juice wasn’t going to come out the other side. His only options at that point were death, prison or the men in white coats.

They share a lot, Tig and Juice.

“I'm not good on my own. I'm not good in jail, not without you guys. Why would he do that to me? Why would he subject me to that? It’s one thing thinking Jax did it, makes sense for a twisted asshole like him, but Chibs?”

He shakes his head as if trying to get his thoughts straight.

“Why? Because he wanted to give you a chance, at least. Bullet to the head and you're not getting up, no two ways about it, but if you did your job and did your time? If you got through it and earned your way out of the noose Jax had you in? You might not be a Son but you wouldn’t be in the ground, at least.”
“I thought he wanted me dead.”

“You know he didn’t. You’re doubting him because of something Jax said? Didn’t cross your mind he might be trying to play you? That boy’s got a malicious streak as wide as my grandmother’s ass.”

“But, why? What would he gain from that? It doesn't make sense.”

“Nothing makes sense. Life doesn’t make sense.”

“I need it to.”

And, isn't that the crux of it with this guy? Hasn't it always been? He needs for things to be good or bad, black or white. Shades of grey confuse him and uncertainties play with him to the point of madness.

He cannot handle insecurity because that means what he has could be taken away and that is not an option.

"I just…I can't live with this confusion."

“Well, you’re gonna be disappointed, because all of this? Crazy."

"Life is crazy."

"Yeah, it is."

Life is crazy. This life is crazier, still. The sooner he learns to deal with that the better.

“Look, Juice. You got what you needed. You closed the door. You’re a better man than me for doing it, I swear, because If I saw him again? I don't know what I would do. You said you were going in there to forgive him. You did that after everything he put you through? That’s something man. That’s really something. But it’s done, now. You just...move on. ”

“And if I can't?"

“Then you're punishing yourself. Nobody else to blame for that. Not Chibs, not Jax, just you.”

There are so many men that have drowned themselves in self-punishment in Tig's lifetime. His old man went down with barely a fight when his mother died. He passed within a year of her because he could never get over the guilt he felt at outliving her and leaving her kids with a deadbeat father that hated them from the minute they were born. There was no getting through to him, a man so intent on drinking himself to death he'd sleep with a bottle under his bed.

His own children found it so difficult to pity him.

It’s easy to pity Juice, a victim of his own poor, forced choices, but that’s not what he needs right now.

"Just call him, asshole. He doesn't deserve this."

“Hmm.”

“Call him, or I'll break your legs so you can't run and I'll call him myself.”

“You wouldn't."
“Wouldn't i? Look at my face, Juice.”

“I'm looking.”

Tig is capable of a lot of things. It pays for people to know that and, though his status as enforcer is usually for outside benefit he's been known to impose inside, too.

“It wouldn't be the first time. Also, you’re forgetting the time I cuffed you to the radiator when you took that dirty speed and started bouncing all over the clubhouse? You think I don’t have it in me to restrain you?”

"No, I know you got it in you, Tiggy. I know."

He caught a guy in the process of beating his wife once. Before he called the cops he took a baseball bat to the guy's left kneecap so he'd still be there when they got there. He's not exactly a maverick or vigilante but the guys did call him Zorro for a while.

He only cuffed Juice because his arm was still in a cast from his last drunken screw up and there was no way he was having the idiot's untimely death on his conscience.

"Just try me, kiddo."

“You’re a lunatic.”

“Certifiable. You know that already. Wanna test out just how much of a lunatic I am?”

“No.”

Juice sighs, a real exhausted tremor running through him. It's bone deep, harshly weighted.

Tig can almost feel it.

“Good. You’re learning.”

“Always learning, Tiggy.”

There's always a lesson to get through, always something to take on board.

Such is the evolution of the world they have chosen.

(*)

It's Tig that sends the message that they're here.

The fact that Juice doesn't stop him says everything. The fact he didn't send it himself is testimony to his own fear.

"It'll be fine," Tig tells him, but it doesn't seem to wash with Juice, who pushes it away, who tries to smile but ends up with a grimace.

"So...are we bonding again, Tig?”

“Over shared trauma, yeah.”

"First in a psych ward and now on a rooftop. What the fuck are we?"

"Two peas in a pod, baby boy."
Chibs told Tig not to let Juice leave, authorised excessive force if necessary because there’s no telling what he’d do if he ran or what state he’d end up in. Tig has positioned himself strategically so as not to allow Juice any chance of escape. He is his prisoner and Tig is the jailer, the man who covers the exit so as to keep him where he needs to be.

This is his job, his purpose in life for this time being. There is no greater purpose than this, no bigger task. Juice knows it. Feels it.

Maybe he hates it, maybe he feels comforted by it because It’s better to be held than left to fly away.

He scratches his arm, runs his nails over the Reaper tattoo that he once feared would be taken from him. It’s as if he’s checking it’s still there, still part of him.

“You're not gonna leave me alone, are you?”

“No”.

“You don't trust me? You think I'm gonna off myself?”

“No. But, you've chugged a half bottle of tequila. I don't trust you not to fall off.”

“C’mon, Tig. Are you serious?”

“I've seen you drunk.”

“I’m not so drunk.”

“You’re well on your way, kid. How’s it feel? It makin’ you feel good? Or, is it making you feel as shitty as you look?”

“I don't know what I'm supposed to feel.“

Who’s judging? What’s right or wrong here? Tig has his own ideas on just what’s mean to be.

“Grateful. That’s how you’re supposed to feel.”

“Grateful? For what?”

“That you're here. That you got a second chance. Every time I go to my daughters grave I thank fuck for that, I don’t thank God, there is no God, but I thank whatever other fuckin’ entity put us on this Earth that I’m still breathing when I don’t deserve to be. Then I have a drink or two in my little girl’s honour and I think about the day she was born.”

He doesn't talk about this. Not ever. Dawnie’s name rarely passes his lips, the bitter sting of her death a choking pain he cannot stomach unless he’s with Venus; unless his girl is there to wipe away the tears left in the wake of his baby’s death.

She knows exactly what to say, exactly what to do.

It’s a shame Juice had nobody to do that for him when it was all eating away at him.

“I wasn't there the minute she came into this world. I was on a ride somewhere, fuck knows where. Probably drunk and covered in my own piss and blood. I wasn't ready to be a dad. But when she left it? When she went out of this world? I was right there with her.“

There is a moment of silence that passes between them, a glitch in sound that marks honour and
respect for his daughter.

He has his own minute’s silence each and every morning when he looks to the sky, to the Heaven he doesn’t believe in, and hopes that she is there.

“Life's cheap, kid. That's all you need to know. It's cheap and it's short and if you have it? You don't waste it.”

He smiles

“Talk to him. Hear him out, then let him fuck your brains out. Heal the wounds. And tomorrow? It's another day. We move on. We do this.”

Juice turns as if outraged before the walls climb back up. He can't look Tig in the eye with his denial, but the flush that forms on his face is all Tig needs to know.

"What…what are you talking about?"

“I have eyes, Juice. If I didn't know before I knew today when he was losing his mind over you. Hand me the bottle.”

“Huh?”

"Gimme that."

Tig grabs the bottle from Juice, leaves him empty handed and gaping. His bottom lip moves almost convulsively, as if his mind isn't in connection with his mouth and the words just don't reach their destination. Its comic. Ridiculous.

It's everything Juice.

"I'll drink to you finally getting laid. You wasted a lot of time. I thought it wasn't working."

“What does that mean?”

“I had a body and an ass like yours? I'd be screwin' so much my dick would've fallen off. “

“Oh, come on.”

“It's true. Wasted gift, son. You're an insult to all us middle aged fucks the croweaters see as sloppy seconds. You're prime beef, Juicy.”

“I don't whore myself out to anyone, Tiggy.”

His smile fades a little when that voice in his head tells him "only Jax does that". Tig can't hear it. He can see it, though.

He thinks he'll be seeing it for a long, long time.

Tig can see him closing off. Shutting out. He can see him backing himself into a corner and closing all the curtains.

He might as well be hiding in a closet.

“When he comes back tell him I'm up here. I'm not planning on leaving.”
It's his way of telling Tig to leave him alone. Tig nods his head but he doesn't comply, won't comply. He found a drunk kid on a roof with his shoes off and a sad little smile on his face and he might not think he's gonna jump but Tig's not prepared to take the chance.

They all ignored his cries for help before. Not anymore. Never again.

“I'm not goin' anywhere.”

(*)

“Y'know, not that it means anything at all, but I knew it was bullshit. I knew you'd never make that kind of choice on your own.”

"What choice?"

"The kid's mom up in the cabin. Me and V, we talked about it. She didn't know you well but even she said it. "That boy ain't no coldblooded killer, Alexander.". But I was backed into a corner, Juice. Jax had me in fucking chains. Chibs? He was just running round in circles hoping to find his way out. Never seen him so bad. He didn't know which way he was facing.”

“Jax told him that's why I ran. Because I was a coward and I knew I'd done wrong. I made myself look guilty. I'm such a fuck-up. I sabotage myself.”

"Just...try to keep an open mind, okay?"

"I'm trying. I'm really trying. I just...fuck"

When he finally looks Tig in the eye he sees it, the shimmer, the glint in the nightlight. He sees the pain of a tortured kid trying so hard to make sense of just what was done to him.

He sees himself years ago trying to do exactly the same thing.

Juice blinks, and it's all over. They're falling freely, now, and with each and every tear Tig panics a little more. He's never been good with this kind of thing. Whenever the girls cried he sent them to his mother. He clams up, the social awkwardness that plagued him in his youth returning tenfold.

His movements are stuff. Unnatural.

He places a hand on Juice's shoulder and hopes for the best.

“C'mon, you know I don't do well with this shit.”

“I know. I'm sorry.”

Juice smiles. It's heartbreaking.

"I'm okay. I'm okay."

Aw, shit.

“I could channel my old man. Tell you I'll punch you in the gut, give you something to cry about, but I guess that wouldn't help. It's all I got, Juicy. I learned bad.”

“I'm fine. Just...go back to the clubhouse. I'll be okay. I swear I'll be okay.”

Everything in Juice's face screams "please don't leave me" even if his words say otherwise.
How can Tig turn how back on that?

He sits back down and pats Juice's leg, fraternal, brotherly.

It's the best he can do in the circumstances.

(*)

"Chen's gonna have a lot to say. In a couple of days it's all over for me."

"What do you mean?"

"If any one of you can look me in the eye after what he says it'll be a miracle."

The worry is evident in Juice's eyes, a thick sheath that bleeds from the corners and spreads across his face. He's been running since Stockton it's all about to catch up with him.

He looks like he's about to go to trial, his dirty secrets aired for the world to see and hear.

"He can say what he likes. Won't change anything."

"It's...not good."

When is that kind of thing ever good? When is sustained sexual assault anything other than ungodly?

"Some of us have been there, son."

"Hmm?"

Tig opens a door and he invites Juice inside. It's a door he rarely opens because he doesn't like what lies behind it.

"I asked you once if you'd ever been to Attica. I figured being a shitty little pissant from NY you may have found your way there for a spell."

"Too young. I never did hard time in New York. Queens lockup, that's about it."

"Well, I've been to Attica. I was 21. Just old enough. I did 18 months for assault with a deadly weapon. I met Chapman in that place, would've shivved him if I'd had one to hand."

"The fucker who killed John Lennon."

"Yeah, that guy. Fat fuck. Nothing special. But, me? Pretty blue eyes, I had. Black curls. Believe it or not, I was a catch, back in the day. I was also what GP lovingly referred to as a 'twink'."

Juice raises an eyebrow disbelievingly, like it's some big stretch to imagine Tig ever being appealing to other men, even hard-time convicts who won't get near pussy for the rest of their days.

"You? Seriously?"

"Hey, don't look so surprised. I was a pretty boy. I made Jax look like John fuckin' Merrick. Let's just say I had to...adapt my expectations. I wasn't forced but I wasn't exactly a willing participant. I made a choice of lesser evils but it wasn't a choice I ever wanted to make."

He leans back, takes a drag of his cigarette and tells Juice something he's never told any of the guys before. That he was a victim once. That he was on the receiving end.
"How...how many?" Juice asks, and he’s tentative and careful, like he doesn’t want to know but has to know, like the clarification will either break him or fix him, he’s not so sure.

"It was just the one guy. My cellie. He was no Venus, I'll tell you that for nothing. I was glad when he got fucked up in the exercise yard. Would've done it myself if I hadn't been such a pussy. But, I was young. I was a fish back then, too."

It's clear from Juice’s face that he isn’t sure he believes it. He's picked up on the twisted truth, Tig thinks, and if he calls him on the pride-laden age amendment he’s in a better place than he’s ever been.

"You were 21?" he asks. “But, weren’t you a marine? Thought you needed a clean record to be a marine. You get a waiver or something?”

And, there it is. There’s the call-out. For the past 2 years or more there’s not a chance in Hell Juice would’ve picked it. He’d have just let himself be bullshitted.

Tig’s proud of the kid.

“When d’you get so smart?”

“Just recently.”

“You got me. I was a late bloomer. I wasn't 21, I was 28. Marines did nothing for my pretty ass. I wasn't always this tough.”

Juice smirks at that, and it's good he can see the funny side, even if it is in a dire scenario.

“The point is, there’s nothing we’d ever hold against you. What happens in prison stays in prison, right? And, if you're really not ready to hear what that prick has to say? There's a great invention called duct tape. I got rolls of it back home."

"Do I even wanna know?"

"Hey, don't knock it 'til you try it. Sensory deprivation isn't always a bad thing."

This time, Tig feels comfortable pulling Juice close, like a barrier had been pulled down between them. He feels a solidarity, a camaraderie with the kid.

It's a sad little club but it's their club.

“I just don’t know what I’m gonna do. Maybe I shouldn’t be there at all. He can’t get to me if I’m not there.”

"Don't worry," he tells him. "We got your back whatever happens. Might not have always been the case but it is now. I love you, brother."

(*)

"Hey, Chibs."

Juice looks up from where he'd been staring. He’s been listening to Tig talk for well over an hour, now, and it’s cushioned him, somewhat. He remembers a few years back when they’d be pushed together on jobs, on watch, and the only thing Juice had wanted from him was what he’s given him tonight. Just words. Just acknowledgment.
For so long, Tig treated him like a burden; a stain on his shirt and a pull in his cut. For so long he acted like he never wanted him around and now he’s embracing him, telling him he loves him as a brother.

Now he’s opening up to him, sharing secrets dredged up from deep inside of him.

Regardless of all that, he still feels himself finally coming together when he hears Chibs’ name, when he identifies that recognisable footstep on the hard concrete floor.

All he wants is Chibs, no matter what.

No matter how much his mind is telling him to keep his distance until it all makes sense, all he wants to do is crawl into his arms and bury his face in his neck, to twist his hands into the older man until he’s bruised and hurting.

“Juice,” Chibs whispers, “where have you been? I’ve been worried sick. I even had Unser out looking for you.”

“Found him up here” Tig says quietly. “He needed a minute.”

Juice passes no words. He says nothing. He just moves, moves fast and determined, focused and intent. He moves until he’s face to face with Chibs and he’s torn between wanting to punch him and wanting to kiss him.

Love wins out over violence and he crashes into him, hungry and desperate, a man that’s flailing out of control and needs something to tether him down.

He feels Chibs tense but doesn’t care, feels him step back but pushes forwards.

“Word of advice?” he hears Tig say in the background, “The last thing either of you need is Rat comin’ up here with one of the croweaters and walkin’ in on something his poor, overgrown juvenile mind can’t handle. Alright? You gonna fuck the pain away? Do it at home.”

“Thanks, Tig,” Chibs whispers.

“No worries. I figure you’d have told me in your own time, what, with me being your right hand man and all that. Full disclosure?”

“You know how it is.”

“Whatever, man. Just…be careful, alright? Looks like a storm’s comin’ in. Lightning looks for the easiest route down and your big head might just be what it’s searchin’ for.”

“I’ll bear that in mind, brother.”

Juice feels Chibs’ hand coming up, resting between his shoulder blades. He feels it moving counterclockwise in soothing circles designed to calm him, to bring him back down to Earth from the clouds he’s currently hiding in.

Juice just wants to stay here for a while, just a little while.

Just until the storm passes.

(*)

“Juicy – “
"- don’t talk. Please. Not right now. Let’s just stay quiet for a while."

He doesn’t want to listen. He just wants to stay here, right here, right here where nothing hurts and where everything is quiet, where the lights of Charming are dancing over the horizon and he can see it all, he can see it all.

He can see what’s coming and he can see what’s gone.

Nothing can sneak up on him up here, nothing at all.

He knows Chibs can’t contain himself, not now that he’s found him.

“Look, whatever it is, whatever he said…”

“Don’t say anything, Chibs. Just give it a minute. Just let me catch my breath.”

“Alright.”

Juice doesn’t want to leave, not right now. He wants to stay here until everything comes back to him. He wants to keep watch, a citadel over the town. He wants Chibs to stand with him and see what he sees, feel what he feels.

He wants them to come together before they continue.

He leans back into Chibs, back to his chest, head leaning back and resting on his shoulder as though it’s the only thing keeping him up. He can feel the dull throb of Chibs’ heart against him, can feel his warm breath on the side of his head.

They’re connected physically, if not yet mentally, but that can come. That can build.

Juice hopes it can build.

“You can see everything from up here, right across Charming. See? It sparkles, doesn’t it? There’s not much shine left in this place but if you come up here you can really see it.”

“Yeah.”

“Looks kinda beautiful. The way the lights move. Nothing about Charming is beautiful but you can at least pretend if you half-close your eyes.”

“It can be. It will be.”

Juice laughs at the thought, at the thought of this place ever shining again. He laughs at the idea that a place so full of death and blood and bad, bad memories could ever be anything other than filthy.

But, what if?

What if?

“It can be good now that the trash has been taken out, right? We’re still here, Chibs. You and me.”

“What’s this all about, boy? Whatever it is we can talk about it. I’ll give you anything you need. Just…ask. Just say it. Don’t bottle it all up. It’ll only drive you mad.”

“More mad, you mean?”
“Don’t go there, lad. Just talk to me.”

It’s funny. Everyone’s so eager to listen, now.

If only…

“You wanna know what he said? He said it was you that sent me in there. Your idea. Your choice. Tig said you were stalling. You knew I’d have a chance if he got me inside. Better than a bullet to the head, is that right?”

“Juice –“

He wants to get through to him just how wrong that was and that Juice, in the state he was in back then, had no real capacity for rationality. He’d have done anything he was asked. Anything. He’d have jumped out of a moving car if he’d been asked to, would’ve dived off a fucking bridge.

He’d have cut his own hand off if it meant forgiveness.

He knows that’s nobody’s fault but his own.

“How could you do that to me?”

He needs to understand why a man who claims to have always loved him, as a brother, then as a lover, could have taken the lamb that he was and coaxed it to enter the wolf den without so much as an encouraging word to get him through it.

“Just….tell me. Tig can only give me so much. I need this from you.”

“It wasn’t punishment. I wasn’t trying to hurt you.”

“No?”

“Of course not. He wanted to drive you out to the desert and bury you in an unmarked grave, Juice. Do you understand that?. Two in the back of the head, not even a fucking stone, just some forgotten thing that meant nothing to anybody. I couldn’t let that happen. I tried to get you to go, to get as far away from him as you could get. I knew what he’d do to you. You didn’t listen. You didn’t go. If I could go back? Christ, I’d sit you down and I’d listen to every bit of shite you had to throw out there. But, I didn’t, and I can’t change that. I can only explain why I did what I did.”

“Because you wanted to give me a chance?”

“I thought it’d give you a chance. I thought you’d go in there, you’d do what he wanted you to do and he’d be done with you. You’d be free.”

Juice nods, weak and numb.

“Done with me…”

“You might not have your cut, Juice, but you’d still have a chance at livin’ a life, for fuck’s sake.”

“That's what Tig said.”

"Because it's the truth. Do you want to die now? You ready to go?"

“No.”
“You wish he’d done it?”

Juice chokes on his words.

“No. No, of course not.”

“That’s why I made the choice. That’s why I did it. I wanted you safe from him. Mother of Christ, I couldn’t let him kill you. Not you, Juicy.”

“But, that’s why you beat me, because you couldn’t put a bullet in me. Because Jax wouldn’t excommunicate me or kill me.”

“I’m not good with all that shite. I was angry. I reacted badly and I’m sorry. But if he’d got to you? If he’d killed you? Christ. Doesn’t bear thinking.”

Juice pulls back from Chibs, conflicted and hurt, and it's like a void’s opened up for a second. He finds he can’t handle the distance. He can’t handle the space. He steps back into it, edges himself closer. Even now, in his hurt and his anger, he cannot walk away.

He cannot let go.

“I’m just so messed up.”

“Aye, lad. I know. And, I’m sorry.”

“You’re everything to me, but to know you did this? To know you made that choice for me? Jesus.”

When Chibs looks at him it’s like a tangent pull, like a rope wrapped around the back of his head that’s dragging him forwards.

Juice can’t look away, not now, not when everything within the other man is appealing with him to look, to listen, to hear the remorse, to feel the need to make amends.

“I swear on my daughter’s life I would never, ever do anything to hurt you, Juicy. Not now. Not again, lad. I didn’t tell you because you shut me down and I figured you weren’t ready. I didn't want to push you. This is all on your terms. You know that.”

Chibs has been patient. He’s been kind. He’s been loving and attentive. He’s held him when he needed to be held, fucked him when he needed to be fucked. He’s sacrificed a lot of himself just to make Juice happy and how can he not be grateful for that?

How can he deny the resolution Chibs is aiming towards?

“Yeah, I know.”

“I’ll tell you anything you need to know, but you have to be prepared for the fallout of that. Things…weren’t good. But they’re better now. They’ll never be that way again, and I’ll throw myself off this fucking roof before I let them get that way. Just…let me make it up to you.”

There’s so much in him right now, so much in both of them.

"You’re doin’ well, Juicy Boy, and I love you. You gave me a second chance and, Christ knows I didn’t deserve it. I know I’m pushing my luck asking for you to give me a third chance – “

“ – of course I’m gonna give it to you. I'm not an idiot. I'm just...I'm scared, Chibs. Of this. Of what it means ”
“I would kill Tully for what he did to you and the only reason I’m not putting out a hit on that bleach faced bastard is because you asked me not to. I know I’m gonna spend a long time making it up to you. But, please, don’t be frightened. Just let me try.”

He leans down and he kisses Juice at the juncture where his neck meets his collarbone, the very spot that sends Juice into a quiet kind of passivity, a silent sort of submission. It’s pointed. It’s calculated.

“Let me try, Juicy.”

He’ll let him try. He’ll let him win.

He can’t make it easy, though, will need to make him earn it.

“I looked him in the eye and he told me what he needed to tell me, and it hurt like a bitch but I did it. Now I just need to get right with what you did, Chibs.”

(‘I love you, brother.’)

“I need to put it straight.”

(I know.)

“Then, do what you have to do. I’ll take anything you have to throw at me. Kick me. Punch me. Do what you will, Juicy, but know me. Know that I would never, ever do anything to hurt you and that every last thing I’ve ever done has come from a place of love. Even that.”

Chibs’ way is to hit. It is to beat. It’s the military way, just as Jax said. He responds to kicks and punches, to blood, to bruises and split lips.

Juice doesn’t work that way.

He’s a lover, not a fighter, always has been, will never change.

“Make it right. If it proves to you how much I want to fix things, give it your best shot.”

“I’m not gonna hit you, Chibby. I’m not gonna beat you down.”

“If it’s what you need – “

“It’ll never be what I need. I’ll get right in my own way. You’ll take me home and you’ll hold me down and you’ll show me how sorry you are. You’ll show me how I should trust you. You’ll put me in my place and you’ll make me feel safe and it’ll all be good, Chibs. You hear me? It’ll all be fucking good.”

He leans in, forehead to forehead, and he presses his hand against the back of the older man’s neck.

“Christ…”

“No blood, Chibby. No hurt. Just…lets go, alright? I need a shower just to get the damn dirt off me. You’re gonna come with me and you’re gonna take me upstairs and you’re gonna do everything I ask you to do.”

“Alright, lad.”

Chibs will take him home. He will take him home and he will do anything that is asked of him, that much Juice knows, that much he values. He will lay him down and he will apologise with every
breath, every touch, every heartbeat. He will spread him out and he will give him his sorries in any which way he needs.

There’s something in that, Juice thinks.

“I’ll give you anything you want.”

He will submit to Juice’s will and wants because that is what is needed, and tomorrow they will wake up and it might not be fixed but it will be better, because Juice will be loved and he will have been listened to, and his fears will have mattered.

“Just say the word.”

“I’m sayin’ it.”

“Get your helmet. There’s no way I’m letting you loose on a bike this hammered.”

“I’m not so bad.”

“Aye, well, I can’t prove anything to you if you’re dead, can I?”

“Guess not.”

Chibs smiles, and even with those scars it can be beautiful, more so than if they weren’t there, Juice often thinks, because those lines at his eyes become more prominent with that tightened skin, the slightly lopsided quality disarming him where the scars might intimidate.

There’s no intimidation here.

There is only mutual care.

“It’s gonna be alright, okay? You have my word. It might not be worth much to you at the minute, and that’s my own fault, but it’s all I have to give.”

“I don’t think that’s true.”

“You don’t?”

Chibs gives him so much more than that.

With Chibs, Juice always felt safe, that long-searching little boy having finally found his place in the world in the form of a not-quite-father but something that will guide his way. He’ll look at his own reflection, at the things that have gone before, and instead of feeling as though his whole world is backwards and his whole life has been a joke within a joke, he will feel at ease, as if their brand of crazy is simply his world’s truth. He didn’t want Jax to take that from him. He wanted Chibs to have his reasons, and there they are laid bare, poor choices made from a place of love that Juice had always longed for but never quite took for granted.

Juice understands poor choices made out of love and to know he was not sent in there as punishment is something he can work with. It’s not perfect, but it’s better.

Chibs, for Juice, is a re-made movie, a second edition book on a dusty library shelf. His imperfections are what make him charming and his scars, those well-vivid, well-worn scars, are what show he has battled. Jax was a white knight turned dark but it’s Chibs who will guide Juice’s way.

He, like everything else, is not perfect, *they’re* not perfect, but they could be *enough.*
As Juice wraps his arms around Chibs’ waist, as he rests his head on the older man’s shoulder, he feels *safe*. Despite everything, he feels *secure*.

Maybe it really is that simple.
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

Warning: Character death

Hope you're bearing with me. I am going somewhere with all of this. Promise.

Jax meets Mr Mayhem on an inordinately cold Wednesday in November.

There's a cold frost laid out on the ground that licks the grass and trees and turns the roads into a dangerous place. It's the first frost of the year, may well be the last. It was often said that Hell would freeze over before Jax Teller admitted defeat and, though Charming is not Hell and his murder was not defeat of any kind, there's something to be said for that.

He went to sleep in a Stockton cell and didn't wake up, three jabs to the jugular the effective method of execution he'd pondered for so long. He bled out before sunrise and, where he entered this life screaming louder than anything his mother had ever heard, he left it in utter silence, dead by the order of a brotherhood he loved and ultimately destroyed.

His legacy lives on a farm far, far from here and will not hear of his passing. They will grow up looking towards another man as a father and, once they're old enough to know the difference between right and wrong, they will be told just how wrong their true father really was.

The club, his club, it belongs to someone else now, a guardian who will keep it in check and nurture it the way that it was meant to be nurtured.

There's honour in what he has passed over.

As it stands, there's nobody claiming responsibility for the kill, it's doubtful anyone will, but word on the street is a young man who has lost so much of himself in the short time he's been inside had an ugly whisper in his ear that grew and grew until he could no longer contain it. Phillip Christell entered those walls a petty thief with a swagger in his step and a chip on his shoulder, a real welfare poster child with no hope, no chance. If he ever leaves alive it will be as an AB shot-caller's lethal weapon, a fish no more, a relative innocent trapped and twisted by his own pretty face.

Ron Tully may not have murdered Jax Teller with his own hands but the responsibility lies at his feet.

He wasn't prepared to wait for an order any longer.

Unser delivers the news as though it were a formality, though there's sadness there for the pointless waste of life of a young man who could've offered so much to so many had he not been pummelled mercilessly by the pull of the gavel.

"Got the call this morning," he explains to the once-brothers Jax has left behind. "A shiv to the throat. No sign of a struggle. He just bled out where he lay."

"It was on the the cards."
"I'd love to say he went out good but there wasn't much good left in the boy."

"Aye, you're right there."

It feels as though he’s comforting them when he lowers his head in what appears to be respect, though that in itself is unnecessary. Jax is a symbol of the old world and everything that went bad within it. The new world is brave and honest.

The new world doesn’t hurt.

"It's over."

The reaction around the table is sober and conflicted. Rat can’t raise his eyes from the carved Reaper, his fingers grazing its edges as if it's about to speak aloud and explain it to him in a way he understands. Quinn and Montez, they say very little, a man they barely knew having passed from this world leaving only pain and tattered trust as a legacy. T.O asks legitimate questions about ownership of the crime, to which he receives no formal confirmation, and Hap removes himself from the revelation entirely by leaving the room to calm himself.

Surprisingly, it's Tig who sheds a tear, though it's not from sadness. He can't quite explain what it's for, an overwhelming rush coming over him at the thought of Jax no longer being alive, at the thought that whatever hold he had over him is well and truly broken.

Maybe it's relief that sets his emotions free.

Maybe it's just the last of the negative energy vacating his body before it can fester and grow again.

“I didn’t wanna tell you over the phone. It seemed like an in-person kind of delivery."

"Thanks for letting us know," Chibs says quietly, a hand on Unser's shoulder as of to steady the old man. "I know he and his Ma meant a lot to you."

"Shit happens. You force the hand of God? You earn this. I must've pissed him off in a past life to be saddled with my load. Jax was just a little more obvious about it."

“That he was.”

Unser shivers, though it's not from emotion. It's from legitimate cold. He pulls his coat closed, his thin body not as capable as it once was of warding off the chill. He used to be bigger than this. He used to have a beer gut and a layer of fat on his bones. Now he’s just got skin.

"Sorry,” he says with a reticent smile. “Cold's wearin’ in my old bones."

He's wearing a hat and gloves, an oversized coat. When he mentions the heating in his trailer's not up to scratch he's told to pack his things and move into the Clubhouse.

"We've got a couple of rooms set up. You might as well use them."

"Nah. I got sweaters. I'll manage. Wouldn't want to be a burden in my old age."

"Just for now,” Chibs tells him. "Just until the cold front passes."

"You worried about me, Telford? I'm flattered."

"Don't be a cunt about it, aye? Just nip back your pride and pack a bag. Haven’t you seen the old ads about takin’ care of the elderly in cold months?”
"I’m not down and out yet, son. You’re only a decade behind. Bear that in mind."

They may not mourn Jax’s passing but if they can hold off on Unser’s then that can only be a good thing. That’s what Chibs tells him when they’re alone, when they’re sharing a few glasses of amber nectar and waxing lyrical about how it used to be. The old days. The old times, before the net, before the fucking Xbox, before it all went to Hell and back. He’s been a guiding light for the club for so long its world would be pitch black without him.

That’s what they tell him, at least, that’s what they say, and it might be flattery, it might be humouring a desolate old bastard but he’ll take it.

He’ll take anything, these days.

(*)

Chibs follows Juice outside into the courtyard. His boots aren’t made for the elements so he has to take it slow and it’s not that he’s fast closing in on Unser for age, it’s more that he hasn’t the leg strength he had as a younger man.

Juice’s hands are deep in his pockets and he appears to be kicking a weed that’s sprung up between two slabs of pavement. He’ll pull it up before the day’s out, his ordered mind not wanting something so disordered amongst the neat, clear lines in the ground.

"You alright?" Chibs asks.

Juice looks up. The black woollen hat’s pulled right down to his forehead and only a tiny flick of his hair peeps out beneath it. For a split second Chibs can imagine it’s the old days; that he’ll pull that hat off to reveal his old Mohawk style, his trademark since adolescence, the tattoos that he now knows mean nothing sitting proudly at either side.

He misses it sometimes, the style which defined Juice and set him apart in a crowded room, but he doesn’t think he’d welcome it back.

"You took off pretty fast. Just wanted to check on you."

"I’m fine. I got a paint job to finish. We got heat in the garage?"

"We do. Wasn’t expecting it to drop this fast. It’s no Scotland but still. It’s fucking cold."

"Yeah. It hasn’t felt this cold for a long time. Feels like it’s gotta mean something."

If there was anyone that was going to place significance on a cold spell the day Jax Teller died it’s Juice. He’s the kind of guy who’ll walk across the other side of the street if he sees a black cat, who’d say a thousand Hail Mary’s if he happened to crack a mirror because it’s seven years bad luck and he needs all the help he can get.

He calls it his Catholic curse and Chibs knows all about those.

"Don't look into it, Juicy boy, all it means is winter is coming. Nothing more than that, alright?"

He kisses Juice’s forehead, swift and quick. Juice closes his eyes and leans into it. He smiles softly, raising his eyes to meet Chibs’.

"Words of wisdom, right?"

“Aye.”
"Just take it slow today, okay? This is a big deal for all of us. We can play it down all we like but it is what it is."

"Not to me it isn't. To me? This is just inevitability. You fuck with the reaper and sooner or later it catches up. Good for him, it was sooner. No point dragging it out, huh? That's what I told him."

He told him he didn’t want him to suffer unnecessarily; that he wouldn’t drag it out in spite. Chibs can’t imagine Hap doing the same thing, Tig, even. He can’t imagine them not taking some kind of sordid pleasure in knowing the man who had reduced them to little more than a speck was suffering for his sins.

Juice isn’t Hap, nor is he Tig.

"I just wish he'd get out of my head."

"You're a good lad. Heart's in the right place."

"There's a lot of me that's in the right place, brother."

"Aye, I know. I put you there."

“God, yes, you did.”

He could go there again. He needs to. The look he offers Chibs tells him as much.

The older man backs him up into the wall, his hands pushing down against him, fingers putting pressure on as only Juice likes, pressure that is achingly firm, bruisingly hard. He edges into him with movements designed to be felt, though not to hurt, dancing that fine line in between.

“Chibs – “

"Helping?"

"Y-eah..."

He grabs Juice’s wrist and pulls him closer. Juice gasps, but it only lasts a second before he relaxes into the firm hold. It's not violent, never will be, but it’s insistent. It's the kind of firm pressure he needs in order to ground him, to Earth him when things get tough and his mind starts running.

Chibs grazes teeth against his ear and whispers "If you need me...."

He knows this is what Juice needs, a firm hand, a presence that cannot be ignored, that physical pull which takes him outside of his own head when all that’s in it threatens to overwhelm. It's not the best timing but it's needed. It's wanted.

He kisses him again.

“...just say the word.”

"Always, Chibby."

The sound of movement behind them is an unwelcome intrusion. The loss of sensation is something which sinks them both as hands fall away and costumes and masks are pulled back in place. Chibs pushes past Juice as if he were merely speaking to him in passing though he eyes him pointedly, a ton of promises in that one look together with many an unspoken word.
The look says "later" and the eyes whisper "I promise."

The residue of feeling between them says that this is how it is and how it always shall be.

It feels right, even when everything else feels wrong.

The death of JaxTeller cannot come between them.

"I'll go and find Hap," Chibs says, "see what the score is with him."

"Maybe he just needs some time to himself," Unser says, for it's he who broke the tie. It is he whose presence put an end to a momentary connection. "He was pretty tight with Jax at the end."

"Aye, well, last time he needed time to himself he wrecked a car and a wall. I best check anyway."

Juice watches him leave and even he knows his eyes hold for a little longer than is natural, attention held captive by the man who holds everything he is in the palm of his hand. He knows, now, that Chibs would walk to the edge of the Earth for him. He feels it as strongly as he has ever felt about a promised fact, knows it as wholly as he could possibly know anything at all.

He knows that his mind is not where his words are at and that, indeed, Jax's death is going to play hard on him.

He knows he'll be able to relieve that pain later on, will be able to replace it with something better, stronger, healthier and more auspicious.

It’s frightening how much Chibs means to him in the midst of all of this.

"You need a ride home?" he asks Unser as he tries so hard to get back to the real world and away from the place in his head where it’s just he and Chibs and nothing else, nothing else at all. "You need to pick up some stuff? I can drive you."

"I'm good. I got the truck."

"The roads are pretty bad, Unser."

"I got here alright, didn’t I?"

"I guess. So...anything else you need?"

"Not that I can think of. Just thought I'd come out, see if there was anything I could do."

"It's all good."

The conversation draws closed but still, Unser doesn't move. He holds Juice to the spot by not saying anything at all and the look he is giving him is that of curiosity, as if he’s waiting for something, some confession, maybe, some kind of glaring revelation. Juice feels nervous, as though Unser can see right through him, and as he shifts from foot to foot, rubbing his left palm with his right hand fingers, he feels himself gradually fraying.

He doesn’t want to fray. Not today.

He doesn’t want to talk, but if he has to?

"What?" he asks finally, no longer able to contain it. "Whatever it is, spit it out. I'm freezing my ass off here."
"Just wanted to make sure you’re okay."

"About Jax? I’m fine. Like you said, it’s not like it was unexpected."

"That’s not what I meant. You sure you know what you're doing here, son?"

"What do you mean?"

Juice knows exactly what he means, fears he’s given himself away. He’s always been a person who can just ‘see’, who can just ‘feel’. He’s oblivious to a lot of things but emotions, feelings, he’s always been sensitive to those.

Maybe Unser is too.

"You and Chibs."

"What about us?"

"Word of advice. You might wanna think about putting the deadlock on the front door if you’re gonna be...engaging...at Scoops. I came over looking for Chibs the other night. I found something I wasn't expecting."

Juice can feel his chest burn. He can feel his face burn, his cheeks, his spirit. He can feel the tough pull of humiliation as it threatens to overwhelm him but it’s battling out with amusement because, fuck, of all the people to walk in on them.

Of all the dead-set old men to stumble across his old friend Chibs with a kid he sees as a hazard in himself.

"Sorry about that," he whispers, clearing his throat. “Guess we weren’t thinking. We’ll bear that in mind."

"Just wanted to make sure you were okay with it. It's a huge step. He was banging Jarry not so long ago. I didn't even know he went that way."

"That way?"

"You know what I mean."

Juice smiles.

"Yeah, I know what you mean. I guess things just...happened? I don’t know. It is what it is."

"Just...be careful. You strike me as a guy who'll fall hard and you've had enough spills of late. Don't set yourself up for another one,"

For Juice, again, it signifies a huge change, such care and concern from those around him in the place of such flagrant indifference.

It warms him as much as it baffles him.

"Thank you for the vote of confidence, Wayne, but we're fine. You don’t need to worry."

"Just makin' sure."

(*)
He once considered Jax as his saviour, later his executioner.

He hated him as much as he loved him.

Juice sits down in the garage, paintbrush in handful the tiny, intricate detail, earbuds in place, a full on ‘in the zone’ moment where he can forget about the rest of the world and focus only on this. His art. His work. His future. The music drowns out Jax’s voice in his head, the body of the Harley drowns out the pain.

Still, the memories remain. Jax condemned Juice on the very doorstep out front, threw him against a wall in this very room with a threat of exposure, a promise of death should he not do as he is told. In contrast, he kissed him on the forehead in this empty space and told him he was proud of him after carrying out one of his mind-numbing tasks, though the only thing Juice ever felt from him was scathing disappointment.

He always felt like Jax was a grenade with its pin pulled and one tiny, tiny movement out of place would’ve set him off completely, with Juice being the only one in the blast radius as he kept his hatred from everyone else. He will forever haunt these walls, though the memories will fade in time and if Juice can expel them faster, that is what he’ll do.

He whispers a quiet prayer to send Jax off on his way as he ponders just how much has overturned.

It’s a good transformation, a positive change.

He thanks God for that.

(*)

When Hap is arrested on a whim later that day it spells the end of the sombre calm for Chibs – and perhaps the start of a new era of maddening persecution.

They hope it’s not the case.

It’s hard not to hit out when cornered.

They’d been told the new Sheriff wanted to keep his distance and would only come down on them if provoked but it seems to be his sicced lapdog just wanted to make an example out of Hap. He’d headed down to Clear Passages that afternoon to see Michelle, a girl who he’d been warned off by Juice but whose company he was starting to depend upon for sanity, for happiness. She’d agreed to let him take her for a beer which, to him, had been a step in the right direction and she was a better option for company than Diosa. He’d stopped off at the weed dispensary beforehand, had got into a fight with an officer who thought he’d try and make something of himself in his new precinct by ‘taking down’ a high-ranking Samcro member.

Hap had tried to keep it calm only to be put in cuffs and arrested for possession of marijuana and assaulting an officer of the law.

He’d been provoked. There are witnesses who could attest to that, those who saw a terrier barking at the heels of a pitbull looking to make a name.

As it happens, the Sheriff is a man of his word, a rarity when it comes to enforcement, and having looked at Happy’s permit, having listened to his side of the story when it came to how aggressive the young officer had been, he’d let him go without charge.

“Just a misunderstanding, that’s all.”
“A misunderstanding. Right. We seem to have a lot of misunderstanding with you lot.”

It had seemed to Chibs that the whole thing had been orchestrated as a way of Jarry’s replacement ‘introducing’ himself and his men as both a good cops and bad cops, a guy whose subordinates will not hesitate to arrest them because they’re wearing a cut and who himself will give benefit of doubt as a way of building relations.

It’s like hurting in order to comfort, a method Chibs has never been comfortable with, a method Ron Tully coordinated with Juice time and time again fostering something that cannot be defined and is proving a challenge to weed out.

Hurt. Comfort.

Arrest. Release.

This is what the kid had to deal with from Roosevelt. There’s no way on Earth Chibs is planning on letting any of them suffer it from this weasel-faced asshole that Unser claims is a good man yet has done nothing, yet, to prove that.

“I’m sorry,” he says to Chibs as Happy signs for his property, “maybe my guy was a little hasty, but rules are rules. You can’t raise your hand to an officer of the law and not expected to be brought in.”

“Aye, You might want to rein your guy in a little, though. You can’t raise your hand to a member of the public either. A gun and a badge doesn’t make you special. We’ve had a lot of harassment over the years with guys of the law. Don’t let this be the start of a new era.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, Mr Telford.”

“It’s Chibs.”

“Chibs. Right. Any reason for the name?”

“Just a nickname. Doesn’t mean anything.”

“I heard about your former President. May I take this opportunity to offer my condolences? I didn’t know him personally, never met him, but I know he was important to your club.”

“No need for condolences. Just…steer clear of us. That’s what you can offer for the time being.”

“Understood.

As they leave it’s with the knowledge that they have said their piece and that, should a pissing contest suddenly come into play between them and the law, they won’t be afraid to mark their territory.

They won’t be pushed around.

It’s a poor choice of day to start putting in oars and digging in the water and Hap, who left Scoops in an emotional state that only he can define, wasn’t the best choice to make a point with. Still, he’s grateful to be released, the alternative being a night in lockup and a hearing in the morning to determine if a custodial sentence was warranted and whether he’d breached parole just like Juice did.

Regardless of the unfair incarceration, the thing that seems to be pissing Happy off the most is standing up Michelle. Judging by the way he’d left he’d needed something or someone to bring him pull him out.
“Took me weeks to get her in my lap. She’s not the kind of girl to offer second chances. I wanted to kill the guy just for putting the brakes on that.”

“Ah, she’ll come round. “

“She better.”

Chibs knows where Hap’s anger came from. It came from Unser’s news. It came from the idea that a man he loved and trusted, a man who betrayed him, had been murdered in his bed. It came from the knowledge that life really is that fucking cheap and this club really can be that destructive.

They all see its ugly side in clear, vivid colours these days and it’s a sight they weren’t able to process before. Now it’s there, clear as day. Mr Mayhem is never too far away from any of them to put in an unwelcome appearance.

Sometimes, Hap wears his heart on his cut in the same way as he wears death on his hip.

He’s mourning for a man that never truly existed at all.

“I guess it was too much to ask, that things were gonna run smoothly after he was put in the ground.”

“Give it time, Hap. Just…give it time.”

“I’m getting too old to give it time, Chibs. I’m getting too old to be hauled across town in cuffs by children with badges.”

“Ayre, aren’t we all?”

Hap has never asked for much, just his time in the ring, just his free rein with a gun and a knuckleduster from time to time.

“All I want is my dick sucked and my belly full of spirits.”

He’s a simple man, in a lot of ways.

“It still can. Go. Explain what happened. Take your mind off all the shite, Happy Boy. I’ll give you the night off. We’ve got a heavy day tomorrow. I think we could all use some winding down.”

“I’m ready for it.”

“I wish I could say the same.”

Word has it that Chen’s flight lands tomorrow afternoon. His first port of call is always his mother. They’ll be nearby waiting to bring him in, waiting to pounce. They’ll be the sharks that lie in wait at the bottom of the ocean while the seals swim by.

Mrs Chen won’t get to see her son tomorrow. She won’t get to see her son at all.

The club will get to watch their current greatest threat disappearing before their very eyes before being reduced to ashes and dust in front of them.

Maybe it’ll give Hap a chance to exorcise some of his demons.

Maybe…

(*)
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

The boys meet a Chinese man.

Many thanks for words and likes :)

Happy was never a distinguished gentleman.

He was handsome in his younger days, thick black hair, dusky skin, a decent physique from weightlifting and hitting the gym five times a week but there was always something in his eyes that intimidated; that turned people away. That's what they told him, at least. They said he was intense, that he had a stare that could look right through a woman. The very eyes of a killer or at least a very violent man.

They didn't know the half of it.

Happy is a killer; he's a violent man, this is true, but he's also an attentive partner, a loyal, thoughtful man. He's a man with infinite patience for those he loves, a man who sees things that no other man could see.

Despite the path he has taken in life, Happy could be good for someone.

Now that he's older things are different. He knows if he were to grow his hair out from bald it would be thick and grey, a ‘halo’ covering the snake that coiled on top of him. He’s never worn a suit in his life, not even to his father's funeral, though his mother begs and pleads with him to pull on a nice shirt and tie and find himself a good woman. She wants to be a grandmother before she dies, though her son is unlikely to fulfil that wish for her.

Happy wouldn’t wish himself on any child, not with these killer hands, not with this fang-smile and these snake eyes. He tells her he’ll buy her a cat; that she’s not dying any time soon.

She caves, tells him she loves him for who he is, not what he can give her.

Michelle? She sees through the facade. She sees past the killer's eyes and venomous skull. She looks beyond the fixed stare and a tendency towards wordlessness. She appreciates his uniqueness, would never entertain him in a suit.

That's why he sees something in her, and Happy is nothing if not persistent.

“Put in a good word for me,” he tells Juice, doesn't ask him. “Tell her something came up.”

“You want me to lie for you?”

“Getting arrested isn’t reason enough to stand up a good woman. I’m asking as a brother..”

“And, as a brother, I’ll tell you that I’ll do what I can but I can’t promise anything. She yells at me all the time. She calls me out on my shit. She’s never been someone who falls for these big, beautiful puppy dog eyes.”
“That’s why I like her. She’s not an idiot.”

He likes her because she's no-one's fool and that, to Hap, is worth more than a perfect body and a pert set of 22 year old tits.

Hap hasn't got the energy for youth, not any more.

"Just...tell her I'm a good guy."

"She knows you are. But, Hap, she has a kid. A little boy. She has a whole lot of shit with her ex-husband and this job means everything to her. If you're just looking for a quick fuck, she's not - "

" - I'm not, Juice. Trust me."

If there's one good thing about his murderous eyes it's that they're honest. They hold no lies.

"Alright, then. As long as we're clear."

"We are."

Maybe it's Teller's death that's forced Happy to look at himself from the outside. Jax was over a decade Happy's junior and had two marriages behind him. Two wives. Two boys. He went to sleep and never woke up, taken by the reaper before he even reached middle age.

Hap's already there...and, what's he got to show for it but a hip full of death?

It's a wake up call, a stark confirmation that guys die young and the only thing we can leave behind are the people we loved and who loved us back. He's past getting his dick sucked on car hoods and screwing women whose names he'll never know and who'll never see beyond his cut. Maybe he can thank Jax for that.

He's been wracking his snake laden brain for something to thank him for.

(*)

"You want me to hurt him?"

"Who?"

"The chink. Just say the word and I'll dish out my own special brand of retribution. I got tension coming out of my ears. If I don't get laid tonight I can't be held responsible for myself."

Happy feels he needs to put the offer on the table. He's a pitbull, a guard dog. He's a fighting bear, a great white shark.

They ask, he gives. They give a request and he fulfils it above and beyond. If Juice wants to dance in the guy's gushing blood he can give that to him. He deserves it. He deserves more than it, after what that guy did.

Hap doesn't know the details but he knows enough, that many hands holding a broken kid down, that many fingers, that many mouths. Hap had made it his mission to protect him from that once upon a time. He couldn't protect him this time but he can make amends.

There's hesitation in Juice's eyes, though, a kind of modesty that Happy has never been able to relate to because Juice tolerates rather than enjoying.
Unlike Hap, he's not a killer. He's not a very violent man.

"Thanks," he says, "but it's not about me. It's about what's right for the club. He's a wild dog who needs to be put down. That's all that matters."

“I’m just letting you know that I might not be able to hold back.”

“Do what you gotta do, Hap. I'm not gonna stop you. Just...don't do it for me."

The distinction seems important, seems to mean something to Juice.

"Alright, little brother."

He doesn't want that on his conscience.

(*)

Juice owns Chibs as much as Chibs owns him. That doesn't sit on his conscience at all.

There's a shine to all of this, now, that has nothing to do with a black skull or a Black Death. He pinches, he teases, he scratches, bites and kisses. He laughs in the face of everything he’s been through, shares everything he is with this man who lies beside him, a brother not by blood but by word, a lover by every other means.

His lungs are drawing Chibs in deeply as he tangles fingers into too-long hair and sinks fingers into the thick leather of his second skin.

"You been waiting for this?" the old man asks, to which Juice closes his eyes and tells him "all day! Couldn't get you out of my head."

"Better me than anything else."

"You're not wrong."

Juice pulls the cut away with ease, the shirt, the vest, exposes the man underneath. He's rough and imperfect but everything he wants and all he needs.

"Wish we could just forget about it all and fuck 'til Christmas. That would be awesome."

"Tough time, lad. We lay it to rest tomorrow, alright? We put it to bed. Then you've only got me to worry about."

Juice smiles. Breathes hard.

"Aye."

He wonders why it hasn’t always been this way and his heart aches for the time they wasted, time that could’ve been spent doing this instead of that.

Time that could've been spent feeling love, not war.

He takes Chibs as his own and it’s not a fault in his stars. It's a fix. He claims him. He makes him tingle. He wreaks havoc on the older man’s senses as he presses his lips against a sharp collarbone, pushes a kiss there. A bite. A scratch. He leaves a mark. Juice will always leave a mark, Chibs tells him. He always has.
"I love you," he whispers, and there's more to those words than there ever was before.

"Tha gaol agam ort, Juicy. More than you will ever fucking know."

"I love it when you talk dirty to me."

Chibs was always part of Juice and now Juice is indelibly part of him. It’s attainment. It’s success, as they move in time, as they follow a path shared only with each other and no-one else.

No-one else.

No-one can take that. No-one can change it.

(*)

Tig finds Rat at the bar in the clubhouse. Venus had cut him off an hour or so earlier but Rat’s always been a guy who can get himself out of tight scrapes or talk and act his way out of a situation he’s not happy with. Tig doesn’t know how he managed to snatch the bottle from under her nose but there it is in his backpack, two thirds empty and on its way to dryness.

He's glazed and unfocused. His eyes are fixed firmly on his hands as if they're not a part of him.

"You look like dried shit, buddy."

"Yeah."

He was always going to be the one to take it the hardest because Jax was all he knew. He came in when times were turning tough, when Jax was heading to the helm and building his Empire around Clay’s faltering feet. It was Jax who afforded Rat his cut and told him that life could be better than what he had before, a dead-beat job stacking shelves at a supermarket and no prospects whatsoever.

He’d given him a lifeline.

“Your holdin’ up okay?”

“I’m fine. Peachy keen, jelly bean."

He smiles absently.

“I hope for your sake Brooke finds that cuter than I do."

"Oh, she does."

"Let’s get you up, okay?"

“I can walk."

“You can scurry."

"Like a rat, right?"

This is going to be difficult. There's a reason Tig doesn't like children.

"There’ll be no scurrying tonight, vermin or not. Have some self respect."
Rat stands. He falls to his knees. Tig laughs, the in-joke springing straight to mind.

“Nice of you to offer but you lost your chance months ago. My zipper doesn’t fly down for any Tom, Dick or Harry, know what I’m sayin’?”

He remembers pushing the guy’s head down and telling him how hard he made him. That had been a gauge. A test. It's not that Rat's phobic but there are places he won't go.

“You’re getting too old for this kind of shit. Know your limit, kid. If you vomit on the floor I'll make you eat it.”

Rat looks beat. His hand flies out in Tig's face. He tries to push him away but he's about as coordinated as a newborn giraffe wearing blinkers.

It would be funny if it wasn't so pathetic.

"Screw you."

"You think I'm kidding?"

“I lost a friend today, Tig. That’s what Jax was. He was a friend. You remember that?”

If he was sober he might not sound so crushed. Tig knows it's the vodka speaking, knows it's the booze rendering the kid vulnerable like this but it's still hard to see.

"He was a friend, jerkoff."

“I know he was. Bobby was a friend too. Clay. Clay was the closest thing I had to a best friend and I've been too old for one of those since before you took your first shit on a toilet. It happens. We lose guys. People end up in the ground. It’s what we chose, son.”

It's easy to say. It's not so easy to feel. Tig knows better than anyone how hard it is to lose someone you love to the mark of the cut.

"We grieve and we move on. Simple as that."

“If it wasn’t for him I’d probably be dead. My brother’s a crack addict. My mother’s a whore. He saw something in me and he took me in and, yeah, he was a shitty guy, but I’ve lived my life with shitty guys."

“Haven’t we all?”

“He wasn’t that much older than me. He had a wife. He had kids. What do I got, Tiggy? I got nothing."

“You got us. You got family. You got that sweet little girl, though fuck knows how you bagged her, you dirty old man. And, you got your cut.”

“I don’t even know if I want it anymore."

“Because of this? Because of Jax? C’mon, Rat. You signed up to an MC, not the great spiritual leader that is Jackson Fucking Teller. Let me tell you something. Jax? He wasn’t all that. He may have scraped you up off your deadbeat life’s path but you don’t owe him anything. You don’t owe him this.”

None of them owe him a God damned thing, and yet here is one of them sitting in a clubhouse barely
able to contain himself.

“I don’t know what I want. Tomorrow we’re gonna kill a guy, another guy. What kind of a life is that? I got Brooke to think about now.”

“She knows who you are. She knows what you do. This is the last time. It has to be done.”

Tig knows how many times he has heard those words himself. They become hollow, worn out like Hap’s used condoms.

It becomes difficult to swallow after awhile.

“I said it myself, Tig. Fucker doesn’t deserve to live. I just look at all the promises Jax made me and I wonder where it all went, y’know? When did it get so murderous?”

It wasn’t always this way, he wants to say. It was good once.

He just can’t bring himself to say it because it feels like that happened to someone else.

"I don't know, Rat. It just...evolved."

"I was talking with Quinn about it yesterday. He asked me if I’d still want in if I knew where the club was headed. I said I would. He couldn’t say the same."

That bothers Tig in as much as he understands it because if that kind of fractious attitude remains it could destabilise everything. He hopes it's not the case but he'll be having words with them. He'll be analysing to see where their heads are at.

All he has is Rat right now.

“We’re movin’ on, kiddo. Tomorrow? We lay it to rest. We do it for the club. We do it for the fucking future, Rat. You and Quinn? Have that conversation six months from now. Don’t quit right now when it’s all raw. You don’t follow a man. A club is more than one man. You hear me?”

“Yeah.”

“Atta boy."

Maybe he thinks it's done. Maybe he thinks the pep talk is finished.

Tig won't let him off that easy. He grabs his ear like he might a disobedient toddler and twists.

"You also don’t steal from my girl. She told you no. You understand? You disobey her again, I’ll have her put you over her damn knee. You think you’re too old for a spanking?”

“Jesus. Let go of me. Don’t even go there, dude.”

“I’m goin’ there.”

Tig takes the vodka and it feels like stealing candy from a child. He knows all too well how easy it is to lose yourself in clear liquid at the bottom of a glass, in the burn of vodka as it goes down smooth and straight. It’s easy to forget when your mind’s numbed by the only good thing to come out of Russia, so damn easy.

“Sleep it off, jackass, and don’t let me catch you talkin’ this way again, you hear me? You have a problem, you come to me. You don’t drown yourself in booze and hope the answer miraculously
comes to you. You’re better than that.”

“If you say so.”

“I say so, now gimme your keys.”

“Huh?”

“I’m being a responsible parent. Give me your fucking keys or I’ll pat you down and take them myself. You really don't want that, Rat. Trust me.”

The scowl would be cute if the face wasn’t so vermin. Rat has a look only a mother could love.

He takes the keys.

"Good boy."

Tig is saddened by the knowledge he’s more of a father to this thirty-something with a bad beard and a twisted nose than his own beautiful daughters.

Maybe it’s only now he’s growing up.

A long time coming.

(*)

In some warped, disturbing way, Chen's brutality was a welcome relief for Juice.

The second guy, Li, had been slow, almost gentle. Juice had been hurting badly after the first, Yung, a guy who had gone in hard and fast and raw leaving his nerve endings exposed, sensitive to touch, to pain, to any sensation available to them.

They had laughed when he hadn't bled, mentioned something about Tully's girth and preparation and told Yung he was losing his touch.

He'd been expecting more of the same, had felt himself rolling with nausea when the guy, in turn, treated him like a treasured lover. His movements had not been designed to hurt and he was feather-light in his ministrations. Somehow that bothered Juice even more. There had been a kind of faux-tenderness that had unsettled him and that is what had left him thrashing despite of himself. More hands had come down upon him in what was as effective a restraint as the leather straps Oprah had threatened him with. He could not move. He could not break free. He could not turn his head. He could only lie there until Li was finished with his soft, slow movement, his mind floating gingerly in the space above as he looked down at himself.

He could almost, almost say he was grateful when normal service resumed with Chen, all sneering insults and viciousness, all claws on his hips and mint-fresh breath in his ear as he asked him how it felt to be taken like the dog his club thought of him as. He was the most verbal, the most disrespectful. Still, Juice almost welcomed the feeling of being twisted to the point of breaking and seared in half because it was better than the mindfuck that had gone before.

He's close to thanking him when he finally lays eyes on him again, bleeding from his forehead from the 'extraction' and bound rigid to a chair.

He woke up a few minutes ago but it's only now that he's making any sense.

“What is this? Is this some kind of joke?”
“No joke,” Chibs tells him. "You see anyone laughing?"

There's nobody laughing, not even smiling.

This is deadly serious.

“What, you’re gonna kill me? You put me in the ground, another guy’s just gonna spring up in my place. We don’t forget. For Lin and Ryu? We will have our vengeance in this - .”

“ - in this life or the next?” Tig asks. “Jesus. Kind of desperate when a guy starts quoting a movie from fifteen years ago to get his point across.”

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"What, you didn't see Gladiator? It's a classic. But, I guess there wasn't any Kung Fu in it so maybe it wasn't your thing."

It’s only when Chen glances at his once-captive-victim before casually looking away that Juice realises.

('He might not even recognise you, kid. You look like a different person now."

The last time Chen saw Juice he was battered and broken, his head shaved down to the bone like a guy going through chemo in nondescript prison overalls and white slip-on shoes. The tattoos are buried under thick black hair, the haunted look in his eyes replaced by something less nihilistic. He doesn't look near death any more. He's not touching fingers with Mr Mayhem.

It makes him feel uncharacteristically angry to be unrecognised, as though what he went through meant nothing

Chibs nods towards him, permission as such, and Juice steps in front of him.

"Am I so forgettable, Chen?"

Maybe he recognises the voice, maybe it’s the eyes. Maybe it’s the defiance that Juice so carefully procured for himself that fateful day. Whatever it is, something changes in Chen when Juice moves before him, still smaller than he was but stronger, mentally and physically.

He’s not a beaten dog any more.

He’s not a skinned rabbit waiting to be thrown to the wolves.

“You don’t remember me?” he asks. “I thought I meant more to you than that. I gotta say, I’m kind of disappointed.”

Chen may smile, may position himself in such a way that indicates indifference but Juice can see the apprehension. He can’t imagine anything more terrifying than being placed in a position of vulnerability with a person you took from in such an inhuman way.

The captive shrugs his shoulders.

“You were nothing special.”

“Just one of many, huh? Tell me, what kind of a guy does that?”

“Listen to you. Got your backup now, have you? Weren’t so tough by yourself. Would your boys be
so eager to side with you if they know how you took it?”

He can hear Tig's voice in his head telling him "you don't have to do this," can hear his own telling him it's the only way.

Own it, Venus had told him. Wear it like a boyscout badge of honour.

It's Juice's turn to shrug.

"I got nothing to hide, dude."

"Really? So they know how you didn't even put up a fight? They know you were some nigger and chink hating fucker's blow-up doll? I hear he made good use of you. Twice a day, sometimes. The guy's got stamina."

He looks to his audience, a hideous grin on his face.

"Your boy, here? He performed the matinee and the encore."

"Keep talking. It's all you got."

"Oh, I got a lot."

They're just words. That's what Juice's mom used to tell him.

Words can't cause bruises.

"You got a lot to say for a soon to be dead man, Chen. I seem to remember you jumping the minute your boss told you to. I doubt you’d have fucked me if it wasn’t for him."

He smiles, looks skyward as if pondering a memory.

"You were number 3. Not quite bottom of the list but that's how far down the pecking order you were. Pretty sure I was barely conscious at the time. That what you need to get yourself off?"

His places a hand on Chen's shoulder and he's glad to see some fight in him when he tries to shrug him off.

"I can do this all day, man. You can’t hurt me. I’m not concussed and half drugged now. There’s not a handful of guys and a couple of shivs between me and the door. Say what you want. I’m walkin’ out of this room. You’re not. That’s the truth there, pal. Anything you say? It dies with you."

Chen says nothing. Not right now. Juice lets him ponder that for a minute.

He lets the big boys step in.

"You ordered a hit on the club," Chibs says. "Me, especially. You think we were gonna let that slide?"

"Call it vengeance. For Lin and Riu. For the fuck-ton of my people you finished off. Lets call it Even Stevens."

"Sorry, can’t do that. Pretty shitty if you gotta bribe guys with money to do a hit for you. You not got any loyal followers any more? I thought you were all about the brotherhood."

Again, silence. Juice remembers a man who could not keep his mouth shut; someone whose words
were like knives and kept digging and digging deeper.

Easy a difference half a year makes.

“This thing you got goin’ on? This is an act of desperation. We’re out of the game now, Chen. We’re nothing to anyone. You think taking us out is gonna mean anything?”

“It’s a pride thing.”

Juice can’t let that slide. He can’t let him talk about pride. Not after he humiliated him.

“Pride? That’s hilarious. Let’s see how proud you really are.”

“At least my pants are up. I got that pride. Nice ass you got, boy. Good and tight. Your boys should try it. Be gentle, though. Don’t wanna see those tears again.”

(I think we upset him, boys.)

Juice turns away, shaking with rage. He didn’t think it’d affect him like this. He didn’t think it’d be this way.

He didn’t think he’d want to pick up Happy’s tool kit and use them himself.

“That’s it. Run away, little boy. I hear Tully’s missing you. Dreams about you every night. I hear he was the one behind Teller bleedin’ out in his cell. Was that for you?”

“Shut up.”

Chen smirks.

“That your sore spot? Tully? Or, is it Teller? Maybe your sore spot’s just that rosy little asshole of yours.”

It’s T.O that steps in. He places his hand on Chen’s jaw and he forces his mouth closed.

“You heard the man. If you want to die with your tongue intact I suggest you pipe the fuck down, you mouthy motherfucker.”

Maybe it’s the tone that sets him aside. Maybe it’s the look in his eyes.

Or, maybe it’s the flick-knife that’s pressed towards Chen’s groin, the unspoken threat there loud and clear for all to see and hear.

(’Your tongue or your manhood.’)

“You wouldn’t be the first man to lose something precious to him courtesy of our good selves. Ask your friend. Oh, no. You can’t. He’s gone back to China. Loyalty, huh? You really can’t buy it.”

It can’t be purchased. It can only be cultivated. It can only be grown.

"Are we gonna talk or are we gonna let my friend Happy loose with the wrench? I know he's eager to let some tension of his own out. So, what's it gonna be?"

Which way are you gonna turn, T.O is asking?

How are we going to do this?
Chen says nothing.

It's practically consent.
Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

So how do people want me to end? Do you want me to? I have always been pretty bad at that and never know when people have had enough of me.

I could end here or hereabouts if that's what's wanted. Jax is gone. No club threat. The guys that hurt Juice are taken care of. Help a girl out :) I kind of like developing people's lives but nobody wants to read a 500,000 word fic.

Ah I'm so bad at this...

They don't get much from Chen. It may well have ben a fatal error holding back hope because hope is what loosens the tongue and gets a man saying anything he can to make it stop. Chen knows he is not leaving this room alive and so there a high chance he's going to take his secrets with him once Happy is done with him.

That would be a shame.

There's a scalpel in his upper arm and it seems symbolic to Juice, not something that Hap's bag of tricks usually contains but a visual reminder of the threat he held against Juice's throat that day.

('My hand could slip at any time. Tully wouldn't want you scarred.')</n
Juice stares at the blood as it trickles down his white shirtsleeve and is reminded of the fact he was not allowed to shower before he was thrown back into solitary. He saw his reflection later on and the dried trail of blood remained on his throat where the blade had dug in. The psychological effect of knowing another man's dirt was on him and in him was almost more than he could stand. It was the first time he seriously considered jamming that blade into himself.

He still doesn't feel clean sometimes but his meds help hold off the obsessive need to scrub until his skin breaks and Chibs' mouth and hands on his body erase at least some of it.

Chen has learned that every mention of Juice is met with harsher treatment which doesn't so much please Juice as relieves him. He could feel Montez staring at him whenever Chen spoke and it may have been unintentional but it bothered him. He doesn't want to be looked at like some poor little victim.

He never wanted his brothers to know how he lay there with barely a fight, that he let himself cry silently when he hadn't the strength to hold it back anymore.

"I almost felt sorry for him," Chen had said. "I felt bad."

He wants to reassure the guys it was a one-off and that he never shed a tear with Tully but he realises how fucked up that pride sounds.

He's just quiet now. He's just doing his job.

Chibs wants to hurt Chen, that much is clear. It's not that he's applying unnecessary cruelty but he's
provocative and antagonistic. He's angling for a reaction that Happy can punish.

He has figured out that Chen is a man who lashes out when he is cornered so he's cornering him the best way he can. The only useful bit of information comes when they insult him; when they call him someone else's lapdog.

"You're not intelligent enough to come up with this all by yourself. Who put you up to it?"

"Nobody put me up to it," he swears, believably, confirming he is the only one calling the shots. "This was all me. Leave my guys out of it."

"We can't involve any of your men," Chibs says, "because you don't have any. Not since we finished the best of them off."

"Yeah, well, we can all do damage with an AK and a fast car."

The final nail comes when Chen drops the bombshell Juice isn't expecting; a revelation that is as new to him as it is to the rest of them.

"He called your name," he says, staring Chibs in the eye, gravel voiced and aching with pain because there's a blade in his thigh that aches with every heartbeat. "Just before Ryu was done with him. Over and over. Chibs. Chibs. Please, Chibs. Please, brother. He said that he loved you. That was hilarious."

He spits blood onto his chest but it's poison that's dripping from his ugly, loose toothed mouth.

He's beyond caring about T.O's promise.

"I don't know if he was pleading for you to come get him, Telford, or pretending it was you that was fucking him. Either way, it's pretty fucking sad."

He smiles at Juice, bloody teeth, gaping hole where his decency should be.

"Poor, poor baby."

That's the very moment the trigger is pulled, his face caught in that ugly smirk as the bullet pierces his skull.

That's the very moment a weapon is fired, silencing him before he can do any more damage.

The room falls silent, only the reverberation of that shot echoing around them and as all eyes turn they fall upon Juice, his eyes wide and terrified but his hands notably empty.

He feels as if he's suspended in time, Chen's frozen face a glitch in all of it.

"Rat -"

"What?"

It's Rat who is holding the gun, all rigid arms and fixed, angry stare.

"He had nothing useful to say" are the last words he utters before dropping the gun and getting the Hell out of there.

(*)
"You alright?"

Juice isn't speaking. Chibs looks into his eyes and all he sees is that same dead, vacant stare he used to wear.

It's natural he zoned out after this. It's to be expected. Still, it's frightening to see just how far inside of himself he's gone no matter how well Chibs knows the mechanics of it.

('Harlow says it's a mental protection thing. Kind of like when a hedgehog curls into a tight ball until the danger passes.')

Juice is just waiting for a safer, more stable time to re-emerge.

"Juicy -"

"He in one piece?" Tig asks, sober and concerned.

"Yeah. Have the others help Hap clean up the mess, would you? You go after Rat. I'm gonna take Juice outside."

"Sure thing."

Tig lingers on Juice for a little while before turning away. It's a concern, seeing him like this, but it's not like none of them have seen it before, Chibs thinks. It's not like they all didn't turn a blind eye to his blind eyes when it matters.

He's as guilty as the next man.

"C'mon, lad, you don't need to look at this."

Chibs leads Juice by the arm. He follows worldlessly, obediently, as if allowing Chibs to take over his decision making and his movements is second nature. Chibs wonders how many times he had hoped for the same; that he had blinked himself back to awareness completely alone and wishing Chibs had been there to take him away from all of it.

He thinks of him lying down, hurting and confused, calling out the name of the man who made the choice to put him there in the first place.

It makes him feel utterly ashamed.

He sits Juice down on a wall outside. It's still cold and he's glad for the thick hoodie because Juice is shaking in his stillness and if the shock doesn't get him the chill might.

He places his own hands on Juice's, a physical connection as he wills him to return.

"It's alright now," he says softly. "It's finished. He's not gonna say anything more."

He doesn't tell Juice he's sorry he wasn't there. It's too raw for that right now.

He just tells him he's here now and hopes that's all that matters.

(*)

By the time Chen is bagged, his blood wiped clean from the warehouse floor, Juice is still not 'back'.

"He doesn't look good, Pres."
"He's fine. He's just a bit quiet."

"Quiet, huh?"

T.O crouches down in front of him as one might a frightened animal and attempts to look him in the eye. He shows he's on his way to returning when he blinks slowly and turns his head away. As much as a person in an altered state of awareness can, he looks sad. Ashamed.

"Forget it," T.O whispers. "Everything he said? Doesn't matter, brother. Wasn't your fault. None of it was."

Chibs smiles sadly at the thought, thinking "if only it were that simple."

If only.

(*)

It's two hours later when Juice finally speaks.

They're back at Scoops. Chucky has made chilli and left it on a low heat with instructions for the rice, like they've never made rice before. He has a date tonight and does not want to be disturbed.

He might not be disturbed to hear one of the guy's who took his fingers is ash, now.

Juice shakes his head.

"Well, that was fucked up."

He tells Chibs he's sorry he had to hear that, admits he didn't know. He was so out of it by then, he says, he could've been calling for his Mom and he wouldn't have known it.

"What a way to come out to the guys, right?" he says, his cheeks burning and his smile curled self-deprecatingly. "Couldn't have gone better."

"Don't worry about it."

Chibs wraps his arms around him from behind, presses a kiss against the side of his head.

He silences the concerns ably, capably.

"It's all good, lad."

Juice relaxes into him, no mean feat considering his level of tension. He becomes liquid, flaccid in Chibs' hold.

"Yeah."

"All good."

That night, Juice receives a text that changes everything for him, an Instagram photograph of a tiny child in a blue knitted cap with the name "Theo" handwritten on the name banner above.

"I love him already" the message says, and he reads it in his sister's voice, the way it used to be before, not the sour, bitter tone he grew to despise.

He smiles brightly, laughs softly.
"When one door closes another opens. That's what my mom used to say."

"What's that?" Chibs asks, looking up from behind his glasses.

"Life and death all in the same day," Juice says, showing Chibs the first photograph of his nephew, beautifully named, thankfully loved. "This feels hopeful."

"He's beautiful."

"Yeah he is. Looks like his mommy. I thought she was gonna name him Miguel or Joaquin. Some Hispanic crap. Theo? I kinda like it. Seems like the kinda name a privileged kid has."

He strokes his index finger over that tiny mouth, that tiny face and he feels it.

"He's perfect."

With the birth of this child he feels the future and it doesn't hurt any more. It isn't the wasteland it once was.

It feels like it's going to be okay.

That's new.

That's novel.
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

And, this marks the end of this little chapter. I hope you liked it. It was quite a ride. This just felt like a natural place, with all ends tied up.

For those who are not bored of this Alternate Universe, there will be a Part 2. I have a lot to say and write so those who are reading and want to end here, thank you so much for reading and I hope I did okay with giving these guys a kinder fate. Those who want to stick around? Will see you later in the week.

The next part will be focused on the ups and downs of club life as well as lives away from the club. There really was not enough of that on the show. I found myself wondering about Chibs family, Happy's outside interests, Juice's bloody gamer tag. All of that shit. Maybe we can play with some of that :)

Thanks for reading all 200,000 plus words here!!!
Walking away from that building and knowing he’d never return under the guise of a psych out-patient felt like removing an item of clothing. He’d felt naked, exposed, and for one split second he had found himself wanting to run back and plead for another week, another month, another few sessions just to keep him safe.

Then he’d felt Venus’ arm as it folded across his shoulder and he’d realised that was all the support he needed.

"Come on, baby boy. Ice-cream awaits."

He’d never expected to come this far and it’s all he ever wanted, all he’d ever pleaded for yet nobody had ever listened before.

They’re listening now. Everyone’s listening.

"I feel like I have a voice. You don’t know how something so simple can feel so fucking good."

It's plain sailing like nothing they’d ever imagined possible. The biggest shift in the club’s axis is Chucky’s girl Yvonne getting knocked up with his child, a little girl due in August, four days after his 42nd birthday.

“How can you be a hands-on dad,” Tig had asked him when he'd told the guys, genuinely baffled, “when you haven’t got any hands?”

"I'm on a waiting list to see a specialist. Gonna get some of those fancy prosthetics."

"Aw, man, I'll miss your sacks for hands."

Yvonne wants to name the child Arya after the little girl from Game of Thrones.

Chucky accepts that.

It's all going smoothly - then, the beast re-awakens.

It never sleeps for long.

Tully dies in a blaze of glory that will be remembered for years. Nobody knows how he managed to light the fire and investigations are likely to go on for months into how the whole of the South wing went up because of one man’s quest to go down in flames.

His motive, however extreme, is obvious to those that knew him, even if it's not for those that didn't, and as Juice reads the headline in the newspaper he whispers, ironically, "you went out good, sweetheart."

Tully had known about the AB’s forthcoming plays for his life and, since they had not given him a voice with which to explain himself, had taken measures to leave with their respect. His rumoured infatuation with a mixed breed like Juice had thrown him into the spotlight. A man in such a high position within a racist organisation could not be seen to have such proclivities and so the only course of action had been to make an example of him.

He knew how they'd finish him. Brutally, and without mercy, leaving behind only a humiliated corpse stripped of it's titles, it's reputation in tatters.

Tully had other ideas.

He’d pinned Jax’s death on a jealous prison lover who couldn't handle a more handsome man
catching the eye of his keeper and Christell had been swept away for questioning. Juice had been written off as a powerplay; a white man turning his race rival into little more than a captive sex toy.

"He was to me what a whore is to all of you," he had told his brothers in letters sent after his death. "I was putting him in his place."

At least, that's the word on the grapevine.

On the day he had opened the gates of madness he'd painted a swastika on the wall of his cell with his own blood, a sign to his Aryan brothers that he remained one of them to the bitter death and that they were wrong to condemn him. He would bleed for the cause. He would die before he let it be taken from him. Then, in a show of absolute power, he had orchestrated the biggest riot Stockton had seen since 1963.

Three men died in the riot, one of them being Tully himself.

They're still picking up the pieces of his "Death by authority" even now.

His denouncing Juice and taking it the way that he did leads to his brotherhood honouring him in death whereas they'd planned on sending him to it.

His reputation as one of the most prominent and vocal leaders remains frighteningly intact.

(*)

To Chibs' absolute despair, Juice (quietly, and unseen) attends his funeral because, no matter what he did, he's alive because of Tully.

("You're crazy, boy. What are you hoping to achieve?")

The cemetery is lined with skinheads who marched all the way wearing AB regalia citing freedom of speech when called out for their vitriol. Juice sticks to the periphery making sure he is out of sight because he knows without a shadow of a doubt that the AB would make an example of him where Tully did not. He imagines a night spent swinging from a tree before he is found, bloated and purple where the brown used to be.

That's what Tully would've done to him had he not had his cogs turned by Stockton.

The AB have made it clear to the club that they won't associate with them even in a casual level until Juice and T.O have the cuts torn from their cold, dead bodies, a kind of late show of rigidity that hadn't been there before. It is how it's supposed to be with racists, not the hypocritical turning of blind eyes it was before.

Chibs had nodded his head and reminded them their ties were cut ages ago; that they have nothing of interest to each other any more.

"We are a little more...liberal."

Juice did not come to Tully's 'laying to rest' to pay his last respects. It's more to make sure Tully is actually dead. He won't believe he's free of him until they put him in the ground.

Two weeks before Tully died he had sent Juice a parting gift in the form of a first edition Jane Eyre, a dried sprig of lavender between the first two pages. He hadn't written a message, not wanting to devalue his present, but with that gift he had said what he needed to say.
He said, remember me.
He said, I'm still here.

Looking at it now, at an estimated value of $70,000 dollars, he may well have been saying thank you and goodbye.

*I denounced you, but this is what you meant to me.*

Juice watches as his skinhead friends circle his grave and he wonders if they even knew Ron Tully at all. He wonders if anyone did.

The sun is setting on this evening in late May. It's his birthday soon, his first since he left the hospital, and he feels grateful. He's grateful to be living as he watches the man who helped maintain that lowered into the ground, a Jew at birth, a Catholic at death, a person no doubt knocking on the gates of Hell as it stands.

Juice raises his hand and he waves goodbye.

It feels...final.

"You ready, laddie?"

The hand on his shoulder is firm and strong, always strong. It's a presence that hasn't left him since the minute it broke down in that sterile visitors room over a year ago.

It will never leave him again.

He turns to the man who wouldn't let him go this alone no matter how much he failed to understand it - and, he smiles. He would talk about riding off into this beautiful sunset but life isn't that perfect.

Nothing is, nor should it be.

"I'm ready, brother. Let's go."

Still, they rise.

They won't fall again.

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