My life as a foreign country

by alinewrites
Fateful holidays

*************

beta by Eliza "super-beta!"

chapter 1

White-grey sand vanishing into a grey sea swallowed by a dark-grey sky; or whatever it was, Toby thought and stepped back to take a look from a different angle; abstraction maybe, but his mind insisted on showing him lazy waves washing over a beach under a grey sky –strange choice considering the wide range of colours offered by the surrounding landscape –deep blue sea, intense blue sky, bright green and everywhere stunning riot of red and yellow flowers.

The spell was so strong he stood a long time outside the gallery, watching the painting in the window; wondering if the other ones were alike, wondering if he'd go in. Gen was having lunch in a little restaurant nearby with the kids and of course Toby never sat inside a restaurant or a bar or anything like that anymore; besides, he wasn't hungry.

It was the hottest hour of the day in the south of France, in this old village that had been built 10 centuries ago by stubborn local lords at the top of a rocky hill, towering over the seaside; an impenetrable stronghold, small houses nestled around a fortress, lanes narrow to keep the burning sun away. Toby liked the place and they'd spent the night in a hotel nearby before leaving, going back home –reluctantly, as far as he was concerned, he would've loved these holidays to go forever.

Well, he guessed he'd go inside get a look.

Three steps plunged him into the fresh shadow preserved between the thick walls; the room was small and empty but Toby saw a red curtain separating it from another room, and thought someone was probably there. In front of him 8 paintings were hanging on the bare stone, framed in black thick shiny wood.

Thick layers of oil; Toby didn't know much about painting but certainly the artist had used a palette knife; the grey wasn't so grey after all; he could see light touches of blue that made it colder, made the white shine and freezing, and red barely visible traces trailing along an ominously dark sky; he remembered a class in high-school about paintings; white was never quite white, the teacher had said, if you look closely enough you'll see that and he'd spent an afternoon at the Met with Leslie staring at paintings, enthusiastic –that was 2 months before she was killed. Leslie would've loved these paintings, she would've accompanied him here and bought one, probably, her blue eyes shining with pleasure; Gen wasn't quite like that; fine but different. But of course no one would ever live up to Leslie's sanctified memory, the adoration Toby felt for her was somewhat unfair, he knew that; dead people are so much easier to love than living ones and Gen deserved more than the half-hearted love he was giving her.

He sighed, losing himself in the strange universe opening in front of him, grey, beige, subtle gradation of lights and shades; hell the guy was a talented one, his instinct told him. He came closer and made out a name. C. Keller? He remembered seeing it written somewhere before, probably about an exhibition in the area; he wondered what the man, or the woman who'd painted that looked like.

"Are you looking for someone?" a voice said on his right as the curtain moved.
The man had spoken in English, no real accent, and the voice, Jesus… Toby stood absolutely still, ears ringing, throat tight, frozen by sheer terror.

"Hey, something wrong?"

Someone please take me away from here, I don't want to hear this voice again, please let me go, please don't kill me, please please please… It took him all he had to turn around and face the man who was saying "I am Chris Keller, I painted these. Like them?"

Toby stepped back, moving to the door and the man, Keller, frowned at that, held out a hand and grabbed Toby's shaking arm, moved with him out of the shadows of the little room into a ray of light - their eyes caught.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Chris Keller said, not even trying to hide, not trying to disguise, or lie or anything, his fingers tightened around Toby's arm. "Jesus fucking Christ."

.....

But Toby's mind was gone, he was back 13 years ago on a late day of June, in a bar in the center of town with some friends, far from their wealthy suburbs, too far maybe; celebrating Leslie's birthday; she was 18, and Toby loved her, as much as she loved him - madly. It was late, the place was empty, they were about to leave, they'd drunk a bit too much; Toby felt sharper, stronger, bolder and he leaned to kiss her again.

But in his arms her body went limp suddenly, and he heard the noise – gunshot, he had time to realize before a sharp pain stole his breath, and he fell to the floor, still holding her, blood running down on him from her mouth, and slowly, across the fear, the thought she was dying and so was he; and the gunshots going on, screams and other bodies falling on him.

Then the silence and the smell of powder and death; the bar being broken down – they were robbing the place.

"Let's clear off!" A voice said and another one, a voice he'd never forget, deep and growling and that kept haunting him, haunting his nightmares, the voice of the man the police said had never existed.

"Wait. I wanna check; make sure they're all dead."

His friends' bodies piled upon him had been removed, Leslie torn away from him and he'd stood as still as he could, hoping the guy wouldn't hear his heart beat, wouldn't see his chest rise, wouldn't smell the panic of an animal about to be slaughtered.

Through his lashes he'd seen a young man crouch beside him, look at him and sigh; "shit," the voice had said again and he'd heard the trigger of the gun. Then he had been unable to resist, he'd opened his eyes, caught a very dark blue gaze, and whispered, "Please! Don't kill me!"

The man had hesitated for a fraction of second, looking shocked.

"Hey, what the fuck are you doing?"

Toby had seen a smile on the guy's face, Jesus he was young, not much older than him.

"Finishing the job, Ryan."

The deafening sound of another shot and Toby'd passed out, sure he was dead.
At the time the story had been on every channel, in every paper, his picture everywhere—Toby didn't give a damn, he was lying on a bed in a hospital room, crushed with pain and grief; a bullet had smashed his shoulder, another one gone through his belly; nothing too bad; but his mind, Christ, his mind was shattered, his own life was shattered. He'd lost Leslie, he would never be alive again.

"Why didn't he kill me?" He asked his father for the hundredth time and Harrison Beecher sighed again.

"Toby, remember what the psychiatrist said; there was no blue eyed man, he didn't exist."

"I saw him! I fucking saw him!"

Harrison caressed his son's hair lovingly, soothingly.

"I know that but... The police shot two of them down and the other one's locked inside a high security prison, he doesn't look like the man you described."

"Why don't you believe me? Why does no one believe me? Why do you think I'm crazy? There were four of them!"

But he was wrong and the only survivor had confirmed it; they were only three, all under 21, high on speed or stuff, and they'd seen the rich pricks celebrating in the bar; life had been unfair to them and they'd decided to take their revenge, entered the bar and opened fire on all of them—killed seven of them and fled; but the cops were outside, they'd been easy to catch.

"They robbed the cash, I heard them."

"The cashier says it was empty; listen to me, Toby, you've been through very difficult, traumatizing moments, your mind has been badly..."

"No! Fuck, no! I know there was another one! I saw him, I could recognize him, recognize his voice!"

But he'd recognized none of the suspects the police had so patiently shown him; and when he'd questioned Ryan O'Reily in the security prison he was locked in, waiting for death, months later, the Mick had shrugged.

"You dreamt, rich boy, there was no one else."

And he'd believed, eventually, believed that fear and trauma had stuck this false memory into his mind and gone through a long therapy and got cured—or so they thought. He'd left grief and anger behind, become Toby Beecher again, nice guy, rich guy, a bit shy, maybe, who sometimes drank a bit too much; he'd resumed his scholarship, gone to Harvard, graduated as a lawyer and he was working with Gen in his father's practice; doing corporate law, pleading sometimes. Married, two kids, an average yuppie.

Until now.

And Chris... at first he'd only thought the guy was great; good-looking, nice clothes, too long blond hair bleached by too much sun and sea, slightly tanned skin, cute nose and the way he looked at the paintings had been flattering, moving, his concentration, the way he frowned and tilted his head on the side to have a better view... Chris had stood still, enjoying the sight. After a while he'd had enough and he'd gone to him, talked to him—very wrong move, Keller.

He'd seen that in the clear blue eyes, their expression when the man had turned to him; the flicker of
madness and the change in the man's gaze, lips tightening, eyes narrowing – stubborn and crazy looking.

Fuck. Memories and sickness had overwhelmed him. How far was he supposed to run away? How far to be left alone? How far to let bygones be bygones?

Fierce look, bared teeth… a wild animal and Chris came nearer, cautious and slow; until he was near enough to touch him, brush his fingertips against a bare arm and hear a low rumble; he grabbed the man's wrist, trying to soothe the cold rage he felt simmering inside the man.

"Hey, hey, come on, calm down, OK?"

Toby was looking him deep in the eyes.

"You're real," he said, not believing he was able to talk "No one believed you were, they all thought I was crazy. But I wasn't. Jesus! You killed my friends, do you remember? Do you remember me?"

He was whispering those words, his voice stumbling on them, his eyes roaming over Chris' face with the intensity of a lover's gaze.

"Yeah," Chris said, "you're the one I didn't kill."

After that Toby remembered nothing clearly; there was a desk on his left; on the desk a pair of scissors, sun flickering on them; he was fast, seized them, plunged them, once, twice in the man's body, heard a soft painful hiss and stepped back in horror, staring at the form slowly crumpling down on the floor, his heart racing madly, scissors still in hand. Turning to the door he saw that the place was empty, knew he was given a chance to escape; before he left, he lacerated the paintings, staining them with blood, the same blood he saw dripping through the man's clenched fingers and smearing on the floor, as red and shining as Leslie's blood had been.

It's not me, he thought; I didn't do this; it's the bloodthirsty demon inside me that did it.

Then he ran away.

Tbc…
**Bleeding**

*It's all right, Ma;*

*I'm only bleeding…*

*Bob Dylan*

*****************************************************************

**chapter 2**

"I'm colour blind, metaphorically speaking."

The quote kept echoing in Toby's mind; and the picture of a recovering, pale and emaciated Chris Keller, sitting on a straw chair outside a little stone house, probably his house, his eyes hooded, looking exhausted, a weary smile on his lips haunted his nightmares. Blood flowing everywhere and Leslie going limp in his arms, asking for mercy with his own voice... He woke up covered in sweat, biting his lips, drawing blood to stifle his screams.

Nightmares that had spared him for 10 years. Intense, urging him to ask, find out, demand, shake the man until he was forced to explain. Kill.

Then ‘I'm colour blind, metaphorically speaking’, Keller had told the journalist of some American magazine, and his fucking picture was on the cover in every store, mocking and taunting, even in Beecher's waiting room, fuck! I'm colour blind and the wonderful colours of the place I'm living in mean nothing to me; I'm unable to paint blue and yellow and green and red.

You can't paint red, motherfucker? Too much blood on those hands, maybe?

Toby was shaking; standing in front of his desk, locked inside his office, looking at the picture, unable to take his eyes off it; Jesus he was alive, he'd missed him. Relieved, Toby? Not even. Here's the man who killed my friends, killed my Leslie and he's sitting in this chair, wearing only a pair of jeans and a sleeveless shirt and so alive it hurts. It's said he left the hospital too soon, and a nurse comes to his place once a day to check up on him; would she still come if she knew?

You're eaten up by hate, Toby. Just tell everyone he's the man and prosecute him, get him fried; that's what you want deep down in your guts. See him die, see the light vanish from his eyes.

But…

Keller pretended he knew nothing about the man who'd attacked him in his own gallery, nearly killed him, left him for dead; he didn't have time to see him, had no idea of *who* he was, couldn't imagine any reason for lacerating the paintings, must've been some freaking psychopath. The police had given up fast enough.

A psychopath. Fucking liar. Toby had to sit down.

But that's what I am; I stooped that low. Now I'm as guilty as he is; what does that make me? Fuck.

If it means you're found guilty too, imprisoned too, will you still go to the court, Toby? Ruin your
life, Gen's life, the kids' life?

Of course you won't. Of course I will. I'm the innocent one, after all; I'm the victim.

He went to his father, threw the magazine across the desk and pointed at the picture.

"It's him. The man who didn't shoot me, the man you were so sure he'd never existed. Look at him; this is the picture of a killer."

*****************************************************************************

"Finish the job, Chris."

Ryan's voice in the distance, so far, another universe, another life. An ocean of pain between them.

"I can do it for you; hire someone for you from here, do the job, rid you of him, once for all. Fuck, the guy’s crazier than we are."

Chris shifted and sighed.

"How are you?"

"Same old, K-boy. Sort of ‘as happy as can be in a 10 feet cell’. But the place's fine; experimental stuff, we're free to go around during the day. And there's Gloria."

O’Reily had told Chris about Gloria before and that love sounded fucking wicked to him, but if it could improve the Mick’s wasted life...

"And I received the money. Thanks."

"It's the least I can do. You're in, I'm out."

"We had a deal on that, K-boy, we knew the risks from the beginning, both of us. I lost my brother that day, I lost freedom, you lost yourself. Maybe I'm the happiest of the whole. You would've done the same."

Yes, probably. They'd always worked that way together, since the beginning. Keep your fucking mouth shut, never rat on the members of the gang, if you’re caught the gang will take care of you. He would’ve done the same. He'd helped find a lawyer, and Ryan O'Reily's sentence had been commuted. Now he could do nothing better than send money and keep in touch. He didn't want to wonder how strong the connection was between O'Reily’s silence and the amount of the checks he sent him; didn’t want to doubt. Finish the job? Sometimes he had regrets. Maybe he should’ve let the fucking state fry Ryan.

“I have to go, K'boy. If you change your mind…”

"I'll call again."

"Finish the job, Keller, or the rich prick will get you in the end."

“Gimme the name. The guy’s name. I need it now.”


Chris put down the phone and reclined in his chair, trying not to let the pain pervade every cell of his brain. He had to work; work was the only thing that mattered.
Taking a look around, he thought how much he loved this place. With his bare hands he'd made a house out of an old crumbling sheephold. At the time he'd just been a young American wild guy who'd landed here by accident; he'd used the money he'd got left to buy a rocky parcel for almost nothing —no water, no electricity, a half-dry dwell and settled down there, knowing he'd never return home. He'd resumed painting; he'd been good at that in high school, had gone through some meaningless "art therapy" in prison.

For years he'd lived on nothing, really, helping people out, drawing portraits of tourists for a little cash. Now he was a local figure; hell, he'd exposed in several well-known galleries all around but he was known for living a very secluded life, far from civilisation most of the time. He was successful, made a lot of money and it was some weird accomplishment for a man whose life had stopped 13 years ago, when he'd heard the gunshots outside and fled, stumbling across the dead bodies, running through the streets, deaf with the noise of explosions that were killing his best friends - motherfucking cops always where they shouldn't be; thought they worked to protect people but it was all a lie, all that they were protecting was a rotten society where you were nothing when you didn't have money.

Now he had money, and he was dead inside.

But he was safe, he had been since the day a man from the French administration, holding out his hand, had told him “Congratulations, Mr Keller, you’re now a French citizen.”

He’d shaken the man’s hand and walked out, sat down on a wooden bench in front of the sea in the freezing cold of winter; and cried with relief.

"Do you believe the French government will extradite one of its most talented artists, just so we can fry him because you think he's the one who killed Leslie 13 years ago?"

A hand slammed the wood of the desk, hard.

"I don't think he is; he *is*.*"

"From what I know, the French administration has a very clear position on that; they don't extradite someone who's likely to get killed.”

“I know that.”

“Then you know too that in order to convince them, we’ll have to ask a judge to negotiate a commuted sentence, and when he's here – if he's ever here, I'm not sure you get him convicted because that man, O'Reily, he won't testify.”

"I'll talk to him, convince him.”

"You already tried that, he said you were mad. Toby, get real, please; Gen's pregnant again, you're a father and a husband, you got a job, your own testimony will be easily shattered by any good lawyer…”

Toby had already slammed the door at that point.

It didn’t take long for Gen to make the connection; Keller’s story had been in a lot of magazines, he’d been questioned by American journalists about the attack; the day, the place, the time matched perfectly; the pieces of the puzzle eventually fell in place, memories flooding her.
Jesus, Toby, what did you do?

She’d noticed how agitated Tobias had been before boarding the plane; she remembered asking him what was wrong. “Nothing,” he’d said, avoiding her gaze. But he’d lied, she was sure about it now.

When she found the strength to question him, he sat down heavily on the stairs that led to their bedroom and buried his face in his hands.

“Don’t lie to me, Toby, please.”

He kept silent for a moment, sighed and raised his eyes to watch her; she sat beside him, her shoulder touching his, their fingers entwined.

“See, until that day, I could rely on a minimum amount of certainties. I’d imagined someone who’d been both my tormentor and my saviour; it was a fantasy meant to soothe a deep feeling of guilt because I was the only survivor of this unfathomable slaughter; I was convinced I’d dreamed, the man wasn’t real. But when I saw him, recognized him… I was back 13 years ago and it was… unbearable. I’d been right for the beginning and all the walls I’d built to protect me, the walls everyone had helped me building fell down. I was helpless, exposed, threatened; it was like waking up after 13 years of sleep to find that the nightmare was still here”

Toby sighed, at loss of words for once and looked at Gen, her furrowed eyebrows, her sorry expression; he was glad that she didn’t say anything.

She’d met him ten years ago, he was still haunted and dark but month after month, she’d grown attached to him, his kindness, his shyness; he was different from the other boys, sensitive and careful. She’d fallen in love; she’d refused to acknowledge that sometimes he drank a little too much, sometimes he was a little lost in his dreams, sometimes he was just absent, most of the time he wasn’t very passionate; she’d thought she’d get him to love her.

“You don’t love me,” she said, and knew she was right “you do your best I guess, but this isn’t love. You use your family to go on believing everything’s normal…”

“Nothing’s normal. As long as I’m alive; as long as that man is alive, nothing will ever be. And yes, I love you, love the kids.”

“Then I guess you should leave the past behind you and assume your responsibilities.”

“I won’t be able to take on anything until that man is brought before a criminal court and sentenced to what he deserves.”

“You don’t sound like the Toby I know and love.”

“Maybe you don’t know the real Toby, maybe you wouldn’t love him.”

Then nothing could keep him away from his obsession; he grew more and more nervous, and indifferent and dark. Gen had told no one what she suspected, but she was no longer able to share Toby’s bed. She was discouraged and scared by Toby’s mood shifts. When he decided he’d leave for a month or two, travel, try to make up his mind about what he had to do, fear and relief coiled in her mind at the same time. She was afraid to lose him, and afraid to keep him; afraid that he was putting his life and his family in danger by staying and scared that he would do the same by leaving. The only thing that still kept him home were the kids –he wouldn’t leave them easily, skipped work to spend more time with them, played with them much more than he usually did.

One morning, though, she woke up and he was gone. He’d left a note to say he loved her and that
he’d call on a weekly basis. He’d left all his papers for her, and his will. She cried through the morning and the whole day, tried to call him on his cell phone, heard it ring near her and realized he’d left it on the kitchen table.

Chris Keller was sitting in front of his easel, leaning forward, his stained fingers pressed to his lips. His mind focused on the canvas. The light red paint he used to cover the whole surface with was now dry. No one knew about his technique; everybody kept blabbering about the muted tones and this way he had to convey every colour through grey and beige but they didn’t know the amount of care he put in every detail, every touch, the superstitious and meticulous progression that led to every completed painting. Red paint and under the paint, words written with a black pen –now invisible. “Tobias Beecher nearly killed me on August 8th 2001. Fuck him”. He used a different message on every painting, and changed the paint from red to blue—the colour he bore in mind but never showed.

He sighed; during his three months in the hospital he’d been afraid to lose his talent, afraid that when he was out he’d become unable to paint again. He’d spent hours sitting under the shadow of the porch of his house, trying to gather his courage but the pain and the exhaustion made every thing a Herculean effort.

And now was the moment he’d delayed for weeks, as he wasted his time in Claire’s arms. She was his nurse, young and tough, she didn’t mind taking the hard walk up to the house. He’d spent a lot of time talking to people in the local cafés, avoiding the moment where he’d have to struggle with himself and get back to work.

His hand began to work thick layers of beige, prepare the future perspective, the depth that had made him famous, but in his mind he was painting infinite shades of blue; blue sea; blue eyes he met in the mirror everyday, changing shades of green and black playing in them; dark blue shadows playing over the body of the women he fucked; luminous electric blue of Beecher’s eyes 13 years ago, so blue, the desire to live in them so intense, he’d let him live, shot the floor just inches near him and left. Months ago they’d been blue with anger and hatred and rage. What would be his next move? Would he try to get him extradited? He doubted that, anger and pain didn’t find much relief in justice, it had something to do with the desire of red blood, of watching someone agonize under your eyes. But who knew, after all? The guy was a fucking lawyer, wasn’t he?

He painted until the light was too low, ate a little, went to bed early, didn’t stay out to stare at the stars and let the emptiness wash over him.

It took him three weeks to finish the thing, working on it all day until his back hurt. When he was done with the painting, when the painting was done with him, he thought of breaking the soft tones with some shiny red. Blood was a romantic idea but he knew well enough blood wasn’t good for painting, turning to black as soon as air tainted it, so he decided he’d use red India ink and spent hours trying to figure out what he wanted, the right amount of red, the right shade, the right place. In the end he rose and stepped back to have a better view, leaned against the stone wall of his house, the bottle in his hand. Memories of pain and cold metal piercing him roused a sleeping anger -he flung the bottle across the air, red ink spurting everywhere, on the tiled floor of the terrace, the table and the painting eventually, red droplets running down the canvas, here and there trapped by a thicker spot of paint, escaping in tiny rivulets that ended their course on the wooden stained easel.

Yes. Just like blood.

It took him a long time to wash his hands, and the tiles, and the table but then he was filled with such a feeling of elation he would’ve cried and he felt the urge to move, run, drink, talk, meet Claire at her
place, fuck her senseless, let go of the tension, the disgust, the fear.

He locked the house and left, down the steep slope of the hill, not even a path, wedging his feet against stones. It would take him half an hour to reach the quiet village below. In the distance the sea was shining like a silver mirror, sun bright in the cool air of February; mimosas blooming all around him, bright yellow on the blue sky were a breathtaking sight and the trip down would be sheer pleasure.

Then as he turned left he saw a silhouette below, making his way up to him with the cautiousness of someone unused to the place, unsure, but determined. He was able to make out long blond hair, and tanned skin. Probably the man saw him too because he stopped too. They were too far to see each other well, but they didn’t need to and they resumed walking.

They met halfway.

“You're going to give me some answers,” Toby said "I brought wine."

Tbc…
tonight's the night

It was a very simple place; old stones and few windows, probably to preserve some coolness with thick walls and small openings.

After the bright sun outside it took him a moment to get used to the darkness. The huge room was nearly empty; a large wooden table, benches, an old couch and a shiny wooden closet… The tiles on the floor were a red brown; two locked doors probably hid other rooms. A monk could’ve lived there, apart maybe for the canvases in a corner and a painting drying on the shelves, barely visible in the shadows. No ornaments, white walls, a big lamp and French magazines on the floor.

Crossing the room Chris unlocked a heavy double door and the bright sunlight flooded the room. Toby followed him outside on a tiled terrace surrounded with a low stone wall. Looking down he saw scrawny bushes as far as the eyes could see–and mimosas, an endless tapestry of green and gold tumbling down to the sea.

Breathless, he turned to Keller who stood near him, two glasses of red wine in his hand; Keller who’d told the journalist he turned his back on the landscape to paint his own world where everything was beige and grey.

“February and March are the most beautiful months of the year here, because of the colours. Spring is still beautiful; but summer…” Keller shrugged “summer’s boring,” he said, handing Toby a glass.

The wine was light, tasted of strawberries, raspberries and wood.

“You had questions.”

Toby sat on the wall, put his glass down carefully, hesitating. Now that he was there, he wasn’t sure anymore what he’d wanted to accomplish with this trip. Kill the man, maybe or beat the shit out of him, maybe?

“I hate you. And I hate myself for begging you; I should’ve let you kill me like the others.” he said, acknowledging the thought for the first time.

“Survival instinct is a wonderful thing.”

“I should’ve died. What difference did it make anyway?”

Keller didn’t answer and Toby turned his head to look at the man standing beside him.

“Or was it too hard to kill someone who looked you in the eyes, harder than shooting people whose face you could barely see? You didn’t have the balls?”

“Maybe.”

“Do you have any regrets?”

“Yes, I do. I do have regrets.”

“About saving me?”

“Do you want the truth?”

“That’s what I came for.”
“I feel bad for the friends Cyril’s stupid arrogance and my own weakness condemned to death that day. But Cyril’s dead too, so now I’m the only one to blame. But your friends? And you? I didn’t give a damn and I still don’t. So if you want to be my Nemesis, fuck with me, ruin my life, go ahead, there’s not much to ruin.”

Chris poured himself some more wine.

“Besides you tried to kill me already and you failed.”

“I could send letters to the local papers, tell the French police who you are and what you did, give interviews to the American magazines, have you extradited.”

“Help yourself. You have a bad history of mental disorders, you spent a lot of time in hospitals; there’s no evidence against me, who would believe you? Let it go, Beecher; it’s useless.”

Now they were facing each other, Keller looking cool; and Beecher …

Ah, Beecher didn’t look cool, Chris thought; but he was unable to decipher the emotions simmering there, in the clear gaze resting on him.

“I think we have to find some kind of closure.”

Beecher snorted.

“A closure? Your death is the only possible closure, because as far as I’m concerned, let me tell you what my life is… My life is a foreign country, an alien place … I’m living in a parallel universe, somewhere I don’t quite fit in. I’ve been living there for 13 years, and every morning I wake up hoping maybe finally I’m back home and that my friends and Leslie are somewhere down the stairs waiting for me!”

He was shouting now.

“Do you hear me? Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Chris nodded.

“Yes. On the other hand, if it’s a dream, what happens to your wife, your kids? They’re not just a dream.”

Toby averted his gaze and remained silent.

“How many bottles did you bring?” Keller asked.

“Six.”

“Good. Come on, let’s go back inside, the sun’s blinding here.”

They’d downed the first bottle when Beecher asked “Why did you spare me?” started the second one when he said “I don’t know how you can stand yourself” and still “Why are we here, drinking ourselves silly with expensive wine like old friends?”

Keller didn’t answer the first two questions. But the third one roused something in him. He pushed the crystal glass aside and leaned forward, looking Beecher deep in the eyes.

“It’s because we’re the only two survivors of a merciless war and in the end it doesn’t matter who was the killer and who was the victim. We’re just the ones who survived.”
Beecher stared at him for a long time, silent.

“What we share is alien to other people, it’s only ours. We’re each other’s only reality. You’re mine; I’m yours,” Keller said.

And grabbing his glass again “I think I fucking need more.”

After two bottles and a half Keller asked “Why do you assume I’m the one who killed your friends? I could as well have killed no one. I spared you after all.”

A flicker of doubt in Beecher’s eyes, then a hard glimpse and a scornful look.

“Easy way out, uh? I’m the good guy, the killers are all dead.”

Keller shook his head.

“That’s not what I’m saying. I shot like the others; but the fact I’m the only one alive and free makes me all the guiltier, doesn’t it? Why am I not the good guy here? The one who saved your life? Why do I have to take all the guilt on my shoulders?”

Toby was lucid; the battle he was fighting wasn’t what he’d expected. He hadn’t expected the monster to be such an alluring man with sapphire eyes shining so bright it was hard to stay focused on hate and not sink into that gaze. He hadn’t expected the man to face the facts that way, assume his crime with so much calm; he’d expected denial and anger and from their first meeting in the gallery Chris’ quiet admission had taken him off guard. Now that he’d found out the truth Toby didn’t quite know what he was supposed to do with it and looking at Keller who’d gone silent, studying his sharp profile, he felt a twinge of uncertainty.

“I guess I’ll never get you to confess to a judge.”

“You guess right. Come on, you don’t even know what you want. Justice isn’t enough and revenge? Face it; you don’t have the balls to kill me.”

Smug self-confident bastard. But Toby was tired and he’d drunk a lot; he needed a break.

“I’ve come a long way,” he said, “mind if I take a shower?”

The bathroom was so small he could barely move; but water washed the weariness away. When it turned cold Toby walked out of the place still wet, too long hair curling around his face, damp and dripping down his naked torso, eyes wildly clear, shiny droplets caught in his eyelashes like tears, jeans low on his hips. He joined Keller who’d gone out again, his silhouette bathed in the sweet afternoon sun. Drinking again, savouring, and turning to him, his gaze roaming over the lean body, slim hips, long legs, muscled shoulders, soft pale skin –and looking away a bit too late.

“Don’t have any clothes?”

“I slept in a station three nights ago, thugs stole my bag.”

“You slept in a station? What’s wrong with you, rich boy?”

Toby sat on the wall, shivered; watched Keller grab a woollen sweat on a garden chair and throw it to him; slipped into it and explained.

“I left home 50 days ago; I took a flight to France, been walking since then.”

He raised his eyes to catch the other man’s gaze.
“I wanted this trip to be a pilgrimage; I wanted it to mean something.”

Keller sat near him, playing with his half full glass.

“OK; what is it you want from me?”

And suddenly Toby wasn’t sure he was up to such a confrontation.

“I want my friends back, and my illusions, and my life.”

“Get over it, Beecher; leave it behind now… Move on.”

“Yeah, wouldn’t that be great for you?”

Keller shrugged and didn’t answer. It would’ve been so much easier, Toby thought, if he’d been pleading his cause, fighting... He looked away, at the sea, the sky, the wonderful landscape, the village below. The light was slowly dimming to a warm gold, an afternoon of winter, the air getting colder and after a moment they retreated inside, closed the double-doors, and Keller prepared something to eat, something that smelled good while Toby sat on the couch, awkward and tired.

“You should take a nap,” Keller said “there’s a lock on the bedroom’s door, you’ll be safe.”

“I’m not afraid.”

“No? You sure? Maybe you should. You tried to kill me because I killed your friend and that girl, Leslie, right? But you lacerated my paintings and those were the only friends I’ve ever had.”

Toby snorted. “I think I’m going to cry.”

Fuck, maybe I should’ve killed him after all, Chris thought, annoyed, going back to cooking. After a while he turned to look at Beecher; and shit, the dude had fallen asleep on the old couch like a baby, looking all innocent and young and the wrinkle of worry between his eyebrows was gone, his breathing regular and slow.

Chris wiped his hands with a towel and came nearer.

So the rich prick had hitch-hiked his way to him with only a bag and even that he’d managed to lose. Yeah, take a look at him, my killer, the feral beast that attacked me. Jesus, I can’t believe it.

What did he tell his family? I’m gonna kill the guy who killed Leslie? Or did he just pretend he needed some holidays, a break, some time alone?

Finish the job, Keller, he thought; it’s easy, no one will ever know; you can always pretend he fell down the slope or something. Yeah; and like the Beecher family, father, wife and Holy Ghost is gonna let that pass? Too risky; he’d let him leave his house alive.

Beecher woke up at night, disoriented and cold. The day had been sunny and warm; but he opened his eyes on a late winter afternoon and Keller was sitting on the floor against the wall.

“How long did I sleep?”

“Two hours. How d’you feel?”

“Fine enough to leave. I was wrong coming here; nothing you can do or say can change my mind; nothing can soothe down the pain or make things easier. It was stupid. I’ll take my chance before the court when I’m back.”
Keller looked at him for a minute, shook his head and eventually sighed.

“OK, listen now. I had a girlfriend at the time; a girl named Kit; she looked like one of those models in magazines, and I loved her like crazy, wanted to marry her, buy her a diamond ring. A big one, ya know... To show her my love. But I didn’t have enough money to live a decent life; I’d spent some months in prison for some stupid shit and after that it was impossible to find a real job. One day two friends, brothers I’d met in prison came to me, talked me into a break-in, something easy and safe. We were high on some bad stuff that afternoon. Another friend joined, he’d got some weapons; I was like ‘wow; I like these ones, gonna be great using them.’”

He made a pause and shrugged at Beecher torn up expression, shook his head.

“Yeah and we arrived into the bar; we’d expected it to be empty but there was a bunch of people there; young uptown dickheads celebrating something. I said ‘we’d better come back when they’re gone’ but Cyril and Ryan needed the money right then; so... we didn’t think about it much more; broke in, shot around, stole the money. I thought if someone was still alive we were fucked; I wanted to check; I thought I saw one of them move; saw his chest rise and I cocked my gun but... he begged me to spare him; he had beautiful eyes, deep and clear and I thought what the fuck? He’s hurt anyway; probably bleeding to death. I just shot against the floor to have Ryan believe I’d finished the job. I was walking around the place to make sure nobody else was there when the cops came in and began to fire. I didn’t look back, jumped through the window; ran away, dropped my gun into the river and ran, ran, until I could see the harbour. I saw a ship about to leave; they needed someone, an odd-job man. That’s how I landed here, working for the company that owned the ship.”

Beecher’s eyes were closed; his voice a low snarl...

“That’s all then? Wrong place, wrong time?”

“That’s about it, yeah. And the thrill of shooting around; when you’re high on drugs or adrenalin people don’t look real. But when I saw the blood all over you, saw your eyes, heard your voice... then it all became very real.”

A cold look roamed over Keller’s unreadable features.

“Really got a kick out of it, uh?”

“Yeah. Guess you could say that.”

Beecher jumped on his feet all of a sudden and walked up to him.

“But they were dead!” he said in an intense voice, his gaze blazing with anger. “How could you ignore that? Dead! Death is something definitive, it’s not just a game. It’s final.”

“Ahh; it’s not that simple either,” Keller said and shook his head, sighed. “It’s not what you wanted to hear, uh? Hoped for remorse and shame and all the rest?”

Beecher didn’t answer and Keller tilted his head on the side, his eyes narrowed.

“What the fuck possessed you to go there, by the way? Far from home, in such a seedy bar?”

“We were celebrating Leslie’s 18th birthday; we’d begun the party at her parents’ place but they kicked us out after a while so we drove downtown; thought we’d have some fun...”

“Wanted to slum it a bit?”
“I don’t know; maybe. Leslie was some adventurous girl.”

Beecher’s voice was quivering with admiration, devotion; yeah, Chris thought, he’d loved the girl for sure.

“Bad stroke of luck then; the bar was our target that day. Rich brats like you should stay in their fancy places, let us own the town, part of it at least. Guess you won’t let your kids go anywhere after that.”

The urge to pounce was unbearable but Beecher wasn’t sure he was up to the challenge, and he didn’t want to play along with Keller’s game.

“You really hated us, uh? Still do?”

At least Keller seemed to give it a thought.

“I never saw anything that could change my mind, not then, not now. Most of the rich people I meet don’t deserve any respect, any trust. It’s just them and their fucking money.”

“But you take it.”

“They buy my paintings, so yes. They can go to hell after that for all I care.”

Toby ran his hand over his face; exhaustion was washing over him, making it hard to focus but there was something he had to say; he owed his friends’ memory that, at least.

“Do you realize what you did that day? You and your friends? Killed 7 people just for fun? Really killed them, boys and girls who had parents, friends, brothers, sisters, friends? Do you know what the funeral was like? Do you know the pain it was for those people? The hopes you shattered, the families you destroyed? Leslie’s mother never talks to anyone anymore; she stays in her house among things that belonged to her daughter… How can you live with it?”

“I never think about it.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Keller’s looked at him for a while with a strange expression; then he rose, went to the closet, unlocked the door and opened a drawer to retrieve something.

“Take this,” he said, coming very near, holding out an ordinary cardboard box, “I kept it; I thought maybe one day I’d find a use for it.”

Keller rose and walked out. Toby stood there alone, unable to take his eyes off the watches, the bracelets lying in the box; picking up a beautiful necklace and pressing it against his lips, frozen by grief. It was night when he joined Keller on the terrace, his fingers clutching the golden necklace until its shape was imprinted in the palm of his hand.

“How did you get those?”

“I pulled them off the bodies before running away; most of the stuff was gold, you know.”

“But you didn’t sell it.”

“No.”

“Why?”
“The fuck if I know. I’m happy I didn’t though. The necklace was around your girlfriend’s neck.”

“I remember it. Jesus.”

A silence and Beecher shivered in the cold.

“Do you realize,” he said, “that this is the evidence I needed? Do you realize that you’re giving me the means to get you sentenced?”

“I’m a gambler, Beecher, I bet you won’t use it. You can’t kill me; I’m the only bridge between you and your past.”

“No! It’s not true!”

Keller took him by the shoulders and shook him. “Of course I am! I am part of who you are! Come on!”

Beecher slammed a hand against the other man's chest, wanting to hurt, hurting.

“You are the devil.”

“Of course I’m not.”

Toby shook his head, trying to process Keller’s last words.

He stood silent for a while, watching the illuminated cities in the distance, Nice stretching on the seaside like a lazy whore; some nearer lights – the village, probably; sometimes the lamps of a car on the winding road. Throwing his head back, he looked up at the stars; they looked brighter, bigger than he was used to and he tried to recognize the constellations he’d learned with his grandfather long ago; but he’d forgotten the names. When he looked down again, he stumbled and nearly fell but Chris arms came around him and next thing he knew, warm soothing lips were roaming over his face; “ssshhhh! It’s all right, you’re gonna be fine, everything’s gonna be fine, just let go…” and when Keller’s lips reached his own, he had no strength left to fight; his mouth opened and he moaned under the attack, wrapped in the arms of the monster in the clear cold winter night.

They didn’t take the game further. Keller stepped back and said “you can have my bed; I’ll sleep on the couch.”

So did he.

In the middle of the night, Toby woke up in the chilly room and held out a hand to grab a blanket before remembering where he was.

Overwhelming silence, darkness and freezing cold got him out of the bed. He wrapped himself in the blanket, opened the door and padded through the darkness.

Maybe Keller was going to appear in a corner, a weapon in his hand and kill him. And why not, after all; if he was wise that’s what he should do.

“Hey, I woke you up,” a voice said behind him. Startled, he turned on his heels and saw Keller, his arms loaded with logs standing at the door, wearing a thick jacket and his hair… white? It took him a moment to understand as Keller walked pass him and after unloading his charge kneeled in front of the stone chimney.

“Snow?”
“Yeah, it began two hours ago and from what I heard it could last for a day or two; we’re high enough here, it’s still winter.”

Toby wrapped the blanket tighter around him and walked to the window; it was dark and he could see nothing but pressing his nose against the glass like a kid he saw snowflakes stripping the night; no lights, nothing, as if everything had been swallowed by clouds and tempest.

“How cold is it outside?”

“Too cold. The road will be impassable tomorrow, the snow is freezing to ice; the earth isn’t warm enough yet to make it melt.”

Beecher heard the wood crack, flames roaring like tigers; a hellish light cast huge shadows on the white walls and the floor.

“Why don’t you turn on the light?”

“It’s gone. The wiring’s somewhat fussy; sorry for that. The fire should do though. It’s a little primitive here, in the beginning I didn’t even have water; well sometimes during summer I still don’t.”

“Why do you stay here? You’re rich enough to live somewhere else, where life would be easier, don’t you?”

Keller turned his eyes to him and smiled.

“Yes, probably. But I tend to consider this place as my home and I’m a very stay-at-home guy.”

Toby pulled the couch in front of the fire and settled himself on it while Keller stood near the chimney.

“Do you miss it sometimes?”

“Miss what?”

“Your country?”

That earned Beecher a cold laugh. “My country… Please don’t give me that patriotic bullshit; it makes me want to puke. But of course sometimes I think of stuff I used to do and places where I used go and I miss that. But it was long ago, another life; I’m sure I’d be disappointed if I went there. Memories are better than reality in any case. The problem is, how long can you live on memories only?”

“A long time.”

“Not in my case. I need reality to seize me, I need the touch and the feel and the scent of it. Memories … It doesn’t work; I don’t feel like curling up on a bed and drowning in memories.”

“All right, that one was for me, wasn’t it?”

“Partly, yes. I think you have to move on. If you don’t move on you die.”

They stood like that for a while, silent, watching the fire grow, feeling its warmth surround them.

“I’m stuck here until the snow stops,” Beecher finally said.
“Guess so. It will be a fucking mess in the morning; people here don’t like snow, they don’t want to drive, close the airports, that sort of things… I think they exaggerate a lot but they’re that way. They like a little drama.”

“They? Not ‘we’?”

Keller turned to him, frowning.

“Are you gonna make me face my own contradictions all the time?”

“Yeah, would be fun; I’d bet you’re a very paradoxical man.”

A slow smile crept over Keller’s lips, his gaze hardened, bright in the reddish light.

“What about your own contradictions, Mr Beecher?” he said, walking up to him, the smile not leaving his lips, frightening and cold; and Toby straightened a little, but smiled back.

Crazier than we are, Ryan had said, finish the job or he’ll get you in the end. And then what, in the end I’m going to hell anyway.

He crouched in front of the man sitting cross legged on the couch, rested his elbows on Beecher’s legs.

“How many times did we kiss?”

“Fuck; I lost track.”

“Yeah, I guessed so. How many times did you say you hated me, wanted me dead?”

Beecher’s eyes didn’t waver, his smile hardened.

“A lot.”

“I wanna hear you say it again. And again, and again until you have no breath left.”

Holding out his hand, he touched Beecher’s lips and a tongue pushed against his fingertips.

“You never did it before, did you?”

“No.”

“Wanna give it a try? More than just kissing? Get a little deeper into contradiction?”

Beecher slapped the hand away, hard.

“The question is; what makes you think you’re up to it?” he said, disdainful and they rose at the same time, facing each other, angry and ravenous.

“Give me a chance, give me a fucking chance and you’ll see; I’m gonna take your breath away, gonna make you yell and come so hard you won’t be able to hate me again.”

Smug bastard; you’ll live to regret it, I swear. Then “OK. Let’s see what you can do.”

“Not here.”

“Here’s perfect; the room’s too cold.”
Ah, sex… Sex with a man, forgotten delight that brought back half-forgotten memories… Keller pushed the blanket away; Beecher was naked under it, not even boxers.

“You’re quite the tease, uh?”

“I always sleep naked.”

Four words and Keller was harder than he’d ever been with Claire in the past weeks.

“Good idea; I don’t like stripping guys; the socks part turns me off.”

“Nothing turns me off,” Beecher said, getting Chris out of his clothes roughly “not even the socks part, nothing, come on; you promised something; you’re a little slow, at the moment.”

But it was difficult to stay angry; to keep the hate burning high in front of Keller naked, his sculpted body, slim hips, tight belly, broad shoulders and the breathtaking tattoo on his left arm Beecher couldn’t keep his fingers from running over.

“You’re a catholic? You believe in hell? Heaven? All that bullshit?”

“You talk too much,” Chris said and put a hand behind Beecher’s head, pulling him close to kiss him and plunge his tongue in this warm venomous mouth; soothe the anger, take the bitterness away; make it all sweet and tender; with his other hand he stroked the tense back.

“Inappropriate relationship,” he whispered in Beecher’s mouth, “but so good.”

“Enjoy it, Keller; that might be the last thing you have.”

He didn’t believe it and Keller knew he didn’t; but he needed a last-ditch struggle before a possible capitulation – just Keller’s mouth on his made his head spin.

Sex was slow and careful and enjoyable, and nonetheless rough and painful and good, so good… When Keller moaned, buried in Beecher’s body, he heard the other man’s voice in his ear.

“Make it last, Keller. Make it last.”

“Yeah. I’m not young enough to get it up five times a night; but make it last, that I can do.”

Strange how pleasure felt with a man; strange how wonderful it felt to let go for once, not be the one in charge of someone else’s pleasure; just be the frail barque tossed by the waves, each of them higher, each fall more breathtaking until he was nothing more than a feather plummeting endlessly down. With every thrust Keller’s belly brushed against the tip of Beecher’s cock, Keller’s dick hit Beecher’s prostate and the men’s moans melted in each other’s mouth.

“Please, please, stop it…”

“You wanted it to last; did you change your mind?”

“Oh god, it’s too much; I don’t think I can take more.”

“Of course you can.”

When Beecher threw his head back and yelled, coming, there was nothing else Keller could do than finally let go, let go of the tension, thrust harder, deeper, faster.

“Look at me, look at me, I wanna see your eyes,” he hissed, feeling pleasure build so hard, so fast,
like a coming storm, deep inside him; irresistible; and Beecher did, looked him deep in the eyes, his
gaze dizzy and lost, nothing to do with Keller’s memory of that day he’d killed those people; he was
moaning again, meeting every thrust with a vicious one of his own, burned down to ashes already
but hungry once more…

They collapsed on the couch, fell to the floor, on the blanket near the fire, panting, kissing, kept afloat
by each other’s hands.

Beecher thought, really hard, of a snarky remark, something hurtful and half found it but never had
the strength to actually say it, fell asleep locked in strong arms, his own arms tight around Keller’s
waist; the white dawn of winter creeping inside.

When they woke up, the fire was dead.

tbc...
The story of Chris Keller

Keller left early without a word, locking his paintings in a closet before leaving.

Afraid I trash something, Mr Keller? Toby thought with bitter amusement, looking at the dark silhouette walking down the hill.

He stood by the window for a while looking at the sparkling snow, blinding white, and the bright golden mimosas; the sea was a deep green under the blue sky.

But even the beauty of the place, the breathtaking view, didn’t explain how a young American gang member who probably knew nothing else than the lowly places where he'd lived before had chosen this particular place to lay down his bag; why he'd worked like a slave to turn a ruined shack into a decent house; spending 13 years of a secluded honest lonely life when he could’ve got any dirty lucrative job somewhere; elsewhere. Had someone helped him? Had it been a love at first sight kind of decision? Had he been so badly haunted that he'd felt compelled to change in such a drastic way, afraid maybe that someday he got caught, killed? Had the slaughter been some hideous epiphany?

"It makes me mad," he confessed to the black cat curled up on his knees, reluctant to freeze his paws in the snow outside "that he managed so well when I failed so miserably."

The cat yawned widely and looked at him with curious golden clever eyes.

"Let's face it, cat; I'd dreamt of a slightly more exciting life, more exciting job; I have a wife I love mildly and after last night I know for sure that my sex life has been a mess until then …"

The cat pawed Beecher’s thigh, purring and shifted to find a more enjoyable position.

"And I'm not even a very good father."

He remained sitting in front of the fire for a long time, tired and sore, his body still tingling with last night's sensations, bruises, lips swollen from the kisses, ashamed of how easily he'd given in to Keller's nimble lovemaking.

When the cat finally stirred and walked away, Toby rose and stepped out, shivering in the cold. Far away, clouds were gathering; they'd been of a shining white turning into a soft grey as morning went by; soon everything would lie under their threatening gloom.

Keller returned around 2 in the afternoon to find Beecher half-asleep on the couch, a cold intact coffee beside him.

"Hey, where were you?"

"Like you give a damn!"

Keller set down the bags he was carrying, gave him a quick annoyed look and began to put away the food he'd bought.

"Went to the village, met some friends, had a drink and lunch with a woman I know … Hoped that when I come back you'd be gone but no such luck; you're still here. Did you miss me?"

Toby rose and walked to the window, looked outside, wishing he had left.

"Do you think it'll be snowing again?"
"Same fucking weather until Saturday. They closed the airports and some main roads. No planes, no trains, no buses; looks like you're stuck here."

"Fuck."

Keller rose. Walking up to Beecher, he rested his hands on the suddenly tense shoulders and asked "So, how much do you hate me today?"

"As much as yesterday."

"I thought so," Keller said, burying his nose in Beecher's hair, circling his waist with his arms.

"It's not a game, Keller."

"Everything is a game if you decide so."

Beecher turned in his arms and frowned.

"You're weird."

"Maybe but admit it, the sex was good."

"Fuck you," Beecher said just when Keller's mouth took his, long fingers roaming over his skin, holding his chin, a hand pressing against the small of his back. Sharp teeth bit Keller's lips and he had to let go.

"You're full of shit, Mr Beecher," he said, licking his lips, tasting blood, shrugging and letting go of him "Now come on, I wanna show you something."

A minute later, standing in front a white canvas, a black pen in his hands, Toby was listening to Keller's words.

"Write it down, what you're feeling; I'll start my painting over your words."

"I can't do that."

"Of course you can; come on, write it down!"

So Toby did; he had an elegant cursive writing; a bit too adorned maybe; but the words stung.

"Now,,' Keller said "you know more about the way I work than anyone else."

"You're going to paint over my words? What was the use of writing, then?"

"The message will pervade the whole painting; that's the important thing, you can't see them but they're still here somewhere, a message to me, to the fucking world."

All right, Toby thought, he's *that* crazy; but he sat in a corner of the room and watched; watched while Keller painted a blue light background over his words of hate and scorn, not quite hiding them; long strokes of the brush, choosing the shades of blue and the directions of the strokes with the same care he'd taken in choosing the angles of his thrusts while fucking him.

// I have to stop thinking that way; I'm losing perspective here. //

After a while he rose and walked out; Keller didn't even notice.
Keller painted all afternoon while Beecher read, fed the fire, took a walk out in the cold, made coffee again. As predicted, snow began falling and around 6, and Toby spent a fascinating moment watching the sky turn to an even dark grey before freeing the first flakes; a test obviously, a vanguard preceding the final assault. When it happened there was nothing left to see, just snow falling, relentless, and a dark ending day sinking into a winter night.

Eventually Keller stretched, put down his brushes, washed them, washed his hands, put everything away and looked at Beecher engrossed in book he'd found in Keller's room. Somerset Maugham's "The moon and sixpence". An appropriate choice, Keller thought.

"Want some music?"

"Depends on what you've got."

The Doors; John Lee Hooker, Eric Burdon... Keller's musical tastes were unexpected, as was the man himself.

"I don't listen to music a lot," Keller said, "My right ear isn't very good; got hurt there long ago. Can't get stereo, you know, that kind of things. And the records, actually, they belonged to my elder brother; the fucker died when I was a kid, I inherited the books, the records. It's the only music I still listen to. Old stuff."

This peek at Keller's privacy was unsettling, forcing Beecher to admit the quixotic monster his mind had been picturing for so long was nothing but real, human, a man who loved, suffered and got hurt; and the smile Keller gave him, the dreamy warm smile made him smile back.

Keller averted his eyes. You're so easy, Beecher .

After dinner they ended in bed again, wrapped in each other's sweaty scent, warmth and arms, breathing against each other's skin after sex, resting their head on the other's shoulder; entangled in the blanket and groaning when a move pulled it off their body, scooting impossibly closer to get more heat, waiting for next round, desire flaring dangerously again.

The next day went the same way and so did the whole week. It was easy to fall into a routine; Keller was right, it was a game they were both playing, refusing to think any further than the moment where they'd fall asleep in each other's arms.

At dawn Keller would wake up, rustle, shift, groan, still wrapped around Toby's body, Toby's arms still locked around him; early morning fucking had nothing romantic or subtle, it was just about bringing each other off and they both proved formidably good at that, using their hand, their mouth, their whole body. After that Keller walked away. Left to his own devices Toby would take long walks across the country; walk down to the village; rent a car to visit the surroundings, go to Nice, Cannes and buy souvenirs for the kids and Gen, write her letters, call her on the phone. She listened, trying to understand him; and failing.

"I'll be back on July 1st whatever happens; sooner if you need me."

She didn't, not really; she was focused on the unborn child; her mother had settled with her and Gen didn't need a man; not now; maybe never again, she thought sometimes, scared by her own indifference. The kids missed their father like kids do; but the gifts that landed regularly in the mailbox, the cards and the phone calls more or less made up for the absence, or that's what Gen wanted to believe.

"July?" Keller said. "You're staying, then?"
"I don't know. I could go somewhere else; travel. I really don't know."

Keller had the feeling that Beecher would stay; like the black half-wild cat that kept coming for more when he was hungry or tired and that didn't even have a name, Beecher would stick around. He'd been spending a long time outside these past weeks; he was slightly tanned and slimmer, hot as hell and crazy and fucking rough, or sweet as honey, but as addictive as a top quality drug. Chris woke up every day thinking he'd kick his ass out; get rid of the guy; but the sight of him confidently curled up against him had something utterly moving. The idea of sending him away that kept growing during the day vanished at nightfall when desire took over. And probably, he thought, Beecher woke up every morning determined to leave and didn't. What did that make them? He didn't want to know; stuff you don't acknowledge don't exist. He focused on work, and sex, refused to think any further.

"What the fuck are you doing all morning?" Beecher asked Keller one day, in vain. Working at the gallery where he had a phone and a computer, probably; what else? When he came back around 2 in the afternoon he settled himself in the little room and painted until nightfall, his back on the window, his canvas bathed in a bright daylight. Sometimes Beecher went in and watched him like he'd done the first time. They didn't exchange more than ten words in the whole day, ate in silence, lost in their own world.

But at night... At night the barriers fell down, wariness and anger vanished, whatever had happened during the day was meaningless then, past and future disappeared; they shared the same world, the same words and Beecher's body acknowledged Keller's body as the perfect complement of his own, didn't let go of it, drowned in it, gave in to the touch of it and Keller did the same; hours spent luxuriating in all sorts of sexual delights, then just lying in each other's arms.

"When I was a kid," Keller said once "I thought nothing was real, except me. Just a dream that I kept alive. I believed that places vanished when I walked away and people stopped leaving when I didn't need them."

Beecher turned to lie on his elbow and looked at him.

"Yeah, some ancient philosophers already taught that the world we live in is only a figment of our imagination."

"I still feel this way sometimes but I don't think you're a dream; I think you're fucking real."

That was probably some compliment, Toby thought. And he didn't confess it of course but every minute he spent with Keller was more real than any moment in his own life had ever been before; he supposed Keller knew that. In his dreams, Leslie's ghost was often walking away from him with a disappointed backward glance, dressed in her vaporous bloodstained summer dress; and during the day it was hard to remember her face or the sound of her voice that used to come so easily to him a few weeks ago.

"I feel terrible about that," he told Gen one day. And Gen didn't answer because she thought that at last maybe he was letting go of Leslie, abandoning her, acknowledging her for what she was, ashes; and it didn't really matter where he was or what he was doing, if this journey could turn Toby into a happier man, a renewed man, she'd give him the time he needed.

Snow melted fast and spring turned the mountain into a bright palette of colours, wild flowers, early spring trees blossoming everywhere. Beecher still didn't talk about leaving; and Keller didn't ask.

About a month after Beecher’s arrival, O'Reily called Keller at the gallery, using a cell phone he'd robbed from a dead inmate some days ago. From the beginning, nearly twenty years ago Cyril had been the crazy, violent, bold one; smart and ruthless as much as Chris was; but Ryan was the leader
of the gang. Maybe that was the reason why Keller told him about Beecher; what was going on. There was a stunned silence and Ryan's voice, hard.

"Kill him, K'boy."

It wasn't an advice anymore.

"You owe me big time on that, Keller; you were supposed to finish the job and you didn't; part of what happened is your fault; Beecher was the one who identified me, it's because of him that the fucking cops got me. If you'd killed him, K'boy, I'd probably be free."

Keller brushed a hand across his hair and sighed.

*Like I want you free, O'Reily.* Of course he didn't say that.

"Settle the old scores, K'boy. Do what you have to. Kill him."

There was an underlying threat in Ryan's voice that Keller didn't like. He said he knew what he had to do, he was just playing with his prey, he'd always loved doing so and Ryan said yeah, he remembered that and how Cyril used to do the same. They talked a little longer, about the good times that were gone for them both. Then Chris hung up and sat at his desk, playing with a pen; thought about it for a while. He could ask Ronnie but Ronnie had never been the smartest boy and for this job Keller needed someone smart and trained and reliable; a name came to his mind and he smiled inwardly, dialled the number; it probably was his lucky day; Schilllinger was home.

"Hey, Vern."

"Chris. What a surprise. Still painting your shit?"

"Yes. Listen, I need your help for something; a job."

"A job. Why should I do any job for you, boy?"

Keller took a deep breath, fighting unpleasant memories.

"Remember that guy I rid you of two years ago? I took a lot of risks then; you said you'd pay me back."

"Yes; I remember. A good work you did then. Ok, what?"

"I want someone dead; listen, maybe you know him; you're the only one I trust on that because he's a fucking smart dangerous guy, and a cautious one."

"His name?"

"O'Reily. Ryan O'Reily; I think you were in the same hell hole before your parole. He's become... how d'ya say? A liability."

"Yeah, I know the greedy little shit, tries to poach on every one's territory; always scheming and cheating... He'd sell his grandmother to succeed. That's him, then? OK, I'll tell the Brotherhood to take care of him. Anything else?"

"No. Just make sure I get rid of the guy, right?"

"Please, don't be rude, Keller. Where's the old trust gone, did I ever fail you?"
Which fucking trust are you talking about, bald sadistic motherfucker? I'd get rid of you too if you gave me a chance. But he just laughed.

"The trust's still here, Vern. Thank you."

"As you said, I owe you."

After that Keller could breath again; he rubbed his hands against his face, feeling weary; went to the bar; chatted with the man who ran the place, drank a bit, tasted a new wine, bought two bottles of it thinking he'd drink them with Beecher and took the way back home, hoping to hell his plan would work because if it didn't Ryan wouldn't be long to understand who'd ordered the hit and Keller didn't want to die yet; there were a lot of things in his head that needed to be painted; a lot of demons to ward off. Hell would have to wait a little longer.

That night, long before dawn, Keller switched on the little lamp at the head of the bed to look at his sleeping companion; pulling the blanket down and letting his eyes roam over the naked body. He brushed his fingertips along the pale scar under the collarbone, where the skin was thin and white and silky; memories of a shattered past. Then he ran the back of his hand down from the beautiful shoulders to the muscled thighs, enjoying the silky warmth of the hairless chest, the hard belly and the softness of blond pubic hair. In his sleep Beecher moaned and Keller grinned. Time for a little fun, he thought, grabbing the lube on the night table, coating his own cock with it, then pulling Toby to him, spreading his cheeks and entering him without any preparation but hey, the motherfucker had been rough sooner, pushing Chris down to the floor, taking him doggie style, an arm across his shoulders to keep him still. It was warm and tight inside, tighter and warmer than any other body he'd been in and when Beecher moved in surprise and shock, the powerful muscles squeezed his cock hard and he had to clench his teeth not to come right there like a kid; a bead of sweat rolled down his forehead with the effort and he closed his eyes.

"Fucking bastard," Beecher said "don't you even think of doing that again."

"Keep your breath for what's to come, Beecher."

He thrust once, hard, and Beecher arched his back.

"Fuck you."

"You did already; now it's my turn."

Toby had to clutch the sides of the mattress not to be flung out of the bed, tensing every muscle to take the strength of Keller's body working inside and around his own, pushing him further into desire and need until he was sure he couldn't wait a second longer.

"Yeah, you can; do it for me... Wait for me."

That was Keller's forte; pushing Beecher far beyond his limits, take more than what Beecher even knew he had to offer and give him back exactly what he needed. Toby didn't know when he lost control, he didn't realize he was moaning and hissing and arching his body to meet the other man's thrusts, clutching his shoulders, his arms, pulling him into a searing kiss, scratching his chest, his belly to try and force him into pleasure, take Keller with him, take him into the abysses of delight.

"Please don't let me go alone," he thought, and probably it was a loud thought because Chris bent over as much as he could to kiss him and said "I won't."

Yeah, Keller thought as he came deep inside the trembling body locked in his arms, if this is how Satan lured the angels, then he knew why they fell; and if feeling so much pleasure meant being
doomed, then he called damnation upon him every day of his fucking life.

Tbc...
Old friends...

Toby woke up in the darkness of Chris’ bedroom; a single ray of dusty golden light dancing above his head through a tiny hole in the wooden shutters and tracing a mysterious pattern on the wall in front of him; the sheets still warm, smelling of Keller.

/ Shit, it must be late. I overslept. /

Holding out his arm he felt around, grabbing his cell phone to check how late exactly. 10:30.

It had a tough night, but an amazing one. Was getting a sexual epiphany from the man who’d killed your friends the first step to damnation? At least Toby thought it might be the sign of a serious personality disorder.

/ I should go see that psychiatrist again. Yeah, and tell him what? I found that guy; he’s real and I’m falling for him hard because he’s giving me the best time in my life? Like I’m gonna say this to anyone. /

The green light at the top of the screen began flashing. A message.

Toby read it twice. Breathe, Toby, breathe. He read it again, too stunned to fully understand the words on the small screen then lay back down and closed his eyes.

How would Keller stomach this particular new? Toby felt a vicious surge of wild expectation run through him.

/ Fuck. Looks like I’m not cured yet. /

Throwing away the sheets he got up, opened the blinds, saw Keller bustling about in the garden only wearing shorts, his shoulders bruised and scratched, heard him whistle like the smug happy bastard he was –not for long, motherfucker; then he went to the kitchen; poured himself a cup of the strong bitter coffee Keller prepared every morning, shivered, added some more sugar and put the cup down –too hot. After a quick shower he joined Keller outside and sat down under the tree, his cup beside him.

Keller had spread out a huge thick canvas underneath the trees, over the yellow dry grass, prepared the brushes and two brooms; filled big cans with colours and sat there, thinking, motionless, focused, blind and deaf to anything that was not this 7 by 6 feet white sheet and Toby thought he should probably consider himself lucky to be admitted in this intimacy. A sign of trust?

Fuck that; more likely Keller didn’t give a damn about his presence, maybe hadn’t even noticed. After a moment of silent concentration Keller drank half a bottle of water, droplets running down his neck, his tanned torso and sliding under the waistband of his shorts, wiped his hands against the worn fabric, rose and began working, Toby sitting against the rough trunk, watching.

/ I should tell him now. /

But it was such a peaceful moment, sitting there under the shadows, coffee within reach; Toby didn’t feel like shattering it. Not yet.

Plus anticipation is half the pleasure he thought, not quite believing it.
Watching Keller’s hands, so nimble, so strong, handling the brushes, he remembered how it had been last night to feel those fingers on him, around him and inside him, so deep he’d yelled and moaned with surprise, pain, fear and delight, begging while Chris’ other hand, wrapped around their cock dragged them both into ecstasy with powerful maddening thrusts. Fuck, just remembering that made him hot.

And even clutching the gun Keller’s hands had been lethally efficient.

In Beecher’s mind, memories wouldn’t fade… His own voice, “Please don’t kill me” and Keller’s dark gaze, the fingers loosening their grip on the gun, Keller turning his head to talk to Ryan, his distorted voice echoing in Beecher’s ears above the roar of his own blood, Leslie’s warm dead body weighing on him. “Just finishing the job” and Keller’s smile while he pressed the trigger.

No! Don’t go there again, Beecher, he thought and opened his eyes, panting like a drowning man trying to surface. Focusing on the scene in front of him, something real and captivating to cling to.

The painting was too big to be worked on as Keller usually did; he had to walk around it and throw the colours, then use the brushes and the brooms to smoothe them all over the white linen, his feet, his bare legs and chest spattered with droplets of paints making him look like a surrealistic leopard,

After painting a rough red background stripped with a vivid dark blue Keller stopped again, tilting his head to have a better view.

Smiling, happy with what he saw.

Then burying the colour under soft layer of very pale blue, and white, very pale, very thin so that the bright background was still shining through.

Painted shapes that called up clouds on a spring sky, foam on the crest of the waves and white birds flying above, maybe, everything alive crashing against the dark grey of lethal rocks...

/ Is that an allegory Mr Keller? /

“Ryan O’Reily’s dead,” Toby said, breaking the news, both eager and reluctant, his gaze on Keller’s face to catch the first signs of grief or stupor.

What had he expected? Keller barely nodded, crouched in front of his painting, focused.

“Yeah, I know. His ex-wife phoned at dawn. Sounded crushed, she never quite got over him.”

Keller had expected and dreaded that call more than anything else.

Keller was still wrapped around Toby’s body, lost in the warmth of it when he’d heard the phone. Stark naked and dizzy he’d run to the kitchen…

“I know you’re behind it, Chris,” Sharon’s voice was pervaded with hate and disgust; “I know you had him killed to protect yourself. No one really matters beside you, uh?”

Suddenly Keller’s mind was sharp again, clear again.

“Ryan was an old friend. Why would I kill an old friend?”

“I don’t know.”

“Listen Sharon, when we divided up the loot you had your share. You didn’t ask anything then; so what now?”
He was thinking he’d hate to hurt Sharon; he’d been in love with her a long time ago; from time to time he thought he still was, wished she was there with him; he didn’t feel like discussing Ryan’s death with her.

“So? Is that all I get?” Toby asked, jolting Chris out of his thoughts.

Looking at him Keller frowned.

“She told me Ryan was killed in a brawl,” he said, “Sad. He used to be very nimble at staying alive.”

Beecher could barely believe it; Keller looked perfectly cool and collected; maybe he’d felt some grief but it was all gone now; after all it had been a long time, so long since the two friends had been face to face for the last time. What did friendship mean for such men? He realized he didn’t have a clue, tried to imagine them together but it was like mixing fire and ice. Or maybe two kinds of different ices.

“Not as nimble as you are,” Beecher said, “He spent 20 years in prison while you were free. He’s dead and you’re alive.”

Keller shrugged, looking like he didn’t give a fuck about it that but after a while he said, “Anyway… Fucking looks like you lost your witness, after all,” and Beecher frowned, looked at the sharp profile until Chris turned his head to look at him.

Something in Keller’s voice, something challenging and hard in the way he looked at him…

Realization crashed in on Beecher, gagging him, sickening him.

“You had him killed,” he said when he was able to talk again, “You were afraid that he sold you out so you had him killed. Jesus. You fucking did it.”

Keller put down his brushes and began washing them with his usual care, his long fingers washing away every bit or colour from the thick bristles.

Glanced at Toby.

“You’re nuts, you know that?”

“My father told me he’d been killed in a brawl; I was surprised because I had the feeling Ryan O’Reily didn’t get into brawls. Maybe he had the others around him fighting but he didn’t get involved.”

Smart guy, Keller thought. Too smart for his own good.

“Come on,” he said, “You didn’t even know him. I did. He was in that bar, you know, he *was* involved.”

Beecher’s clear gaze didn’t leave Keller.

“Are you going to kill me too?”

“Come on, stop that.”

“Are you going to get rid of me to make sure I won’t ruin your perfect little life?”

Keller sighed. A perfect little life? All the loneliness and the hours at night when panic took over and he felt like baying at the moon, drowned his fears in alcohol and drugs?

>You still don’t understand, do you? OK, time to break the news, you self-absorbed prick. /
“O’Reily wanted you dead. He told me I should finish the job; it would’ve been easy if I’d wanted to; just an accident, you falling down the hill or something.”
“But you didn’t kill O’Reily because of me; you killed him because you thought in the end he’d rat you out. Must’ve been pretty tempting, he didn’t have much to lose.”
“And nothing to gain; I didn’t kill him; will you stop that?”

Beecher looked at the painting, felt sheer rage rear its head, let him fill his brain.

“You are a living lie; your art is a lie. Everything real hidden under neutral colours that say nothing about who you are; you don’t even dare show it, do you, you’re too scared? You’ve done such a good job about forgetting, hiding… Lying …” He was yelling now “How can you look at yourself in a mirror, Keller? What kind of monster do you see? How far will you go to make sure no one gets in your way? Will you kill me?”

Keller walked to the fountain near the wall, washed his hands, splashed his face with cold water, took his shirt off and ran a thick wet cloth over his shoulders, his chest, his belly, under his armpits.

He could’ve puked.

“Beecher I think it’s time for you to go, now. Pack your things and go.”
“No.”
“I’m gonna kick your ass out.”
“You love my ass too much to do that; I think I’ll stay. I’ll be your Nemesis; I’ll force you to face what you’ve done once for all.”

His skin like dark amber, his eyes tired, Keller stepped back to stand in front of him, half naked. Gave him an indulgent smile.

“Yeah? And then what? Think I’ll kill myself out of grief? Remorse? Lose my mind? You are so innocent,” he said softly, running a finger along Toby’s jaw, pulling him into a soft kiss, warm lips against trembling mouth, Chris’ tongue darting out to tease, feeling Beecher mellow under the touch.

“Innocent yet such an incredible stubborn blind fucking bitch!”

Toby didn’t see it come. Suddenly Keller was shoving him against the warm wall, Toby’s head hitting the stones with a dull sound, once, and again, hard fingers around his neck, wet thumbs stroking his throat, dark eyes holding his, soft and cold as death voice mumbling against his ears.

“So you wanna know, uh? Wanna know if I got him whacked? Well big news, Tinkerbell; I did. You know, I don’t trust friends very much; a French poet once said that a friend is half a traitor already; plus O’Reily cost me a lot of money and I heard something in his voice the last time we talked… I didn’t intend to take any risk. Does that make you hot?”

Toby felt the long fingers tighten around his neck, stars exploding behind his eyelids, raised his hands to loosen the grip and was pushed back hard against the stone wall.

Now that’s the true Keller, he thought, the one I faced in that bar long ago, it’s him.

“Maybe I was wrong about you after all; sparing you was a mistake.”

Toby closed his eyes, felt his body give in; he tried to breathe, concentrating on only that. Breathing, because he wanted to live.

“So listen, Beecher; you’re gonna grab your stuff, pack your bag and fucking leave before I change my mind and kill you too… Take a cab to the fucking airport and fly back to your wife and your nice
little family, forget about me and…”

Gunshots echoed in Toby’s numb mind, once, twice and Keller’s body stiffened, the grip on Toby’s neck loosened. Toby opened his eyes to see Keller’s face contorted with surprise and pain.

A voice yelled nearby, something in French Toby didn’t understand and then another gunshot; this time Keller stumbled back and looked at him with a strange expression on his face.

“Go away,” he said in a breath and Beecher caught him under the arms as he was falling, going down with him, holding him, pressing his palms against the bleeding wound; blood smearing through his fingers.

/No, no, no, it’s not what I want! I don’t want him dead! I need him alive! Dead, he’s useless to me!/ 

Raising his head Toby saw a young man standing a few feet in front of him, his shaky hand holding a gun, his eyes wide with terror, realizing what he’d done, probably, wondering if he should shoot again –Keller would have, he would’ve finished the job. Toby saw the guy stumble back and run away, dropping the gun.

Jesus. Stupid prick.

Blood was running down Chris’ chin, he’d closed his eyes and each ragged breath was drawing more blood on his lips.

Am I supposed to feel happy now? Tooth for tooth time? Bullshit!

Hurrying inside Toby retrieved Chris’ phone and called the emergency services, then ran back to Chris.

He was conscious and when Toby ran a hand over Chris’ face he opened his eyes, veiled by pain and agony and smiled weakly, opened his mouth.

“Don’t talk, don’t you fucking dare say anything, Keller; I don’t wanna hear it.”

“Get the fuck back to your family, Beecher.”

“When you’re safe we’ll see.”

Chris would’ve said something but he was too weak; he just closed his eyes and gave up, awfully pale. Internal bleeding, Toby thought.

He won’t make it. Shit.

Ten minutes later a helicopter took an agonizing Keller away and Toby stood there, looking up until it had disappeared.

In a mirror he saw bruises all over his neck; the back of his head hurt.

Later he saw two men walk up the hill. Cops. They asked him a lot of questions in very bad English that matched his own terrible French. Of course they would’ve preferred the whole thing of settling old scores between Americans and one of them couldn’t take his eyes off Beecher’s bruised neck. But Toby showed them the place where Keller had been shot and they found the weapon. The older cop sighed.

“Mr Keller had a love affair with a nurse after being shot down last year; we think that her lover found out. Probably a crime of passion, but would you be nice enough to stay here until we make
sure? Time to check the prints on the gun? We might need your help.”

“Am I a suspect?”

The younger cop shrugged. “Not really,” he said, “but we’ll probably need you to identify the killer.”

The killer. Keller had been one and now he’d been shot down by another one, a very clumsy thoughtless one, more clumsy than he’d been himself, Toby realized with some surprise.

“Is he dead?”
“His condition is critical; the doctors say that if he survives until dawn, maybe…”

Toby remembered hearing the same sentence 20 years ago, lost in a haze of pain and terror and grief in a hospital bed where he was struggling to survive. Two of his friends had lost the fight that same night. Keller’s victims.

He’d never manage to break this vicious circle, how hard he tried.

“May I go see him?”
“As long as you don’t try to run away…”

They took his passport and left.

Toby sat outside until the middle of the night torn between conflicting feelings before finally making up his mind. He locked the house, walked down to the village. The bar was still open and the men gathered in the smoky room looked sad but they didn’t talk to him. Taking pity on him the bartender offered to give him a ride to the hospital.

If Keller was to die, he wanted to be by his side.

tbc...
Survivors

Beecher left France on a rainy Monday morning, getting drunk during the return flight to ease the pain and the sorrow.

A week ago a mass had been held in the old little chapel perched at the top of the hill—long columns of people walking up the path under the sun, the small church overflowed with artists, city officials, everyone from the village and even a former Minister of Arts who’d been a fervent admirer of Keller’s paintings from the very beginning...

…Crowded inside the old chapel, listening to the priest’s voice reverberated by the thick walls, praying for Keller to live, an old painted wooden statue of the Virgin Mary looking down at them with a compassionate expression.

Beecher had listened to the young enthusiastic priest, not knowing what to wish. He wanted Keller dead; it was the right price to pay for vengeance, the price to pay to give his dead friends a restful peace. Peace for Leslie. But- He wanted Keller alive for himself; he wanted to be able to close his eyes at night when he’d be back home and know that Keller was alive somewhere. Like a part of himself. The only two survivors of an old war... Just what Keller had told him the first time they’d met.

Beecher had spent ten more days at Keller’s bedside but after that Keller signed himself out of the hospital against his doctors’ advice—so weak and tired he could barely stand. Pale, emaciated and stubbornly determined; of course nothing would change his mind, especially not the numerous wise advice that maybe just one more week in hospital would be a sensible decision. Beecher knew better than to say anything; and actually as soon as Keller entered his house, he managed to look better—and very blunt, perfectly Keller-like. He let Beecher buy some groceries, call a nurse, make sure everything was all set then asked him to leave.

“Get out of here,” he said “before I really get pissed. Then I’d have to hurt you.”

“Hurt me?” Beecher snorted, shook his head “You can barely move! Listen, you can’t…”

“I’m afraid you didn’t quite hear me. Get the fuck out of here. I’m certainly not having you as a nurse. Do I have to shoot you down to get rid of you?”

Beecher would’ve stayed, even the promise he’d made to Gen wasn’t enough to make him leave, not when he was facing a half-dead Keller. Something probably showed on his face—his best stubborn expression, the pouting lip his family knew so well.

The little strength Keller had left was enough to retrieve his gun and aim it shakily at Beecher’s chest.

“Don’t you even glance backwards, Beecher. Just... Just leave, go back to your wife, your kids, your job. Move on. Forget about me. You don’t need me, I don’t need you. We’re done, it’s over, we’re through with this.”

Beecher didn’t even try to fight; he left without a word. A taxi to the airport, the drinks...

His plane landed two hours before Harry was born; he got his father’s call in the taxi that took him back home. After that it all happened in a rush, preventing him to dwell on the past. Harry was a wonderful baby, Gen didn’t ask anything; Beecher resumed his own life, everyone acting as if he’d never left, and for some time years he thought he’d found it. Peace of mind. Happiness of a kind.
All of it a fucking lie.

The end of a sunny afternoon in the middle of May.

Keller was sitting on the terrace, looking at the man walking up toward the house, looking for the right path between the mimosas and the junipers, avoiding the treacherous stones, making a pause before turning left to meet the old stony trail that led behind the house.

A glimpse of fair hair when the sun fell down on him from behind a cloud, an unmistakable silhouette.

Chris sat back and sighed.

Toby fucking Beecher in all his glorious tenacity.

This guy was so stubborn… shit! What part of “stay away” didn’t he understand?

And why now? They’d spent five years apart – just one phone call from Beecher and Keller hadn’t been too nice.

On the other hand, Keller thought, wiping his hands on his jeans, getting laid was a nice prospect- he could be a little soft on Beecher after all. Fuck him senseless before kicking his ass out, looking deep into those baby blue eyes to see the pain? Or the rage, maybe?

Aw fuck, he had it bad, just thinking about it made him hard already.

He heard the footsteps on the gravel as Beecher walked around the house. He picked up his brush, tracing a long sinuous red line across the white surface. Red. Earth. Fire. Burning…

“Hi,” the voice said, sounding exactly like he remembered it, both shy and scruffy.

“Hey, Beecher, what a surprise!”

“I…”

He’d brought wine, just like the first time.

“Don’t even bother saying anything. I’m working. Anything you wanna say will have to wait. The glasses are in the kitchen, you know which cabinet.”

“Yes, I’m fine, thank you for asking, Keller,” Beecher said and snorted “Christ. It would kill you, wouldn’t it, just looking pleased to see me.”

“That would be lying, Beecher. Go pour that wine and let me work.”

…………………..

Bastard, Beecher thought; but it wasn’t enough to make him leave. Not even to make him angry; Keller’s indifference sounded studied and forced. All the ordinary Keller macho bullshit, just what Beecher expected.

So he did just that. Poured two glasses and settled on the low wall, looking down at the hills, the village, the sea bathed in a golden sunshine and Keller could see him just at the corner of his sight, looking good, a little thinner, maybe, hardly looking any older, thinking how long it had been since he’d forced him to walk back, and out of his house, down the that road, the gun aimed at him.

……………………
“Get the fuck away from here, and don’t you ever set foot on my property again, you fucker.” Keller felt so angry after 2 weeks of being poked and prodded; tested then shot with drugs, sick with painkillers and other stuff; felt so angry at himself and the fucker who’d shot him, and so fucking angry at Beecher and O’Reily and the whole fucking *world*. So angry that he would’ve hurt Beecher, no matter what. Out of himself. At least Beecher had understood and left without a word.

He’d watched Beecher’s silhouette vanish in the distance before crashing, spending two days in bed locked inside his house, the gun at his side ready. An animal licking his wounds. For a whole year he’d thought he wouldn’t make it. Wouldn’t be able to walk again, work again. Fuck again. Live again. Not even sure his life was worth all these efforts.

Then one day, out of the blue, he resumed working. On a cold winter morning with a very crude light shaping every detail mercilessly he wanted to paint what he saw from the armchair where he’d spent the whole night, drinking, smoking joints. He retrieved his neglected brushes and an old canvas and began painting. When he stopped it was dark already.

I’m back, he thought, although he didn’t know what he was back to.

His paintings had changed. Deeper shades of brown, touches of red. Sometimes a trace of blue. Rage and resentment and despair entangled in what the art critics called the “dark period”. Small paintings when he’d been so fond of monumental canvasses. Critics didn’t know shit about him.

Doctors, therapists, nurses, and for months the relentless pain that no drugs would ease. Working nonetheless to feel alive, useful, to be the one who’d survived, the strong one. Everybody was dead –everybody but him and Beecher.

Now what?

He sighed and looked at his guest. OK, he’d take the hint, play Beecher’s game.

“So,” he said “how’re the kids? The little woman? The job?”
“Fine.” Beecher said quietly. “So why did you come back?”

Beecher was staring at his glass.

“Don’t tell me,” Keller said “Wanted to be roughed up a bit? Fucked into the mattress?”
“You’re such a romantic, Keller.”
“The fuck I am. What do you want, Beech?”
“I think…” Beecher’s voice, reluctant and low. “I think that’s about it. Just like you said.”
“You’re shameless, you know that?”
“Yes. I know. I don’t think it bothers you too much, considering who you are.”
“Gloves are off, then?”
“Were they ever on?”

You had to give the guy credit, he had balls.

“So,” Chris said, fading the next red line with his fingertips and wiping them on his jeans, “You were good for five years, took care of the wife and kids and now you’re here to get your reward, am I right? Or do you still want to kill me?”
“Keep it up this way and I just might,” Beecher said, glaring at him, standing up. “Mind if I take a shower?”
“Help yourself. Take the wine back to the kitchen; the sun is bad for that baby.”
Didn’t it sound perfectly domestic?

Keller had spent part of those five years wishing Beecher was here and the other half wanting to be left alone. Well, he’d spent most of the days wishing to be left alone—which he’s been mostly if you except some nosy journalists and a few old friends, all of them running away pretty fast because man could Keller be one mean and scary motherfucker when he wanted to- but most of the nights he spent touching himself, bringing himself to an unbearable state of arousal and wishing that Beecher was there.

As soon as he’d gotten his strength back he drove to nearby cities, fucking rich tourists in luxury hotels. Women who didn’t even know what his name was. He would fuck them with his eyes closed. But now Beecher was here, standing in front of him, damp from the shower, tight black polo and jeans unbuttoned opening on a trail of blond hair… Keller reached out and brushed his fingers against it, warm skin, soft hair getting coarse a little lower, feeling Beecher shiver…

“Don’t they dress decently anymore in your country?”
“Coming from you, that’s pretty funny.” Beecher’s shaky voice
“Yeah. I bet I can find a way to make it a lot less funny.”

With that he withdrew his hand.

Beecher blushed and looked down. Ah, not so bold, after all.

“Are you nervous? Did you think I’d kick you out?”
“Yeah well… I don’t know; I wasn’t sure.”
“You know, an easy fuck is nothing I’d turn down, especially not if it’s a good one, and on top of all a home delivered good fuck.”

Beecher poured himself a second glass of wine, his hands trembling a bit. Keller frowned.

“So what’s this? Did you decide to take up drinking?”
“Shit happens.”
“Stop playing the tough guy; that crap doesn’t work with me.”

And suddenly Keller was up, wiping his hands with a cloth and dropping it, turning to Beecher.

“Come on, let’s get it on; I don’t want you drunk, not yet.”

Taken off guard Beecher put down the glass on the stones too hard, breaking it, shattering it into pieces on the floor, staining the tiles purple. Keller came to him and dragged him inside.

“Freaking out there, Beech?”

He didn’t even leave him a second to figure it out; his tongue was already deep in Beecher’s mouth, his fingers digging in Beecher’s hips through the worn fabric of his jeans, his knee parting Beecher thighs while he was pulling him closer, kissing him harder.

“Yeah, you came all this way for it; a pretty expensive fuck, I’d say,” he whispered against Beecher’s mouth, leaving him a little time to recover, then tugging at the shirt and the jeans “these come off.”

And when he had Beecher naked against him, trembling and warm and looking almost frail, and maybe just a bit scared he thought he might come in his pants just from this.
Get a grip Keller. Make it last. You don’t know how long he’s gonna stay.

So yeah, leading him to the bedroom but not too gently, throwing him on the bed and then landing on top of him, pinning his wrists above his head hard, bruising; fuck he wanted bruises, he wanted marks, he wanted to look at Beecher in the morning and see the damage done and he wanted Beecher’s breath to come out just like this, a painful hiss when Keller bit his jaw hard and licked the wound.

Frenzy took over. Keller pulled the drawer open, retrieved the lube, coated himself “no latex, baby; I’m safe; I’ll assume you are too” and didn’t even prepare him. Just the rough invasion and Beecher moaned in pain, or surprise or pleasure, tried to accommodate, panting. Keller waited until Beecher stopped shaking.

Grabbed his hips and pulled hard, impaling Beecher on his cock, listened to the sharp intake of breath

“Fuck you, Keller, you like this…”
“Yeah; surprised?”

He thrust once, hard, twice, slow and heavy, changing the angle and the speed; licked the sweat rolling down Beecher’s cheek, or maybe a tear; salty and warm all the same and yes, wasn’t it just the way he wanted it, dreamed it would be; fucking Beecher hard, feeling him try to adjust, trying to pick a rhythm that would match his own -and failing, having to give in to what Keller wanted because fuck, Keller's anger was rising and boiling and bubbling just under the surface and he didn’t even know where it came from –you left, you fucking left me, you didn’t even try to come back until today and suddenly it reached on him; Beecher’s pain and fear and he slowed down.

Leaned forward to kiss the dry lips, slid his tongue inside, stopped moving, waited until Beecher was there again, waiting for his heart to slow down then starting again; slow this time, slow and effortless and so fucking good and he was not going to stop, not now, not ever, he’d fuck him for all the days to come, make up for five years of frustration…

Beecher hissed, throwing his head back and coming, hard, against Chris’ belly, moaning low in his throat...

A few more thrusts and Keller was coming too. No matter how long it lasted, he couldn’t resign himself to let go. Eventually he collapsed on Beecher’s body and fell asleep.

*******************************************************************************

Beecher woke up late, sore and exhausted, wanted to move and gave up; only opened his eyes to look at the room. The bed was still in the shadows but sunshine was flooding the rest of the room with an unmistakable light. Pure, bright, luminous –nowhere else, Toby thought, nowhere else was the light that dazzling; nowhere else was the day that triumphant, a constant victory over the darkness.

The room smelled like coffee, a cup was near the bed; Toby drank the bitter strong beverage, and lay back.

“Ah, you’re awake,” Keller said from the door.
“You too,” Beecher said putting the cup on the floor.
“Yeah. There’s great light this morning, I got up at 5 and thought I’d get some work done.”
“And did you?”
“Sure did.”
Keller strode in with his usual confidence. Barefoot, old stained jeans and the shirt had been black. Long ago. The mattress gave way under his weight and he lay down on his side, facing Toby.

“So? What prompted this?”
“What are you talking about?”
“Five years and you come up here unannounced, able and willing… What the fuck does that mean? Did you wake up one morning, thought you’d get yourself suitably laid and flew here?”

Chris’ fingers were tracing the curve of Toby’s shoulders, sliding along the bruises and he leaned forward to kiss them.

“Did you like it? Was it worth a first class ticket to get here?”
“It’s not about money.”
“I bet it’s not. So why don’t you tell me?”

Toby sighed, lay back, looked at the golden rays crawling on the floor and up the bed, reaching the nape of Keller’s neck.

“Gen and I divorced. She moved to Florida where she used to live before meeting me. Got her friends there, her family. It was a very amicable divorce. She didn’t love me anymore, I’m not sure I ever loved her. She has someone else and he’s going to take her to Australia… I felt like I needed… I don’t know…”

“A break? Come see big bad Keller so he helps you make up your mind?”
“Maybe.”

Keller’s fingers grazed down his arms, catching his wrist, lifting his hand to his mouth, kissing his palm, biting softly.

“I’m afraid I’m not quite…”
“Don’t worry, you are. Just lie down and close your eyes; I’ll take care of the rest.”

And he did, God how well he did, mouth, teeth and tongue working on Toby’s body, hungry kisses, soft bites, hot licks, lips closing around his cock, making Toby come hard and fast, blinding him to the light; then fucking him, all soft and careful not to hurt until Toby arched his whole body like a possessed man and begged until he had no voice left.

“You’re pretty addictive, Toby, you know that?”

They fell asleep again in the growing light.

L

Later Keller was wiping his paint stained fingers against his jeans and asked,
“So why here? Why me?”

It was around noon; Keller was preparing a mixed salad –tomatoes, salad, eggs and many things Beecher didn’t really identify –he took a bit of something unknown from the porcelain bowl – delicious.

“I don’t know.”
“You don’t know? What if I didn’t want you to stay? What if I wanted you to leave?”
“I just thought you wouldn’t turn down a free fuck. Anyway, I’ll go if you want me to.”

“You never really care about the impact your decisions will have on other people’s lives, do you? I
mean, you felt like coming here so you just fucking did."
“Considering who’s speaking I can’t say I really feel guilty about my decision.”
“OK. This is the last time I’m asking and you’re gonna answer, OK? Why – did – you – come – here?”
“I don’t have many friends…”
“I’m not one of your fucking friends.”
“No. But… It’s not easy. When I’m with you…”

Beecher didn’t know how to say it; he didn’t even know how to *think* it, the truth was hidden under so many layers of denial, anger and fear. And he was 40; too old to say the words he wanted to. But Keller guessed; averting his gaze, he said.

“Ok, don’t tell me. Eat.”
“But you wanted to know…”
“I changed my mind. I changed my mind; I don’t want to hear anything more, OK? You fucking want to stay? You can stay. Now shut the fuck up”

Beecher looked at him, frowning, trying to read something behind the cold look.

“Does it bother you?”
“Of course it does; what do you think? I’ve been living alone for 20 years and now…” He shrugged.
“When I’ve had enough, you’ll be the first one to know.”
“Fine.”

They didn’t talk much after that.

Keller spent three hours painting, then took his sweet time putting everything away, washing and drying the brushes, before walking out of the bright room where he liked to work, showered, changed clothes. When he finally entered the living room Toby was sitting in front of the fire, his cell phone in hand.

“I don’t know, Dad, I feel like I need some time away; some time to make up my mind about what I really want and…”

Yeah, Keller could easily guess how happy Beecher Sr felt about this; his son spending valuable time away from his family with a killer. The man who’d fucked up his life…

“What about your kids, Beecher?” he asked when Beecher hung up with an exasperated sigh.

“I don’t know; look, I can’t solve everything at once, it’s…”

Keller raised a hand –shut up.

“I’m OK with having you here but don’t even begin to imagine I’ll agree to anything that looks like a kid in my house. This is where I draw the line.”

Beecher snorted. “I wouldn’t let my kids around you, anyway.”
“Of course.” Keller was feeling tired suddenly “What was I thinking?”

Anger again. This wasn’t going to work.
“If you stay, no matter how long, we’d better lay down some rules. Like… You stop boring me with the past; you’re here so I take it I’m forgiven, or whatever you want to call it. I won’t let you use me as a punching ball. What happened that day in the bar… Happened. I don’t think about it anymore. I do want you, Beecher but I don’t want you *and* the whole shitload of guilt you’re carrying around. I’m alive, you’re alive, I’m happy we are. Got it?”
“I think so, yes.”
“Ok, now find yourself a new job –I’m sure they love American lawyers here; no way I’m going to have you under my feet constantly. I guess it wouldn’t last for long, anyway.”
“I already have a job in Nice; an international practice; I’m supposed to meet them next week.”

Manipulative bastard. He’d planned everything. Well, better than nothing, at least he’d given the whole thing some real thought.

“Good. Then what the fuck are you still doing here? You’re gonna go down to the village and buy some groceries. I’ll make you a list of things we’ll need and take your sweet time about it, get to know the people, buy whatever you want. Just don’t hurry back, I have a painting to finish.”

His voice was hard but his eyes were smiling; Beecher smiled back.

************************

The girl at the shop had a nice accent, sounding like sun and happiness. She spoke English quite well, told Beecher she’d spent some time in London after graduating.

“I’m glad Mr Keller finally has some company. He’s been very lonely all this time. Very depressed.”
“How do you know?”
“I used to deliver the food up there once a week…. spent an hour or two with him; we chatted, he showed me his paintings. When I was a kid he would come to school every week and teach us painting and drawing; still does, from what I heard. He was great. Not very patient but we loved to listen to him. He was so… charismatic. Passionate.”

Beecher tried to picture the scene and smiled.

“So knowing he’s not alone anymore is great. Really. Will you stay?”

Beecher smiled.

“I think I will.”

She smiled right back and he left.

Yeah, he thought, looking back in the sun at the silver sea, the deep blue sky, surrounded with the scents of citrus and lavender, walking back to the house where Keller was waiting; yeah, I’ll stay.

Keller gave him was exactly what he needed. Amazing sex. A feeling of safety. Peace of mind. Wasn’t that ironic? No one had been able to do it before, not his parents, not Gen, not the kids. Only Keller who’d almost ruined his life could make him happy. That day in the bar an unbreakable bond—and Beecher was still wondering if Keller had let him live because he’d felt that bond? Or was this thing between them the consequence of Keller’s action that day?

He’d never know and in some way it didn’t really matter.

What did matter was Keller waiting for him on the terrace, looking at the bags in Beecher’s hands, smiling; stubbly, a little scruffy.

“I take it you’re staying for a while,” he said and looked up to Beecher “Let’s go in and celebrate.”

And while they were unpacking the bags he added, “Toby… I think it’s about time you called me Chris.”
Fini!!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!