Mind Games
by Talithax

Summary

Ethan's world unravels when he's unable to protect Will from an assault he holds himself solely responsible for.

** Complete as at 8 June 2016 **

Notes

~ Narrated by Ethan. Self-beta'd.
~ Finished fic comes in at around 50,000 words.
~ Am posting in chapters as my non existent attention span can hopefully just about cope with beta'ing a chapter at a time. (That's, of course, assuming my cat ever allows me to have my computer on my lap as opposed to her...)
~ Meh. Dodgy attention span. Demanding cat. Ideas, but no actual inclination / energy to actually write. So, you know, if in doubt, dig out something old and hope for the best.

**Community Service Announcement**

These warnings are REAL.

- This is heavy on the guilt and angst. Possibly even dangerously close to over-the-top territory. But... it is what it is.
- For the first time, and most likely the last, the assault happens 'on the page' and in 'real time'. It is far more detailed than I usually write and... is not pleasant. (This happens in 'Chapter 2' if
you wish to avoid it...)

- Trust me?
“Whatever it is you’re thinking,” I murmur as, still fumbling over strapping my watch to my wrist, I turn around from the dresser and fix Will with a knowing look from under an arched brow, “the answer, I’m fairly certain, is no.”

“No?” Will echoes, feigning a wounded expression as he sits, watching me dress, from his cross-legged position on the middle of the bed. “You don’t even know what it is I’m thinking.”

“Oh, but that’s just it. I’m pretty sure that I do,” I reply perhaps just a little smugly as I kick my shoes over towards the bed before taking a seat on the edge of the mattress and leaning forward to put them on.

“You’re good, but you’re not... that... good,” Will responds dubiously. “For all you know I could have been thinking about what I might like to have for lunch.”

“Mmm... I know that answer too,” I retort with a quick laugh. “And that’s... Pop-Tarts. Granted, you might, for a nice change, be thinking of a particular flavour, but...”

“Smart-ass,” he interjects as he shifts slowly into a kneeling position and crawls over to both drape his arms over my shoulders and press his chest up against my back. “While it pains me to admit it, you are, of course, right and should I actually feel like eating anything for lunch, yes, it will be a Pop-Tart and, no, because my taste buds are still non-existent, I won’t actually care what flavour it’s supposed to be.”

“Given that they all taste the same any...”

“You know, oddly enough I’ve heard your opinions on them before. Quite a... few... times before, at that.”

“Hey. You’re the one living on a diet of the damn things, not me.”

“And yet... I still have to listen to you whine about them,” Will replies, clasping his hands together as, with a contented sigh, he rests his chin on my shoulder.

“If I don't tell you how awful they are, who will?” The usually simple act of doing up shoelaces proving to be close to impossible with Will draped over my back, I give up for the time being and, gingerly sitting up just that little bit straighter, place my hands warmly over his. “Back to where this started though... You weren't thinking of your stomach.”

“Fine, Oh Great Psychic One, what... was... I thinking, then?”

“You were thinking of trying your luck at coming in to the office with me,” I reply, glancing at Will out of the corner of eye as, just as I expected it would, his mouth drops open in obvious surprise. “What? I'm right, aren't I?”
"I take it back, you... are... that good," Will mutters as, rolling his eyes, he gives my cheek a kiss. "That said, you're also still a smart-ass, though."

"A smart-ass that probably should be on his way, at that," I retort, removing my hands from Will's and, solely because I know that I need to keep moving, reaching back down to my shoes. "Oh, and on that, you know as well as I do that you're not even close to being up for going in to work yet and were only considering it for reasons of boredom and nothing more."

"Boredom, and..." Trailing off, Will abruptly pulls his arms away and, sitting back, starts to cough. "Shit! I'm... so... over... this," he adds through his coughing as, my laces finally done up, I twist around to face him. "You... You're probably not going to miss... this, but... uh... I'm going to miss you..."

My resolve, not that it's ever been what I'd call particularly strong in terms of this morning's decision to grace HQ with my presence today, faltering in the face of Will's breathless confession, I stand up and place my hand down on his shoulder. "I don't have to go in, not if you..."

"Go," Will mutters as he dredges up a wan smile and gestures towards the door. "You deserve a break from all the damn coughing and, besides, as you already know from recent experience, all I'm probably going to do is sleep anyway. Yeah, I'll miss you on the odd occasions when I'm actually awake, and I may even malign your absence when I've got to drag my ass downstairs to get my own Pop-Tart, but... Go. Seriously. Jane and Benji would probably love to see you, and... I'll be fine."

"The definition of 'fine', of course, being somewhat up for debate the moment," I retort blandly as I help Will back under the bedding. "Look. As I'm really only going in to catch up with people and see what, if anything, we've been missing out on, I honestly don't mind staying if that's what you'd prefer."

"Go," he repeats, giving me an exhausted look as he settles against the mound of pillows at his back. "Not only will I be fine, but I suspect my day will pretty much run the same course whether you're here or not. Sleep. Cough. Feel sorry for myself. Repeat. Now, I love everything that you've been doing for me, and I really will miss you, but, for your own sake, I want you to go. I mean, hey, it's not like I'm not going to be in the exact same spot when you get back."

"When you put it that way..." Sighing, I glide the back of my hand along Will's cheek and, leaning over the bed, plant a soft kiss on his forehead. "You're hot," I comment as, hoping like crazy that his fever isn't about to return, I take a step back and continue dithering over whether to go or not.

"Mmm... Not this morning, dear, I've got a headache," Will mumbles as he does his best to stifle a cough before sliding down the mattress and pulling the bedding up to his neck. "Ethan, please... Just go. I'll be fine."

"As that's something I just happen to be counting on, you'd better be," I reply with another sigh as, unable to help myself, I walk back over to the bed and give Will a kiss on the cheek. Glancing at the bedside table, I take careful note that he has all the essentials – medication, water, iPad, phone – within easy reach before, with one final kiss to his other cheek, starting to walk out the room. "But... Fine. You win. I'm going."

"Enjoy your day."

"The definition of... enjoying... one's day lurking around HQ is another one of those things I suspect would be up for debate, but... I'll try."

"It could be worse. You could be stuck in bed feeling like death warmed up."
“Will...”
“Go.”

“Yeah, yeah. I'm going.” Pausing in the doorway, I glance over my shoulder and smile at Will as he watches me through eyes that are struggling to stay open. “If you can think of anything you might want during the day, just call or send me a message.”

“Mmm... Goodbye, Ethan.”

“See you later. I... I love you.”

“Mmm... Love you too. Now... Let me sleep.”

Knowing a cue to leave when I hear it, I walk down the stairs and, after grabbing my car keys from the kitchen and my coat from the rack by the door, make my way out of the house. As has been the case ever since we got back from Mexico a week ago, rain is steadily falling over the cold, grey world outside and, turning my collar up, I hurry across the soggy front lawn to where my Mercedes is parked in the driveway. Getting in, I turn the engine on and quickly adjust the heating so that the interior of the car is doing its best to simulate that of sauna before, with a sigh, pulling on my seatbelt and just gazing through the windscreen at the house that has been my home for the past four days.

Will's house.

Despite having my own place barely twenty minutes away, I've been staying here with him since he got out of the infirmary and this is actually the first time I've been out of the house since I helped him through the door and straight in to bed four days ago. On one hand it feels as though next to no time at all has passed, while on the other it almost feels as though the past ten days have stretched across an entire lifetime. From the initial shock of learning that Will had not only been beaten but also stabbed in the waist while I was tying my end of the mission up on the other side of the city, to the relief at hearing that his wound was only a flesh one, to... everything that then followed, it's just been one thing after another and, even though I know I've got his blessing, it just feels odd to be leaving him after all the time we've been spending together.

I know he'll be fine. Just as I know I haven't really done that much for him other than hover around and make sure he has everything he needs anyway.

But...

All logic – he'll be fine, I probably really do need to go in to HQ, it's not like he actually needs me – aside, I still don't particularly want to go. The last ten, emotionally exhausting and, at times, downright worrying, days having really brought it home to me in a big way just how much I love and, yes, rely on Will, all I want, preferably under my watchful eye, is for him to get better. I don't ever want to see him, feverish and fitting from the effects of the infection he'd picked up from either the knife or the hospital itself, strapped to a hospital bed again, and I...

… Just want him to stay with me.

It's a simplistic, possibly even quite selfish way to view things, but it's just how it is. I love him, and regardless of the mission having been a success and my own health being fine, it's all just been too hard. It's been hard to watch, hard to cope with knowing there wasn't a single thing I could do for him and, in the early days in that Mexico City hospital before he was finally stable enough to be flown back to D.C. and the IMF infirmary, it was... hard... not even knowing if he was going to make it. Ultimately, it was just... one of those things. The knife may have been dirty. His immune
system may have already been compromised by the cold or virus he's had the week before. The hospital may not have sterilised one piece of equipment properly. One of the nurses or doctors tending to him may have somehow passed it on.

Just...

Whatever.

From being taken in to the hospital covered in bruises and with a knife wound, Will, within hours of being admitted, got sick. Very, very sick. And...

… It was awful, and it's been awful.

He spent three days in Mexico City lapsing in and out of consciousness while his temperature spiked and I had to fight through the hideous memories of having watched my father die in a hospital bed so that I could hold it together for Jane and Benji. Then, as soon as it was safe to do so, I had him moved to the infirmary where, still weak and ill, he spent another four days before being discharged to fully recuperate at home. He's still got a cough, a constant headache, and lacks the energy to do much more than sleep, but the infirmary doctor, Foster, is hopeful that given both time and rest he'll make a full recovery.

Again, it really was just one of those unfortunate things. It could have easily happened to anyone and, really, the only thing that matters at all is that he's – still here – going to make it. The knife could have gone into a major organ, or the infection could have got into his brain, and...

Basically, he could have died.

He could have, so fucking easily, died.

And I think, all things considered, I'm just not coping all that well with any of it. I'm a lot better now than I had been, and God knows how, in a sense, lucky we've actually been, but it's still just been hard.

Just as I'm finding the thought of leaving him now to be far harder than, really, it should be.

Taking a deep breath to clear my thoughts, I tell myself to just get a damn grip and get on with it and, with a quick glance in the rear vision mirror to see that it's safe to do so, reverse the car out of the driveway and turn it in the direction of the IMF headquarters. I'm about halfway there and am sitting ten or so cars back at a red light when a message comes through on my phone. Thinking that it's more likely to be Benji checking to see whether I'm coming in or not than Will, who I suspect would have been asleep even before I'd backed out on to the street, I nonetheless pull my cell out of my pocket and bring up the message.

My interest piqued at seeing that it's both a photo message and from someone with a blocked number, I quickly access the image and what I see on the small screen manages what, until now, I hadn't even thought possible.

And that's to banish all thoughts of Will out of my mind.

Although the photograph's grainy, I can still make out the details in it clearly and, as the light turns green and the traffic around me starts to move, I flick on the indicator and, as a kind soul in a Prius lets me into their lane, quickly turn the car in the opposite direction to HQ. The sender being anonymous not really bothering me as I have a number of... invisible... contacts around the world – agents from other agencies, people who move in the same underground world that he does but who don't like him any more than I do – who know to get in touch with me if they've got anything on him, I take the image on face value and know that I have to act on it.
Charles Jefferson.

Here.

In D.C..

The photo date and time stamped as having been taken yesterday afternoon, I recognise the office building he's standing outside of as being near a park to the north of the CBD and, whether there's anything to be seen there this morning or not, I have to get there as quickly as I possibly can to investigate. The thought of Jefferson, who's been a thorn in my side for ten years now, being in the same city as I am, well, it's just like that old saying of being a red rag to a bull and I simply, without doing anything sensible like phoning it in or checking to see if anyone knows anything else about why he's suddenly put in an appearance, have to go after him.

Given the way I feel about him, it's not really as though I have any other choice.

Twelve years ago, Charles Jefferson, at the age of forty was the youngest ever agent to be appointed as Secretary. To everyone around him, he had it all. He was bright, and despite his clear ambition and the way he'd quickly made it up through the ranks, he was also popular with everyone who knew him. While I'm not, and nor have I ever been, one for hero worship, I have to admit that at the time I'd been just that little bit in awe of him. Slightly in awe and because, as a rookie, I'd been lucky enough to work a mission with him, proud to actually be on first name basis with him. I thought, as did everyone else, that he had it all.

I also thought that, again, just like everyone else did at the time, he was loyal to IMF.

Then, ten years ago almost to the month, a mission that I was involved in went to hell. Someone having been feeding our targets intel, they were on to our interest in them even before we'd shown our hand and, being proactive, attacked while we were still just setting up. Two members of the team, Joseph Arcus and Bianca Nguyen, were gunned down in front of me in cold blood while the team leader, a man whose name I can't even remember, and I were captured and dragged off for interrogation. During the days of torture that followed I thought, even though I didn't attach much weight to it given the condition I was in, that I heard Jefferson's name being bandied about by our captors and made a mental note to raise it with him once I was back in D.C..

Not... if... I made it back to D.C., but... when.

Now, whether it was due to self-belief or dumb luck or whatever, I managed to escape and, once I'd found the team leader and freed him too, we... did... make it back to D.C..

And...

… I did confront Jefferson.

Still firmly convinced that I hadn't heard them correctly, I mentioned it in a conversational, 'you're hardly going to believe this, but...' sort of way, and Jefferson, he...

He didn't deny it.

In fact, he seemed more pissed at them for having foolishly dropped his name than he did at being caught out. He also, just before he knocked me out and disappeared, took the time to share with me his sense of... pride... at having for so long pulled the wool over the IMF's collective eyes.

Double agent. Solely in it for the money.
A well groomed sociopath working both sides.

Needless to say, from that point onwards I've had a personal vendetta against the bastard. He was responsible for the deaths of two of my team members, he'd sold out countless other agents and missions, he'd fooled everyone, and...

… I'd once been in awe of him.

I was as disgusted by his betrayal as I was hurt by it and, to this day, I hate him and want him brought to justice. I want him, if not in the ground, then at the very least behind bars where he belongs and, ever since I woke up on the floor of his office all those years ago, I've been after him. For ten years now we've danced around each other and, while to him it may even be something of a game, to me it's personal and I know that I'll never stop until I've got him where I want him. We dance around each other, hunting and getting close, but, sadly, just never close enough to bring him down. I know, however, that I'm as much of a thorn in his side as he is in mine thanks to the number of his... interests... I've had a hand in causing to disintegrate before his eyes. In fact, I've probably fucked over so many of his investments and plans that, these days, he may well hate me as much as I hate him.

It's just not enough though and my desire to stop him is as strong today as it ever was.

The last piece of intel I'd had on his whereabouts having had him slithering his way around Madrid in the hope of sucking up to a local arms dealer there, I have absolutely no idea about just why it is he might be back in the States and nor, really, do I even care. All that matters to me is that he's here, and that I have another chance to get him. That's it. I'm past being interested in what he's up to and just want him stopped.

Bringing the Mercedes to a stop in front of the park opposite the building in the photo, I switch off the ignition and get out. Leaning over the roof, I take in the nondescript, seemingly family run, printing business housed in the ground floor of the building and am just contemplating calling Benji to see if he could dig into the place a little for me when, without warning, a needle is jabbed into the side of my neck. Whatever it is I've just been injected with being of the quick acting variety, I slump to my knees as the world around me starts to go black and a familiar voice from somewhere above me announces...

“That's your problem, Hunt. You always have been predictable.”

~*~*~
~ Chapter Two ~

Chapter Notes

Seriously. As per my original post - this chapter is... uh... rough. Far more, I would say, 'in your face' than usual.

Oh... And... Language. Lots and lots of bad language. (Captain America would not approve! ;-) )

So. Please. Be warned.

~*~*~

With consciousness comes a number of unwelcome realisations. Without even having to open my eyes I know that I'm in trouble. Actually, make that a hell of a lot of trouble. Someone having clearly reached the conclusion that I was wearing too many pieces of clothing, I'm now clad only in my jeans and T-shirt and the bitterly cold air circulating around my bare feet and arms, along with the sound of rain falling on a high up tin roof, tells me in no uncertain terms that I'm most likely being held in a warehouse. My captor, either knowing who I am personally or possessing a far better idea of my skills than the average up-to-no-good scumbag, has done a right number on binding me to the wooden chair I'm sitting on and I know, just by attempting to flex my wrists, that I'm stuck tight. Instead of just relying on either rope, zip ties or good old fashioned handcuffs, he's used a combination of the three which means, even if I could free myself from one of them I'd be hard pushed to get through all of them. Same goes for my ankles which are strapped tight to the legs of the chair and, if the hard metal chain pressed into the small of my back is anything to go by, I think the bastard has even gone so far as to anchor the chair to one of the warehouse's supporting columns.

So, you know, all in all it's safe to say that I'm not going anywhere in a hurry.

And, yeah, that – as some might say is the story of my life – I'm in trouble.

My head hurts, either as a side effect from whatever it was I was injected with back at the park or from hitting it on something as I fell, and my mouth feels like a desert. I'm not, however, gagged though and, oddly, this strikes me as more a cause of concern than it does relief. I get that I'm probably in the middle of nowhere and that my captor isn't worried about me being able to call out for help, but even if he's wanting to interrogate me for information it still would have made more sense to me to have gone down the tried and true gag route. They just, and yes, I speak from experience here, always add to the suspense somehow and, again, the fact that I'm not wearing one just bothers me.

That, or not having a fucking clue as to what's going on here, I'm just fixating on the smallest possible thing because, well, I can.

It's still raining, but given how much rain has been falling in D.C. this week the sound of it hitting the roof in a steady rhythm doesn't tell me anything. Maybe I've only been out for a brief period of time and it's still Wednesday. Alternatively, maybe I was out a lot longer. Hell, maybe I'm not even in D.C..
Just...

Fuck.

Focus.

Trapped. Cold. Headache. Warehouse. Going by the faint smell of human waste that keeps wafting past my nostrils, make that an abandoned warehouse favoured by the homeless for shelter. The hum of electricity. Someone standing a metre or so away from me. Watching. Waiting. Their breathing calm and measured.

They have the upper hand and they know it.

Without warning a bucket of icy water is suddenly thrown over me and my eyes fly open as I both gasp and splutter in shock. Goosebumps break out all over my skin and, not wanting to give the fucker the satisfaction, I throw everything I've got in to keeping my teeth from chattering as, with effort, I defiantly lift my head and just gaze around me. What I see set up in front of me is so strange and unexpected that for a moment or two I actually forget all about how cold I am. I mean, I've seen a lot of whack things in my time, but this, this really is just something else again.

Portable spotlights are set up at the four corners of a large white shag-pile rug and the bright light they're throwing down at it somehow makes the scene even more surreal than it already is. Something is obviously planned to take place on the centre of the rug but I can't for the life of me deduce what it could possibly be. Just behind the rug, and parked a little to the left, is a nondescript black van with its back doors open and, in front of that, is a black Chrysler 300. That, however, is pretty much it. The two vehicles and the spot lit shag-pile rug that, really, couldn't look more out of place in a derelict warehouse if it tried.

I can't see, unless they're being kept behind me to be unveiled at a later time, any of the traditional implements of torture favoured the world over by assholes who think nothing of doing whatever it takes to get what they want and, just like realising that I wasn't gagged a moment or two ago did, this bothers me.

Sure, it's not pleasant and, okay, fine, one day it might actually kill me, but being tortured I can generally handle. Been there, done that, and all that.

This, though...

The great unknown.

This worries me.

It worries me a lot.

“I'd say you look like a drowned rat,” a sadly familiar voice announces as a large, imposing figure of a man steps out of the shadows and comes to stand in front of me, “but that would be insulting to the rat.”

“Fuck you, Jefferson,” I retort as, things immediately starting to make a little more sense to me, I blink the water that's still dripping from my hair out of my eyes and gaze up at him. All things considered, I should have known this bastard would have been behind my predicament. Gung-ho in my obsession to finally get him, I didn't pay the attention it deserved to the random photograph on my phone and just went in, as the saying goes, half cocked. I thought I knew what I was doing. I thought I was safe.
Yeah. Right.

Hindsight, needless to say, can be a complete fucking bitch at times.

“Fuck you, Jefferson,” he repeats with both a smirk and a shake of his head as he shifts even closer and crouches down in front of me. “Imaginative.”

“And yet it conveyed everything that I wanted it to,” I grind out as, narrowing my eyes, I slowly look him up and down. Clearly subscribing to The Rock school of physique, time has been reasonably kind to Jefferson as he still looks to be a big, well built man and, even hidden behind what I suspect has to be a bespoke suit, I can see his muscles flex as he balances on the balls of his feet in front of me. With his bald head, small eyes, thin, cruel lips and broken-one-too-many-times nose, he’s also far uglier than I remember him being and, wanting him to know that this is how I see him, I sneer and make a point of looking away. “At the risk of asking the obvious here, just what do you want from me anyway?”

“Oh, just the usual,” Jefferson murmurs, quickly closing his hand around my jaw and forcing me to look at him. “To make you suffer in a way I doubt you’ve ever even contemplated before,” he adds softly as he squeezes my jaw harder for a couple of seconds before abruptly pulling his hand away and standing up. “Don’t worry though, I’m not going to kill you. In fact, I’m probably not even going to touch you again.”

“I’m not going to be the one doing the watching,” he replies, to my ears anyway, cryptically as he folds his arms across his beefy chest and gazes coolly down at me. “And while I’m not usually... shall we say... hands on myself, in this case I’ve decided to make an exception as... Well... Just call it the cherry on top of the whole experience.”

Given that my shoulders, along with my head, are about the only parts of my body I can move, I give an insolent shrug and stare at him impassively. “I hope you realise you’re not making a lot of sense. In fact, as all you're succeeding in doing here is bore me, why don't you just get on with whatever the hell your show is, yeah...”

“Oh, dear boy, be careful what you wish for,” Jefferson all but croons as, his face suddenly hardening, he gives me what I can only describe as a truly evil look. “I just want you to know, Hunt, that this is not only down to you, but it's also... for you. Everything that's both happened, and is about to happen, is on your head and your head alone.” Pausing, he leans forward and, locking his gaze on mine, whispers directly in my ear, “Sure, I could have done it to you, but what would have been the point? You’re a hard bastard to crack and I honestly think you’d have just found a way to quickly make your peace with it. This way though... I’m going to break you without even having to lay a finger on you, and...” Straightening up, he glances over at the van and nods. “It's all your fault. You cost me a lot of money, even more than your usual, annoying interruptions have caused over the years, by ruining my operation in Istanbul and the time has come for payback. Payback, Hunt, and you’re never to forget this, which is all on you. Everything you're about to witness is because of you.”

“What the fuck are you...” Falling silent as two black clad, from the top of their balaclavas to the tips of their boots, men drag another, semi-conscious at best man out of the back of the van, I feel an icy sense of dread wash over me that's even colder than the water had been and groan. “Oh God... No. Jefferson, you... You don't have to do this!”
Will...

Fuck!

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

The bastard's got Will.

Will, who's still wearing the white long sleeved T-shirt and dark grey pyjama pants that he had on when I left him this morning and who, if his vacant expression is anything to go on, is barely conscious and only being kept upright by Jefferson's two minions holding him roughly by the arms.

He...

Oh God... Oh fuck...

He looks so pale, fragile, and clearly unwell, that...

Oh God...

He needs to be at home in bed.

He...

He needs to be safe, not...

… Here.

Because of me.

Because of my own personal obsession.

“Ah, but I do,” Jefferson replies, shrugging out of his expensive suit jacket and letting it fall to the dusty floor. “Don't you see, Hunt?” he continues, straightening his shoulder holsters and, with all the subtly of a sledge hammer, making sure I can see the two Glocks he's got nestled in the pouches. “I know you better than you think and, because of this, I know the only way to break you is to first break something you care about. Or, in this case... someone... you care about.”

“You don't have to do this,” I repeat hoarsely as, fighting back nausea, I watch with mounting horror as he retrieves a small flick knife out of his pocket and pulls out the blade. “Jefferson! Please! I'm begging you! Can't you see that he's sick? He... He's...”

“Only here because of you,” Jefferson finishes with a shrug. “Just as... everything I'm going to do to him is also because of you. Did you hear that, Hunt? Everything.”

“Please! Do whatever you want to me, just... Oh God...” I know, deep down, that it's futile, that Jefferson's mind is made up and there's not a single fucking thing I can do about it, but ranting and pleading is all that I have open to me. I can't stop him, I can't protect Will or take back time, and...

He's right.

This is my fault.

Everything that's about to happen to Will is down to me and me alone.

I'm the one who, for the past ten years, wouldn't leave Jefferson well enough alone. The Powers
That Be told me that I didn't have to, that they had other men hunting him, that... I'd done enough, but I...

… I didn't listen.

I'm the one who thought he could easily pay any cost associated with his obsession.

I'm the one who let Will, the best thing to ever happen in my life, down.

Me.

Will, who's still too unwell, and, I think, drugged as well, to look after himself, is going to be made to suffer because of me, and I...

Jefferson's right. About everything.

This is my fault.

And it...

… Is going to break me.

“Jefferson! Don't... Oh God! Do whatever you like to me. Kill me. I don't care. Just leave Will alone. He doesn't deserve...”

“You're right, he doesn't,” Jefferson interrupts as, with a swift nod, he has his men drag Will on to the centre of the brightly lit rug. “But he's going to get it because it's a position you've put him in.”

His piece said, he walks on to the rug and, as his minions hold Will into a more upright position, uses his knife to carefully put a small cut in the neck of Will's top. This done, he calmly returns his knife to his pocket before ripping the T-shirt down the middle and pushing the remnants over Will's shoulders. “Tsk,” he mutters disapprovingly as he lightly wafts his hands over Will's bare torso and the number of still healing cuts and bruises that litter it. “You don't take very good care of your toys, do you, Hunt...”

“He's not a Goddamn toy! Damn it, Jefferson. You... Fuck! You don't have to do this!”

Not this...

Anything but this...

I know there are some people out there who find the idea of being publicly humiliated or raped a turn on. I don't get it myself, but whatever, live and let live and all that. It's just a fantasy. A harmless, personal fantasy that, while it certainly doesn't float my boat, is ultimately none of my business if it floats yours. There was even an agent, Paul Briggs his name was, that I went through training with who thought, with all of his limited, led-by-his-cock thinking, that, hey, being captured and taken against his will sounded like a pretty good idea to him. Instead of being horrified by the lecture on what was actually a very real threat we might, at some point in our career, have to face, he was unashamedly turned on by it. I remember thinking at the time, as he recounted his excitement at the thought of it over a few beers that night, that there were certainly better things to be turned on by than being captured and raped, but, again, whatever. To each their own.

What I also remember, and God knows given the current circumstances I wish I wasn't remembering it quite so clearly, is Will's own personal version of a fantasy.

And how exactly it was he came to confess it to me.
I remember all of it.

From the sense of disbelief that we were actually on a break that never truly left me for the entire weekend, to the scent of cooking bacon and the fucking unbelievable sight that was waiting for me as, still groggy with sleep, I walked into the tiny kitchen of our cabin. There, standing in front of the stove and cooking breakfast while wearing nothing other than an apron tied around his waist, was Will. My gorgeous and hot lover was naked save for a red apron emblazoned in large white polka dots and, as I stared, perhaps even drooling just a little, at his ass, all my flustered brain could really fixate on was that my idea of the perfect fantasy at that exact point in time would be to be on my knees in front of Will, with my head under the apron and my mouth wrapped around his cock. The thought alone was almost enough to make me harden right there. I wanted under the apron and, despite having had more than my fill the night before, I wanted Will. I wanted him hard and dripping, and... still wearing the apron. It wasn't anything I'd thought about before, and my sudden desire at the sight of it was certainly unexpected, but it just was what it was though. Will looked so incredibly sexy in the damn thing that I wanted him. End, really, of story.

Will, however, as though reading my mind – or, alternatively, translating the sound of heavy breathing that was coming from behind him to mean that he was in danger of only having wasted his time slaving over a hot stove – insisted that we eat first and it was while we were sitting in that tiny kitchen that our conversation turned to fantasies. Still holding firmly on to the hope of getting under his apron, I confessed to how taken aback I was by the sight of him wearing it and, both reluctantly and after a lot of gentle prodding, Will shared what his idea of a fantasy just happened to be. It wasn't, needless to say, anything that I'd been expecting.

It wasn't even sexual.

No.

It was...

… To have someone that he could love, trust, and just be himself with. Someone he could grow old with.

All he wanted was a proper, lasting relationship and someone who'd love him in return.

As fantasies go it was beyond innocent. In fact, it was...

… Perfect.

I...

I remember that morning with crystal clear clarity, and although I did manage to fulfil my wish of getting under Will's apron, it's his fantasy that ultimately made more of an impression on me.

Wanted. Loved. Companionship.

Not humiliation, pain, and debasement.

Not...

… This.

Will isn't like the Paul Briggs' of the world and knowing that I inflicted this on him is just, even before it's even really started, tearing me apart from the inside.
Neither the cold air ghosting over his naked flesh or the sensation of Jefferson's invasive touch being enough to bring him to any semblance of life, Jefferson gives an annoyed sounding sigh and, squeezing his fingers tightly around Will's left nipple, gives it a vicious twist that suddenly causes him at long last to both gasp and jerk his head up. Gazing around through wide, vacant eyes, I get the impression that Will doesn't really have any idea of his surroundings or just what it is that's happening to him, but...

It doesn't help.

Not really.

While I can hope and pray that whatever it is they've drugged Will with holds out until it's all over and that he's never fully aware of what he's being put through, it, and I know I'm being selfish here, doesn't help me. I still have to see it. I have to watch a body I've come to think of as mine being used, and I have to try my hardest not to think about everything I happen to know about that very same body. Like, how sensitive his nipples are and how much what Jefferson just did would have both hurt and shocked him. I...

I know they're sensitive because I once made him come just by kissing and licking them.

I know...

... Everything about him.

I know what he likes and doesn't. I know his hot spots and that he's both incredibly ticklish and likes to be able to laugh during sex. I know the feel of his muscles as they shift under my hands and I know both the taste of his cock and the rasp of his tongue as it travels over my body. I know the warmth of his skin and the reassuring strength in his arms when he holds me. I know how to translate the sound of his moans, and I know the expression on his face when he comes.

I know how gentle and how thorough he is, and that he once said that, as he saw enough of it in his job, pain had no place in his bedroom.

I know that this isn't Will.

And I know that it's my fault.

“Jefferson, you mother fucker! For God's sake, leave him alone! It's me you want, not him!”

Scowling, Jefferson gives Will's nipple another twist before stalking over and grabbing me by the hair. “I don't actually... want... either of you,” he snaps, pulling on my hair until I've got no choice but to be gazing up at him as he looms over me. “What I do, however, want is to fuck you up in a way that I hope you never recover from and... This just happens to be how I'm going to do it.” Releasing his hold on my hair, he closes both his hands around my cheeks and leans in close enough that our noses are almost touching. “Every time you see him naked from now on,” he hisses, “you're going to think of my hands touching his skin, and my...” Trailing off, he pulls his hands back and stares down at me through cold eyes. “My cock impaling his ass...”

“What? Jefferson! Please. I'm begging you. Don't do...”

“You set this in motion, Hunt,” he murmurs over his shoulder as he heads back to Will, who's now on his knees with the minions keeping him upright by holding his arms above his head. “Never forget that this is on your head. Now...” Coming to a stop next to Will, he turns around to face me and unzips his fly. “It's going to be like this,” he continues almost conversationally as he pulls out his already half erect cock and gives it a couple of strokes. “For every time you, Hunt, close your eyes
for any longer than it takes to blink, there's going to be another cock up his ass. First there'll be the cocks of the two behind me, and then I'll put the call out for anyone who wants a piece of IMF ass to come by and have a go. Now...” Locking his gaze on mine, he lifts his cock and slowly wipes it over Will's face. “Going on the look of him, I'm doubting he has it in him to take much, so consider yourself duly warned. Watch every second of me fucking with your little pet or he's going to be made to pay the consequences.”

“Fuck you,” I reply through clenched teeth as, not wanting to take his threat lightly, I nonetheless reluctantly nod my agreement. “I'm going to kill you. You know that, don't you. When this is over I'm going to fucking kill you, you sick bastard!”

“Sticks and stones,” Jefferson responds with a shrug as he crouches down and turns his attention to Will. “As for you, My Delirious One, I want you to get this through your empty head as I'm only going to say it once. Don't do as you're told, or so much as contemplate using your teeth and I'm going to lodge a bullet in lover boy's knee. No hesitation. No second warning. I'm just going to shatter his kneecap. Do I make myself clear?”

Something in Jefferson's threatening tone managing to penetrate the fog of confusion in Will's head, he blinks and slowly nods.

“Good boy,” Jefferson murmurs condescendingly as, once again keeping his gaze fixed on mine, he lightly strokes his hand along the curve of Will's cheek. “Now... Open wide.” Grabbing his cock, he hardly even waits for the time it takes for Will to open his mouth before, with a self satisfied grunt, just shoving it in through his barely parted lips. This invasion of his mouth, despite all the warning signs, clearly coming as something of a shock to Will, he gags and begins to cough wretchedly as, moving in unison, the two men tighten their hold on him and stop him from moving. Finding something pleasurable in this sad and sorry scene, Jefferson laughs and, after finding the time to drop me a quick wink, keeps up a steady pace of roughly fucking Will's mouth. Tears begin to run down Will's paler-than-ever face as, gagging, it becomes obvious at least from where I'm sitting that he's struggling to breathe. His chest heaving from the exertion of trying to get enough air into his lungs, he tries helplessly to free his arms from the hands holding them and, terrified that Jefferson's sick game is going to go to far and he's going to kill Will in front of me, I just lose it.

“You twisted fucking bastard! Can't you see that you're choking him? I swear to God I'm going to fucking kill you! That I'm not going to rest until you're lying dead at my feet! You... For fuck's sake! Let him breathe!” Pulling with everything that I've got at the binds holding me to the chair, all I succeed in doing is tearing at the flesh around my wrists but, even as the blood drips down my hands and on to the floor, I barely feel it as the physical pain I now have to be in doesn't so much as come close as to the anguish I'm feeling mentally.

“Jefferson! For God's sake, just listen to me for a second! Can't you see that he can't breathe?”

Pausing in his vicious rape of Will's mouth, Jefferson pulls his cock out and gives me the kind of look that, if I wasn't already frozen, would be enough to turn me to ice. “I'm sorry. Were you saying something?” he murmurs. “I was so lost in the pleasure of feeling my cock hitting the back of your pet's throat that I can't be sure if you were speaking or not.”

“Fuck you!” I shout, hiding my momentary relief at the fact Will is now gulping in huge lungfuls of air behind yet more futile swearing. “You might think that I'm only kidding when I say that I'm going to kill you, but I'm not! So... Fuck you!”

“And... There you are. Wrong again.” Shrugging as he languidly strokes his now fully erect cock, Jefferson glances pointedly at the men holding Will and, knowing a silent order when they see it, one takes both of Will's wrists in his hand and pulls him taut while the other one pushes his pyjama pants
down, exposing him. With what's left of his top pushed back over his shoulders and with his pants around his knees, Will's effectively on display and all but fully naked, and I swear my skin literally crawls at the repulsive sight of Jefferson, as his hand still works his cock, slowly looking him over. Even though he's flushed and, despite the coldness of the warehouse, covered in a light sheen of sweat, Will's still incredibly pale and looking at him like this, with all his bruises and slowly healing wounds on display, makes me feel sick to the stomach. As, injuries notwithstanding, he has a great body, I usually love seeing Will naked. He's smooth, firm, and toned in all the right places, and while I'd be the first to admit the male sexual organ doesn't always make for that much of an attractive sight, his has always struck me as close to ideal. Perfectly proportioned, the right size and, because our far too frequent physicals are a cause of embarrassment to him and he's of the opinion that seeing as he can't escape them he can at least control what the doctor gets to see, barely hidden by a small patch of neatly trimmed hair, his cock, like the rest of him, is usually a sight to behold.

But...

Just not like this.

Not on display against his will, and not with three sets of stranger's eyes gazing down at it.

“You're dead. Do you hear me, Jefferson? Dead!”

“Yeah, yeah. So you keep saying,” Jefferson mutters as, his eyes lighting up with intent, he crouches down and closes his hand around Will's flaccid cock. “I think I've got a better idea now as to what you see in him,” he leers, extending his grip to encompass Will's balls as well as, using the firm grip he's now got on his genitals as leverage, he stands up and pulls Will, stumbling and breathing heavily, to his feet. “It's just a pity I've got no use for it.” With one last yank on his cock that sees Will swaying unsteadily and whimpering incoherently, Jefferson pushes him down on to the rug and within seconds of the minions having yet again followed a silent order that, this time, I didn't even see, he's stripped of what was left of his clothing and is lying there completely naked.

Naked. Shivering. And helpless.

I look at Will and, as I'm fairly certain I know what has to be coming next, there's not a thing in this world I wouldn't give to protect him by swapping places. I'm not saying I'd be able to take it any better than him, but at least I'm in good health and, of the two of us, I'm the one who actually deserves it.

I...

… Deserve this.

Not Will.

Will never did anything to Jefferson, and for the bastard to be torturing him like this is just wrong.

Especially as it's my fault.

“Jefferson... Please... Don't do this...”

I can feel tears, unbidden and unwelcome, well in my eyes as, ignoring me, Jefferson and his men manhandle Will until he's positioned on his hands and knees and with his legs slightly spread. Too weak to hold up his own weight, the minions hold him by the waist on both sides as Jefferson kneels between his spread legs and points his cock at his ass. Glancing at me as he uses his free hand to get a rough hold of Will's hip, he states in a tone devoid of all emotion, “Remember. This is on your head,” and, with absolutely no form of preparation whatsoever, rams his cock straight into Will.
Will, who's not that much of a fan of being fucked at the best of times and who only ever allows it when he's really not wanting to think about the things we'd seen that particular day and who, even then, needs a lot of time and warming up to be ready, not exactly surprisingly howls at the sensation of something before forced so abruptly into his body and begins to sob. Between Will's deep, raw, gasping sobs and the sound of Jefferson's balls as they slap against his ass as he thrusts repeatedly in and out of him, I can barely hear the litany of abuse and hatred coming from my own lips as I shout it out over the cavernous warehouse but, having nothing else, I keep at it because it's all that I have. I yell, and rant, and swear, and make idle threats as all the time tears stream down my face and Jefferson rapes my lover.

There being no end to the indignities being inflicted on him, one of the minions even clamps his hand over Will's mouth while the other one reaches a hand under him and, with no care or finesse, begins to jerk him off.

I watch this, all the time struggling against my binds and ranting like a madman and, just like Julia and Davian all over again, I want to die. In a case of history very much repeating, I'm a menace to those I care about and their suffering is my fault. My delusion of being able to live a normal life very nearly got Julia killed, and now it's Will's turn.

Will, who I foolishly thought was safe. Will, who's IMF like I am and who not only shares my training but who I also thought would always be able to look after himself.

Will, who like Julia before him and, who, until today, made the mistake of trusting me with his life.

“Oh my God, Jefferson! I'm going to fucking kill you, you sick mother fucker!”

My own breathing as laboured as both Jefferson's and Will's is, I clench my nails into the palms of my hand and actually scream myself hoarse as, with final thrust that even with the hands holding him nearly see Will falling face first into the rug, Jefferson shudders to a forceful climax. Pulling out, he sprays his seed over Will's back and ass and, when his finished, delivers a vicious kick to his stomach that immediately causes him to slump, wheezing, onto the rug. Curling into as tight a ball as he can manage given the pain his body has to be in, Will whimpers quietly to himself and, as Jefferson uses what was left of Will's top to wipe down his cock I can see, for the first time, the small droplets of blood that are splattered on the white rug around Will.

“You bastard! You absolute fucking bastard!”

Tucking his cock back into his pants, Jefferson pulls up his fly and nods to his men. “I've had my fun,” he states, gesturing at the van. “Get him out of my sight.”

Nodding, the men drag Will, who appears – thank God for small mercies – to have lapsed into unconsciousness, by the arms towards the van as, pulling out one of his Glock's, Jefferson begins to head in my direction. “I hope you liked the show,” he mutters, using his free hand to rub himself through his trousers, “as I know I did.”

“Fuck you!”

“The show's over now though, so...” Grinning, he brings the butt of the gun down hard on the side of my head and, just like that...

… Blessed darkness.

~*~
Consciousness descending on me a lot more slowly than it did the last time I came to bound to the chair, I dimly realise that there's hands fumbling over the binds around both my wrists and ankles and, opening my eyes, abruptly jerk back my head. It really not being my day at all, all this succeeds in doing is making the world around me both spin and blur and for a dreadful second I honestly feel as though I'm going to throw up. I'm freezing, my head is absolutely fucking killing me, and...

I remember.

I remember everything.

Jefferson.

Will!

Groaning, I struggle weakly against the rope and cuffs still encircling my wrists and try desperately to focus on the two people tending to me. “Will,” I mumble as, to my incredible relief, the familiar shape of Jane Carter gradually becomes clearer before me as she fumbles with the rope around my right ankle. “I... I need to know know where...” The rest of my question dying on my tongue as, gazing past Jane, I note that both the van and the Chrysler 300 are no longer in the warehouse, I groan again and numbly shake my head. “No...”

“Will's gone,” the voice of Benji Dunn announces from behind me as he gives a grunt of satisfaction at having finally managed to free my left wrist.

Not wanting to so much as hear, let alone believe it, I spin what I can of my body around and, for my troubles, half fall off the chair. “No! He... Oh God... He can't be. He...” Gasping as the enormity of Benji's simple statement threatens to overwhelm me, I shake my head repeatedly and, as nausea rolls over me, close my eyes. “He can't be...”

“Shit!” Jane exclaims, giving up on the rope around my ankle for the time being in favour of cupping one hand around my jaw while she uses the other to give my knee a squeeze. “Ethan! Look at me!” she adds in a breathless, commanding tone as, too far gone to do anything other than follow simple orders like a beaten dog, I reluctantly open my eyes and gaze up at her. “What Mr... Never Thinks Before He Opens His Mouth... behind you meant to say is... That's Will's already en route to the infirmary. He's... gone... from this shit hole, not... He's not dead. Do you hear what I'm saying? Will's alive and, seriously, Ethan, you need to calm down. It's bad, fuck, it's pretty fucking awful, but it could be worse and you've got to believe me that Benji didn't mean what you clearly thought he did.”

“What? Oh God, Ethan! I...” Following Jane's lead in giving up on trying to free me for the time
being, Benji rushes around and grabs my free hand. “I... Fuck! I'm sorry. I never meant to give you
the impression that he was... I... I can't even say it...”

“He's alive?” I query in such a pitiful, anxiously hopeful tone that, even to my own ears, doesn't
sound as though it should be coming out of my mouth. “You're not just...”

“Even if I was about to try my luck at lying to you, Ethan, trust me, I wouldn't pick Will as my
practice subject,” Jane replies, sharing a worried look with Benji as, with a nod, she sends him back
to the task of freeing my wrist. “You have my word that he's alive and that, not wanting anyone else
to see him like... uh... he was, Luther's already driving him to the infirmary.”

“Luther?” I croak, blinking at Jane owlishly as my addled brain tries to make sense of what's going
on here. “I... I don't...”

“As he happened to be in the vicinity he thought he'd swing by to check things out,” Jane responds,
pulling her hand away from my cheek and crouching down in front of me. “As for why he's the one
playing the role of chauffeur, well... He's bigger, you know, and...” Pausing, she grimaces and
abruptly looks away. “Of the three of us he was the one able to lift Will the easiest, the one who'd...
cause him the least pain,” she continues in a hollow tone as, looking annoyed at herself for falling
prey to them, she blinks back tears and gazes out across the open space of the warehouse. “Will, he...
He was just dumped on that damn rug with all the spotlights on him, like... like he was an object or
something! We... For a dreadful minute we thought he was dead, that... Uh... That both of you were,
actually. You were so cold that finding a pulse was...”

“But we found one in the end, and... here we are,” Benji interrupts in what I take to be an obvious
attempt to free Jane from her unwanted reverie. “I know! Why don't you tell Ethan how we even
came to find them, yeah?”

Nodding, Jane drops down into a kneeling position and, possibly so as to avoid looking at me, goes
back to working on the ropes around my ankles. “In any other circumstance it would probably even
be funny,” she states dully. “I mean, Benji, you only gave it to him for a joke, didn't you...”

“Oh, hell yeah,” Benji readily agrees. “God knows I never expected...”

“The mini panic button. You know, the one Benji gave Will as joke,” Jane explains, cutting Benji
off. “The one he told him he could use if he fell down while no one was around and couldn't get up.
It... It was just a joke, but, Will, he... Somehow he managed to snatch it up when they took him,
and...”

“That's how you were able to find us,” I finish, almost as impressed with Will for having enough
wits about him to grab the device as I am in debt to Benji for having given it to him in the first place.
While it may only ever have been meant as a way to take the piss, and I can remember clearly the
unimpressed look on Will's face as he reluctantly took it, the fact that he even had it is something I
know I'll be forever grateful to Benji for.

“We'd have known sooner, only... Uh... Because it had only been meant as a joke I hadn't set it up
for instantaneous monitoring and it only popped up during the hourly sweep of the system” Benji
murmurs in that apologetic tone of his that we all know too well. “I... I'm sorry, Ethan. I should
have... If I'd thought... It... It's my fault, I...”

“No, Benji,” I interrupt flatly as yet another groan slips past my lips and I slump limply back against
the chair. “It's not your fault, it's mine. All of it. It's all my fault.”

~*~*~
Hmm...

... Let's see what we can do about dialling the angst up a notch.

~*~

The simple, far from strenuous task of putting my socks and shoes on very nearly being enough to bring me undone, I rest my hands flat on the mattress behind me and, in the hope of it stopping the room from spinning, just gaze up at the ceiling. I feel...

… Wretched.

I feel like I...

… Deserve to feel.

The lump on the side of my head from where Jefferson pistol whipped me is throbbing and even the smallest, most tentative of movements is enough to make feel as though I'm in very real danger of throwing up.

I also feel...

Empty. Numb. As though, if I were to give in to the urge to start screaming, I'd never, ever stop.

I've been captured before, and I've been hurt before. Hell. I've even had some sort of fucking device implanted in my head that tried to kill me. I know, thanks to my many years with IMF, that the world can be an absolute cesspool and that any day you get to crawl into a bed at the end of it can be considered a good one. I also know...

… Pain.

That is...

I thought I knew what pain was. I've lost people I've cared about. I've even been the cause of some pretty fucking horrible things happening to those I've loved. It's just... one of those, comes with the job type of things. Don't get me wrong. It's shit. Of course it's shit, and each and every time I've waded through the aftermath trying to do what I can to pick up the pieces I've wondered whether it might be time to pack it in, to look for a new career. Perhaps selfishly though, most of the time I actually love what I do. The adrenaline, the sense of achievement at being able to make, even if it is only in some small way, the world a better place. Not to mention the travel and, at times, no expense spared budget that comes with having to sell just whatever it is you're needing your target to buy. I like to think that I've been able to do some good, that I've made a difference.

My childhood growing up on the farm being something that's so distant to me now that I can hardly recognise myself when I look back on old photographs, all of my friends work, or have worked, for IMF and I long ago came to accept that my job defines me. It shapes every aspect of my life and,
while it's not something I've ever said to anyone, I sometimes wonder if I wouldn't actually be lost without it.

It...

It even gave me Will.

Ignoring the fact that he'd somehow managed to work for the agency for years without me even being aware of his existence, IMF handed me William Brandt on a platter and I honestly thought that I had it made. That I had... everything.

My job, a lover who, on paper at least, could have been my clone in terms of expertise and who, along with two of the best friends I've ever had, I got to work with every day, and I was happy. Perhaps even a little smug.

Oh, and definitely deluded.

I was so fucking off with the fairies for thinking I ever had any chance of making it work that I should have just been packed away in my very own padded cell.

This...

Fuck.

This living hell is a creation entirely of my own making.

Will, who I love more than I've ever loved anyone, is lying in bed a few doors down from the room I'm in, and...

I put him there.

My obsession with Jefferson. My ill perceived arrogance that, even if Jefferson did decide to retaliate, I'd be his target.

Me.

Me, me, me.

It's all my fault.

I've failed Will in a way that actually causes me physical pain to so much as acknowledge and I already know that it's not something I'll ever be able to make up to him. Knowing that I'm responsible for what Jefferson put him through, what he... took... from him, it makes the physical pain I'm in seem like nothing. Concussion can be slept off and lumps can go down, but guilt...

Guilt can last a lifetime.

Sighing, I slowly stand up and make my way over to the door. Dr Foster, although I could tell from his expression that he was fully aware that he'd had enough experience dealing with me to know that he was simply wasting his breath, thinks I need to stay here in the infirmary over night but, my health meaning nothing to me at the moment, all I want is to get out of here. I don't want to be lying in bed like a sitting duck in case Jane or Benji feel compelled to visit me and, having been through what happened with both the operations manager whose team has been assigned to look into Jefferson's re-emergence and the Secretary himself, I just see no reason for me to stay.
Leaving the – well and truly undeserved – painkillers and anti-emetics Foster left for me on the small cabinet by the bed, I walk out of the room and, with my sole goal being that of reaching my car which some kind rookie retrieved from the park and drove back to the IMF garage, make my way through the quiet and seemingly abandoned infirmary as though on autopilot. Although, given the time it took to tell my side of the story and the brief nap I took after the men had left me, I have no real idea what time it is, I suspect that it has to be late and that the infirmary is already running on the skeletal staff required for the night watch. Not wanting to run into anyone in case they try to cause a fuss over the fact I'm leaving, the fact that the place is so silent almost strikes me as being the best thing to have happened to me all day and I'm nearly at the door that will take me back into the main IMF office when I see it.

The room, or, if you're wanting to sound pretentious, main suite that's always given over to the infirmary’s most... long stay... guests. Larger and more luxurious than all of the other rooms, it's as much a hotel room as it is a fully functioning hospital room, and... it's a room I'm only too familiar with. Not because I've spent that much time in it as a resident, but because it's the room Will was given when we got him out of that Godforsaken hospital in Mexico City and brought him back here to recover. Seeing him both so injured and so unwell having left me feeling oddly – fragile – flustered, I didn't want to leave his side and spent the better part of the four days he was in the infirmary just lurking in his room. I held his hand while he was asleep and read online news articles to him when he was lucid. I even, much to the annoyance of one nurse in particular, bathed him myself and, when he was feeling up to eating, brought him in chocolate and some of his beloved Pop-Tarts, complete with toaster, to save him from the infirmary's peculiar version of what they seem to think passes as food.

I... know that room well.

Just as I know, thanks to Foster having made a point of mentioning that he could hardly believe he was back in it already, Will's once again in it now. In it, and likely to stay in it for the foreseeable future. While the tearing Jefferson inflicted on him is thankfully minimal, Foster seems to think that thanks to the combination of the cold air, what he was put through, and the strong course of antivirals he's now having to take most likely reacting unfavourably to all of the other medication he was already on, Will's only going to get worse before he gets better. His immune system wasn't up for so much as being out of the house, let alone for what actually happened to him, and the thought of him being at risk of becoming sicker than he's already been just adds to my crushing sense of guilt.

I did this.

It's my fault.

Just call me masochistic though, but...

... I've got to see him

I don't deserve to but, not wanting my last memory of Will being dragged, naked and unconscious, into the back of that van, I...

... I have to see him.

I just do.

Mentally crossing my fingers that I'm not just making a hideous mistake here by giving in to my urge to see Will, I sneak over to his room and hesitantly poke my head around the doorway. To my great relief he's sound asleep and I can't help but smile all too briefly at the sight of Benji slumped, snoring softly and with his mouth open, in the chair next to the bed. His hand resting on Will's, he's in the
exact same chair I spent so much time sitting in during Will's last stay in the room and I'm glad that he's there for him in a way that...

… I can't be.

That I...

… Don't deserve to be.

Will's pale, and I can hear a slight wheeze in his breathing, but he's alive and, no thanks to me, safe.

And, as I can feel my heart hammering in my chest and the world around me threatens to start spinning again, I realise that I really do just have to get out of here.

If I stay, I'll... falter and go to him, and...

… He both doesn't need me and is better off without me.

Biting back a sigh, I move away from the doorway, turn around and, proving that when you're down you're fucking down, find myself face to face with Jane. Holding a take-away coffee cup in her hand and looking almost as weary and just over it all as I feel, the smile of greeting she'd been going to give me quickly turns to a frown as, unable to look her in the eye, I step around her and begin to walk towards the exit.

“Ethan?” she calls out quietly. “Where are you going? Shouldn't you...”

“I... I've got to get out of here,” I mumble. “I... can't be here.”

“What are you talking about? Of course you can be here,” Jane replies as, just as I knew she would, she walks after me. “Not only was Foster quite insistent on you staying the night for monitoring, but... Will... You need to be here for him as much for your sake as his.”

“He...” Risking a glance over my shoulder and being rewarded for my stupidity by an expression on Jane's tired face that's as disappointed as it is disapproving, I shake my head and, knowing that I've got to be on my way, speed up my pace. “He's better off without me. Jane... Just... This... This is for the best...”

“Ethan! You're not making any sense. Will needs...

“For me to stay the fuck away from him!” I exclaim, cutting Jane off as, reaching the door, I push through it and, in the hope of her getting the hint once and for all, actually start to run. Knowing better than to make the same mistake twice, I don't so much as glance over my shoulder to check to see if she's following me, and nor do I slow down until I've jogged down the four flights of stairs it takes to get from the infirmary to the basement parking garage and finally have my Mercedes in sight. I'm not proud of my behaviour, and know that Jane's now been added to the ever growing list of people I need to avoid for their own good, but, and this can probably stretch to include the entire fucked up day, what's done is just done.

The sound of muffled voices coming from the alcove by the elevator telling me that that there's a couple of men standing there chatting and no doubt smoking, I hurry over to the key-safe to retrieve my car keys and punch in the code needed to open it. Although the entire IMF complex is a no-smoking zone, the area by the elevator is the 'go to spot' for the resident nicotine addicts when it's raining and they're not wanting to get wet by using the designated location behind the gym and, my only interest in the men being that they don't try to talk to me, I pay their chatter no real attention as I retrieve my keys and start to make way over to my car.
This, however, doesn't stop me from hearing it.

“Hey. Given that I have it on good authority that Brandt's a fag anyway, he probably enjoyed it…”

Stopping dead in my tracks as a red mist of searing anger instantly settles over me, I shove my keys in my pocket, spin around and, with what feels like plumes of steam billowing from my ears, storm over to the alcove.

“Did you hear what I just said? As a fag he probably…”

“As a matter of fact, I did actually hear it,” I announce acidly as, recognising the man with the offensive turn of phrase as Alan Phillips, an agent who lasted one mission out in the field and who just happens to have spent his next twenty years in the employment of IMF as a trainer specialising in the far from enthralling art of report writing, I narrow my eyes and, without slowing my pace, shove him heavily back against the cold concrete wall. “I'm wishing I hadn’t but, just as you're no doubt wishing I hadn't either, as I've had it so spectacularly brought home to me today, we don't always get what we fucking want!”

“Hunt! I…” Looking more flustered at my – up close and personal – presence than embarrassed by being caught out opening his stupid mouth when he's well and truly old enough to know better, Phillips shakes his head and won't look me in the eye. “I didn't know you were there,” he mumbles lamely as, his co-smoker, a younger man that I'm not entirely sure I recognise with any confidence and who may, or may not be from the cafeteria, gives him a disgusted look and, with a 'nothing to do with me' shrug, takes a casual step back.

“No. Shit,” I grind out. “So, let's see if we're on the right page, yeah. If I were to break in to your home and have my way with your wife, that... would be perfectly fine with you ’cos, hey, as a straight woman she'd probably just love, hell, would most likely be... gagging... to have some unknown man force himself on her.”

“I... That... That's not what I…”

“No? Could have fooled me,” I snarl, cutting Phillips off mid-apologetic babble as, hating him right at this moment almost as much as I despise Jefferson, I grab him by shoulders and ram my knee forcefully into his crotch. “Next time,” I add flatly as I spin on my heels and, without even bothering to check out how he's faring from being so roughly kneed in the balls, once again set off towards my car, “think twice before mouthing off about something you obviously wouldn't have a fucking clue about!”

“You... You're mad, you are! Steve, you saw what he did! He had no...”

“Don't look at me like that,” the other man interrupts with a dry snort, “as I happen to be on Hunt's side in that what you said was just fucking wrong.”

“But... It was only meant as a joke.”

“Yeah. Some joke.”

Still seething, I tune the men out and, not a moment too soon, both unlock and open the driver's side door to my Mercedes. Climbing in behind the wheel, I pull the door shut, buckle my seatbelt, start the engine and, without giving myself time to think about just how much I’d like to give Phillips a heart attack by driving straight at him, drive out of the park and turn the car in the direction of the exit ramp. Too caught up in thoughts of hatred towards everyone from Jefferson and Phillips, to myself and, while I'm at it, the unfairness of the world in general, I don't notice that my hands are shaking
until I'm at the top of the ramp and waiting for a break in the traffic to pull out onto the road. My hands are shaking, my concentration is shot to shit, I'm yet to be convinced that I'll even be able to make it all the way home without vomiting, and, as I know I wouldn't have thought about actually turning them on myself, all I can say is that all the other motorists on the road should thank their lucky stars that my car possesses both automatic headlights and rain-sensing wipers.

But...

It just is what it is.

Jefferson's an asshole. Phillips I now know to be an asshole as well.

And...

… I've lost it.

Traffic, despite the heaviness of the rain and the fact that the LED screen in the centre console is telling me that it's nearing midnight, being heavy enough to command as much of my attention as I can muster to give it, I concentrate on focussing on my driving and, as the kilometres tick slowly by, am just beginning to feel that I'm finally a little more in control when, taking the left turn at a particular intersection, I realise that without even thinking about it I'm heading for Will's place. Having been staying there with him for the past week, I just...

Damn.

Lowering the window in the hope of some of the cold night air waking me up, I execute a quick u-turn without so much as glancing at the traffic and, as horns blare and tyres screech around me, speed off in the direction that I should have been going in the first place. Strangely mortified by my lapse of — intelligence — concentration, I shake my head as the bracing air circulates around the interior of the car and, with no small degree of effort, focus solely on making it back to my house in one piece. Once, no doubt to the great relief of everyone else who just happens to be out and about tonight, there, I accept that I lack the patience required to put it away safely in the garage and just abandon the car on the driveway before making my way up to the front door.

My hands still feeling as though they're at odds with being both connected to my body and capable of just what it is I want them to do, I fumble over unlocking the door for what feels like minutes and, once I'm finally inside, very nearly set the alarm off as I dither over entering the security code to disarm it. Eventually though I manage to press in the right numbers and, after shutting the door and locking it, head on unsteady feet towards the kitchen.

Feeling emptier than I can ever recall having felt before, and this includes dealing with the deaths of my parents, I use the light from the hallway to guide me and, with the sole intention of getting myself a glass of water, am halfway to the sink when I see something that, even though I know it to be entirely irrational, causes both my breath to catch in my throat and my head to spin.

It's a plant.

Will, thinking it was the done thing to do, originally bought the plant as a house warming gift for Jane when she moved in to her new apartment six or so months ago. He then, as is his usual way, applied far too much logic to his planned gift and came to the conclusion that giving it to Jane would
simply result in it suffering a cruel and unusual death and that, because of this, he'd be better off getting something else and just giving it to me instead. I tried, or so I thought at the time anyway, to counter his logic with some of my own in that, basically, if he thought I'd be any kinder to it than Jane would that he had rocks in his head, but he wouldn't have a bar of it. And that, really, was that. Jane, in another spot of Will-inspired logic, got a radio controlled Charger for her new apartment, and I scored a plant.

A plant that's now causing me to unravel and that, thanks solely to Will's care and attention in ensuring that it lives in a self-watering pot with just enough slow release fertiliser to keep it happy, is looking as vibrant and healthy as it did when he first landed on my doorstep with it.

And I know... I just know that...

… I'm going to be able to see signs of Will in each and every room of my house.

Our relationship having reached that easy, taken for granted stage months ago, we've got in the habit of treating each other's homes as little more than an extension of our own and Will, being a creature of habit, has a collection of his belongings scattered around everywhere here. There'll be, because he's forever misplacing them and has just decided that if he leaves spares all over the place he'll always be able to put his hand on a pair, his reading glasses on both the coffee-table in the living room and the bedside table on his preferred side of the bed. Then, in the bathroom they'll be his toothbrush, favourite products, and the blue towels he talked me into buying when I'd just been going to grab the first ones my hands reached for in the shop. Not to mention his Nike's, for the rare occasions I manage to drag him out for a run with me, by the back door, and, in the kitchen, one of the pair of black mugs with the word 'Helper' emblazoned on it in white that Benji gave him last Christmas.

He...

He's just everywhere.

Everywhere I look I'm going to see Will.

Will, whose presence in my life I took very much granted and who, because of me, is now once again lying in a hospital bed.

A noise quite unlike any I've ever heard come out of anyone before, let alone myself, slipping past my lips as my legs give way beneath me, I slump down on to the floor and, crawling over to it, press my back against the side of the breakfast bar. Hugging my knees to my chest as silent tears stream down my cheeks and I struggle to breathe, I rest my head down on my folded arms and, for what may well be the first time ever, just give up.

I'm done.

I've done it this time, and...

… I'm out.

~*~
“Well, shit. If that ain't a relief,” Luther drawls as, prodded awake by his foot not entirely gently poking my thigh, I slowly open my eyes and peer groggily up at him as he stands over me. “For a second there I honestly thought you'd done something stupid like die on me.”

“And miss the fun that is my life?” I retort as I take stock of the few facts that are currently staring me, quite literally, in the face. One, I'm still slumped on the kitchen floor where, just for something different, I obviously passed out last night. Two, by squinting at it really carefully I can just read on the microwave that it's only six-thirty in the morning and, three, because today is clearly going to be as much of an award-winner as yesterday was, Luther's let himself uninvited into my house and is looking down at me with an expression of obvious concern on his face. Oh, and four... I still feel like complete and utter shit. My head hurts, my body is telling me in no uncertain terms that I'm too old to be sleeping on a cold kitchen floor and, not that I have any intention of letting Luther know this, I feel no more in charge of myself than I did when I left the infirmary.

“That good, huh?” Frowning, Luther holds his hand out towards me. “Come on, then. Let's get that ass of yours up off the floor.”

“Maybe I’m happy down here,” I mutter as, nonetheless placing my hand in his, I let him help me up. “Maybe I... was down there for a good reason. Did you ever stop to think about that?”

“As I really did have a dreadful moment of thinking you could have been dead, no, I didn't stop to think about it that way,” Luther replies, keeping his hand curled tightly around mine as, still frowning, he carefully looks me up and down. “Seriously though, Ethan, are you okay? You look like shit, and...”

“Given that I feel like it, I may as well look like it too,” I interrupt with a shrug, “but... Don't worry about me. I'm fine.”

“Uh-huh. And I'm Bugs fucking Bunny,” Luther counters sarcastically. “But, fine. Have it your way. It's not like I came here wanting to play touchy-feely, let's-share-our-feelings time with you anyway.”

“Now, on that...” Pulling my hand free of Luther's, I walk over to the table and sink down into the nearest chair. “Not that I don't love waking up to your foot in my thigh, but... Why exactly... are... you here?”

“Because I thought you needed to hear just what it is I've got to tell you in person,” he states matter-of-factly as, looking solemn, he joins me at the table and takes a seat. “You're not going to like it. Hell, I think it sucks too, but...”

“Will? If... If you're going to give me bad news about Will then...”

“Chill,” Luther mutters, cutting me off and fixing me with a wry look. “He's as... fine... as you are and, if you don't believe me, believe this... If there was bad news to be delivered about William then, trust me, as I just ain't that much of a masochist, there'd be no way in hell I'd be the one volunteering to give it to you.”

“He's...” While I'll own up to being a little curious as to whatever it is Luther feels as though he has to tell me in person, my main concern is still – instinctively – very much Will and I need to be
satisfied about his condition before I can move on. “You're sure he's... fine?”

“About as fine as you are at any rate.” Shrugging, he leans back in his seat and, as though he's just made up his mind about something, gives a small nod. “Look. From what I heard from my source in the infirmary he's about as... fine... as can be expected. He's got a fever, and the doc's decided that he'd be better off not having any visitors for the next twenty-four hours in order to give him time to rest which, as you can imagine, has ruffled the feathers of Jane and Benji, but... He's fine. He's not in any danger, and...” Pausing, he gives me a pointed look. “He got to spend the night in a comfortable bed which, hey, is more than can be said for someone else I happen to know, and... he'll live. Like you, he's a stubborn S.O.B., and he'll get through this.” Pausing again, he leans forward and, after a moment's hesitation, reaches out his hand and gently gives my arm a poke. “As much as I don't want to be saying this, given what I saw when I walked in here, of the two of you he's actually less of a cause for concern than you are.”

“...” Pulling my arm way, I shift the chair further out of Luther's reach and shake my head. “It's not about me and, really, I'm fine. So... What is it you're wanting to tell me?”

“Want? Shit, no. Want... has absolutely nothing to do with it.”

“Then...” Just call me psychic, but I can't shake the impression that I'm not going to like whatever it is Luther's going to hit me with. It's early morning, he's attributed enough weight to his news to drive over here and let himself in to my house, and now he's gazing at me with an unreadable expression on his face, so... Yeah. All in all it's just not looking good. “What is it you're... here... to tell me?” I query cautiously as, just wishing he'd get it over and done with already, I fold my arms across my chest and give him an expectant look. “Come on, just spit it out already. I mean, I'm taking it that delaying the inevitable isn't going to make it any better or anything like that.”


“Jefferson! Unless you're here to tell me that mother fucker's been found dead in a gutter somewhere, I don't...”

“He's handed himself into IMF,” he states, scowling as he calmly talks all over the top of me. “While you were in the infirmary last night, he walked in to the reception area and announced that he wanted to surrender himself in to IMF custody and cooperate fully in respect to sharing all the information and contacts he's gathered over the years in exchange for both protection and immunity from prosecution.”

Although I hear, and fully comprehend everything Luther's telling me, I just, I...

… Honestly can't believe it.

Handed himself in? Had the nerve to offer up intelligence regarding the shady world he operates in exchange for protection?

That...

… Given that he would have known all along that his end game was to go crawling in to the secure confines of the IMF, he did what he did yesterday safe in the knowledge that I wouldn't be able to touch him, that...

He could just get away with it.

His knowledge and, so it seems, hatred of me being far greater than I ever gave him credit for, he put on that disgusting performance in the warehouse, just to...
Win?
Get one up on me?
Prove beyond all reasonable doubt that he's a calculating, morally reprehensible douche bag who gets off on manipulation?

“I...”

“Ethan? You okay, man? You're looking, I don't know, a little...”

“I'm fine,” I murmur, returning Luther's concerned gaze and flashing him a grim smile. “Why wouldn't I be, huh? Like you just said, Jefferson's handed himself in and...”

“They're buying his buying his bullshit,” he mutters. “While not, thankfully, falling hook, line and sinker for the promises of intel beyond their wildest dreams that he's trying to sell them, the Secretary still has enough interest in the deal he's offering to be willing to play along and consider it.”

“What? No!” I jump to my feet and, as both a sense of nausea rolls over me and I immediately feel light headed, go over to lean my back against the breakfast bar. “You can't seriously be sitting there telling me that they're falling for his crap? It... It's a ploy. It has to be. He's up to something. I... I don't know what it could be, but he has to be up to something.”

“I'm with you one-hundred percent,” Luther replies as he swivels around in his chair to better face me. “The mother fucker's too clever to just throw in the towel and roll over.”

“But...”

“They're still erring on the side of giving him the benefit of the doubt.”

“Even after...”

“What he did to William, yes.”

“I...” Shaking my head, I push away from the breakfast bar and, even though it only makes me feel more dithery and empty headed, start to pace the length of the kitchen. “Fuck! This isn't right. None of it's fucking right. Jefferson needs to pay for everything he's done, not just... be handed the fucking keys to the IMF on a plate!”

“I agree, but...”

“This isn't right,” I repeat, coming to a stop in front of Luther and giving him a beseeching look. “He's playing them and... they're just falling for it.”

“Not... entirely... falling for it,” Luther corrects as, grabbing my hand, he pulls me down into a chair. “Instead of keeping him inside the IMF which, for all we know, might have been his goal, they've put him up in a four star hotel in the Circle and have plans to fact check and confirm the first piece of intel he gives them before sitting down and talking deals.”

“Big whoop,” I mutter, banging my hands down on the table before leaning back in my chair and, just for good measure, giving the table leg a kick. “So he's in a hotel instead of holed up in HQ, big fucking whoop. He's still playing them and the fact the Secretary has even fallen for it just... disgusts me. Jefferson's responsible for untold deaths, both personally and as a result of all the weapons and drugs he's traded over the years and...” Trailing off, I shake my head and stare down at my hands. “He can't be allowed to get away with it,” I add in a soft, flat tone that immediately causes Luther to...
narrow his eyes and shoot me a warning look. “I realise that the lure of being able to pump him for information is great, but he can't be allowed to trade it in exchange for a blind eye being turned to all the damage he's caused. That, of course, is assuming that he's being genuine here and doesn't just have something far bigger in play which, personally, I don't believe for a second. So... No. He can't be allowed to continue down this path.”

“Maybe not, but you're not going to be the one to stop him,” Luther bluntly declares as, still staring at me intently, he closes his hand tightly around my wrist and presses it down against the table. “Ethan, I know what you're thinking but, listen to me here, don't... Just don't go there. I came here because I wanted you to hear the news in person, not to... start the cogs whirring in your head as to how you might be able to get to him. As... Are you listening? You can't. I get it, I do, but you can't so much as contemplate going after Jefferson. He's being guarded around the clock, and...”

“If you don't think I could get past a couple of guards then, wow, Luther, you mustn't think too highly of my abilities.”

“Oh, I... know... you could get past the guards. What I also know is that if you choose to go after Jefferson on your own, it won't be because of everything he's done and the ten years you've chased after him. No, it'll be for revenge. And, hey, again, I get it. The bastard crossed a line yesterday and he deserves to pay for it, but, Ethan, and I can only pray you're actually listening to me here, you've got to leave well enough alone. He'll show his true hand at some point, or perhaps one of his... associates... will learn of his attempt to deal with the IMF and arrange to have him taken out themselves, but you... You can't go after him. Not in cold blood.”

“You weren't there,” I murmur, pulling my wrist free of Luther's hold on it and once again folding my arms across my chest. “You didn't have to watch it, or... hear... that the only reason he was even doing it was simply to get at you. Luther... What he did to Will, he only did... for me. He... He's that fucked up that he... hurt... Will for no other reason than he wanted to destroy me, and I... I just don't think I can stand calmly by while he gets on with whatever his end game is.”

“You can, and you're going to,” Luther counters. “Yeah, yeah. It's hard, and it sucks, and, fine, you're actually right on every count. Jefferson's a douche, he's no doubt playing IMF, what he did yesterday just proves that there's something far from right about him, and... you've still just got to let everything play out. You'd be the number one suspect even if you did succeed in both making your peace with killing him cold blood and following through with it, and it's just not worth it.”

“I bet I could cover my tracks in a way that would make it impossible to prove I'd done it,” I state with a defiant shrug. “I'm not saying I'm going to do it, but...”

“Nor are you going to say that you're not,” Luther finishes as, looking as though he's had enough of this conversation, he pushes back his chair and stands up. “Again, I get it, and, again, I'm telling you to get the idea out of your fool head right here and now as, hey, you've got far better things you could be doing with your time. In fact...” Pausing, he taps me on the shoulder and waits until, with some reluctance, I've turned to look up at him before adding, “How about this, yeah... This is what I'm here to tell you you're going to do with yourself today. First you're going to have a sleep, not on the floor but in your actual bed. Take a pill if you need to, I don't care, just sleep. Then, after waking up, showering and having something to eat, you're going to take yourself into the infirmary where you're going to put on one of your patented performances of pig-headed determination and 'won't take no for an answer' arrogance until Foster relents and lets you in to see William. And that, Ethan, is all you're going to do. You're going to look after yourself for a bit, and then you're going in to be with William where, contrary to what I suspect is your current opinion on the subject, you belong. Have I made myself clear?”
“Crystal,” I mutter, giving Luther a quick salute as I stand up and, in the hope of him getting the hint that he's more than free to leave now, begin to head in the direction of the front door. “Despite everything he's done, I'm not to think about Jefferson at all and am to just let him get away with it.”

“In this instance, yeah. That's it exactly,” Luther retorts as he follows me up the hallway. “Just... Don't do it. You can't change history and just need to focus on the future. Seriously, Ethan, just leave well enough alone and, even though I know it'll be hard, don't even think about him.”

~*~
Chapter Notes

Apologies for posting the next 'chapter' later than usual. (Damn reality!) On the plus side, it should -- all being well -- mean there's only 2 days until the next bit...

~*~

Hard?

Don't even think about him?

Luther, I'm sorry to have to say, could not have been further from the cold, clinical truth if he tried.

Not thinking about Jefferson and whether I should or shouldn't go after him isn't so much as just... hard, as it is simply impossible. I can't... not... think about him. Despite following Luther's instructions in terms of having a proper, half-a-sleeping-pill inspired, sleep, followed by, yes, both a shower and something to eat, Jefferson is still all that I can think about. I passed out, both on the bed as opposed to in it and still wearing the clothes I'd put on in the infirmary, grinding my teeth and trying not to think about how much I'd like to wrap my hands around the bastard's throat and just keep squeezing until his heart stopped. Then, upon waking and finding myself once again in the grips of the less than compelling reality that I seem to be existing in now, I went straight back to thinking about him even as I was going through the motions of showering and, for no other reason than I knew I had to, shoving food into my mouth.

Jefferson.

What he did to Will and, because they simply go hand in fucking hand, just why it was he did it.

Everything he's ever done. From betraying the IMF and causing the deaths of Joseph Arcus and Bianca Nguyen, to providing weapons to ISIS and kidnapping women to sell as sex slaves in the Middle East, all the way to being behind the assassination of the American diplomat in Moscow.

How he's not, contrary to how the Secretary is probably viewing him, a source of valuable information pertaining to the shady world he slithers around in and is in fact simply the same as he's always been – and that's an irredeemable oxygen thief.

How...

... I know that I could do it.

I could kill him.

I'm fairly confident I could live with having done it on my conscience, and I'm actually positive that, with careful planning and patience, I could get away with it. I'm not an assassin and have only ever killed in either self defence or in the pursuit of successfully completing my mission, but I have the skills required to see it through and it goes without saying that I certainly possess enough of an incentive to see it done.
In fact...

… What is actually hard is finding a reason... not... to take matters into my own hands and to just rid
the world of his offensive presence once and for all.

He deserves to die. He just does. He's caused suffering to an untold number of people and...

… I'd be doing the world a favour.

It wouldn't be revenge, it'd be...

… A service to the community.

I could do it.

I... should... do it, and there's a part of me that... wants, quite desperately, to take the plunge and just
go through with it.

Only...

… There's another part of me that... doesn't... want to do it.

Don't get me wrong, I want him dead, and the quicker he's no longer amongst the living the better,
but what I'm just not so certain on is whether I want to be the one who actually does it. It not being
as though I've never taken a life before, I think I could live with having killed him in, as Luther
called it, cold blood, but at the same time I just can't shake the thought of...

… What if it's the first step down a very slippery path?

Having no family that I'm aware of, it's not as though there'd be anyone left behind to mourn him,
and God knows he's responsible for enough deaths of his own, but if I did it would it be for the, in a
sense, greater good, or would it simply be revenge for what he did to Will?

I've wanted Jefferson for ten years. For ten long years I've hunted him and done whatever I could to
try to bring him to justice. But, at the end of the day, that's all that I ever wanted. Justice. I wanted to
bring him in and see him locked up. I didn't want him dead, I just wanted him stopped. Same goes
for everyone else I've ever been after. I want them stopped and incapable of doing any more harm.
I'm not going to sit here and say that watching Davian die wasn't without its own sense of macabre
satisfaction, but if he'd survived to live out the rest of his miserable existence behind bars then, yes, I
could have lived with it.

If I kill Jefferson because what he did to Will has pushed me into a very dark corner, who's to say
that won't be my default, go-to position for everyone who ever hurts anyone that I happen to care
about?

And I don't... I just don't want to go down that path.

Maybe it wouldn't prove to be a problem at all and Jefferson really is such an unique case that it
would just be a once-off, never to be repeated event.

Or maybe I... could find it all too easy to move on from and, because of this, feel no need to hesitate
over doing it again.

As questions to contemplate go, it's, like everything else at the moment, hard.

I want him dead, and I can justify it happening until the proverbial cows come home, but I just don't
think I want to be the one to do it.

Which leads me to...

… The message I've got typed out on the computer screen in front of me.

**

A Community Service Announcement

Act of Contrition?
Agent JFSOON spotted returning to the fold.
Absolution Sought? Secrets for Security?

Act now or wait for him to speak.

Anonymous

**

If I hit enter, which given that I've been staring at it for over an hour now is just another thing I'm currently dithering over, and the message is posted on a section of the dark web favoured by the arms dealing, people smuggling, despotic scum that make up Jefferson's particular field of expertise, it'll flag his return to the IMF to those in the know and, hopefully, sign his death warrant. Whatever his motives for handing himself in are, and I still don't for a second believe it's simply because he's had enough of the high flying life he's been leading and wants to turn over a new leaf, there's still a reasonable chance he'll be willing to give up just enough genuine intel to achieve his goals and that, in turn, could easily be a cause of considerable concern for those he's had dealings with. So considerable, in fact, that they mightn't think twice of doing whatever it took to silence him permanently.

There's no guarantee, of course, that any of them will actually care enough about his apparent change of heart to want to do anything about it, but by putting it out there and drawing it to their attention there's still a definite chance that the thought of Jefferson talking to authorities might ruffle some high enough feathers to make positing it well worth my while. I know that they'll see it because I've used the 'high alert' code by starting each of the lines of my message with the letter A, and I know that there'll be a few big names who, if nothing else, will investigate further before deciding whether to act on it or not, and, or so I'm leaning towards anyway, it has to be worth a chance.

The forum being one I'm familiar with using, I'm confident that my message will reach its intended targets and I know, given all the firewalls my laptop is currently bouncing through, that it's never going to be traced back as to having come from me, and...

… It could work.

It just could.

There'd only have to be one of the many underground figures Jefferson's had dealings with over the years to be worried enough about what it is he might have to say and, by having gone to no more effort than both writing and posting a message, my work would effectively be done for me. It mightn't happen as quickly as I might like it. Hell, it mightn't even happen at all or, proving that if you want something done you've just got to do it yourself, they could possibly even choose to extract him instead of just taking him out. I think though, given my wariness of what doing the deed myself might mean for me in the long run, that it's a gamble I'm leaning towards taking. Jefferson will be marked as of interest to those with the wherewithal of doing something about it and how they choose
to react will simply be out of my hands.

What will be, will be, in other words.

Perhaps I'm just clutching at straws because I want Jefferson to pay for what he's done while, at the same time, not feeling as though I'm fully dragging myself down to his level, but I really am just leaning towards hitting the 'enter' key to post the message and being done with it.

If it sets something in motion then... so be it, and if doesn't then... I'll have still done my bit and will still be able to sleep at night with a clear conscience.

Sighing, I lift my hand in anticipation of setting my decision in concrete by tapping the enter key when the sound of my cell receiving yet another text message causes me to reach instead for my phone. I know that the message will only be from Jane, as she's been busily sending them to me all day, and that by reading it I'm only indulging in a spot of 'kicking myself while I'm already down', but I just can't help myself. Jane's messages, all of which have been deteriorating in tone as the hours have ticked down and I haven't sent a reply back to any of them, in an odd sort of way have been giving me a vague sense of connection as I've been sitting here and I feel as though I owe it to my entire team to keep dutifully reading them. I can't reply, or even answer the phone when it rings, but I can read the messages and, from a careful distance, take note of just what it is my current behaviour is putting my friends through.

From starting with 'Where are you?' and 'We're worried. Are you okay?', Jane's texts then moved on to the likes of 'Stop behaving like a dick and reply' and 'Just what is your problem, huh? Fine. Things are bad, but you're just making them worse', before, really wanting me to know how little she was beginning to think of me, and ending with, 'Will's asking for you. What am I supposed to tell him?'.

Now though, an hour or so after what I was starting to think had to be her last message, she's pulled out all the stops and gone with...

'For God's sake, Ethan. Pull your head out of your ass and put yourself in Will's shoes for a second.'

And, just like that, I stare down at the screen of my phone and realise that she's right.

The issue of Jefferson, the one I've been fixated on all day, I can put to bed by just posting my message and leaving his fate in the hands of others, but Will...

It won't change anything or I suspect even help, but Jane's right.

I do need to put myself in his shoes.

And, in search of my own form of absolution, I need to do it now.

~*~
“Oh yeah. Suck it, bitch.”

If I liked research or had absolutely nothing better to do with my time, I’d love to know whether the urge to... mouth off... during sex had a direct link to watching pornography or whether it was just... instinctual and something that has always been done. Did the Ancient Greeks or Romans feel compelled to grunt, 'You're a dirty little whore,' or, 'Fuck! You've got a tight ass', or was panting and moaning enough for them? Has the age of being able to access 24/7 pornography made everyone feel as though they... have... to talk dirty while getting it on? Is the repetitive crap that comes out of porn stars mouths' actually scripted, or does it come naturally to them?

I'd also quite like to know what the general consensus towards it is. Do you do it without thinking? Do you feel as though you... should... do it? Does being called a bitch and being told that you've got a tight ass add to the moment in a positive way?

As for me personally, I'm not a big fan of it and don't think it adds anything to the moment at all. It doesn't particularly bother or offend me, and whenever I've been with someone who's felt compelled to keep up a running commentary about just what it is we're doing I've always been able to tune them out without too much difficulty. In terms of actual preference though, I can do without it and, luckily, as until now he's the only one I've been with for the last two years, I know Will feels exactly the same way.

I can still remember walking out of the bathroom in our hotel suite in Vegas and finding him sitting on the bed and watching, with an adorably bemused expression on his face, a porn video that he'd accidentally stumbled across while aimlessly flicking through the channels. He couldn't, and he made a point of making sure I was clear on this and that he hadn't been watching it because it turned him on or anything like that, believe the utter garbage coming out of the man's mouth as he went about his business and had just become momentarily transfixed by it. Not the visuals of what was going on on the screen, just the appalling audio and how, not only would it have to be one of the least sexy things he'd ever heard in his life, but how he also just didn't get it at all. This, of course, led to a discussion about the compulsion to talk dirty during sex and, perhaps inevitably as we had no plans for the evening and were alone in the suite, we then decided after a couple of glasses of scotch to give it a go ourselves.

And...

… The results were hilarious.

Will couldn't keep a straight face and started to laugh every time he tried to come out with something, and, to be honest, I wasn't much better. We even paused a couple of times and turned our attention back to the porn video in the hope of it showing us where we were going wrong. This, however, only made us laugh even harder when we tried to copy, with the right arrogant tone and sense of conviction, the increasingly stupid lines coming out of the man's mouth and, in the end, we just had to give up and admit defeat.

It...

… Was fun.
We laughed, and somehow through all the giggling and merriment we reached climax together, and, more so than ever, we knew how similar our tastes were and that what we had... worked.

“Oh yeah, baby. Wrap those lips around my cock.”

The man's perfectly pointless, yet, I'm sure, meant as quite complimentary, grunted statement bringing me back to reality with a thud, I push all thoughts of Will and what we'd once had out of my treacherous mind and concentrate on just what it is I'm currently doing. Although she would have meant it in terms of what my disappearing act must be doing to his sense of worry and anxiety, I chose to translate Jane's message about putting myself in Will's shoes to mean that, albeit in my own, far more willing and by actual choice way, I needed to put myself... through... something similar to what he'd been through.

That, because it's also what I actually deserved, I needed to be...

… Used.

To give my body over to strangers and let them do what they want to me.

I know it's nowhere near the same as what Jefferson put Will through, that I'm here, naked, on my hands and knees and with a cock in my mouth while hands belonging to someone I haven't even seen caress my ass and squeeze my balls, entirely by choice and that no-one's forcing me to do anything that I don't want to, but...

It's all that I've got.

I can't replicate or fully put myself through what he had to endure, and that this, giving myself over to strangers in the closed off back room of a gay club, is as close as I'm going to get to, as Jane put it, putting myself in his shoes.

It's not my sort of scene, and I'm far more detached from what's happening to me than I am turned on by it, but it's still... something. Men that I don't know are using my body for their own pleasure and, with no thought to either my own or how I'd prefer to be just about anywhere else, I'm simply going along with it. They think I'm here for the same, solely physical reason that they are and, given that it's what I think I deserve, I just don't have a problem with it. My body's theirs to use as they see fit and I don't care what they do to it. In fact, if anything I'm almost disappointed at how... mundane... it all is. Condoms are used without hesitation, the hands touching me are gentle, and even the cock being shoved in my mouth is being done so in a slow and steady rhythm.

I'm not in pain, or feeling as though I'm in danger of choking, and while there's no denying it's a little awkward being naked in a room full of men I've never seen before, it's...

Nothing.

I feel nothing.

I'm here by choice, I know I could call a stop to things at any time and that the men would respect my wishes, and...

… It's not enough.

Compared to what I'm responsible for putting Will through, it's nowhere near enough and, regardless of knowing full well that it's not going to change a single fucking thing, I know that I need, that I... deserve... more than this. That, contrary to what I might have thought as I got into my car, tonight isn't going to be a once off at all.
Bringing the Mercedes to a smooth stop, I kill the ignition and, gazing out the windscreen at my chosen destination for the night, take a moment or two to idly contemplate if things are about to get any stranger than they've already been today. Sixteen hours ago, as I lay, hungover and feeling sorry for myself in bed, I would have readily put money on my planned trip to Hard Wired being the, for the want of a better way of putting it, strangest thing that was most likely going to happen to me any time soon. I had, after all, made my mind up to accept the recommendation of a complete stranger – who, creepily enough, having been perceptive enough to notice my lack of enthusiasm for the goings on in the back had decided to take it upon himself to slip me both a card and whispered praise for a, and I quote, 'far more full on' club because he thought it might be what I was looking for – and, as soon as it was late enough, take myself off to a hard core sex club that was running a theme night entitled 'Taken By Force'. So, you know, my day, or so I'd thought anyway, was always going to end on something of a strange note.

What I hadn't thought, hell, what I hadn't even considered as so much as a possibility, was just how strange my entire day was going to be. In too much of a funk to think outside the confines of my own, self-induced misery, I'd planned to just lay around in bed, or possibly on the sofa, for most of the day before having a shower and getting ready to – whore myself – go out. Having posted my message on the dark web last night before leaving for the club, Jefferson was no longer a gnawing concern of mine, and Will...

Well, in a completely cowardly move I'd just decided not to think about him at all. Not how much I loved him and was hating being apart from him, or how I owed him one hell of both an explanation and an apology, or even that what I was doing by avoiding him was, whether he'd see it that way himself or not, in his best interests.

It wasn't that he was dead to me. More that...

… I was being stoic in the face of my – brought home to me in the harshest way possible – realisation that I was bad for him and he was just better off without me.

As it turned out though, given that my doorbell rang before seven and I was sitting in the back of a nondescript black sedan that was being driven towards HQ by a dead-from-the-knees-up grunt by quarter past, I didn't have time to think much about Will today even if I'd been wanting to.

No.

I was too busy being interrogated in a small, windowless room about what my whereabouts were for the previous nine hours by some blank faced idiot in a cheap suit and who, it just has to be said, had all the charisma of a dead fish. Although I’d never met him before, I still couldn't be bothered taking any notice of his name and, no more interested in what it was I was seemingly being accused of doing than I was in life in general, just let the surreality of what was happening wash over me as, failing miserably in his attempt to be imposing, he sat there asking tedious question after tedious question.

Where had I been? Would any witnesses corroborate this? Did I own, or have access to such and such a rifle? Would I be willing to submit to a GSR test to prove whether I'd recently fired a weapon? Had I been anywhere near Dupont Circle? Did I believe myself to be above IMF? What did I know about Charles Jefferson?
At first, until his questions took on an obvious slant towards Jefferson and I started to dare to hope that something had happened to the bastard, all I gave him was bored, disinterested attitude. Seeing no reason whatsoever to be anything other than honest, I told him in far more detail than he required about not only the club I'd been at, but also just what exactly it was I'd been doing while I was there. It was clear that hearing all about my – naked – activities at the club made him uncomfortable and, although I knew it was childish of me, this only encouraged me to go into even more graphic detail. Small things obviously amusing small minds, for a moment or two I even felt something akin to entertainment as I watched him both squirm in his chair and struggle to maintain a professional, non-judgemental expression.

Then, however, his questions started to relate to Jefferson and, suddenly, the game I'd been playing with him took a back seat and, for the first time since I'd been dragged out of bed by the sound of the doorbell, I found myself actively engaged in what was going on.

And...

Although it took him hours of both questioning and leaving me to stew on my own in the room, he finally got to the point of it all and announced that Jefferson had been killed by a sniper's bullet between the eyes as he pulled back the curtains of his hotel room at six AM and that, yes, given my history with him, I was being considered as a valid suspect.

Dead.

Jefferson was dead and while I might never know whether my post had anything to do with his murder or not, there... was still a good chance that it had.

And, yes.

I smiled at the news.

I listened to the drab little man explaining how Jefferson had been killed and that I was being considered a suspect, and, not caring that it would have only fed his suspicions towards me, I smiled.

And I kept smiling as my hands tested negative for gun shot residue and both CCTV footage and the tracking on my Mercedes put me outside the club I'd told him I was at. It may then have changed to something of a smirk as news came through of images having appeared of a well known assassin catching a flight out of Dulles only hours after Jefferson had been shot, before returning once again to a broad, smug smile as, twelve hours after I'd been marched in through the doors, I was marched outside and thrown into a cab.

Jefferson was dead and, whether I'd had anything to do with it or not, I'd been cleared of any involvement, and, one small part of the sad and sorry mess was finally over.

Yet...

It still didn't really make one iota of difference. Although the world may have been better off for no longer having Jefferson in it, I was still responsible for what he'd done to Will and I still felt... Make that, I still... feel... empty.

Empty, and in need of... something... that I hope to be able to find inside Hard Wired.

Pain. Force. A better inclination of what Jefferson did to Will. Something, anything, to get through the obliterating sense of nothingness that's become my constant companion since what happened in the warehouse.
I just want to feel...

... Something.

And if it comes from being on my knees with a collar around my neck in a leather club called Hard Wired, then... So be it.

The sound of a car pulling up behind mine causing me to look in the rear vision mirror, I note that it's only a cab and, feeling as though the time has come for me to get moving, reach for the door handle. Hard Wired being nothing like the club I went to last night, instead of having posters stuck to its walls declaring that it was Madonna week and that anyone who came dressed as the 'Queen of Pop' would get free entry, there's a blackboard by the door stating that tonight's theme is both 'Taken By Force' and 'Anything Goes' and the men milling around outside are all dressed in varying amounts of black leather. There's also a white neon sign that moves from being a whip to a pair of handcuffs in the blackened window and, just on the off chance the average passer by hadn't yet got the idea that club was far more into bondage than it was pop music and dancing, one of the men standing by the door and having a smoke even has another man, naked save for a tiny, tight pair of black leather shorts and with a leash around his neck, on all fours by his feet.

All in all it's as far from my usual preferences as I can get and, never having been one to back down from anything, it's something I feel as though I just have to do.

So...

Here goes nothing.

Opening the door, I climb out of the car and, as the cab pulls out from behind the Mercedes and drives past, use the remote to lock the doors before slipping it into my pocket and starting to walk across the street. I've barely made it a step or two when the sound of my name being quietly called out from behind me causes me to come to an abrupt stop.

Having no expectations or even, given the current state of my life, any particular interest in just whoever it is that's wanting my attention, I slowly turn around and, to my absolute, immediate horror, find myself staring at Will.

Will, who must have been dropped off by the cab after tracking me down by either my phone or car and who, in the all black clothing he's wearing and under the dull light of the streetlights, looks positively awful. Pale and sickly, and with dark circles under his eyes, he looks both frail and as though he never should have gotten out of his hospital bed, let alone be out and about on his own in the cold night air.

He...

He still looks like Will, though.

My Will. The man I shouldn't have anything to do with in case it causes him to come to even more harm.

I...

I can't do this.

I can't deal with Will looking at me with such a worried expression on his face, and I...

... Can't falter.

“What are you doing here?” I query flatly as, folding my arms across my chest in a defensive gesture,
I make it clear that I have no intention of making my way any closer to him.

“I wanted... Uh... That is, I... I had to see you,” Will replies as he too, although in his case I'm sure it's got far more to do with reasons of needing the warmth than it does defensiveness, folds his arms across his chest. “Ethan, I...”

“You look like shit,” I interrupt, looking him up and down dismissively as I fight the urge to just bolt across the street and disappear into what is suddenly striking me as the safe confines of the club. “You also look as though you never should have left the infirmary. So, here's an idea, how about turning around and going straight back there, as I... I've got somewhere I need to be.”

“Like where? That club across the street?” he counters in hoarse tone that tells me he's only a moment or two away from starting to cough. “Ethan? I can guess... Uh... I think I can guess why you're thinking you have to do this, but... Damn!” The combination of both the cold air and talking, not to mention the exertion of being up and about, adding up to get the better of him, Will coughs loudly for a few seconds before, punctuated by yet more bursts of coughing, adding, “Ethan... You don't have to do this. I... Oh God... Hang on, I... I'll get it out in a...”

“As there's nothing to... get out,” I state, cutting him off as, blaming myself as much for the fact he's even here, and clearly suffering for it, now as I am everything else, I just want to run and hide, “just save what little breath you've got and be on your way. This... This is what I have to do.”

“Then...” His coughing finally under control for the time being, Will takes an unsteady step towards me. “If you're going to insist on going in there, then... That's where I'm going to,” he states, fixing me with a look of steely determination. “And, anything you're planning to have done to you in there, I... I'll have done to me too.”

“What? No!” Horrified that he could even consider such a thing, I shake my head and, startled into action, pull the remote out of my pocket and use it to quickly unlock the car. “That... No! I... Fuck! Just go back to the infirmary, Will. If... If you knew what was good for you you wouldn't want to be anywhere near me!” My piece, such as it was, said, I open the car with a shaky hand and, as Will gazes at me through wide, worried looking eyes, climb in behind the wheel. “Seriously, just... Stay away!” Pulling the door shut, I start the engine and, without even checking to see that he's a safe distance away from the car, pull away from the curb and speed off down the street.

Too... shocked... by everything that's just happened to think straight, let alone plan my next move, I focus what attention I've got left on keeping the car in a straight line and just drive. I don't look in the rear vision mirror to check to see whether Will's still standing there or not, and nor do I consider what... could have been. Not... that he was willing to go into a leather club if that's what it was going to take to get through to me, and not that... I could have so easily waved the white flag of defeat and just taken him in my arms. Desperate to see me, he tracked me down, took himself out of the infirmary even though it was glaringly obvious that he's still not in any fit state to be out of bed for anything longer than a few minutes, and...

Fuck.

He came to me and, because I had to, I...

... Pushed him away.

I pushed him away, left him standing, close to midnight, on a street without any immediate form of transport, and...

... Ran.
I ran away from him with my tail between my legs, and now I...

… I don't think I could fall any further if I actually put some effort in to it.

I...

I just don't know what it is I'm supposed to do. Knowing that it'll probably be the first place he'd try next, I know that I can't just go home and knock myself out with either a pill or by downing a bottle of scotch and, not knowing of any club to retreat to other than the one I went to last night, the urge to return to my original plan of handing my body over to others just... isn't there. Not because I'm afraid of Will not getting the hint to leave well enough alone and finding me on my knees, but because, odd though it may sound, I just don't want to be in any sort of position of... expectation. Strangers or not, the men would be in their right to expect some sort of... engagement... from me and, after my run in with Will, I just don't have it in me.

Spotting a dive of a bar on the opposite side of the road I've somehow found myself on, I bring the car to a sudden stop and, wanting a drink more than I've ever wanted one before in my life, get out and make my way over to it as though on autopilot. Entering the bar, I note with a sense of relief that there's only a dozen tired and lifeless looking patrons scattered amongst the tables and, walking up to the bar, decide there's no point messing around and order a bottle of scotch and one glass. The barman having the look of a man who's both seen it all before and couldn't care less about it, takes my money without comment and, seeing no need to move from my current position, I sink down on a stool in front of the counter and just crack the bottle open right then and there. After half filling my glass with the amber fluid, I bring it up to lips and, noticing that my hand is still trembling, quickly gulp it down before pouring myself another and swallowing that too.

The only thing I've eaten today being half a sandwich after I got back home from HQ, there's nothing in my stomach to soak up the alcohol and, within minutes of having started drinking, I can feel a nice, 'nothing matters' vibe settling over me. Being nothing if not – a control freak – always needing to be aware of, and in charge of my surroundings, I'm not generally a big drinker and don't particularly like getting drunk, but given how fucked everything currently is, in this instance I actually welcome it. The sense of warmth and strangely comforting... nothingness. The scotch is of average quality at best, but it's all mine and I plan on drinking it until I'd be lucky to remember my own name.

It's only a diversionary tactic, as everything will still be shit when I sober up, but right now I'm just happy to take it anyway.

I'll drink, and I'll zone out my surroundings and just why it is I've found myself here, and when a hand lightly touches my shoulder and a voice murmurs that I've probably had enough, I'll...

… React badly at having my void of alcohol induced nothingness interrupted and lash out without thinking.

Then, it all happens at once.

My fist comes in forceful contact with what has to be somebody's face.

An arm is placed around my throat as something tiny pricks the skin on the back of my hand.

And a voice...

… A female voice that, as the floor begins to feel as though it's sliding out from under me, I feel as though I should recognise, announces...
“You know, despite not having seen you for a few days you're already pissing me off and, seriously, Ethan, enough is enough!”

Then...

From the nothingness I'd been revelling in only a moment ago comes...

… Blackness.

~*~
I wake, of all places, on my own bed. Sprawled diagonally across the middle of it and still clad in everything, from my coat to my boots, that I was wearing when I left the house, I feel as though I've been hit not just by one truck but an entire convoy of them and can't quite work out whether I should be grateful for having returned to being amongst the living or... disappointed... that whoever drugged me wasn't kind enough to finish me off. Lifting my head slowly off the pillow, I groan at the almost Herculean effort of moving and, blinking the clock-radio into focus, read that it's just gone past five in the morning.

"See? I told Benji that even pissed as a newt you'd be conscious before six," a familiar female voice states from the corner of the room. "I think the poor boy was worried that I might have taken things a step too far and killed you."

"Jane?" Groaning again, I struggle inelegantly into a vaguely upright position and, swinging my legs over the edge of the mattress, turn to face Jane as she sits in the arm chair by the door into the en suite. The only light in the room coming from the hallway, I can't quite make out her expression but what I can clearly see is that it's definitely her, and that, unless I've added hallucinating to everything else that's currently wrong with me, she really is here sitting in my bedroom. Which, you know, given that Will materialised outside of Hard Wired last night, doesn't even particularly surprise me. Hell. For all I know Benji's probably somewhere around here as well.

"The one and only," she replies, leaning forward and frowning as she looks me up and down. "Now... How are you feeling?"

I shrug and, as it almost makes me throw up, immediately wish that I hadn't. "Like shit."

"Don't take this the wrong way or anything, but... Good," Jane responds in a matter of fact tone. "After your little performance last night it's about what you deserve. God, Ethan! What were you thinking, huh?"

"You were the one who drugged me?" I query, ignoring her – quite frankly unanswerable – question in favour of trying to get one of my own answered. I don't care if she did, and truth be told I'm not that far gone that I don't realise it was probably for the best anyway, but I still want to get to the bottom of what happened last night as much as I possibly can. I doubt I'll like it much but, as seems to be par for the crappy course these days, shit happens.

"I was," she confirms with a nod as she stands up and stretches before walking over to position herself in front of me. "After you hit Will, I..."
know. If I had... Oh God... Jane, I...” Groaning, I reluctantly look up at Jane and shake my head. “Tell me! Please... I've got to know. Did I hurt him?”

“Ethan... What's done is done,” she replies, squeezing my knee. “Don't do this to yourself. Will's...”

“I hurt him, didn't I?”

“It doesn't matter. It's in the...”

“Jane, tell me. I've got to know.”

“Fine.” Sighing, Jane gets up and takes a seat on the bed next to me. “Foster said you hit him with enough force that it's a miracle you didn't manage to break his cheekbone.”

“Oh God... I...” That's it. Learning that I very nearly broke Will's cheekbone makes it official. I've now hit rock bottom and doubt I'll ever be able to crawl my way up from it. “I didn't know it was...”

“It's okay,” Jane murmurs in a soothing tone as she places her arm around my shoulders. “We all know that you were in no fit state to recognise anyone and, listen to me, Will doesn't blame you. Sure, he may have got yet another bruise out of it but, and I hope you're listening to me here, Ethan, nothing's broken and... he's fine. You lashed out without knowing who he was, and... he doesn't blame you. Hell. None of us blame you, and the only reason I drugged you was because I didn't want to risk making an even greater scene.”

“You should have killed...”

“Don't! Don't even dream of going there.”

“But... Will! I hurt...”

“Did you know it was him?” Jane asks plainly as, ignoring how I'm stiffening at her touch, she tightens her arm around my shoulders and pulls me against her.


“Then there's your... get out of jail free... card. You lashed out at a stranger who dared touch you, that's all.”

“But it was Will...”

“You didn't know that.”

“No, but... I still shouldn't...”

“Maybe not, but you did and it's history.”

“Will...”

“For God's sake, Ethan. Listen to me. Will's made his peace with it. He's also exactly where he wants to be and... you're just going to have to come to terms with that before you succeed in making things even worse than they already are.”

“Huh?” Something in everything Jane's just said capturing my attention, I glance at her and murmur, “What do you mean Will's exactly where he wants to be? Isn't he back in the infirmary?”
“He's asleep in your guest bed,” Jane states, pressing her hand down on my thigh and giving me the sort of warning look that tells me she's not going to take it well if I try to jump to my feet and make a run for it. “Given that he's as stubborn as you are in his own way, he refused point blank to be taken back to the infirmary and not even Foster himself could get it through to him that that's where he'd be better of. Don't you get it? He wants to be with you and, if this is the only way he can achieve it, then... So be it. He'll put his health second to his need to be with you.”

“Foster's been here?” I query in a dull tone as, not wanting to think about it, I gloss over everything she's just said about Will being determined to stay with me.

“He has. I asked him to meet us here after what happened at the bar and, seeing as he wasn't too happy at his number one patient having taken it upon himself to escape, he made an exception to his usual 'no home visits' rule and was waiting out the front as we pulled up.”

“And...?”

“While he's not at all happy about it, he eventually admitted that, so long as he continues to take his meds and rest, Will should be fine to stay here. He's not to over exert himself and, if his body is telling him that he needs to sleep then, hey, that's what he's to do, but...”

“Foster didn't drag him back to the infirmary, then...”

“No. He's here, and here's where he's staying.”

“I...” The magnitude of everything that's happened since I felt that hand on my shoulder at the bar finally adding up to get the better of me, I clamp my hand over my mouth and, after jerking free of Jane, stumble into the en suite. Dropping to my knees in front of the toilet, I lean over the bowl and throw up until there'd just have to be nothing left in my stomach.

I...

... Hit Will.

Not content with abandoning him by the side of the road, I then nearly broke his cheekbone, and...

He's here.

In my house.

And, still seeing something in me that he shouldn't, he's refusing to leave, and...

… I can't.

I can't do this.

“Look. Why don't you have a shower and clean yourself up before meeting me in the kitchen for a coffee, yeah,” Jane murmurs from outside the door. “Just... Come on, Ethan. Things are bad, sure, but they're not as bad as you're so obviously convinced they are, and... Whether you like it or not, Will needs you.”

Somehow resisting the urge to tell Jane that he needs me like he needs a hole in the head, I don't reply and, after getting slowly and unsteadily to my feet and flushing the toilet, make my way over to the basin. Turning the cold tap on, I splash water on my face for a few seconds before straightening up and walking calmly out of the en suite and across the room in to the hallway. Not having it in me to explain to Jane just why it is Will most definitely... doesn't... need me, I then, without once
pausing to think about what it is I'm doing, what it is I'm... running... from, sneak down the stairs and
carefully exit the house through the back door. Not wanting to risk drawing attention to myself by
either taking the time to get the spare keys to my Mercedes, which, given that it's sitting in my
driveway, someone must have driven back here for me, from their hiding spot behind the shed, or
starting the engine, I decide to stick to my own two feet as my chosen mode of transport and, after
creeping out the front gate, simply set off down the darkened street.

I'd call it, walking out on both my friends and my own house, my lowest moment yet, only I'm not
even sure that it is. I mean, is it really any worse than either leaving Will to fend for himself on the
street or nearly breaking his cheekbone? Or the anonymous sex? Or taking a perverse delight in
telling that agent yesterday all about it? Or getting drunk and needing to be drugged by a friend in
order to keep the peace?

Really, if you think about it I'm quite spoilt for choice.

Spoilt for choice, and...

… Beyond redemption.

Feeling, along with the guilt for being the cause of everything, as though I've let everyone I care
about down, my one and only coherent thought is to get away from them before I manage to cause
them any more damage. I don't know where I'm going, or what my grand plan for the future is
outside of right this very moment, but I...

… I've got to get away.

That's all.

Away.

Away from everyone and everything I care about and, seeing as it's caused nothing other than grief
this week, away from my life.

Blinking back the stupid, futile tears I can feel welling in my eyes, I jam my hands in the pockets of
my jeans, lower my head, and just walk. Having no destination in mind and lacking the inclination to
come up with one, I simply put one foot after the other and walk. The sun gradually comes up and
the traffic becomes heavier, which tells me that I must have been walking aimlessly for hours, but
still I keep going. My feet start to hurt, and a dim, whispered sense of logic tells me that I could do
with a drink, but I don't stop or even check my pockets to see if I've got any cash on me and just
concentrate putting as much distance between myself and everything that I've left behind as I can.

Sensing a car pull into the curb and drive slowly beside me, I don't so much as glance at it and
simply quicken my pace.

"Get in to the car, Ethan," the voice of Luther Stickell declares in that no nonsense tone of his that he
only uses when he... really... wants to make it clear he's not messing around as, speeding up a little,
he brings the car to a stop a couple of paces in front of me.

"Thanks, but I don't need a lift," I mutter with a shake of my head as, pretty much unable to miss it, I
note that he's driving a dark blue Maserati that I've never seen before.

"Oh. I'm sorry. Did you think that was a request?" he draws, leaning out the driver's side open
window and fixing me with a look that somehow manages to be even more no nonsense than his
voice. "As you really don't want me opening this door and getting out, get in to the damn car,
Ethan."
While I could, I suppose, attempt to make a run for it, I know there's not a snowflake's chance in hell of Luther just giving up and letting me escape and that, unless I really want to make a scene and make my day even worse than it's already been, I'd be wise to just do as I'm told and be done with it. I don't, oddly enough, want to get in to his car and have him lecture me on the error of my ways, but nor do I really have it in me to do anything about it. So...

“Fine.” Shrugging my acceptance, I walk around to the passenger side of the car and get in. “Happy now?”

“Fucking ecstatic,” Luther mutters, looking at me pointedly until I get the hint to pull my seatbelt on. “I mean, I just... live... for having to hunt down your ass.”

“Yeah, well, some people just get all luck,” I retort, pulling on a bit of performance of clicking my belt into place before slumping back in my seat. “So, now what? You get to play the role of chauffeur and deliver me back to Jane?”

“Nope.” He shakes his head and, after a cursory glance in the rear vision mirror, pulls out from the curb and does a quick u-turn. “I'm gonna buy you breakfast.”

“I'm not hungry.”

“Do I look like I care?”

“Luther...”

“Keep it to yourself, Ethan, as I'm just not in the mood.”

“But...”

“We're having breakfast together and then, hey, you can go about doing whatever it is you think you've gotta do.”

“Fine.” Knowing that this is one of those battles I have no real hope of ever winning, I fall silent for a couple of minutes before giving in to curiosity and asking, “So, as I didn't even know that you'd changed cars, what happened to the R8?”

“Sweet ride, ain't she,” Luther grins, running his hands with obvious delight along the steering wheel.

“Well, you certainly wouldn't get any complaints from me,” I reply, glancing around the Maserati's beige leather interior and nodding. “Mind you, I didn't have any about the Audi either.”

“A man's got a sort of status he needs to uphold,” Luther retorts with a haughty sniff.

“Oh, he does, does he...”

“Mmm... He does.”

“And the Audi...?”

“Was last year's status.”

“Uh-huh. Of course.” Pausing, I give Luther a cunning look. “Now, this status of yours... Are you sure you're willing to risk it by being seen in public with...”

“You're unwashed and bedraggled looking ass?” he finishes, wrinkling his nose with obvious
distaste as he turns to look at me. “Hey, a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do.”

“Even at the risk of his oh-so-important status?”

“Believe it or not, there are a few things more important than a man's status and, yeah, saving a good friend from self-destructing just happens to be one of them.”

“Luther...”

“Save it, Ethan, until we've both got a cup of coffee in front of us.”

Nodding, I close my eyes and, as silence descends over the interior of the Maserati, don't open them again until I feel the car being pulled into a park and Luther kills the engine.

“We're here,” he announces, opening the door and getting out. “It mightn't look like much but, I'm telling you, the coffee's great.”

Following Luther out of the car, I take in the very sixties and very, very stereotypical, small town American diner that, going on its fading paint job, has seen better decades, that's in front of me and, not quite knowing how to reply, settle instead for going with a non-committal grunt and weak smile.

“You'll be thanking me for bringing you here in a minute,” Luther mutters, locking the car before walking around to where I'm standing and placing his hand on my back. “Come on, let's go.”

“What's with the hand?” I mutter with a shrug as, all the time with him propelling me along, we walk up to the diner. “Don't you trust me or something?”

“Given your exploits over the last twelve hours, no, I don't particularly trust you,” he retorts, reaching around me and opening the door.

“Now, see that booth at the back? I'm thinking it has our names on it, don't you...”

Spotting the booth in question, I nod and, walking in to the diner, make a beeline for it. As it would have to be well past seven now, the diner's half full of people eating breakfast and they pay me about as much attention as I pay them as I sink down in the booth and press myself up into the corner.

“Not really wanting to risk your stomach doing something I don't want it to, you good with just toast?” Luther asks as he pulls his wallet out of his pocket before taking a seat on the other side of the booth. “You can have whatever you like, but...”

“I'm not hungry.”

“Don't care. You've got to eat.”

“Then... Whatever. Toast. I don't care.”

“Toast it is, then.” The arrival of our waitress, a bottle blonde with a chest that defies the laws of gravity and lips as pink as her uniform, saving Luther from having to deliver me any more of a lecture regarding my need to eat, he flashes her a practiced, polished smile and quickly rattles off our order as she splashes coffee from the pot in her hand in to the two cups that I hadn't even seen materialise on the table. Once she's gone, Luther gazes at me impassively until, being nothing if not good at reading the signs, I've picked up the cup and taken a sip of the surprisingly good coffee. He then does the same and, as a smile of enjoyment spreads across his lips, relaxes against the back of the booth.

“So, tell me. I've got to know if...”
“No.” I shake my head and curl both my hands around my cup. “I didn't pull the trigger.”

Luther raises an eyebrow and takes another sip of coffee. “No?”

“No. I'm not going to sit here and tell you that I didn't think about it, but... No. I didn't do it.”

“I heard all about the fun day you got to spend with Simpson yesterday.”

“Simpson? Is that his name?”

“Kade Simpson. Born pencil pusher is ever there was one. He didn't give you his name?”

“In one ear and out the other.”

“From what I've heard he was positive that he had you.”

“Yeah, well, seeing as I wouldn't be sitting here if he was right, it seems that he was proven wrong.”

“Apparently so.”

“Look, Luther...” Leaning forward, I drop my voice and, because I feel that I owe it to him, add, “I'm not lying when I say that I didn't pull the trigger, but I... may... just may, mind you... have had something to do with it.”

“Colour me surprised,” Luther murmurs with a knowing smile. “Come on, then. Spill.”

“Maybe I... posted a message on a particular forum that flagged to those in the know that he was looking to trade secrets for immunity. I mean, what anyone reading it chose to do with the information was their business, not mine, right...”

“Well, indeed.”

“Maybe... someone put out a hit on him on the strength of the anonymous post, or... maybe his card was already marked. We'll never know.”

“Just as we'll never know what it was he might have known that was valuable enough to get him killed.”

“And yet... I'll still be able to sleep at night.”

“Yeah. Me too.” Sighing, Luther puts his cup down on the table and looks me in the eye. “I gather you haven't heard then what was found in the bastard's room?”

I shake my head. “Hey. In case it's escaped your attention I'm not really in the loop these days.”

“At the centre of it, but just not in it,” he mutters drily. “You still need to hear this though, so... Get this. You know how, when they took him in, they would have taken all his electronic devices off him for both searching and controlling who he can contact, well... When they were going through his room after his death they found another iPad hidden in a secret compartment in his bag and, on it, they found, carefully hidden, yet another email account and a collection of emails between him and someone as yet unknown that... Wait for it... You're going to just love this. The emails were about working out a price for the... Goddamn Rabbit's Foot! Can you believe it? That mother fucker's end game was to get in to IMF so that he could find the location of the damn Rabbit's Foot!”

Luther's news about Jefferson's ultimate goal being something like the Rabbit's Foot not really coming as any great shock to me, I meet his gaze and sigh. “I knew he had to be up to something,” I
“There was no way known he would have just handed himself in out of the goodness of his heart. And... Yeah. I can believe it. Of course I can. What I'm having a little more difficulty believing is how easily he could have got close to it.”

“The dude was a Grade A player, that's for sure. But... You can see now, can't you, that not only were you right all along, but... even if you were somehow responsible for his death, you're not to feel bad about it or anything as, hey, he had it coming one way or another.”

“Oh, trust me. The one thing I... don't... feel bad about is that,” I retort, dropping my gaze and taking a mouthful of coffee as our Dolly Parton clone of a waitress returns with our plates of food and places them on the table in front of us. “Everything else, though... Luther... Shit! It's all my fault.”

“Bullshit it's all your fault,” he replies, his eyes lighting up at all bacon, eggs, tomatoes, and toast piled high on his plate. “You've got to get out of this rut, Ethan, as it ain't doing a thing for anyone.”

“You weren't there.”

“No. I wasn't.”

“You didn't hear him. He... He made it clear that everything he was doing to Will was on my head. Did you hear that? The only reason Will got hurt was because of me!”

“That's bullshit, Ethan, and if you could pull your head out of your ass for a second you'd know that I was right.”

“It's my fault,” I whisper, picking up a piece of strawberry jam covered toast and, although it's just about the last thing I feel like doing, taking a small bite. “He made it incredibly clear that he wanted me to live with knowing I was the reason for what he did, that... every time I looked at Will I'd know that I was responsible...”

“So what you're really saying then is...” Pausing, Luther brings a huge forkful of food up to his mouth and both chews and swallows it before adding, “You're letting him win. First you let that bastard in to your head, and now you're handing victory over to him on a silver platter. For fuck's sake, Ethan, don't you get it? You're giving him exactly what he wanted. Not only are you being eaten up with guilt, but you're also doing your darnedest to turn your back on the best thing that ever happened to you, and...” Pausing again, he takes another mouthful of food and waits until he's swallowed it before reaching across the table and lightly trailing his fingers along the back of my hand. “What happened, has it changed how you feel about William?”

“Other than he's better off without...”

“That's not what I asked and you know it.”

“It's my...”

“You ashamed of him or anything like that?”

“What?” Pulling my hand back, I glare at Luther for daring to even suggest such a thing and shake my head. “No. Of course not. What happened wasn't Will's fault and... No. Of course it doesn't change how I feel about him.”

“Still love him?”

“I...” I give a small nod and stare down in to my coffee. “Yes. I still love him. Of course I do. It's just...”
“That you're hell-bent on letting Jefferson win,” Luther states softly. “Look. You know I can't sit here going, 'there, there, I know what you're going through', as I don't, not really. What I can do though is sit here and try to get you to wake up to your fool self. By running away from not only William, but also your team and, or so I suspect anyway, everything that makes you... you, you're letting him win. He wanted you to suffer, and that's exactly what you're doing. You're not fighting or trying to see the light at the end of the tunnel, you're just... wallowing... and, while I never thought I'd say this about you, Ethan, what you're also doing is giving up.”

“I...”

Luther flashes me a triumphant smile over the top of a fork full of bacon. “You hadn't thought about it that way, had you?”

“I... No. I hadn't.”

“Yet you're now realising that I'm right, yeah?”

I nod and, for the first time in days, smile as what can only be described as the most amazing sense of relief floods through me. Luther's right. Of course he is. By behaving like I have, I've effectively been handing over continued victory to Jefferson. He wanted me to suffer and, oh boy, have I been suffering. Just as Luther mentioned though, what I haven't been doing is fighting. No. I took everything Jefferson told me and just ran with it.

And...

... No more.

I'm done running.

While I don't for a second think it's going to be easy, from this moment onwards I'm going to fight. I'm going to fight for both the man and the life I love, and I'm going to fight the insidious seed of doubt Jefferson planted in my head. I know that I've probably caused as much damage in my own way as what he did, but...

... It stops now.

For both Will and my friends who haven't given up on, as much as for myself, Jefferson's hold on me stops now.

“Thank you,” I murmur, picking up my toast and, with far more enthusiasm this time, taking another bite. “Now... As I want you to take me home, hurry up and finish eating!”

“Hey! Just because I've finally gotten through that thick of head of yours and you've suddenly turned over a new leaf doesn't mean that I'm going to hurry my breakfast for you,” Luther replies, flashing me a relieved smile of his own. “Now, Ethan... You're not playing me, and really are with me here, yeah? Whether it's any of my business or not, I wasn't joking when I said that William's the best thing to happen to you and I really would hate to see you blow what it is you've got together over what that asshole did.”

“I give you my word that I'm not playing you, that you really did deliver the kick up the ass I was in desperate need of, and...” Trailing off, I toast him with my coffee cup. “Believe me, better late than never, I'm going to fight.”

“Then that's all I need to hear. Now... Let me eat in peace.”
Knowing better than to hurry Luther while he's eating, I try to keep my impatient twitching to a minimum and concentrate on just finishing my toast and coffee. While I know it's not going to be easy, and that I'll probably have to sit through a much deserved lecture from Jane before I can even get to Will to apologise for everything, I still feel far better than I have in days and can't wait to get home in order to put this... new start... into action.

I'll apologise, and I'll grovel if I have to, and...

... I'll make it up to them.

Somehow, I'll make it up to Will, and Jane, and Benji, and even Luther, for letting Jefferson's actions get such a hold on me.

Once Luther's finished his breakfast and I've managed half of my toast, he pays the bill and, going by the brilliant wattage of her smile, leaves a generous tip for the waitress before gesturing me out of the diner and into the car. Having walked even further than I thought, it seems to take forever to get back to my place and not even listening to Luther's explanation as to how he was able to find me by knowing, even it was subconsciously, I'd have to be heading towards one of my caches for either cash or a new identity, seems to make it go any faster. Eventually though he's bringing the Maserati to a stop outside my front gate and, at long last, I'm climbing out as Jane, with her bag over her shoulder, is walking out of the house and along the path towards us.

"Thank God for small mercies," she declares, nodding a greeting to Luther as she opens the gate for me, "something at long last to smile about."

"At long last, indeed," I reply, walking through the gate and directly into her arms that she's holding wide open for me. "Just... Thank you," I add as we hug each other warmly. "I know I've been a dick, and that I probably don't deserve all the effort everyone's put in to getting through to me, but... Thank you."

"Don't be silly, of course you deserve it," Jane murmurs, freeing herself from the embrace and ruffling her fingers through my hair. "I can't even begin to imagine what you must have been going through and am just glad that whatever it was Luther said to you managed to get through to the keeper."

"Mmm... He reminded me that I don't like losing," I respond with a grin as I playfully bat her hand away. "Now, what about you, huh? Given that I've been bracing myself for a lecture, don't tell me that you're leaving?"

"As Benji's got my car and I need Luther to give me a lift into HQ, just call it a reprieve," she replies, returning my grin with one of her own. "Now, I do however want to hit you with a few facts of life before leaving you to it, so... Are you listening?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"No."

"As that's what I thought, Yes, I'm listening."

"Okay. It's like this," Jane states as, linking her arm through mine, she turns around so that we're both facing the house. "I don't want to be the bearer of bad news here, but Foster's actually right in that Will should be back in the infirmary. His big adventure last night, and, seriously, it was a big adventure given that he'd gone from barely being able to make it to the bathroom on his own during the afternoon to tracking you down and getting himself into a cab, has really taken a lot out of him.
and, Ethan, he's sick, really sick. Perhaps even sicker than he was before.”

“Then he should...”

“Yeah. He should. But he won't. He wants to be with you and, not wanting to risk his blood pressure getting any higher, in the end Foster just had to accept it. He's got all his meds, and... Oh! On that, I've left a write up on them for you on the kitchen table so you'll know what he's got to take and when. He's also got, thanks to Benji having gone around to his place to pack a couple of bags for him, everything he needs, and...” Trailing off, she tightens her arm around my elbow and sighs. “Ethan, please... Just be patient and... gentle... with him. Don't go in there on bended knee and beg for absolution straight away, just... be there for him and look after him like you were before... what happened. He needs rest, his medication and, despite his opinions on the subject, to eat. He also needs... you. Again, like before. He needs you to look after him and... reassure him that everything's going to be okay. That... That's all.”

“And... He's got me.” Shifting away from Jane, I turn to face her and plant a soft kiss on her forehead. “It's okay, Jane, I've got this. Again, I know I've been a dick, and that Will has every right to be suspicious of me, but I... I won't let him down. Uh... Again. I won't let him, or anyone else for that matter, down again.”

“Then that, along with extracting a promise from you that won't just leave Will if it all gets too much for you, is all that I can ask for,” she murmurs, giving me another quick hug before stepping back and looking at me expectantly. “So... You promise to tell someone if you're planning on disappearing again?”

“While I have no intention of disappearing again, yes, you have my promise that I won't leave Will to his own devices,” I state. “Seriously, Jane, while I wouldn't blame you for not wanting to believe me, I've got this.”

“In that case...” Flashing me a smile as she spins around, Jane starts to walk towards the gate. “I've got to go. Not wanting to overstay my welcome or anything, I'll probably see you both tomorrow.”

“Just come around whenever you want to,” I reply, giving both her and Luther a wave as she gets into the car. “See you, and... Again. Thank you. Both of you, just... thanks.”

Still smiling, Jane gives me a small wave as Luther pulls away from the curb and, just like that, they're gone and I only have one thing left that I feel as though I have to do before – taking the final step – feeling fully ready to face Will. Entering the house, I shut and lock the door behind me and head straight up the stairs and into my en suite. There, I strip off and, getting in to the shower, quickly wash myself before getting out and, after towelling myself dry, cleaning my teeth and having a shave, pulling on the first pair of clean jeans and long sleeved t-shirt that I come to.

Clean, and feeling more awake and, yes, hopeful than I've felt in too long, I walk out of the bedroom and, knowing that I'm now ready to see him, make my way over to the guest room. Coming to a stop just outside the door, I use the dim light coming in through the cracks in the drapes to just spend a few moments watching Will sleep. Although, thanks to the fact he's sleeping on his side and facing the door, I can see the slowly forming bruise on his cheek from where I hit him, I don't let it get to me – too much – and, leaning against the door frame, can't help but feel blessed to have been given what, really, feels like a second chance. Everything Jefferson said in the warehouse having really done a number on me, I was fully prepared to give up on Will because I'd convinced myself it was in his best interests. Now though, thanks to Luther delivering the wake up call I so desperately needed, I honestly can't think of anywhere else I'd rather be. It's not going to be easy, but what I know is it's going to be is worth it. When Will wakes up I'll hover around him like I did last week and, when he's ready, we'll talk and I'll convince him that, contrary to my behaviour, he means the world to me and
that there isn't a thing I wouldn't do for him.

That, so long as it's what he still wants, I'm as much his as I ever was.

Content that things are finally looking up, I push away from the door and am about to head downstairs when the sound of Will whimpering in his sleep stops me. Will, although he never talks about them, is prone to nightmares and the sound of him crying out has always made me feel helpless. The first time I encountered him having one was in Madrid. Our day having been pretty much shit from beginning to end, we'd not only lost our target but, being more than a couple of steps in front of us, he'd also had the time to kill the innocent family whose home he'd been hiding in. Will was the one who'd found, still in their pyjamas and clutching their teddies in bed, the two small children, and it was clear from how quiet he'd been all day and how he'd just gone to bed the second we returned to our room that their deaths had effected him. Knowing that there wasn't anything that I'd be able to say to him that would help, I'd just left him to it and simply got into my own bed myself and, pleased to be able to put the day behind me, gone to sleep. Then, maybe an hour or so later, I woke up to the horrid sounds of Will crying out in his sleep before waking with a gasp and breathing heavily.

Now, although we were lovers by this stage, our relationship, such as it was, was still more... friends with benefits... than it was anything else and, not feeling as though there was anything I could do to comfort him I didn't let on that I was awake and, as he got up and went in to the bathroom, just pretended to be asleep. I listened to the sound of running water as he washed his face and, once he was back in the room, I listened to him just... stand... by the foot of my bed for what felt like minutes. Finding it all a little odd, I was just beginning to contemplate sitting up when, without any form of warning, I felt the covers being lifted up and Will climbing onto the mattress next to me. He then, once he'd smoothed the blankets back down, settled himself around me and, resting his hand flat on my chest, started to, or so it felt like anyway, knead my t-shirt. It... all just struck me as being so incredibly strange that I didn't know what to make of it. He didn't seem to be wanting sex, and nor did he seem particularly interested in whether I was awake or not. No. It really did appear that he was simply wanting to sleep next to me and it was while I was still considering the oddness of the situation that I just went back to sleep.

When I woke up, it was to both sunshine streaming through the drapes and the knowledge that I needed to get up and go for my usual run, and... it was also to the feel of Will, sound asleep and still curled warmly around me. He was there, where I hadn't invited him, and, out of the blue, I was so... happy... to have him in bed with me that, instead of getting up and going for my run, I just draped my arm around him and went back to sleep.

It was, although we never spoke of it, just special somehow and it was probably at that point that I first started to see him as meaning far more to me than... just a 'good time'.

The second time I heard him having a nightmare was when we were based in an apartment in London and had our own bedrooms. I was heading to bed myself when, walking past his room, I heard him cry out and, without hesitating, I changed course and, getting into his bed, just hugged him to me as thought it was the most natural thing in the world.

And...

… From that night onwards we've always, when circumstances have allowed it, slept together. Be it after sex, or just in pyjamas and in yet another hotel room during yet another mission, or in either Will's bed or mine here in D.C., we've slept together and, perhaps because he's felt safe, I haven't heard Will have another nightmare since that night in London.

Until, that is, now.
Accepting, just as I did that night in London, that there's only one thing for me to do, I walk into the room and climb gently on top of the bed. Lying on my side, I drape my arm around Will's waist and, as he quietens down, hug him back against my body.

I hug Will through the layers of bedding he's sleeping under and, closing my eyes as a sense of peace settles over me, am asleep within minutes.

~*~
~ Chapter 10 ~

Chapter Notes

Short chapter is once again... short.

Yet...

... Aaaaw. *Finally*. (Right??)

(And... To everyone who taken the time to comment - thank you. :-)

~*~

“Sorry!”

With the edge of the blanket he'd been in the process of draping over me still clutched in his hand, Will gazes down at me through wide eyes and, in general, just gives every impression of being frozen to the spot. Dressed in a pair of baggy, old fashioned grey pyjamas that, even as I shake off the last remnants of sleep and slowly sit up, I can't help but wonder if he's turned to, style wise, because of the memories now attached to the pants and long-sleeved top combo that I've always known him to favour, he's pale and as dazed looking as he is apologetic for having woken me, yet...

… Dear God, he's still a sight for sore eyes.

He's here because it's where he wants to be and, regardless of all the effort I've been putting in to convincing myself to the contrary, he still wants... me. The devil on my shoulder, the one's that been my constant friend ever since I came to in that warehouse three days ago, still wants me to doubt the sense of... fighting... for something that perhaps I don't really have any right to have, but I know, more so than ever as I look at Will as he gazes at me anxiously, that it's something I've just got to throw everything I've got into ignoring. I've already wasted three days wallowing in self-pity while Will was having to struggle against his own doubts and fears in the infirmary and, just as I realised back in Luther's diner...

No more.

It's not about Jefferson, or guilt, or focussing solely on the goal of achieving absolution in as quick a time as possible. No. It's about the here and now, and moving forward at whatever pace it needs to take, and Will. It's about this sickly, incredible man standing in front of me who, as has already been spectacularly proven, I'm lost without.

“Sorry?” Shaking my head, I swing my legs over the edge of the mattress and place my feet on the floor. “I think you'll find, of the two of us, I'm the one who...”

“I woke you,” Will interrupts weakly as, letting the blanket slip from his fingers, he takes a step back and, looking increasingly miserable, drops his gaze in the general direction of the floor. “I wanted to make sure you didn't get cold, not... wake you, and... And I'm sorry. I... I shouldn't have...”

“Hey... Shhh... That's enough of that. You've got nothing to apologise for and, as I'd been going to say, of the two of us here I'm the one who should be apologising for, oh God, so much, but...”
Trailing off as I remember Jane's pointed advice of not overwhelming Will with my need to clear the air, I stand up and gesture at the bed. “Come on, you, not wanting to give Foster any reason to doubt my limited nursing skills, let's get you back into bed before you get cold.”

“I...” Lifting his head, Will gives me an embarrassed look and sighs softly. “You're going to think this is pathetic. Hell... I... think it's pathetic, but I...” Pausing, he sighs again and hugs his arms loosely around his torso. “Ethan, I... I'm afraid that if I just go back to sleep that... that this will all prove to be nothing but a dream, that... I'm not really here, or that... you're not really here. It... It's stupid, I know, but that's just how I feel at the moment. Stupid and... not me. I... I don't feel like me and I...”

“Hey... And that's enough of that, too,” I murmur, unable to stand the sight of Will all but disintegrating in front of me, I close the short distance that separates us and lightly place my hands down on his slumped shoulders. “Will... Come on. Just... Shhh... Whether we like, or even want to admit it, you're sick and, because of this, can be forgiven for not feeling like yourself. But... Listen to me, you're still you, and while I'm far from sure that it actually counts for anything, I'm here. You're not dreaming and I really am here.”

“Actually, it counts for a lot,” Will whispers, risking a quick glance at me before, with a small shrug, pressing his body against mine and resting his hands on my hips. “I'm... sick of being sick, and... there are still some things I'm just not wanting to think about, but... knowing that you're here, that... some of this nightmare might finally be behind me... uh... us... behind us, I just want it to be real, you know... I... I'm so far gone that this, I just want this to be real so much that I honestly don't know if I'll be able to cope if it isn't.”

“Does...” Sliding my hands down Will's arms, I give his cold hands a quick squeeze before placing my arms around him and planting a soft kiss on the top of his head. “Does it... Does... this... feel real though?” I murmur, hugging him to me. “I'm here, and I'm not going anywhere, and... you're okay. You are. You just need to take your meds and rest, and, you'll see, you'll get there.”

“But I want to be there... now,” he mumbles, resting his head down on my shoulder and sighing. “I want to stop feeling like this, and...” Shrugging, he looks up at me and pulls a face. “Blah, blah, blah, huh...”

“I wouldn't have put it quite like that myself.”

“Well, I would. I'm still wallowing in self-pity when, you're right, this... does... feel real and I just need to roll with it.”

“Roll... in to bed, more like,” I mutter with a dry, yet genuine laugh as, making a careful point to avoid looking at the still forming bruise marring his cheek, I give his forehead a gentle kiss and, shifting around him, start to slowly guide him towards the bed. “Come on. Given that I've hardly been feeling like myself these past few days either it's not as though I can stand here and tell you that I don't get what you're saying as I do, but...”

“Onwards and upwards,” Will finishes as, stifling a cough, he allows me to help him down on to the edge of the mattress. “I'm not dreaming, you're really here, and... one of these days I might even stop feeling like this.”

“Mmm... One of these days this will all seem like nothing more than a particularly shitty dream. Now...” Noticing that Will's quite literally fading, energy wise, before my eyes, I place my hand on his chest and apply just enough pressure on it until he gets the hint and lies down. “Will... Again, I know what you're feeling as, trust me, I'm feeling it too, but... Don't fight your body and just sleep as much as you need. Everything, and I really do mean everything, can wait until you're feeling better.
I'm not going anywhere and, if you need me, I'll be here. I'll be here reminding you to take your meds, and hounding you to eat, and I might even, if you're feeling up to it later, get the fire in the living room going and set you up on the sofa. So...” Leaning forward, I pull the bedding over him and, as he tries to gaze up at me through eyes that can barely stay open, smile. “Seriously, it... it's okay. Everything's okay.”

“You're okay too, you know,” Will replies, pulling his hand out from under the covers and, although it's clear the simple act is taking it out of him, holding it towards me. “Ethan... Even if it is only a stopgap until the inevitable bites us on the ass, let's... just concentrate on moving forward, yeah...”

Nodding, I take his hand in mine and squeeze it warmly. “Sounds like a plan to me.”

~*~
Stretching out my legs, I cast a quick glance at Will and, once I've confirmed he's still focussed on the – I suspect, to him, seemingly never ending – task of finishing his apple, smile contentedly to myself. Life might still be far from brilliant, and if an independent auditor was to look over the current state of our lives they'd probably just throw their hands up in despair, but, be it against the odds or not, I'm just... happy. Far happier, at any rate, than when I woke up this morning and – not wanting to sugar coat things here – effectively took distancing myself from my life to a whole new low by walking out on not only my friends but also my own house.

When Jane told me this morning that I'd hit Will, I honestly thought that I'd hit rock bottom and that there'd be no coming back from it.

Now, however, thanks to the determination of Luther, Jane, and even Will himself, I'm here, sitting on the sofa with Will in front of a roaring fire as rain falls heavily outside, and...

... I really do just want to pinch myself.

There might be an incredibly long way to do, and I'm not for a second deluded enough to think that everything is going to just fall neatly back in to place over night, but it's still a start. Compared to what I woke up to this morning, it's not only a start but it's a good one. I know that I've got to fight and, even more importantly, I know what it is I've got to fight for.

And that's...

... This.

Not IMF or my career. Not even just to prove to myself that Jefferson was wrong in his belief that he knew what it would take to break me or because I'm a stubborn son of a bitch who refuses to give in.

No.

It's this.

It's sitting here on a rainy night with Will's feet in my lap as, propped up by pillows and wrapped warmly in a blanket, he lies sprawled comfortably across the sofa. There's colour in his cheeks from both the shower he had before coming downstairs and the heat of the fire, and he's here because he wants to be, and...

I'll take it.

I'll take it all day, and all night long.

To anyone else it might be just mundane, nothing, really, to take special note of at all, but to me it's easily the opposite. In fact, to me it really is nothing short of perfect. Simple. Comforting.

“What are you sitting there smiling to yourself about?” Will murmurs as, defeated by the thought of having to eat the last slice of apple, he glances over at the coffee-table and, clearly finding it well and truly beyond his reach, hesitates over what to do with his plate.

“Just... This,” I reply, giving his foot a quick squeeze through the blanket before – solving his
dilemma for him – taking the plate out of his hand and, not wanting to lean forward anymore than he does, resting it on the arm of the sofa. “Sitting here with you in front of the fire after...” Not wanting to ruin the moment by going down the path of comparing it to the hell I woke up to this morning, I shrug and smile a little brighter. “Well, you know, after a hard afternoon of household chores!”

“Household chores?” he echoes, giving me a look from under a deliberately arched brow as he settles back against the pillows and wriggles his feet in my lap. “Dare I even ask?”

“Shopping online for groceries, not to mention having to put them away once they got here, has to count as slaving around the home, right?”

“Er... If you say so?”

“I know! See that fire over there?”

“It's a bit hard to miss, really.”

“Well, unlike just turning the heating up, getting it to look like that actually took a fair bit of hard, back breaking labour.”

“Back breaking, huh?”

“How about a... bit of sweat and a lot of swearing?”

“Well, whatever it took, it was worth it,” Will states with a smile. “And... You're right. This. This is definitely nice, and... Needed.”

“Very much needed,” I confirm, giving his foot another squeeze as, both suddenly and quite randomly, I feel as though I've got to start trying to clear my slate. As in... Now. Right now. Despite knowing full well that it's still probably not the time and that I'm about to take something that's been quite pleasant and... drag it down with me, I just can't talk myself out of it and, with a sigh, murmur haltingly, “I... Will... I'm sorry. Just... I want you to know how... incredibly... sorry I am...”

“For what?” he replies, his smile slipping slightly as he gives me a pensive look “For bullshitting me about how hard you worked this afternoon?”

“For... Everything. You name it and I'm sorry for it. Just... Fuck!” Tilting my head back against the sofa, I run my fingers through my hair and, as I suspect I'm going to do a lot of in the coming minutes, sigh heavily. “I can't even think of anything that I... don’t... need to apologise for. I... I let you down, and...”

“Ethan... Don't. You don't need to...”

“I... You know, everything having seemed like one fuck up after another, I don't even know where to start.”

“Then don't. Don't start, and... don't worry,” Will states quietly. “It's okay.”

“No. It's not. It's very much... not... okay,” I mutter, sitting up a little straighter and glancing at Will. “I mean...” Pausing, I gesture at the nasty bruise on his cheek, the one... I... put there, and grimace. “Take... that... for example. That... That's not okay at all. I... Will, I...”

“It doesn't matter,” Will interrupts, trying unsuccessfully to catch my gaze. “Ethan...”

“Oh. It matters. It really, really matters.” Feeling increasingly agitated, I run my fingers through my
hair again and try to focus on staying both still and in one place. If it wasn't for Will's feet on my lap and the knowledge that I'd probably only cause him to fall off the sofa if I moved too quickly, I'd like nothing more than to jump to my feet and, in the vague hope of it helping calm me down, pace around the living room. I know I started this, but, shit... Although it's only just begun, it's already proving to be even harder than I ever would have thought it would be.

“Ethan, don't do this to yourself,” he replies in a reasonable tone. “You didn't know it was me, and...”

“It doesn't matter. I still...”

“Unless you're going to sit there and confess that you knew it was me and did it intentionally...”

“What? No. Of course I didn't know it was you. Shit. I... I could never hit you.”

“Then I rest my case. You didn't know it was me, and this...” Pausing, he points to the bruise. “It doesn't matter. Like everything it will heal and you're not to take it personally. Besides...” He pauses again and gives a small shrug. “If you must know, I was far more... taken aback... by being left on the road than I was by...”

“And then there's... that,” I mutter, cutting him off as, feeling a tension headache beginning to form, I rub my hands over my forehead and, just for good measure, sigh. “Oh God, Will. I... You guessed it, I'm sorry for... that... brain fade as well. I just... Shit! I know this is going to sound fucking pathetic, but I wasn't ready or... in the right place... to deal with you right then and there and I... I reacted without thinking. It was a shitty thing for me to do, and... Damn!” Not having the faintest idea as to where I can go with this, I shrug and add lamely, “At least you had your phone with you and were able to call for a lift.”

“Actually... While, yeah, I had my phone with me, I couldn't use it to call anyone because its battery had given out during the cab ride,” Will replies in a light, possibly even – dare I say it – vaguely amused tone. “Now, while this, of course, wasn't exactly ideal, I didn't mind... too... much because it had at least managed hold on until I had your car in my sight before dying on me, so...”

“So... I left you standing on the road without any means to call for help,” I mutter, “that... That's just brilliant. I mean, I really did it that time, didn't I...”

“But wait, it gets better,” Will retorts with what, unless I'm so desperate for some sort of silver lining here that I've started imagining things, sounds suspiciously like a laugh. “Your disappearing act being about the last thing I ever expected, I was still standing, rooted to the spot and coughing like there was no tomorrow, when one of the men who'd been out the front of the club came over and asked me if I was okay.”

“Oh...” I want to sound engaged with what Will's telling me. I do. It's just hard though when, really, my preferred option would be for the floor to open up beneath me and swallow me whole. First I... panicked like I've never panicked before and just left him there, and now I learn that he wasn't able to immediately call for assistance. Seriously. With friends like me, who the fuck needs enemies?

“Mmm... He was big, and dressed all in leather, and...”

“I'm sorry. I shouldn't have...”

“He was great. They all were, actually,” Will continues, calmly talking over the top of me as though I'd never even opened my mouth. “His name was Sam and, once I'd managed to get out through all the coughing that I needed a phone, he not only didn't hesitate to give me his, but he also insisted
that, as it would be warmer, I wait with him and his friends inside the club.”

“Oh...” This just keeps getting better and better, it really does. I didn't get into Hard Wired, but Will did. Just... Fantastic.

“Oh... is actually a pretty good way of putting it too and, believe me, the less said about the black leather sofa he had me sit on the better. All I could think about was what it would look like under a black light, and... Yeah...”

“Will, I... I'm sorry. I never should have...”

“The stickiness of the sofa aside, and, okay, I could have lived without the guy on the leash eyeing me off as though he was putting some serious thought into humping my leg...”

“What? He...” I groan and, curling my hands into fists so that my nails are digging in to the palms of my hand, once again rest my head on the back of the sofa. “Oh God...”

“Chill. It was, sofa and Dog Boy aside, fine. They gave me a bottle of water and sat with me talking about the weather and... how the guy in the Merc had to be a real douche bag... until Jane got there and, just for the cherry on top of things, sent Benji in to get me.”

“Benji?” Okay. That, I wasn't expecting. Being referred to as a douche bag by strangers, yeah, not so much because if the cap fits and all that, but Benji having to go into the club, that really... is... a bit on the amusing side. “In a...”

“Uh-huh. Benji in a leather club,” Will confirms with another muffled sounding laugh. “You should have seen it. His eyes almost popped out of his head and, sensing his... naivety... the guys really went out of their way to give him the impression they were wanting to eat him alive. You should have seen him blushing and stammering and... trying his hardest to hurry me out of there without being rude. It... Honestly, it was just funny. They were only teasing him, and I'm grateful to them for both helping me and for making something... awkward... work out okay, but...” Sighing, Will lifts his feet off my lap and slowly sits up. “The men were kind, and I think they were more worried about me passing out on them than I was about... having my leg humped, but... Ethan... You don’t have to tell me if you don't want to, or... can't... tell me, that's fine. I was just curious, that's all.”

“I don't,” I declare hastily as, both sitting up and feeling as though I desperately need to do something with my hands, I fuss over making sure Will has his blanket wrapped securely around his lap and legs. It... That... That's not my type of thing at all. I...” Flustered not even beginning to cover how I'm now feeling, I jump to my feet and go to stand in front of the fireplace. “Will...”

“It's okay,” he murmurs softly. “If you don't want to, or... can't... tell me, that's fine. I was just curious, that's all.”

“You...” Damn it. For all the clinically detached thought I put in to the reasons behind just why it was I thought I wanted to be fucked by strangers, I never, not once, paused to think about what Will's opinion on the subject would be. Sure, my addled brain told me that I was doing it because of what I blamed myself for putting him through, but it never posed the question of what would then happen if he ever found out. Too caught up in my self-loathing and knee-jerk compulsion to suffer for my sins, I never thought about having to try to explain myself.

Yet...

I know that I have to, that there simply can't be any secrets between us. Not now, not when we've
still got a long road to navigate together if we're going to stand any chance of making it back.

“Ethan...”

“I was going to the club because...” Unable to look Will in the eye, I turn around and, shoving my hands into my pockets, gaze into the fire. “This is going to sound stupid, and I've got to admit to never having run through this particular conversation in my head, but... I... I wanted to... Uh... That is... I wanted to... uh... not want it...”

“Sex?” Will queries with just a small note of confusion in his voice. “You were going to go in there to... participate?”

“In...” Hunching my shoulders, I close my eyes and, for absolutely no reason other than I know I have to, add, “Taken By Force night at Hard Wired... Yes. I was going in there to... participate.”

“I...”

“Like I just said. I wanted, or... felt as though it was what I needed... to not want it. I wanted, even though I knew deep down that it was still going to be nothing like it, to feel some semblance of what you'd been through.”

“Oh...”

“Again, I knew it was clutching at straws and that, because I was there by my own twisted choice, it would hardly be similar at all, but I... I felt as though it was what I deserved.”

“To be fucked by strangers?”

“Yes.” Nodding, I open my eyes and, still feeling in no way ready to face Will, go back to staring in to the fire. “I wanted to... not want what I was getting.”

“Oh...”

“And...” If you're going to do something, do it properly. Right? “The real reason I was heading for Hard Wired was because I... hadn't found what I'd convinced myself I was looking for the night before.”

“Oh... So last night was... Take Two?”

I nod again and turn a deaf ear to the obvious note of sadness in Will's voice. “Yes. It was.”

“Oh... And... Take One was...?”

“A failure,” I reply. “That is... I went through with it, but...”

“You had sex with a stranger?” Will interrupts in a quiet voice curiously devoid of emotion. “Ethan, I...”

“Strangers,” I correct as, straightening my shoulders, I turn around not so much to face Will but to... force myself to look over in his general direction. “It was in the back room of the club, and it was anonymous, and it was... nothing.”

“Nothing?” he echoes. “Sorry. But it doesn't exactly sound like nothing to me.”

“It was... nothing,” I repeat, pulling my hands out of my pockets and shrugging. “It was just sex. A little sordid, sure, but not rough, and... Oh!” An unwanted, yet incredibly important thought just
popping in to my head, I grimace and, at long last, force myself to look at Will as he sits, calmly

gazing back at me. “It was safe. Everyone used protection and...” Swallowing hard, I walk on
dithery feeling legs over to the coffee-table and take a seat on it directly in front of Will. “I'll take a
test anyway, of course I will.”

“Actually, I think one of us having to go through that is enough, don't you,” Will murmurs with a
soft, non-judgemental smile as he pulls his hand free of the blanket and slowly holds it out towards
me. “Ethan, it's okay. You don't have to look so worried because I understand. I get why you did it
and I'm not offended or hurt by it. I don't like it, in fact I fucking hate it, but that's because I love you
and I hate the thought of you feeling as though it was something you had to do. It... It's the... why, I
hate, not... that you did it.”

Hardly believing my good fortune at the ease of his apparent forgiveness, I take Will's hand in mine
and, leaning forward, press it against my cheek. “I'm still sorry,” I whisper. “It was done to... hurt
me, not you. I never wanted to...”

“Of course you didn't and, like I just said, I'm not hurt by it. It... It pains me that you felt as though
you had to put yourself through it, and...’” Sighing, Will pulls his hand away and lowers his head. “I
think what pains me the most is that you... had to see it.”

“What pains me the most is that it happened at all,” I counter, quickly shifting on to the sofa and
resting my hand on Will's thigh.

“That, too, but I... I just wish that you hadn't had to witness it,” Will replies faintly as, his expression
one of anguish, he half turns his head to gaze at me through pain-filled eyes. “I... I couldn't do
anything to stop it, and I just... I just took it... Oh God... The thought of you having to see...”

“Hey... Shhh...” Draping my arm around Will's shoulders, I pull him against me and, in the hope of it
helping him calm down, rub my hand up and down his upper arm. “Don't do this to yourself. You
were drugged, and I got the impression from Foster that the effect of whatever it was Jefferson gave
you was only made worse by having a bad reaction with the meds you were already on, and... Look
at me. You couldn't help it. That bastard and his minions had the upper hand and there wasn't a thing
you could have done about it.”

“...” Sighing, Will drops his gaze down on to his lap and clutches his fingers tightly around blanket.
“This is going to sound sick, and I can hardly believe I'm even going to say it aloud, but I... I'm glad
it was me. It... It was, between thinking I was going to choke to death and the pain that, honestly, I
can't even begin to describe, probably the worst experience of my life, but I... I'd rather be on the
receiving end, so to speak, than have to just sit there watching it happen to you. I know what it's like,
and I still know that I'd prefer to go through it again than have to watch you going through it as... it...
It's just horrible, and...” Trailing off, Will shakes his head and closes his eyes. “I don't think I could
do it. I don't think I could watch it happening to you.”

Something in Will's incredibly hard to listen to confession resonating with me in the same sort of was
as Luther's lecture about letting Jefferson win did this morning, I close my hand around his upper
arm and plant a soft kiss on his cheek. “In terms of things I never wanted to hear, that rates right up
there,” I murmur thickly, “but... I think, although I hadn't thought about it quite along those lines
before, that you're right, that... while living it is one, entirely horrible thing, the... helplessness... of
having to witness it is almost worse. I mean, fear and pain is one thing, but...”

“Hatred, and, as you said, helplessness, and... impotent rage, is just as bad, if not worse,” Will
finishes, opening his eyes and giving me a sad look. “Ethan, I can't sit here and say it was a walk in
the park as of course it wasn't. It hurt, and these Godforsaken antivirals are like the gift that just keep
on giving as they're making me feel as sick as I did before, but... you haven't been in any better a
position than I have. To anyone on the outside looking in it might seem as though I've got more of a reason to feel their pity or whatever, but I think... No. I... know... you've had it just as bad and, what I also know is that I'd feel the same way if our situations had been reversed. It... You're not to blame yourself, okay? None of it was your fault, and...”

“I can, and I... do... blame myself though,” I reply, the words just slipping out. “I hear Jefferson's voice in my head, and I see you...”

“Don't. Just... Stop it. All of it,” Will declares, sliding his hand on to my knee and giving it a forceful squeeze. “Given the, at times, fabulously fucked world we've decided to base our careers in, these things... unfortunately... happen. Hell. Shit happens. Just... Look. I'll live. Perhaps not very happily for a while, but I'm still here. And, while I'm at it, you're still here too. We're both here and, if we're going to do this, we have to do it together. So...”

“What doesn't kill you makes you stronger?” I offer, placing my free hand over Will's as, readily accepting that he's as right in his way of thinking as Luther was this morning, I can feel my mood once again starting to lift. He's here. I'm here. And, yes, we have to work together. No secrets, take the good with the bad, and just face up to everything as it comes.

“Something like that,” Will murmurs with a small, hopeful looking smile as he relaxes against me. “If I promise to do my best to remember that it was all outside of my control, do you think you'll be able to do the same?”

“I can certainly try.”

“Uh! Not good enough. I want you to promise.”

“Then... I give you my word that I'll do my utmost best to accept that... it was outside of my control and that I'm... to stop blaming myself for it.”

“As I couldn't ask for more than that, that's much better,” he replies, turning his hand over under mine and entwining our fingers. “Now... Moving on a little here, I just have to ask... Jefferson. Did you...”

“No. I didn't kill him,” I state, cutting him off mid-question because, call me psychic, I just know what his question was going to be. “I wanted to. Hell, you have no idea how much I wanted to.”

“Er... Try me,” Will mutters. “I mean, hey, he wasn't exactly my favourite person either.”

“I doubt he was anyone's favourite person,” I reply drily. “Back, however, to what I was saying. I wanted to kill him, and I put a lot of thought into killing him, so much, in fact, that I'm still confident that I could have got away with it without being caught, but... In the end I just couldn't bring myself to do it, and... the reason I couldn't do it is because...”

“Revenge is a slippery slope to start down,” Will murmurs with a nod. “I get it. Trust me. I get all of it, and I'm glad that you made the decision that you did. I'm also, for what it's worth, glad that the bastard's dead. Not, incidentally, for what he did to me, but for everything he's put you through. Oh! And I'm also glad that whoever it was that did the world a favour by taking him out did so before he got his hands on that damn Rabbit's Foot and fucked IMF over even more.”

“Nothing gets past you does it?” I murmur. “I mean, I only found out about his goal for the Rabbit's Foot this morning, and, well, given that you've spent most of the day sleeping...”

“Try being confined to an infirmary bed some time. It's amazing how many people feel compelled to come in and talk to you.”
“Share gossip, you mean?”

“Well, there's a bit of that, of course. Oh, and on that, did you really knee Phillips in the balls?”

“Wow.” I let out a low, impressed sounding whistle and shake my head. “You even heard about that?”

“I did. So, is it true?”

“Uh...” I affect an innocent expression and shrug. “It... might... be.”

“Do I want to know... why... you kneed him?”

“Er... No. You really, really don't.”

“Fair enough.” Yawning, Will rests his head down on my shoulder. “Can't say I ever liked him that much anyway.”

“Mmm... The less said about him the better,” I reply. “Now... Because I suspect not even your hotline of gossip and intel would have shared this with you, and... all in the name of full disclosure of course, while I may not have pulled the trigger on Jefferson I... may... perhaps have still had something to do with it.”

“You're right. All my informants missed that particular point,” he responds, lifting his head just enough to give me an expectant look. “Care to elaborate?”

Nodding, I explain about the message I'd posted and watch as smile of approval ghosts over his increasingly tired looking face. “Sure, we might never know, but...”

“I like to think it had something to do with it,” Will murmurs through another yawn, “and, I don't know if I've mentioned this recently, but I like the way that you think. The message idea... Seriously, it was brilliant and, again, I'm just glad that his stupid game ended up with him wearing a toe-tag. What he did to you...”

“Me? No. I don't count. Will...”

“You do,” he corrects, frowning up at me as he struggles to keep his eyes open. “Of course you count, and I don't want you to think...”

“But he... What he did to you...”

“I know what he did to me,” Will interrupts, “and what I also know is what made me feel worse...” Trailing off, he tightens his fingers around mine and, with a soft sigh, returns his head to my shoulder. “I know it hasn't even been three full days, but I... I've missed you...”

“I've missed you too,” I murmur both easily and without even having to stop and think about it. “I lost it there for a while, and I'm sorry.”

“Mmm... But the main question is, did you find it again?”

“Oh...” Smiling, I kiss the top of his head. “You could say that.”

“Is that your way of calling me an... it?” Will queries, giving me a mock disapproving look.

“If the cap fits and all that.”
“You know, I could take that as an insult,” he replies, stifling yet another yawn, “but I'm too tired and will just have to settle for saying that I'm glad you were able to find... it... again.”

“That makes both of us,” I reply, gently pulling my hand away from Will's and trailing my fingers down the side of his face. “Now... Given that you appear to be falling asleep on me here...”

“I'm not doing a good job of hiding it then?” Will mumbles, tilting his cheek into my touch. “Damn.”

“Mmm... I hate to break it to you, but I'm not falling for it. So...” Reluctantly removing my arm from around his shoulders, I stand up and hold my hand out to him. “How about getting you back to bed, yeah?”

“Only because you put it so nicely.” Yawning, Will places his hand in mine and, after pushing his blanket away, lets me help him up from the sofa. “Join me?”

“I...” It's not even eight in the evening, and I can't say I'd even thought about going to bed this early, but the second time in as many minutes I don't even have to think about my answer. “I'd love to.”

~*~
I walk down the stairs to the scent of fresh coffee and the sounds of both movement and the low murmur of chatter coming from the kitchen. Tying my robe around my waist, I try not to marvel too much at how this is the fourth morning in a row I've woken to... guests – welcome or otherwise – either already in my house or, in the case of the suited grunts, wanting to get in to it and, not wanting to risk the day getting off to a bad start, make a pact with myself to just go along with whatever comes my way. Feeling as though I'd only just gotten back to sleep since being awake from three AM, I'm not exactly in the mood for unexpected company at ten past seven in the morning, but...

Whatever.

They're here now, I already have a good idea as to who... they're... likely to be, and... I'm up.

I'm out of bed, Will's still sound asleep, and... today is another day and all that.

So...

Here goes.

Walking in to the kitchen, I take in the sight of Jane fussing over the coffee-machine while Benji sits, aimlessly moving the apples around in the fruit bowl, on a stool at the breakfast bar and, once they've both turned to face me, roll my eyes. “You know, and I don't want you to take this the wrong way or anything, but I'm starting to think I might need to change my locks,” I announce as Benji hops off the stool and clearly hesitates over approaching me.

“I mean, can't a man get any privacy around here?”

“Sure. If he hadn't been behaving like such a dick recently, a man could get all the privacy he liked,” Jane retorts, shrugging as she goes back to working the coffee-machine. “As it is though... I'm thinking a man has a few more bridges to mend before he deserves it....” She glances over her shoulder and winks at me. “That said, hey, change the locks if you want. Instead of keeping us out it would only... inconvenience... us for the couple of minutes it would take while we worked out a way in, but, again, it's your money and you're to feel free to waste it any way you want to."

“So... In other words, don't bother then?” I reply, grinning at Jane as, having obviously made up his mind to just go for it, Benji walks up to me and, without any form of warning whatsoever, engulfs me in a bear hug. “Hey! Benji!” Not really knowing what else to do, I hug Benji back and, after silently mouthing ‘what the...?’ to Jane, add, “It's good to see you, too.”

“I've missed you,” Benji mumbles, blushing as he lets go of me and takes a step back. “I know, I know. I saw you the other night, but... it doesn't count, not really, and... I'm just so glad to see you.”

“The less said about the other night the better, yeah,” I respond, smiling at Benji as I place my hand on his shoulder and give it a quick squeeze. “But, look... I'm here now, so... Let's just try to put everything else behind us.”

Nodding, Benji glances with obvious expectation towards the door. “Where's Will? Is he still in bed?”

“He's not only still in bed, but he's also still sound asleep,” I respond, giving his shoulder another squeeze before walking over to the breakfast bar and, with a nod of thanks, picking up the cup of coffee that Jane had just placed down on it. “And, while I hate to be the bearer of bad news, if you
were hoping to talk to him you're going to be out of luck as I don't think, given when it was he took
the pills, he's going to surface until around midday.”

“Oh.” Sighing, Benji takes the cup of coffee Jane's holding out to him and, after a second or two of
just staring down at it, shoots me an odd look. “I... I'll understand if the answer's no, but would it be
okay with you if I went up and saw him anyway? I won't wake him, I promise, it... Its just that I'd
feel better if I could see him. Uh... It's up to you though, and I'll respect your...”

“If you want to watch Will sleep, Benji,” I interrupt, gesturing with my cup towards the door as I
take a seat at the table, “then he's all yours. For what it's worth, I doubt you could wake him even if
you wanted to, so go for it.”

“Are you sure? I don't want to...”

“You heard the man, Benji,” Jane interjects, following my lead and gesturing at the door. “Just go
already.”

“But...” Stopping himself from continuing, Benji nods and salutes us both with his cup. “I take it he's
still in the guest room?”

“Nope. He's in mine.” I glance at Jane and smirk. “Feel free to take a seat in the armchair that's in
there and stay as long as you like. You can always ask Jane whether it's comfortable or not.”

“It's comfortable enough, and you're a smart ass,” Jane mutters, returning my smirk with one of her
own as she calmly flicks me the bird before turning her attention back to the coffee-machine. “Go on,
Benji. Go and see Will.”

“I... Okay.” Flashing me a grateful smile, Benji turns and walks out of the kitchen. “Thanks.”

“I suspect I'm only stating the obvious here,” Jane murmurs once the sound of Benji's footsteps have
reached the landing, “but he's been taking all of this very badly. This team is the closest thing he's got
to a family in the States, and seeing you both like this has had a bad effect on him. Will being so sick
was bad enough, but this... This has really done a number on him.”

“It's done a number on all of us,” I correct as, taking a sip of coffee, I watch Jane carry her own cup
over to the table and take a seat. “But... We're getting there, and Benji, he just has to realise we're all
here for him too. If it'll make him feel better to watch Will sleep then... I'm fine with it. And I know,
given their closeness and the fact that he trusts him, that Will wouldn't have a problem with it either.
He just has to speak up and, one way or another, we'll all do what we can to help.”

“That's what I've tried telling him.” Shrugging, Jane toasts me with her cup before taking a mouthful
of coffee and making herself comfortable in her chair. “This will help, though. Seeing you...” She
looks me up and down and, I swear, wrinkles her nose. “Well, seeing you more or less looking as
though you've returned to the land of the living will help, as will being able to see Will in a bed other
than the one in the infirmary. He just needs to be able to see a few signs that things are slowly
improving and, I'm sure, he'll be fine.”

“Of course he will. If there's anything I, actually, make that either of us, can do to help though, just
let us know. Now...” Trailing off, I curl my hands around my cup and, catching Jane's gaze, raise my
left brow. “What was that about... more or less looking as though I've returned to the land of the
living, huh?”

“I hadn't been going to say anything...”

“Really? That doesn't sound like you at all.”
“I know I've already said it once this morning, but you really are a smart ass.”

“Mmm... One that, or so I'm getting the impression from you anyway, just happens to look like death warmed up.”

“While I hadn't been going to be quite that blunt,” Jane murmurs, her expression turning serious as, placing her cup down, she reaches across the table and touches the tips of her fingers against mine, “you do actually look a bit... rough and, I don't know, I suppose I'd just been hoping to see you looking a lot better than you had yesterday.”

“If it helps, I certainly... feel... better,” I reply, “and I probably would have looked better given that we were in bed before eight last night, if not for... the coughing fit at three AM turning into vomiting by twenty past and...” Shrugging, I pull my hand back and, picking up my cup, take another sip of coffee. “Will, thanks to the quick acting nature of the sleeping pills Foster had prescribed him, was asleep again by four, but...”

“You just couldn't get back to sleep?”

“You're right. I couldn't get back to sleep. I lay there...”

“Not worrying, I hope.”

“Not really, no. Just listening to him breathe, and occasionally contemplating whether I shouldn't just give in and have one of the pills as well. It...” Pausing, I lean back in my chair and give Jane a grim smile. “It just made for a long night, that's all. I know the vomiting is most likely a side effect from the antivirals and that it's just one of those things, but...”

“It's not nice,” Jane finishes with a sigh. “It's not nice seeing someone you love suffering and knowing that there really isn't anything you can do to help. Just... Keep the faith, Ethan, and know that, having made it this far, you'll get there.” Pushing her chair back, she gets to her feet and, after trailing her fingers along my arm, walks around the breakfast bar to the bench. “Now... Unless my eyes are deceiving me, why do you appear to have every flavour of Pop-Tart known to man spread all over your counter?”

“As they weren't all available online, I'll have you know it's not... every... flavour,” I drawl as, grinning at Jane, I make no attempt to hide my relief at the neat way she's just moved things along. “Granted, it might be... most... of them, but it's not... all... of them. Besides, seeing as they're about the only thing he's willing to eat, it's not as though I wouldn't have all the damn flavours if I could.”

“Hmm... Greater love hath no man than one who allows his kitchen to be taken over by Pop-Tarts,” she murmurs, picking up what I suspect is the closest box and holding it up. “Do you think he'll survive if we help ourselves to a couple of strawberry ones?”

“As I think they all taste like cardboard to him at the moment anyway, he'll never know,” I respond, “so go right ahead. And, if I'm wrong, and it's strawberry he suddenly wants, I'll just get more. To be honest with you I don't much get his fascination with them, but...”

“If they're what he wants, they're what he gets.”

“Pretty much. I know they're not great, but they're still...”

“Better than nothing. Although...” Frowning, Jane reads the ingredients on the box for a couple of seconds before shrugging and popping two of the tarts into the toaster. “Who knows, after we've eaten them we may very well change our minds.”
“Short of reading arsenic as one of their ingredients, he can live on them for all I care as, like you said a moment ago, they're still better than nothing.” Standing up, I walk over to the breakfast bar and gesture at the toaster. “Thanks for the coffee and everything, but you don’t have to…”

“I know I don’t,” Jane states, cutting me off with an unbothered smile, “and, believe me, given how I feel about kitchens and all things... domestic... I wouldn’t be if I didn’t want to, so... Sit down, shut up, and just make the most of it.”

“Yes, ma'am!” Laughing, I retrieve my coffee from the table and take a seat on a stool. “You know, ignoring this new penchant you have for breaking in, it's good to see you.”

“It's good to see you, too,” she replies, walking over to the breakfast bar and and leaning over it to plant a quick kiss on my cheek. “Really good, actually.” Smiling, she retrieves two plates from the cupboard by the microwave before going back to stand by the toaster. “Now, not only am I here because we both wanted to see you, but I'm also here because I have news.”

“If it's more bad news, feel free to keep it to yourself.”

“It's not bad. It could, depending on your point of view, be good, or... it could be just... news.”

“Okay. As you've got me curious now, just hit me with it.”

“The bodies of two men were pulled from the Potomac last night,” she states as, the popped tarts not to her liking, she puts them back into the toaster. “Both show signs of having been tortured before their throats were slit and, while they still haven't been officially identified, what I can tell you is that they happen to match the descriptions you gave of Jefferson's minions...”

“It sounds as though someone was perhaps wanting to know what they knew,” I murmur, catching Jane's eyes and seeing in them the same lack of interest in the brutal murder of these two men as I'm feeling. They may have only done the things they did in the warehouse at Jefferson's direction, but they were there, and they manhandled Will, and I... couldn't give a flying fuck that they're dead. In fact, there's a small part of me that's even glad they suffered first.

“Sounds like,” Jane agrees. “Given that we're still no closer to coming up with a name for Jefferson's buyer, maybe they're behind it.”

“Could well be. If Jefferson sold it to them as a done deal, the fact that it all went to hell has probably pushed their buttons big time.”

“Not to mention make them wonder if the heat's now on them.”

“That too.” Shrugging, I take a sip of coffee. “Whatever, though. They're all dead now and, if he's stupid enough to be after the Rabbit's Foot, I'm sure the buyer will show his hand sooner rather than later as well.”

“You're probably right.” Frowning down at the toaster, Jane forces the tarts to pop up and, apparently finding them far more satisfactory this time, throws them down on to one of the plates that she then hands to me. “Here. You can be the guinea pig.”

“You're all heart.” Picking up a tart, I take a tentative bite of the corner and, after swallowing it, smile a patently false smile. “Mmm... Delicious.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Rolling her eyes, Jane nonetheless sinks two more tarts into the toaster and, leaning her back against the bench, gives me a knowing, if not perhaps even slightly curious look. “You know, going back to what we were just talking about, I've got to ask... Did you...”
I shake my head and, given that the thing had no discernible taste, pleasant or otherwise, take another bite of the Pop-Tart. “No. I didn't. I may have put up a message somewhere that may have... assisted... in it, but I give you my word that I didn't kill him. I wanted to, of course, but I didn't do it.”

“Good. I'm glad.” Sighing, Jane looks over at the kitchen window and runs her fingers through her ponytail. “I won't lie,” she continues quietly. “Watching Moreau fall from that window certainly came with its own sense of momentary satisfaction. I wanted her dead and, even if it was only in self-defence, I'd gotten my wish, but... It just didn't change anything in the long run, you know... Trevor was still dead, I didn't feel any better for having been the one to kill Moreau and... I suppose what I'm trying to say is that revenge just isn't all that it's cracked up to be, that... although it might make you feel better or quieten the noise in your head temporarily, it doesn't actually change anything.”

“Nor is it a path you particularly want to start down,” I murmur. “Jane...”

“But it's not about me,” she interjects just a little too brightly as, giving me the sort of look that tells me I'd be a fool to try to continue this line of conversation, she takes a sip of coffee and returns her attention to the toaster. “It's about you and Will and... just how damn happy I am to see that things are finally looking on the up.”

“It's actually about all of us, but... You're right. Things really do seem as though they've finally turned the corner.”

“For now, that is,” Jane replies with a sigh as she picks up her freshly popped tarts and throws them down onto a plate. “Ethan... I know this isn't my place, and that I've probably got a nerve even mentioning it given the way I just shut you down over Trevor, but... Sighing again, she carries her plate over to the breakfast bar and places it next to mine. “You probably already know this and I probably don't need to say it, but... Things, they're likely to get worse before they get better. Will, he...”

“He's still got a long way to go?” I offer as, although it's not really something I want to be talking about, I make the snap decision to just let her get on with sharing whatever it is she's got on her mind. Our team very much being like a family, I know that we've all been hurting in our own individual way and I don't want Jane to ever feel as though she can't talk to me about both anything and everything. I may not like it, and it might be hard to hear, but that's just what families are for. To be both there for you, and to deliver the cold hard truths when you need them.

“I'm just afraid that he's going to crash,” she confesses in a whisper. “While he was in the infirmary he was able to focus his full attention on worrying about you and why it was you hadn't been in to see him. Now that you've returned to the fold though, he'll probably move on to focussing on his health before, one day, just waking up and taking stock of his own life. And... As this is Will we're talking about here, there's probably a good chance he'll find some reason or other to not like what he sees, and... It just worries me, you know. He's been through so much recently, that the thought of him turning the corner only to hit a brick wall, it...”

“It just doesn't strike you as being very fair,” I finish softly as I reach over and close my hand gently around her wrist. “And the reason for that, of course, is because it isn't. None of what's happened has been fair and, as much as I don't want to be saying this, I suspect you're right in that things probably will hit another road hump in the near future, but... What can we do other than fight, huh?”

Fight, and never, not for so much as a single solitary second, think about giving in.

~*~
Chapter 13

“Ethan...”

Turning around, I take in the sight of Will, frail and anxious looking, leaning against the door frame and know that the crash Jane flagged a week ago as being all but inevitable has finally happened. Dressed, even though his bare feet and pale skin make it clear that he's not planning on going anywhere in a hurry, for the first time in I don't even know how long now, in jeans and a khaki hoodie that conveniently has a pouch in the front for him to keep his hands in, he gazes at me for a few seconds before lowering his head and taking a hesitant step backwards.

“Hey. What's up?” Smiling cautiously, I place my brush down on the paint can and, with a rag I pull out from the back pocket of my jeans, start to clean my hands. Not really being the sort of person to view a week of mooching around the house as a gift from heaven, I'm in the process of painting the laundry – from, if the enthusiastic young man in the paint department is to be believed, dull, dated white, to a far more... now, and on trend... 'Eggshell' white – for other reason than it's been something to do. Personally I can't see any difference in the colour, and it's not even as though I pay the laundry any great attention on the rare occasions I pass through it, but, unlike Will who even when he's feeling well can quite contently waste a day reading, I can't simply sit around my ass doing nothing. It's just not in my, as Benji likes to call it, 'highly-strung' nature and I always have to feel as though I'm at least doing... something. Running, planning, learning, looking for something bigger and better to climb, or, in the case of the last seven days, aimlessly cleaning, pretending, with limited success, to know what I was doing in terms of completing odd, handyman type jobs around the home, tending – also with limited to success – to Will and, both finally and perhaps just a little bit in desperation, painting. It hasn't been particularly fun, and I've now accepted once and for all that a life spent around the home just isn't for me, but... compared to what could have, it's been...

...Okay.

It really has.

Benji and Jane, either together or on their own, have visited whenever they've been able to, and even Luther's called in on a couple of occasions. Will, not really that his health allowed him to have much say on the subject, has been a perfect patient in that he's done everything – sleep, stay in bed, stay warm, stay hydrated, take this, eat that – he's been told to and, every night, regardless of how long I might have felt the day dragged on for, I've been able to climb into bed next to him and let the sound of his breathing lull me to sleep. We've got through each day together without managing to get on each others' nerves or falling prey to yet another round of self-flagellation and, again, it really has pretty much been okay. We've been together, our friends have rallied around us, I managed to remain reasonably cool, calm and collected when Benji let it slip that they'd found surveillance photos of me and Will taken around D.C. on Jefferson's iPad and, somehow, I even found it in me to play nice with Simpson when, no doubt directed to do so by the Secretary, he landed on my doorstep to apologise for his interrogation of me.

So, things, they really had been going as well as could possibly have been expected.

And...

...Now they're not.
Now, Will, who I've been trying to pretend hasn't been growing quieter and more withdrawn over the past two days, is both standing in the doorway in front of me and, unless I'm mistaken, giving every indication of being only one tiny step away from going into complete meltdown. He's out of bed, both freshly showered and dressed, and, health wise at least, he's probably the most alert he's been since I left him to go into the office that fateful morning ten days ago. And, just as Jane and I both thought would eventually be the case, he's probably spent every waking moment over the past twenty-four hours or so working himself up to the state he's in now. Why? Because, basically, it's as much in Will's nature to over think things and worry as it is in mine to always want to be on the move. He's logical, and he takes things both to heart and personally, and, if I was ever put on the spot and had to name one serious flaw of his it would have to be that he has this unfortunate habit of keeping things to himself. He has his reasons, of course he does, but as I've always thought the main one would have to be not wanting to bother anyone with his concerns, I wish that he'd feel more confident in both himself and his standing with others to speak up as opposed to just dwelling on things internally and letting them bring him down.

At the end of the day though it's just Will. It's how he is, how I've always known him and, having known this – attack of the vapours – was coming, I just have to brace myself to ride it out with him. I have to listen, and be there, and, having come to the conclusion that thinking things through in the minutest detail before opening your mouth isn't always the way to go, I just have to speak directly from the heart.

I love him, we're in this for the long haul and, together, we can do this.

We... have... to do this.

“Ethan, I...” Taking a deep breath, Will looks up and shakes his head. “I think I'm going crazy. My mind, it... it's stuck in a loop that I can't get out of. I'm just... I... Everything. I feel as though I'm thinking about. Ethan, seriously... I think I'm going crazy.”

“Afraid? What are you...”

“Of everything!” Will exclaims. “Just... You name it and I'm probably afraid of it for some reason. I... I think, and I think, and I think, and... Oh God... That's all that I do, and... I don't like what it is I'm thinking about. Ethan, seriously... I think I'm going crazy.”

“And I'm sure that you're not,” I reply soothingly as, having finished with my rag, I throw it into the sink and take a step closer to Will. Clearly having reached the end of his tether, he cringes against the door frame and steadfastly refuses to meet my eyes.

“But that's just it, I am!” he interrupts, directing his response somewhere in the general vicinity of my feet. “Just... Listen to the fucking ridiculous loop that I'm stuck in and tell me that I haven't lost it!”

“I don't need to listen to it because I...”

“I'm afraid of having to sleep in my own bed,” he mutters, cutting me off. “See? Crazy, huh? I'm an adult male, a fucking field agent for Christ's sake, and the thought of having to go back into my own house and sleep in my own bed is... breaking my Goddamn brain! It... It's stupid, and it's pathetic, and I hate even thinking about it, but...” Taking a deep breath, he jerks his head up and glances at me for all of split second before dropping his gaze back down to the floor. “I was asleep, you know,” he adds in a whisper. “When Jefferson came, I was asleep in bed. He... He came into my room, and he pulled me out of bed, and...”

“It's okay. You're...”
“It's not right. I lie in your bed and, because I'm so fucked in the head and can't think straight, I can't
even decide on what it is I'm more relieved by... the sound of you moving around downstairs, or the
fact that I'm safe in your bed and not... freaking out in mine!”

“It...”

“Don't tell me it's okay as it's not! I'm afraid of having to go...”

“You don't have to go...”

“Ethan, please...” Sighing, Will gives me a beseeching look. “I need you to just listen to me. Trust
me, it's not like I want to be dumping my bullshit on you, but... Now that I've started I've just got to
get through it, you... you've got to know how... far down the damn rabbit hole I've fallen this time.

“I'll listen to you,” I murmur as, echoing Will's sigh, I take another step closer. “Of course I will,
but...”

“When I'm not worrying myself sick about being afraid of my own bed,” Will declares, once again
talking over the top of me as, pulling his left hand out from the pouch on his hoodie, he holds it out
towards me in a 'stop, stay back' gesture, “I move on to worrying about... being sick, and how I'm
starting to be afraid that this is just how it's going to be from now on. Then I... hate myself just that
little bit more because I know there are millions of people who have it far worse off than I do and
that I've got a nerve feeling sorry for myself, but I... I'm just over it! All of it. The headache, and the
weakness, and the coughing, and the feeling as though I'm never going to be well again, it...”

“It's just getting to you,” I finish as, not knowing what to do – pretty much, period – with my hands,
I hook my thumbs through the belt loops on my jeans and, not wanting to give Will the impression
that I'm crowding him, rest my butt against the washing machine. “Everything you're saying, it...”

“Uh! I haven't finished yet.”

“But...”

“Wait. It gets worse.”

“Will... You don't have to...”

“I do. I have to get this out. You have to know...”

“I know enough. I know that...”

“Sex,” Will states, silencing me so effectively with just one word that, given that it was probably the
last thing I expected to hear, I just stare at him in astonishment. “When I'm not working myself up
over my stupid health or my stupid fear of having to return home, I... I'm thinking about sex, and I'm
thinking about... you. Selfishly, I'm thinking about what I can do to try to make sure you... uh...
never leave me again like you did in the infirmary, and I'm thinking about whether I'll ever want sex
again, whether... if I do ever decide I want it, that...” His breath catching in his throat, Will gives a
strangled gasp and starts to back hurriedly out of the room. “I... Ethan... I'm afraid that even if I do
want it that... that you won't want me!”

Having so spectacularly dropped his absolutely heart-wrenching bombshell, Will spins on his heels
and, with a speed that I wouldn't even have thought him capable of at the moment, disappears from
out the doorway and, by the sound of his footsteps, heads immediately up the stairs. For a moment,
as I struggle to get my head around not only everything he's just said but also how badly it's all
effecting him, I just continue to stand, helpless and rooted to the spot, in the middle of the laundry.
While knowing that Will was surely going to have to experience some sort of breakdown or another at some point was one thing, now that he's had it, or, as is probably more to the point, is currently in the grips of it, it...

Shit.

It really is another thing entirely.

What it also is though is something that I have to be able to try and fix. If I can't, if I can't shake off my own fear of saying the wrong thing and choose to take the coward's way out by simply going back to my painting, then...

… What good am I?

The whole sordid issue of Jefferson aside, I am actually responsible for Will's fear of being abandoned thanks to having buried my head in the sand once, and I know that I can't do it again, that things really have reached the stage of being all or nothing.

And...

...I'll be damned if I going to choose nothing.

Feeling a familiar sense of steely determination settle over me, I hurry out of the laundry and, without wasting my energy on just what it is I'm going to be walking into, make my way upstairs and into the bedroom. Finding Will lying on in his side and facing the door into the en suite in the middle of the neatly made bed, I simply take a seat on the opposite side of the mattress, the one that points towards the window, and murmur, “Now that you've had your say, I think it's my turn, don't you…”

“I'm sorry,” Will mumbles dejectedly. “You don't need to worry about me. I... I'm...”

“You're not fine,” I interject with a sigh as I rub my hands over my face, “but then again, as I'm feeling pretty far from fine too, that's not the issue, so... Please. You wanted me to listen to you, and now I want you to listen to me.”

“But...”

“The concerns you've got regarding your house?” I state, pressing on as calmly as I can manage. “They're perfectly understandable and you're not to work yourself up over them. I don't want to say it any more than you want to hear it, but it wouldn't surprise me if you were carrying some PTSD over what happened in it, and...”

“But, I... I'm a man,” he whispers. “I... I shouldn't...”

“Men get PTSD too, you know, and...”

“But, I... I shouldn't be letting it get to me. I... should be tougher.”

“Next thing you'll be telling me is that you're a paid up subscriber to the boys don't cry school of thought,” I counter gently. “Will... Just listen to me for a second. You were pulled out of your bed and, seriously, I think that's enough to effect anyone. Male, female, soldier...”

“I bet you wouldn't be freaking out over it like I am,” Will replies in a quiet, flat tone. “Ethan, I... Don't... Please. Don't take that the wrong way as I... I actually meant it as a compliment, that... you're stronger and less... flighty... than I am, and...”
“To be honest with you, I don't know how I'd react,” I interrupt as, resting my hands flat on the mattress behind me, I lean back a little and gaze out the window. “For all the horrible things that have happened to me over my career, nothing has ever encroached on where I've been living, so, again, I can't tell you what sort of impact something like that might have on me. I wouldn't like it, I know that much, and... Oh! What I can tell you though is that I would probably sell up and move.”

“You... would?” Will queries with a hint of either disbelief or shock.

“Yeah. I would. I'm not saying that the memories attached to what happened wouldn't have something to do with it, but to my way of thinking anyway it just wouldn't feel safe any more. Think about it. If the bad guy of the moment had been able to find where I lived, what's to say he hadn't shared his discovery with others, huh? I just... Well. That'd be enough to make me want to move in itself.”

“I... You know, I hadn't thought about it that way, but... You're right. It makes sense.”

“So stop worrying about it,” I reply, tilting my head back and hoping against hope that we're actually getting somewhere here. “Your house, Will, is nothing more than bricks and mortar. You can stay here for as long as you like, or, if you'd prefer, I can stay with you in yours. It... If you like, it can even be permanent. You can sell your place and move in here or... we could both sell and buy something new together. A house though is just a house, and you'll always have a roof over your head.”

“We... could move in together? You... You'd be willing to consider that?” he murmurs as he rolls onto his back before sitting up and, with a bit of shuffling, resting his back against the headboard. “I... If it sounded as though that was what I was angling for, I... I wasn't. In fact, I hadn't even given it any thought, but...”

“But?” I prompt as, taking the fact he's now sitting up to be a good sign, I allow myself a quick smile. “Now that I've put it out there it's something to perhaps consider?”

“Uh... Definitely. It's definitely something to consider. So long, of course, if it's what you...”

“As I wouldn't have mentioned it if I didn't mean it, of course it's what I want too. The future, Will, is ours to do whatever we please with it.”

“Even though...”

“Even though... nothing,” I declare as, still smiling, I glance at him and shrug. “Now, having, I hope, covered the house thing well enough for the time being, it's time to move on to your health. Your health which, even though it mightn't feel like it to you, is showing steady signs of improvement. Yes, your head might still ache, and, yes, you're still feeling weak and possibly just a little stir crazy from having been indoors for so long, but... You're getting there. You are. You haven't thrown up for three days, the coughing is getting better and you're no longer wheezing all the time, so...”

“Suck it up?” Will offers, giving me a wan smile of his own. “I know, especially when I hear it as succinctly as that, that you're right, that things... are... a bit better than they were a couple of days ago, but... I'm still just over it. I've felt like this for too long now and...”

“Basically you're sick of being sick.”

“Basically, yeah.”

“But you agree that you're getting there?”
“Slowly... Maybe?”

“And you know that you'll get there in the end?”

“Wherever the end may be,” he replies with both a welcome hint of sarcasm and a nod. “Yeah. I suppose. The... not throwing up has defiantly been something of a bonus.”

“You don't say,” I mutter, reaching back with my hand and giving his knee a quick squeeze. “Now... House and health hopefully done, it's time to move on to explaining just why it was I behaved like such selfish fool, and how I really, really hope you'll be able to find it in your heart to forgive me for letting you down so badly.

“It's okay, Ethan,” Will responds as, sighing, he looks down at his lap. “Just... Don't worry about it. I never should have said anything.”

“Actually, I'm glad that you did as I want to be able to explain myself to you once and for all, and... I want you to know that it will never happen again.” Pausing, I swivel around so that I'm better facing Will and, as he glances at me, give him a rueful look. “Not visiting you in the infirmary had nothing to do with you, Will, and you're never to think that it did. The reason I kept my distance was because I'd fallen hook, line and sinker for all the blame Jefferson had laid at my feet and I... I didn't feel worthy of being anywhere near you. I also convinced myself that you were better off without me and... It was all me, not you, and I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry that I hurt you, and... I give you my word that it will never happen again, that, whatever it takes, I'll be there for you if you need me. That... Uh...” Grimacing, I run my fingers through my hair. “That's, of course, if you can ever find it in yourself to forgive me. I... I'll understand if...”

“There's nothing to forgive you for,” Will interrupts as he shifts into a kneeling position and crawls over to settle himself next to me on the edge of the mattress. “Ethan, I never blamed you for any of it. I'll admit that not seeing you in the infirmary hurt, but... everything you've said makes sense to me. You were hurting in your own way and you reacted in a way that, at the time, worked for you, and... It's in the past. I don't... Again, I've never blamed you.”

“But...”

“No. No buts. You weren't to know that bastard would do what he did, and for what it's worth I happen to think you came to your senses pretty quickly, far more quickly, I suspect, than I would have, and I don't... You've got to believe me here, I've never blamed you.”

“I...”

“I know you still blame yourself, and that by opening my stupid mouth I've reopened healing wounds, but it... It wasn't my intention and I regret ever having said anything.” Will murmurs, placing his hands in his lap and gazing down at them. “What I was trying, apparently badly, as it happens, to get across was that I... Fuck! Out of all my fears at the moment, my biggest one is that this will have changed things between us and that... Oh God... Ethan, I'm just terrified that you mightn't want me...”

“Want you? Of course I want you.” Realising that this, Will's fear of not being wanted, is at the absolute heart of everything that's going on and that I have to tread incredibly carefully, I shift closer to him and, as he both tenses and gives me a wary look, drape my arm around his shoulders.Going all the way back to that morning in the cabin and his reluctant confession about how his idea of a fantasy was just being wanted for who he was, I know that this really would have to be his greatest fear right here and that it can't, not for a second, be allowed to take root.
“Why? You... You can't,” he whispers as, instead of relaxing against me like he usually does, he continues to both hold himself rigid and stare down at his lap. “I... You saw what he did to me, what he...”

“Of course I want you,” I repeat, forcefully quashing my own pain at having to hear Will talk like this as I reach over and close my free hand gently around his wrist. “Jefferson, for all the effort he put into trying to ruin things for us doesn't even come in to it and you're never to think that what he did colours my opinion of you.”

“But... He... How could you ever want... this... after...”

“It's not, and never has been, just your body that I want,” I reply, once again cutting him off as, shifting an inch or two closer, I make up my mind to just... go for it. “Did you hear that? I want you, William Brandt, and always have. Not your body, you. I want your fears and insecurities, and I want to be the shoulder for you to brace yourself against. I want your history, every single part of it, and I want both your beautiful smile and those big blue eyes of yours that have always had the ability to make me feel weak at the knees. While I'm at, I want you to know that there isn't a single thing I wouldn't do to make you feel better or, in general, just do... for... you. I want to be by your side every step of the way. I want to be the one to make your fantasy become a reality by both growing old with you and being the one who you know you can always turn to. I want you to know that things are going to be okay, that I'll fight for you until my dying breath, and... most of all, I...”

Taking a deep breath, I look at Will as he finally lifts his head and stares at me with such a raw expression of hope on his face that I almost want to cry with relief at having finally ensnared his attention with my heartfelt babble, and, with a smile, add, “I want you to know that I love you. Hear that? I love you, and I want you in any way that you'll have me, and nothing is ever going to change that. Not Jefferson, not your, perfectly reasonable, if you must know, fears, not... anything. I'm here for the long haul, if you'll have me, Will, and all I want in return is... to know that you still want me too...”

“I...” Pressing his thigh against mine, Will – at long last – leans into my embrace and graces me with what, without a doubt, would have to be one of his most beautiful smiles. “I want you,” he states simply. “I've never stopped wanting you, and I'll always want you...”

~*~
~ Chapter 14 ~

Chapter Summary

** Warning? ** Explicit Sexual Content

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Having finally got the fire going nicely, I stand up and, with my hands stretched out towards it to enjoy the warmth, admire both the colour and the crackle of the flames for a few minutes before walking over to the sofa and sinking down on it. Kicking off my shoes, I push them out of sight under the coffee-table and, once my belt has joined them on the floor, stretch languidly. Although it's been somewhat of a foreign concept for what feels like far too long, I'm actually – even if it is as much to my delight as it is my great surprise – feeling pretty damn content, if not even just that little bit happy with my lot in life at the moment.

Things, they're just...

... Good.

Really good.

Never having been one to believe in fairy tales and their happily-ever-after endings, I'm not opening myself up here for all but guaranteed failure by saying that they're perfect and Will and I are just going about lives as though nothing ever happened as, well, we're not. And nor do I think we'll ever be truly able too, either. What happened in that warehouse, along with the way I behaved afterwards, is just something we'll always have to live with. Will was raped and, while I'll go to my grave blaming myself for it, I've just had to... come to terms with it. Not make my peace with it, because it's still far too soon for that, but... adapt to it.

Adapt to it, and move on from it.

Jefferson's dead. We're still together, and...

... We're getting there.

The idea of returning to field work is on the cards. Not wanting to either stagnate behind closed doors or give anyone at IMF cause to think that he was so ashamed of what happened that he was in hiding, Will, over the past fortnight, has been spending time helping out in the Analyst's Section while I've been re-living the pre-Davian days by – begrudgingly – assisting to train the current crop of rookies. The idea of returning to his house still not holding any great interest to him, Will's been staying with me the whole time and I honestly think it's something we could both get very used to. He's also, when he thinks I haven't been looking, been visiting real estate sites on his iPad and I take this to mean he really is putting some serious thought into the pair of us one day moving in together. His health having taken its sweet time to return, he's let me fuss around him without too much complaint and every night I've been able to go to sleep listening to the sound of his breathing as he
lies next to me.

Today, in particular, has been a good day. Emotionally charged, but, really, what else is new? I just take each day as it comes now. Go with the flow and never, ever forget to thank my lucky stars that we're both still here to enjoy it. Sure, I could work myself up over every minor – or even not so minor – thing, and I could fret and fixate, but having already been down that path with no great success I just can't find it in myself to see any point. Will eventually speaks up if something is bothering him and, better late than never, I know that if there's something on my mind then he genuinely wants to hear it. I also know when to speak, and when to just... be there.

Like today.

I could have insisted on all sorts of contingency plans or harped on like a cracked record about how, if the results were positive, we'd fight this... thing... together, but knowing that there wasn't a single thing I could say to Will that he wouldn't have already thought of himself, I just let him guide me through the day in the way he best saw fit. He asked for a lift – so I drove him. He asked me to wait in the waiting room while he went in to see the doctor – and, all the time picking at my fingernails and wondering if suddenly taking up smoking would be a good idea, that's what I did. He came out of the doctor's office, white as a ghost and with an unreadable expression on his face, and asked me to hug him – and I had him in my arms before he'd even finished talking. And, when he whispered, breathlessly and in a voice full of pent up emotion, in my ear that the results were negative and he wanted to kiss me – I didn't have to think twice and simply welcomed his lips against mine.

I let him, in the waiting room and in front of the dozen or so people sitting there, kiss me until we were both light headed and grinning like complete lunatics.

And, dear God, was it good.

I then let him call the shots of by wanting to first share the news with Benji and Jane before all four of us going out to dinner to celebrate and, with absolutely no hesitation on anyone's parts, that's exactly what we did.

We went out, and we talked and laughed and hugged, and, again, it was just good. We were all just so happy to be together again, so... relieved... to know that, finally, the worst of it was officially over.

Finally.

Although he's not one to ever make a big deal out of anything, especially not if it's something that relates to him personally, I know that waiting for the test results was a heavy weight hanging over Will, and for it to no longer be an issue is just fantastic. His blood's clean, his health's returned, and, like me, he's just taking each day as it comes.

And, he's still here.

With me.

We're... still here.

Which, let's face it, has to be pretty big reason for contentment right there.

“Hey, Ethan,” Will calls out as, having finished with his shower, he walks down the stairs. “What are your plans for the rest of the evening?”

“Plans?” I yell back as I survey the warm and cozy living room and hope like crazy that whatever it
is Will might have on his mind can be done in here. “If sitting on my ass and doing nothing doesn't count then... If there's something you want to watch we can always put on a movie.”

Opening the door, Will steps into the room and, after shutting it behind him to keep in the warmth, leans back against the door frame and gives me an oddly worried look. Wearing his black towelling robe and with his legs curiously bare, he's not exactly dressed in a way that makes a lot of sense to me and, far more alert than I was a moment ago, I sit up a little straighter and gaze at him expectantly. If he had his pyjamas on under his robe, then, fine. That would make perfect sense as it's late evening, we're home alone, and he'd just had a shower. If I could have been bothered showering instead of wanting to pit my wits against getting the fire going, I probably would have just put my pyjamas on afterwards too. To be just wearing a robe though... That's not, especially given his great love for keeping warm at all times, normal at all.

“Actually...” Biting down on his lower lip, Will drops his gaze and toys with the tie keeping his robe closed. “Ethan, I... If you don't have plans already, I was kind of hoping that you'd... That is...” Trailing off, he swallows hard and, just as I'm about to get up and go over to him, jerks his head up and fixes me with one of his best wide-eyed, nervous looks. “What I'd like is... for you to fuck me,” he states quietly. “I... Please... Now that I know that I'm clean, I... I want you to fuck me. Now. Tonight. I want you to fuck me tonight.”

“Will, I...” Hell. I don't even know what to say. I mean, of all the things he could have come out with, he chooses... this? Talk about random. Oh. And let's not forget completely out of fucking left field.

Sex.

The one thing I've very industriously not been thinking about.

“If... If you don't want me, then... then that's okay,” Will murmurs dejectedly as, once again lowering his gaze, he goes back to fiddling with the tie around his waist. “I... I just thought...”

“It's not that I don't want you,” I interrupt, the wariness I'm feeling at inadvertently hurting Will even more than he's already hurting coming through loud and clear in my voice as I shift up the other end of the sofa to be nearer to him. “Of course I want you. I'll... always want you. But...” Okay. Here goes nothing. “Are you... sure? Something like this doesn't need to be rushed in to, you know...”

“That's where you're wrong,” he replies, directing his comment in the general vicinity of his feet. “It does have to be rushed into as knowing that he... that that bastard... was the last man in me is just eating me alive. I... I can still feel him. In me. I can still feel the memory of him in me and... I want it gone. I want the memory of his touch gone and I...” Pausing, Will lifts his head just high enough to shoot me a miserable look. “I need to know that you still want me.”

“I... Oh God, Will...” Groaning at the fact that it appears to have come back to this again, I get to my feet and walk over to him. “Of course I want you,” I whisper, wrapping my arms around his waist and, as he slumps against me with a soft moan, just hugging him to me. “You're mine and I want you, but... It's okay. You don't have to rush in to anything if you're not ready. Time... Time isn't a problem here.”

“It is to me,” Will mumbles with a sigh as he rests his head down on my chest and slides his arms around me. “I'm sorry if I'm putting you on the spot, Ethan, but it's not time that I want, it's... this. I want... No. Need. I need to know that I can still do this, that... we... can still do this. I need to know that that bastard hasn't taken this from us and... I know I'm only repeating myself here... but I... I have to know that you still want me, that... that you can see past what he did to me and... back to what we used to have. I...” His breath catching in his throat, he tightens his arms around me and tilts
his head back so that he's gazing up at me. “Ethan, I need you. I need you to fuck me and I... I think it's what you need, too...”

“I...” Not wanting to close my eyes for fear of being held captive by the memories of what took place in the warehouse and the look on Jefferson's face when he told me that from now on every time I saw Will's naked body I'd think of him and what he subjected it to, I force myself to hold Will's gaze and slowly nod.

He...

Jefferson. He can't win.

He can't take something special and forever hold it above both of our heads.

And Will's right. We need to know that we still can. That I can still touch him without thinking of Jefferson, and that, even more importantly, he can actually allow himself to be touched without being transported back there.

We...

We need to do this.

I'm not saying I wouldn't have been prepared to wait, but Will having presented an incredibly clear, not to mention slightly heart-breaking, argument as to why he needs it to be now, then...

Now it shall be.

“If it's what you want, what you truly want,” I murmur, brushing my lips lightly across Will's forehead as he continues to fix those wide blue eyes of his on mine.

“It's what we both want,” he replies as he slowly unwraps his arms from around me and takes a step back. “Ethan, again... I'm sorry for having dumped this on you without warning, but it really does mean a lot to me and I want it for you, too. I want you to be clear on the fact that, so long as you want me, I'm still yours.”

“So long as it means you both know, and never forget, that I'm yours in return,” I respond, reaching out my hand and trailing my fingers gently along the side of his face, “then... Tell me what you want and I'll do whatever I can to give it to you.”

“As it's only something you've done before, I don't think you'll have to worry about not being able to give it to me,” Will states as, looking relieved, he flashes me a smile and begins to undo his robe. “In fact, on the very slight off chance you needed a reminder...” Trailing off, he shrugs off the robe and, to my jaw dropping, eye popping surprise, is suddenly standing before me clad in nothing but the red apron with the white polka dots on it from that morning in the cabin. “I...” Blushing slightly, he smooths his hands over the apron and looks at me with a combination of hope and anxiousness on his face. “I seem to recall you were once rather taken with it...”

“I...” Damn. First he hits me with wanting to be fucked, and now it's the little red apron. If he has any more surprises up his sleeve this evening then he may be well out of luck in terms of getting anything out of me as I may just end up passing out in shock. “You're right. I was rather taken with it. But... Will... You don't have to... uh... try to sweeten the deal, so to speak, as it's you I want, not... uh... the apron.”

And, while I might still have some misgivings about the timing and whether we'll even be able to fully go through with it, I do want him.
I want him because it's what he wants.

I want him because he's right in that this is something we both actually need.

I want him because he's still the same man I've wanted pretty much from the moment I first met him.

And...

… I want him because he's still fucking gorgeous.

He may have lost a little weight from having been sick for so long, but thanks to all of his injuries finally having healed his skin is once again smooth and unblemished, and, yes, he's still hot. He's fit and beautiful and, seriously, sexy as fuck in that damn apron.

He's still...

… Will.

“It's not... sweetening the deal,” he murmurs with a cautious smile as he runs his thumbs under the waistband of the apron. “It's... because the memories of that morning in the cabin are the sort of memories I want to have, not... the other ones. I remember that morning, and how everything felt, and the apron, which for what it's worth I still think is far from sexy myself, is... Well, it's a big part of it.”

“When you put it that way...” Smiling, I shift closer and, as I marvel not for the first time or I suspect the last at just how Will's mind operates, place my hands half on the apron and half on the cool, bare skin of his waist. “I'd only be lying though if I didn't say that there's at least a small part of me that finds it oddly sexy...”

“Only a small part, huh?” Smirking, Will brushes his hand over my groin.

“If that's your way of trying to change the topic before I move on to the fact that I can hardly believe you actually... stole... the apron...”

“I couldn't be bothered washing it while we were still at the cabin and... uh... nor could I just stick it back in the drawer in the condition it was in, so...”

“Oh. So really you were just protecting the delicate sensibilities of the cabin owners.”

“That, and... I did actually leave some money for it.”

“Ah... I'm glad to hear that you're not wearing stolen goods, then.”

“No, it...” His smirk slipping a little, Will looks away and starts busying himself with getting me out of my shirt. “It's just an apron from happier times,” he states softly as a faint blush once again stains his cheeks. “If you think I'm only being silly though, or want me to take it off...”

Silencing Will's doubt with a moist kiss, I rub my hand gently between his shoulder blades for a few moments before taking a step back and finishing what he started by pulling my shirt off and throwing it down on to the floor. “I don't think you're silly, and I only want you to take it off when you're ready for it to come off,” I murmur, reaching for the fly of my jeans. “Now... As I want you to be in charge here, how do you want to do this?”

“In charge? I...” Hiding what I think is his increasing unease or discomfort behind both a nod and a half-hearted shrug, Will walks up to me and, after brushing my hand out of the way, takes on the self
imposed task of my pulling down my jeans and briefs. “I want you naked and on the sofa,” he whispers not exactly commandingly as, crouching down, he finishes stripping me of my clothing. “Ethan, I... I just want to know that I... can...”

“And I want you to know that you can have me any way that you want me,” I reply as, mentally crossing my fingers that this actually works and Will doesn't just end up even more messed up than he already is, I do as I'm told and take a seat on the end of the sofa. “Will... Only go as far as you feel up to. There's no harm in only making a few inroads at a time if that's what's needed.”

“If I can ignore the pounding of my stupid heart, I'll be sure to try to keep that in mind,” Will mutters, giving me a wry look as he drops to his knees and crawls over to position himself between my legs that I quickly spread open for him. “Just... I'm okay, Ethan. Really. I started this, and I know I can finish it.”

“Wow. Enough with the sexy talk,” I mutter, glossing over Will's clear – stubborn – determination to see this through in favour of just going with it. “I mean, keep that up and you won't even have to touch me.”

“Smart ass,” Will retorts with both a quick grin and incredibly welcome laugh as he glides his hands up the length of my calves and rests them on my knees. “Now... This may not be like... old times, but... practice makes perfect, yeah...”

“Then... Practice to your heart's content.” Perhaps it's against the odds. Who knows, perhaps there's even something slightly wrong with me for even thinking it, but the sight of Will, naked save for that damn apron and kneeling between my legs, it...

There's just no help for it.

It's hot, that's what it is.

Leaning forward and with his head lowered as he focusses both his attention and conviction on my cock, I can admire the lines of his back and the curve of his firm ass and, as his tongue tentatively flicks against my balls, I realise something.

I realise something that's nothing short of fucking amazing.

Jefferson was wrong.

I don't look at Will's bare flesh and imagine it being at Jefferson's mercy.

No.

What I see is familiar, and sexy, and one-hundred percent Will.

His body is his own, and he's doing what he wants with it.

He's on his knees not because anyone is making him but because it's what he wants. Just as the sole reason he's hesitantly closing his lips around the tip of my cock as his fingers brush with growing confidence against my balls is because it's what he's chosen to do.

I'm not forcing him to take this step before he's ready, and...

He knows what he's doing.

Will, with the apron's ties forming a perfect bow in the small of his equally as perfect back, is now
taking me into his mouth and sucking my cock with a steady determination to prove to himself that he still can, because...

… It's what he wants.

Which, in turn, means that I would have to be one of the luckiest men alive and that, without a shadow of a doubt, Jefferson has unconditionally lost.

His mouth, warm and moist, around me being enough to cause me to lose all track of rational thought, I rest one hand on his shoulder while I use the other one to gently run my fingers through his hair. I remember Will once telling me that he'd practised hard at the art of sucking cock in the hope of his partner at any given time being able to forgive him for his preference of not getting fucked all that often, and from where I'm sitting it really does go without saying that it's a skill he's certainly putting to good use now. With his fingers curled tight around the base of my cock, he licks, sucks, kisses and blows along its length with such breathtaking fucking skill my body is a mass of sensations radiating out from one central point. Best of all though, and given the waves of pleasure I'm currently riding this is no mean feat in itself, is the way he keeps lifting his head just far enough to glance at me. He looks up at me with his lips still around my cock and I know, from the brightness of his eyes and his relaxed expression, that he's okay, that, so far so good, this is working as well for him as it is me.

In fact, given that I can feel the beginnings of an orgasm begin to form, perhaps it's working just a little... too... well.

“Uh...” Finding the energy from somewhere to both sit up a little straighter and cup my hand around Will's cheek, I wait until he's let my cock slip from his mouth and is looking up at me patiently before murmuring, “As much as I don't really want to be having to say this... At my age, given that what you see before you will probably be it for the night, if you're really wanting to take things through to the... uh... end, I think we'd better take a breather.”

“I've heard there are these little blue pills that can help with that,” Will teases as, flashing me a gorgeous smile, he shrugs his acceptance and, after running his hands warmly along my thighs stands up.

“So you'd be willing to give me one of yours, then,” I retort, holding my hand up to him and letting him help me up off the sofa.

Laughing, Will presses his chest against mine and plants a fleeting kiss to the tip of my nose. “Never forget, old man, that I'm younger than you.”

“Yeah, well, and... you... never forget that old age happens to all of us.” Curling my arm around his back, I pull him against me and, through the soft fabric of the apron, feel the shape of his reassuringly semi-erect cock. “Now... If you've finished insulting your elder, do you remember just what it was I wanted to do to you when I first saw you in that apron?” I whisper, rocking Will against me but, needing his permission first, making no move to touch his erection.

“You...” Letting out a deep, shaky breath, Will nods. “You wanted to get under it...”

“I did. I wanted to get under it, and... I want to get under it again now...” Pausing, I take half a step back and shift my hands onto his hips. “Will? This needing to go both ways, I need to know if you're willing to let me touch you.”

“You...” Nodding again, Will picks my left hand up and squeezes it between both of his. “Of course you can touch me,” he murmurs thickly. “You... You can do anything to me.”
“Not without your permission, I can't,” I correct as, wanting to strike while the proverbial iron is hot, I pull my hand free of Will's and drop to my knees in front of him. “Here... Let me...”

… Take away the memory of what Jefferson did to you.

… Treat you like you deserve to be treated.

… Give you at least a small percentage back of what you've already given me.

… Love you.

“Ethan... Uh...” Gasping as I duck under the apron and lightly blow on his balls, Will takes half a stumbled step backwards and gives an embarrassed sounding laugh. “If you're wanting me to remain on my feet for this you... Oh God! You'd better get on with it...”

“I don't know. The youth of today,” I mock grumble as, placing my hand firmly on Will's ass in the hope of it helping to keep him in place, I set about the very pleasurable task of reacquainting myself with his cock. While I don't place myself in the same league as him when it comes to sucking cock, I still know a trick or two and, most importantly, I know what he likes. I know that having his balls sucked is almost enough to send him over the edge right then and there, and I know that the one thing guaranteed to both quicken his breathing and make soft little noises of pleasure come out of his mouth is to slowly, and with great care as to not speed things along, lick along the underside of his shaft.

What I also know, however, is that neither of us are going to make it through to Will's very specifically desired end if we don't keep things moving along and after five or so minutes lavishing attention on his cock and balls I pull back from under the apron and beam up at him. His skin flushed as much from the warmth of the fire as from the sensations working their way through his body from what I was doing to him under the apron, Will looks so incredible that I can't help but be reminded yet again of how wrong Jefferson was. Instead of seeing the crumpled mess on the white shag-pile rug, I'm seeing something amazingly beautiful which I know, all being well, I'll also get to see over and over again.

“You sure about...”

“While I have to admit my resolve may have faltered a couple of times while... uh... you were under there, I... I still want you to fuck me,” Will replies as, looking nothing if not dazed and a little shaky, he wanders over and picks up his robe. “I know that you know as well as I do that it's probably far more effort than it's actually worth, but I... I...”

“Need it,” I finish with a nod of understanding as, making myself a bit more comfortable by resting my butt against my heels, I watch Will pull out both a condom and a tube of lubricant from the pocket of his robe before dropping it back down on to the floor and walking back over to me. “So... Seeing as you're still the only one in charge here, how do you want to do it? On the sofa? Or...”

“On my knees in front of the fire,” Will states, cutting me off as he hands me down the condom and lube. “Position wise at least, it... it has to be the same. I... Like everything else, I want to be able to take it back. Again, you know already that no position is my favourite, but I... I have to be on my knees.”

“You're the boss,” I murmur, once again quashing my own misgivings on the subject in favour of making it clear to Will that he's well and truly the one calling the shots. “Just... Promise me, yeah, that you won't just grit your teeth and bear it if it starts to come too much. You've done so well so far that I want everything we've achieved to be ruined by... pig headed determination. Are you listening
to me, Will? I don't want you to get hurt, either physically or...”

“You're not going to hurt me,” he interrupts, dropping to his knees in front of the fireplace and, because there's clearly no time like the present to just get this show on the road, assuming the position. Ass in the air, legs slightly spread, hands flat on the carpet, head lowered. “Ethan, I... I promise that I'll let you know if things are going too far, so... Please. I need to feel you in me.”

“Then... Let's do this.” Slipping the condom on, I crawl over to Will and, without really thinking about what I'm doing, reach for the bow keeping his apron on.

“Please... Leave it,” Will whispers plaintively. “I... I'm not ready for it to come off yet.”

“But...” Falling silent as it suddenly makes a painful degree of sense to me, I shift my hand onto his ass and somehow manage not to sigh heavily. I get it now. Not only does the apron hold happy memories for Will, but it's also saving him from being completely naked. Everything's accessible that needs to be but, at the same time, he still feels covered.

“You're beautiful, William Brandt,” I state in a voice barely above that of a whisper as I lean forward and gently plant a row of kisses down his spine. “I don't want you to ever forget how beautiful you are, and... and that you're mine, that I want every single part of you. The good, the bad, and the exquisite. All of it. I want all of you.”

“And you've got me,” Will replies in a voice no louder than the one I just used. “He tried to take it from you, but it's still yours. Everything he tried to take, my mouth, my body, it... it's all yours. My... heart, it's yours as well. All of me, if you want it, Ethan, it's all yours.”

“I...” Refusing to give in to the sudden urge for tears, I kiss the nape of Will's neck and, leaning further forward, murmur directly in his ear, “Of course I want it, just as I need you to know that everything you've offering me I give back to you in return. My heart, my body, my... everything.”

“And that's why we're still here,” he replies plainly as he cranes his head around and gives me a quick kiss on the lips before none-too-subtly wriggling his ass. “Now... Please. At the risk of sounding as though I've got a one track mind here... I'm hard, you're hard, and I want you in me.”

“In that case, your wish is my command.” Knowing that there's really nothing else than can be said here, I retrieve the lube and slowly, very slowly, set about preparing Will. Although I take it slowly, and spend as much time just running my hands over his body and littering him with light kisses as I do massaging his ass and gently stretching his hole, it's clear from the tenseness in his muscles and the way his fingers keep clutching at the carpet that what I'm doing, even if it is what he wants, is still taking a lot out of Will. He can't see me, I'm touching him in a very private place that he can't help but associate with pain, and, in a way it would have to be one of the most incredibly difficult things I've ever done.

What it also is though is one of the most important.

It's not about sex or reaching orgasm, it's about Will taking back his body, and it's about both of us knowing that we can still do it.

It's about putting the past behind us and moving on from it.

“Well, I think you're about as ready as you're ever going to be,” I murmur, giving the small of Will's back just under the bow one final kiss as, with no small amount of reluctance, I position the tip of my cock against his hole. “Will? If you've changed your mind or...”

“Do it,” he states hoarsely. “Just... Talk to me, yeah. I... I need to hear the sound of your voice.”
“I think I can manage that,” I reply as I use my hold on Will's hips to slowly guide him back on to my cock. “Just... I've got you, and... and you're incredible. So... Come on... Relax and let me in. Let me make you feel good.”

It takes both a while and a lot more babble on my part as Will resists the invasion of his body and pants, but eventually I get my cock buried in the tightness of his ass and the relief we both feel at having finally made it this far is so great that we actually sigh in unison.

“All good?” I query, holding perfectly still as Will adjusts to the feeling of having his ass filled.

“All good,” he confirms breathlessly. “Now... Fuck me.”

“Having made it to this point, it would be my pleasure,” I reply as, gliding my hand down over his flat stomach and closing it around his still gratifyingly hard cock, I begin to slowly move in and out of him. It now, at long last, being finally more about plain and simple sex than making it over what at times felt like a ridiculously high hurdle to jump, I begin to enjoy myself and, confident that Will's with me all the way, just give myself over to both the moment and...

… Will.

The way his ass grips my cock. The arch of his sweat-slicked back as, wanting it harder, he pushes back against me. The feel of his cock as I slide it through my curled fingers. The sound of his moans and the hitches in his breath.

The unbelievable trust he's showing by giving himself over to me in this way.

The fact that I love him in a way that I once never even considered possible.

“Ethan, I... Oh God... I'm close...”

“As that makes two of us, let's...” Trailing off, I return my hand to Will's hips and slowly, gently pull out of him before swiftly pulling off the condom and throwing it into the fire. “Come on, gorgeous,” I murmur, rubbing my hands along Will's back, “how about getting into a kneeling position and facing me, yeah...”

Nodding, Will crawls around to face me and, with what looks to be a little effort, gingerly straightens up. “I'm ready to lose the apron now,” he whispers, holding both his hands out to me in an open invasion to be the one to do the honours.

Shifting closer to Will, I smile and, as I reach around him to untie the bow holding the apron in place, settle my lips warmly on his. Words no longer needing to hold any weight, the apron falls to the floor as, both well and truly on the same page now, we travel together down the tried and true path of reaching mutual climax. Hands are used to both roam freely over heated flesh and hold our cocks together as we kiss passionately and together, always together, we just ride the moment until it reaches its natural, inevitable conclusion. While I reach it first, Will follows within seconds and, without once breaking the kiss, we slump together in an entwined, contented, sticky and exhausted mess.

“Have I mentioned recently that I love you,” Will murmurs as he pulls back from the kiss and rests his forehead against mine. “That... Oh God... I thought what you said to me in the bedroom after my meltdown was perfect, but... This... Ethan, you couldn't have made this more perfect if I'd handed you a script to follow...”

“I'm only ever as good as my partner,” I reply as, almost as though I'm unable to keep my hands off him, I rub the palm of my hand in slow circles against Will's back. “It... It just happens that when I'm
with you I'm... as perfect... as I'm every likely to get.

“Perfect,” Will repeats, closing his eyes as he arranges himself more comfortably and snuggles against me. “I don't know about you, but this has been a fairly perfect ending to what had already been a pretty good day. We... We won, yeah... We're still here, and we can still do this, and...”

“You're right.” I kiss the top of Will's head and, using the arm I've got around his shoulders, pull him even closer to me. “We definitely won and, yeah, you're right. It is perfect.”

~ end ~

Chapter End Notes

And...

... That’s it!

Thank you for sticking in there and reading.

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