Doe & Josten: Deductionists

by SpangleBangle

Summary

Andrew Doe, rude but brilliant consulting detective, thought he had no need of a partner as he worked slowly away at dismantling the largest crime family in the country, helping out with other cases on the side to relieve the tedium. That was, until a scruffy runaway with a stupid amount of secrets stumbled into his life. Or, more accurately, broke into his kitchen.

Notes

Right! So, each case chapter will follow quite closely a particular episode/case from Elementary, with 'extra' small chapters in between each case. You shouldn't need to watch the particular episode to understand the case, though Elementary is one of my favourite things ever so I recommend you do anyway just for a good time. Please watch the trigger warnings I'll post at the start of each chapter as this fic is going Dark Places. The canon backstory triggers/themes are all in place as well as extra ones for each case as noted.
Trigger Warnings: The case is based on the season 1 pilot, which primarily deals with themes of violent obsession, murder and sexual assault, and manipulations by medical staff. There are also allusions to past childhood abuse, rape and sexual assault. None of these things are covered graphically but they are discussed. If you're at all unsure and would like more of a run-down of the content, please message me at my tumblr.

Andrew kicked the door closed behind himself and dropped his suitcase without ceremony on the floor. His little house was dark and cold from the six weeks spent empty but he navigated to the battered couch in the front room without difficulty and fell face-forwards into the dusty cushions. He coughed to clear his lungs and groaned quietly.


He stayed there for a good half hour until his back started hurting and he knew it was a bad idea to potentially fall asleep there if he wanted any chance of beating jetlag to the punch. So he hauled himself to his feet and collected the grocery bags from where he’d dumped them with his suitcase and started the long process of getting all his kitchen appliances plugged in and working again, including the fridge and freezer. He fixed himself some instant coffee (absolutely disgusting without milk or sugar) as soon as the kettle was functional and slathered chocolate spread on plain bread for dinner, too tired to bother with the oven or toaster or anything other than a butter knife.

Not the most gourmet meal of his life, but fuck it.

He snagged his cigarettes and lighter from his backpack and was about to head out the back door from the kitchen into his tiny gravel patch of a garden, when he noticed something… off.

He crouched down to look at the lock properly, and saw just the slightest uneven cant to how it was sitting in the door. Like it had been very carefully jimmed and put back in place. He shone a pen-torch at it from his keyring and peered at the screws and hole of the lock. There was just the slightest shine to the head of each screw, ever so slightly brighter than the rest of the tarnished metal, as if a screwdriver had been applied recently. He fetched out his set of picks, warmed them in his hands briefly, and took a few careful sweeps of the inside of the lock. It felt looser and more responsive than it should, considering he hadn’t unlocked this door for over a month.

He sat back on his heels for a good few moments, brain working again and a vague sense of annoyance and curiosity starting to make itself known.

He began a slow sweep through the rest of his home, examining anything and everything and comparing it to the day he’d left for Stuttgart. It all appeared to be the same. Nothing was stolen, nothing was out of place. One rug was a little off-centre, but he could easily blame that on his own boots when he’d rushed through the house one last time to fetch some spare socks while his cab had idled impatiently at the curb. It was almost exact enough to get the paranoia out of his mind, until he got to the bathroom.

He had a very particular way of arranging things in his medicine cupboard. At first glance, it looked like a shrine to obsessive compulsives, with all the tubs and boxes and packets facing forward with labels in full view, alphabetised, and spaced in precisely regular distances from each other. And they certainly appeared that way when he opened the cabinet door.
Apart from one thing – the bottle of aspirin in the top corner. He’d made a line in magic marker from the side of the lid down to the bottom of the bottle. He pressed a button on his penlight to switch on the UV setting, and examined the bottle.

The line was crooked.

Somebody had been in his house and raided his medicine cupboard.

*Well, Bee, is it really paranoia if it’s justified?* He thought bitterly. He went back to the room with the rug and carefully laid down on his stomach next to it, examining the weft and weave every inch of its length. He saw dust, fluff, a little bit of dirt. And a hair.

He pinched it very carefully between his fingers and held it up to the light. It was dark brown with a reddish root. As if that weren’t enough of a difference from his own blonde hair, it was longer and a little curly.

*Someone’s been sleeping on my rug, Mommy,* he mocked himself. *Where the fuck is Brownilocks now?*

He turned off all the lights he’d switched on, hid his bags and the mess he’d made in the kitchen, and turned all the appliances back off. Once that was done, he retrieved a gun from the safe hidden in some fake books, sat on the couch facing the back door, and waited in the dark.

It took hours, but his vigil was worth it.

It was just the faintest sound at first, would have been inaudible if Andrew hadn’t been waiting for just that set of small scratches and metallic noises. Whoever was picking the lock was doing a good job of it, he noted as he listened to the sequence. Very smooth. Very practised. And entirely too familiar with the internal layout of that particular lock.

*Snick.*

The knob turned, and a slender young man slipped through the crack in the door before rapidly closing it. Andrew watched as he crouched and began locking it again, his motions deft and efficient. He was wearing a shabby black hoodie pulled up over his head, several layered tatty jackets, and had a duffel bag clutched tight to his side. He was only a little taller than Andrew.

Once he had finished locking the door again, Andrew cocked off the safety of his gun with a loud *click* in the silence. The man froze and Andrew bit down a grin; cliché, but effective.

“Drop the bag.” Andrew said softly.

The man slowly eased the strap over his head and released it to the floor.

“Step away from the door. Hands behind your head.”

The man obeyed with slow, careful motions.

“Don’t get any fucking ideas. I’m not afraid to shoot you.”

The man nodded and grunted a strained affirmative. Andrew slowly stepped forward and pressed the nose of the gun against the man’s back while he patted him down one-handed. He kept it brief and to the point, not interested in touching a stranger any more than strictly necessary. He turned out the man’s pockets and aside from some packets of gum, a spare set of picks, some loose cash, and a small Swiss Army knife, he found nothing of interest. He wasn’t carrying any weapons other
than the pathetic little knife attachment, but Andrew wouldn’t put it past him to have something hidden in his shoes or sewn into a seam somewhere that he couldn’t feel right then. Andrew felt the distinct padding of bandages under his shirt and made sure he knew exactly where all the wounds were in case he needed to take this guy down. He didn’t flinch when Andrew poked at them, and stayed silent.

He tugged the hood down and felt a grim sense of satisfaction that the guy’s hair matched the one he’d found on the rug, badly-dyed roots and all. He took a set of handcuffs from his pocket and snapped one onto a wrist, then steered the guy back towards the table with the gun pressed close to his back.

“Sit.”

He pushed the guy down onto one of the chairs and secured the other half of the handcuffs to the metal table leg. Andrew flicked on the kitchen light and stood on the other side of the table, gun ready as he surveyed his unexpected houseguest. He was youngish, probably the same age as Andrew. His face was gaunt and he looked like he hadn’t had a square meal in years, with a mess of stubble on his cheeks and quite a few half-healed cuts and bruises. His eyes were a surprising, piercing blue. All his clothes were shabby and layered and in need of repair or burning. Andrew read desperation and exhaustion in every inch of his frame and the slightest tremble in his thin, bony hands. He looked more than a little homeless, and like he’d reached the end of his rope and was ready to let it go.

Andrew picked up the man’s duffel and didn’t miss how the guy twitched and stared after it anxiously. Andrew raised an eyebrow at him and sifted quickly through it, uninterested in the few sets of clothes and toiletries stashed away in it. He found a notebook buried at the bottom and pulled it out; the man did his best to hide the lunge of his hands to grab for it, but he was far too obvious and Andrew far too observant. Andrew flicked through it rapidly; it contained press cuttings from the past few years, apparently focussed on fucking Exy of all things. Kevin Day and Riko Moriyama’s faces stared up at him in faded pictures that made Andrew want to snarl. He flipped over that section quickly and found the hidden pockets. Now that was more like it.

He found paper slips with gibberish scribbled on them, obviously coded names and numbers and co-ordinates that he had half-cracked within a minute. Other pockets had cash, which Andrew passed over as less important than the bank slips and account details he found hidden next to them. He piled it all up on the table out of the man’s reach and fixed him with a blank stare.

“You must be new around here – I’ve got friends in the local homeless populations, and they would have warned you off casing my house. How long have you been squatting here?”

The guy swallowed and when he spoke, his voice was hoarse and scratchy as if he hadn’t spoken in weeks.

“Just – just a few weeks. I didn’t know it was an officer’s house. Are you gonna arrest me?”

“I’m no cop,” Andrew sneered reflexively. “Who the fuck are you?”

“My name is Neil,” the man replied softly.

“Just Neil?”

“Josten.”

“Alright, Josten, who’s after you?”
The guy jerked, making the handcuff rattle. He gave it a pained look, his fingers spasming, before he looked back up at Andrew. “I…”

“You’re obviously on the run from something, with all this money hidden away. And those injuries.”

“I’m just a homeless kid, alright, I’m not running—”

Andrew pointed the gun at him again and he shut up. “Here’s a quick lesson for you, Josten. I’m not a cop, but I know a few and I cannot stand liars. You are going to answer me with complete honesty, and in return, I won’t shoot you just yet.”

To the guy’s credit, he didn’t immediately piss his pants. He looked rather used to having threats and guns pointed his way, to be honest. Almost blasé.

“You’d be better off just shooting me.” He said in a flat voice, with far too much empty defeat in his pale eyes.

_Oh no you don’t._

“Let’s start off simple. How old are you?”

“Twenty four.”

Only a year younger than himself, then. “How long have you been on the run? And don’t fucking argue.”

Josten swallowed. “Thirteen years.”

“On your own?”

“N-No. I was with my mother. She died last year.”

“Who killed her?”

Another jerk, and Andrew just knew the next words would be a lie. So he leaned forwards and nudged the gun under Josten’s chin. Josten met his eyes and swallowed again nervously, though he still looked far too calm.

“My father.”

“Better,” Andrew said. “He give you those injuries too, or did you piss somebody else off?”

“One of his people.”

“Oh, he has _people_, does he? Funny, I didn’t think any of the major crime families in this shithole of a town were called Jostens. You look more like a Wesinski.”

Josten stared at him, suddenly afraid. “Who are you working for?”

“None of them.”

“You shouldn’t know that name—”

“I’m attached to the police, idiot.”
Josten closed his eyes and groaned softly. “Fuck. Seriously, just shoot me.”

“Tempting. But you must be Junior, am I right? Funny, everyone thinks you’re dead.”

The guy’s hands clenched into fists and he turned his head to press the barrel of the gun square between his eyebrows. “I’m nothing, a nobody. Just fucking kill me and have done.”

“Dramatic little shit, aren’t you?” Andrew couldn’t help but say.

Josten scowled at him, a sudden spark of life in his empty eyes. Don’t you fucking dare, Andrew thought vaguely. Don’t you dare start being interesting.

“Almost as dramatic as waiting in the dark with a gun, half-pint.”

“Oh no, a short joke,” Andrew replied blandly. “My heart, it bleeds. So what the fuck are you doing in my house in particular? Why choose this one?”

“It was empty,” Josten shrugged. “Looked unoccupied for a good amount of time. Good access over the back wall, not a busy neighbourhood, no obvious alarm systems. Looked like a safe bet, and there wasn’t a bolt on the back door. Why don’t you have a bolt, if you’re some kind of cop-accessory?”

“To control the access points, moron. Any idiot like you is gonna go right for that door, and that door only.”

Josten cocked his head, apparently ignoring the gun now. “Huh.”

“Why did you jimmy the lock instead of picking it?”

“That was just the first time,” Josten replied. “I didn’t have enough time to pick it, so I took the lock off. I’ve picked it since.”

“I noticed.”

“How did you notice?” Josten asked, vaguely curious. “I thought I kept all traces invisible, cleaned up after myself.”

“You’re not good enough to ghost through my house, though you’re pretty good.” Andrew allowed. “How long did it take you to pick it the first time?”

Josten chewed the inside of his cheek. “About two minutes?”

Not too shabby.

“How long ago were you attacked by your father’s people? Did they follow you back here?”

“About a week. And no, I got away. I made sure they weren’t tailing me.”

Andrew considered him for a long minute. “Why didn’t you run after they attacked you?”

The dead look was back in his eyes. “This house was comfortable. Made a change from the streets, anyway. And I’m tired of running. Figured it would be better to bleed out somewhere half-nice instead of an alley.”

“Again with the dramatics. When was the last time you ate?”
“Day or two.”

“Stay,” Andrew warned him with another nudge of the gun, then moved around the kitchen. He fixed another coffee and chocolate sandwich, plonking them down in front of his confused companion.

“What’s this? Last meal for the condemned?”

“Eat the damn food.”

Josten looked like he wanted to argue, but also like he couldn’t imagine finishing the whole plate. After a moment’s painful hesitation, he began eating with his free hand. He took tiny nibbles and swallowed with difficulty. A flush rose up in his cheeks as the sugar rush hit and he gulped the coffee down uncaring of its apparent taste. He ate one half of the sandwich before pushing the plate away.

“It’s too sickly.”

“Ungrateful little dick. Your loss, anyhow.” Andrew picked it up and ate it himself. “Do you speak any languages?”

“Why do you care?”

“I’ll rephrase then – how many?”

Josten rolled his eyes. “English, German, French and Japanese fluently. Russian, Mandarin, Spanish and Portuguese enough to get by. Survival phrases in a few others.”

“Congratulations. What else can you do besides pick locks?”

Josten shrugged. “I’m good with knives and guns. I can defend myself. What is this?”

“Job interview, idiot. You really don’t catch on all that quick, do you?”

“What job?” Josten asked, an amused quirk to his lips that almost made him look human instead of skeletal. “Professional criminal? I’m not all that fond of gangs, ta.”

“Close enough. I’m a consulting detective attached to the local cops. I help them out when they’re overwhelmed and useless, which is most of the time.”

“And you want what exactly from me?”

“I want to keep you in my line of sight, Junior, seeing as your dear old daddy is making a lot of fuss for my boss, and I’d rather not lose the bet on when the guy pops an aneurysm over it.”

“I won’t testify,” Josten said immediately. “You can’t even prove who I am. There’s no DNA on file for anybody in the family. You take me into custody, you’ll haul a body out.”

Andrew rolled his eyes again. “Stop that. I don’t want your useless testimony. I just want to know I can get my hands on you in a hurry if daddy dear shows up on my door.”

Josten tilted his head the other way. “What does he have on you?”

“Never you mind.”

“So, what? You want to keep me locked up here as insurance? I’ll just break out – I’ve been in this
house for weeks, I know all the weak points. You look exhausted and jet-lagged as fuck, so it wouldn’t exactly be difficult to outrun you once I got free, and I’m pretty damn good with locks. Not smart, rentacop.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Andrew said with perfect calm. “I can keep you out of your father’s hands for the time being, if you hire on with me.”

“Why should I care? Just kill me.”

“I told you to stop that idiocy. Maybe you’d appreciate a decent meal a few times a day and free access to a shower for a while before your inevitable, oh-so-tragic demise. Sound good enough to you?”

Josten narrowed his eyes. “What do you get out of it, besides using me as a meatshield for the low, low price of a couple of meals?”

“I get your brain on cases. You seem like you’d know stuff about corpses and the criminal life.”

“Charming.”

“That’s me all over, Josten. Prince fucking Charming.”

“Watch me swoon,” Josten deadpanned.

Despite himself, Andrew felt the little tickle in his cheek that meant a smile was threatening. *Stop that,* he told himself.

“What’s your name, anyway? If I’m gonna be your handy meatshield, I can’t keep coming up with insults all the time. There’s only so many short jokes in the world.”

“I’m appalled you’re not creative enough to think of more of your own. Andrew Doe.”

“Like an unidentified body?”

“No, the doh-ray-me variety. Yes, like a body, smartass.”

“Real fucking edgy for a consulting detective.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Andrew said again. “Are you in or should I just turf you out?”

Josten looked him up and down with a sardonic twist to his mouth. “Why not. Should add some variety to my clearly-numbered days, as you pointed out. I’m in.”

“You should know I don’t take kindly to people who break my promises. So no skipping town. You go where I tell you and stay where I say. Got it?”

“Sure, sure. Can I use that shower now?” Josten sighed.

“Eager.”

Josten gave him a flat look. “We’re both extremely aware that I need it. Seeing as you’re not gonna execute me right away, and I’ve agreed to your terms, you don’t really have a reason to stop me, right?”

“No, not really.” Andrew stayed where he was.
Josten tugged on the handcuff. “What is this, the Guantanamo treatment?”

Andrew looked pointedly at the plate and empty mug. “Again, my heart. It bleeds. If you try and run when I uncuff you, I’m gonna be really pissed with you.”

“I live but to make you happy,” Josten snarked back.

“I will use this,” Andrew gestured to the gun still held in his hand.

“Oh stop posturing and let me have a fucking shower,” Josten sighed. “I promise I won’t run, alright Napoleon?”

“Napoleon was actually of an average height for his time period – his shortness was fictionalised and exaggerated for propaganda.” Andrew said without thinking. Wow, thanks Kevin. So glad I heard you rant about it that one time.

Josten blinked. “Um.”

Andrew sighed. “Don’t get excited.”

“ Wouldn’t dream of it.”

Andrew glared at him then unlocked the cuffs. Josten rubbed his wrist almost anxiously once he was free, then gestured to himself. “Amazing, I appear to still be here. Can I have that shower now?”

“If your dirt and hair-grease clogs up my drain you’re gonna be the one with the plunger tomorrow.”

“I’m really seeing the Prince Charming thing now.” Josten shot him a wink with a click of his tongue. Then he picked up his belongings and brazenly walked out of the room without an apparent care for the gun still-cocked in Andrew’s hand.

What a little shit, Andrew thought, ever-so-slightly impressed despite himself. He waited until he heard the water start through the pipes, then secured the gun. He was reasonably confident the jackass wouldn’t run yet, not when there was food in the house for him to steal in the morning. Andrew took his bags up to his bedroom and checked for signs that Josten had taken the Goldilocks thing too far, but cautiously came up blank. He’d definitely picked the lock, but hadn’t apparently done anything to the room.

He changed the sheets anyway.

The shower cut off at some point after Andrew finished unpacking his suitcase. Neil wandered out after a few minutes, dressed in some of the clothes from his bag with his hair still-wet and curling over his face. He looked remarkably improved, though still far too skinny and dog-eared in general.

“Your shower is really shitty.”

“You’re fucking welcome. What do you want?”

“Am I on the couch or what?” Josten asked, leaning his hip against the doorjamb.

Andrew snorted and pushed past him, shoving him out the way with a hand on his chest. “You can sleep in here for now,” he gestured to the spare box-room with a camp bed in one corner. The room
had a window, but it was tiny and up at the ceiling and had no way of opening. “Think you can handle it after the delights of the floor?”

“I’ll let you know if I find a pea under the mattress.”

“You seem to have a high opinion of yourself for someone who was all ‘just kill me already’ not an hour ago.”

“What can I say, a shower and I’m a new man. Practically born-again.”

Andrew fixed him with an unimpressed look. “I’m locking this door tonight. If I find you’ve picked it in any way or gone wandering in the night, I will not be happy. Just stay in here until I get you in the morning.”

Josten raised his eyebrows but didn’t protest and merely sat down on the cot bed, his hands tucked into the baggy hem of his shirt.

Andrew jabbed a finger at him. “Stay.”

“Don’t get your panties in a twist, Doe.”

“Fuck you.”

“Sweet dreams.”

Andrew shut the door and locked it, then jiggled the handle to test it remained firmly closed. After a moment, Andrew retreated to his own room. He locked his own door, then cursed his paranoia as he wedged a chair under the handle just in case. He didn’t think Josten was that particular kind of threat, but he was all lies and criminal skills and the fact he’d been moving through Andrew’s house for weeks had all the old alarm bells ringing loud and worried.

He lay down in his bed, back to the wall and facing the door, set an alarm on his phone, and let exhaustion claim him at last and drag him beneath a deep, dreamless sleep.

He very seriously considered destroying the phone when it woke him up the next morning, but forced himself to just switch off the alarm and got up instead. He showered and dressed before going to stand outside the spare room. He wasn’t really expecting anything.

He knocked once, then unlocked the door. Josten sat waiting cross-legged on the bed, dressed for the day as well with a bored look on his face. They stared at each other for a moment, both perhaps a little surprised that Josten hadn’t booked it in the night.

“Did you find a pea?”

“No. I really need a piss, though. Let me out?”

Andrew wordlessly stood back from the door and Josten eased past him to the bathroom. Andrew took the opportunity to examine the lock with his own picks, and found it stiff and apparently untouched aside from the key he’d used. Interesting.

They ate breakfast in wary silence, though Josten still left the majority of his untouched. Andrew caught him tucking some bread away into a pocket and decided not to mention it for now. He was having a cigarette out the back door when his phone started ringing. He answered it with a long exhale of smoke through his nostrils.
“Did you miss me that much? I only got back last night.”

“New case,” Chief Wymack replied with his usual care for the social niceties. “Get over here as soon as.”

“I’ve got a stray with me.”

“What?”

“He’ll be accompanying me for a little while. You good with that?”

Wymack was clearly curious but also under time pressure. “Whatever. Just make him sign an NDA and keep him on a tight leash. If he fucks something up it’s your problem.”

“Obviously.”

“When will you be over?”

Andrew checked his watch. “Half an hour.”

Wymack hung up without bothering to say goodbye. That was fine though. They’d worked this arrangement out years back.

“Definitely aneurysm-worthy,” Josten remarked from the table, unrepentant about having eavesdropped. “What time are you betting on?”

“Three months.”

“I’d give him two.”

“Like you have anything to bet with, runaway. That money’s all for emergencies and new identities, otherwise you’d have clothes without holes in them.”

Josten gave him a sour look. “Are we going or what?”

Andrew held his gaze and blew another plume of smoke slowly into the air. Josten’s eyes tracked it for a minute before snapping back to Andrew’s face. “Don’t get your panties in a twist, Josten.”

Josten crossed his arms. “How the fuck did you end up a cop-thingy with that attitude?”

“My sunny personality.”

Josten snorted rudely but kept watching him smoke, apparently curious about something, but not so curious to come out and ask. Andrew didn’t care, and turned back to blow the rest of his smoke outside. He’d see soon enough. He dropped the butt in an old sand-filled flowerpot he kept by the door for that purpose and shrugged on his coat.

“Move your ass, Josten, places to be.”

Josten followed him out of the house with a quiet grumble, his duffel bag clutched tightly in his hands. Andrew yelled down a cab and gave the driver instructions to get them to the local precinct.

“I’m not fond of cops,” Josten remarked lightly.

“Don’t whine. I’m not gonna give them your name.”
Josten looked at him in surprise.

“If everybody knew who you were I’d lose all my bargaining chips way too early.”

“We can’t have that,” Josten agreed with mock-sympathy.

“Just shut your face, try not to get in the way and stay in my sight. Think you can manage, princess?” Andrew asked.

“I won’t run if you don’t sell me out,” Josten replied with just a bit of steel. “I can follow you around if that’s the price of it, I really don’t care. It’s better than the streets, and I’m okay with that. No need to be nasty about it.”

Andrew wanted to keep pushing and ask if he’d sold himself for anything cheaper than a sandwich and a shower before, but kept that one to himself. He had the feeling it would hit too close to the bone, and he didn’t actually want the guy to take off just yet. So he just grunted and let the rest of the ride pass in silence.

He signed Josten into the precinct as a visitor and led him through to the main bullpen. He rapped his knuckles on Boyd’s desk and sat down in one of the free chairs. Josten settled in the other with a wary glance at all the cops around them.

“Doe, good to see you back,” Boyd smiled. “Good trip?”

“Nicky’s still an idiot, but he’s alive, so I guess that’s a bonus.”

Matt Boyd smiled, then looked expectantly at Josten. “Who’s this?”

“Temporary shadow,” Andrew shrugged. “Just ignore him.”

Boyd frowned reprovingly at Andrew and turned a gentle smile on Josten, who looked instantly on-edge. “I’m Detective Matt Boyd. Are you one of Andrew’s irregulars? Haven’t seen you around before.”

“Something like that,” Josten replied blankly, though Andrew knew he had no idea what Boyd meant.

Boyd was undeterred; he was used to Andrew’s brand of coldness by now. “Well, you need anything while you’re around, you give me a call, alright? Here’s my contact details.” Josten palmed the card without a change in expression and started fiddling with the strap of his bag instead. Much too obvious a tell, Andrew noted. They’d have to work on that.

“He needs an NDA and all that. Wymack said there’s a new case?” Andrew prompted. “Where is he, anyway?”

“Just finishing up a call in his office, then he’ll take you to the scene,” Boyd said, looking curiously at Josten again. “Breaking and entering with likelihood of a kidnapping. Gordon’s already there – don’t make that face, Doe. He’s a good cop, even if he’s an asshole. You alright, kid?”

“I’m fine,” Josten replied quietly, voice still rough from disuse.

“So what’s your area?” Boyd persisted with a kind look.

“Excuse me?”
“Y’know – your area of expertise. I’ve met some of Andrew’s irregulars before, they’ve all got their specialties. Cars, banks, chemicals. What’s yours?”

“Locks and languages,” Andrew answered for him as Josten looked far too uncomfortable with Boyd’s scrutiny. “Leave him alone, he’s shy.”

“When are we leaving?” Josten directed that to Andrew, lips pressed tight together.

“Soon,” Andrew answered in German, lips quirking at Josten’s vaguely surprised look. “Just relax, you’re drawing his attention even more with the jittery homeless vibe.”

That got a scowl before Josten answered in much smoother German, his accent much more natural and authentic. “I’m not above punching you in the face, you know.”

“Give it a try sometime, you won’t like it.”

Josten snorted and Boyd smiled into his hand as he looked at them both. Andrew saw that and narrowed his eyes. “Don’t you have work to do, Boyd?”

“And who sat down at my desk?” Boyd kept on smiling, then turned in his chair to look at the glass-panelled office to the side. “I think Chief’s done now. I’ll pass on your love and kisses to Dan, shall I?”

“As always,” Andrew replied dryly. “Though I left the gift basket at home, so sorry.”

Boyd laughed and shook his head. “Say hi to Nicky and Erik for me, when you talk to them next.”

“Nope. Bye, Boyd.”

“Nice meeting you, kid,” Boyd smiled at Josten as they got up. “Take care now, and keep hold of that card, alright?”

Josten nodded jerkily at him and kept to Andrew’s side as they waited for the Chief to get his coat.

“He thinks I’m some kind of child.”

“Well, you do look pretty young for your age,” Andrew replied, and carefully noted the slight flinch it prompted. “Don’t mind him. He’s a soft-hearted busybody, but not too bad on the brains. I deal with him more than anybody else here.”

“So what is it you do?” Josten asked quietly, looking at him through the corners of his eyes.

“Other than sass the detectives?”

“You’ll see,” Andrew replied in English, and jerked his chin at the office. Wymack was stepping out, a fresh crop of wrinkles around his eyes and a grumpy manner that had Andrew’s shadow tensing up, even if he tried to hide it.

“Doe,” Wymack greeted, and gave him a quick once-over. “Ready to work?”

“Raring to go, Chief,” Andrew replied blankly. “Boyd said you’re giving us a ride to the scene.”

“Us, huh?” Wymack turned to Josten and held out his hand. “Chief Detective Wymack. And you are?”

Josten shook his hand quickly, drawing it back into his sleeve as fast as possible. Andrew noted he kept his eyes very carefully on Wymack’s collar, so he gave the impression of making eye contact without actually having to do it. Or like he was watching for sudden movements with his

Wymack gave him a long look, then sighed and walked past them. Andrew and Josten filed in behind him into the car. None of them said a word until they got to the scene, and Andrew spent the journey noticing how tense Josten looked at being around Wymack. He had the feeling Wymack noticed too.

“He waits out here,” Wymack said once they reached the cordoned-off building, nodding at Josten.

“I told you he’s my shadow for now. He stays with me.” Andrew said calmly.

Wymack raised his eyebrows at that, then fished some latex gloves from his pocket for them both. “Don’t touch anything.” He told Josten, who nodded.

“It’ll be messy in there, probably,” Andrew said as they got in the elevator. “Think you can handle it?”

Josten gave him a sour look. “I’m familiar with mess.”

They approached the door around which techs were swarming and Wymack cleared his throat to set the scene for them. “Richard Mantlow came home late last night to find his door kicked in and his wife, Amy, missing. That’s Mantlow there, with Gordon. He’s a psych at Sandbridge Hospital, said he got an emergency call last night and didn’t get home until five AM. Saw the door, signs of struggle through the apartment, no Amy, called us in.”

Andrew stepped around the techs, feeling his brain start to buzz to life once again. He surveyed the boot-print on the door, muddy with a little secret inside, and the mess of shattered glass in the kitchen. He took it all in for a few seconds, then followed Wymack to the living room. Now there was a room to make Bee annoyed – all perfectly symmetrical and aligned. Aside from one very crucial thing, and the irritation of the picture frames.

“No ransom demand? Do you have her cell phone?” Andrew asked as he peered at the pictures of the oh-so-happy couple.

“No demand yet,” Wymack sighed, and snapped his fingers at the techs until somebody produced a cell phone. Andrew took it from him and scrolled rapidly through the pictures. He was starting to feel just a bit jittery, a tiny fizz of interest and excitement at the puzzle being set out before him.

“Hm.”

“What?” Wymack asked, watching him closely.

“The wife either lost a significant amount of weight recently or had plastic surgery at some point in the past two years.” Andrew said.

“How d’you figure that?” Wymack frowned.

“She looks the same in all the photos,” Josten said quietly, surprising them all from where he stood unobtrusively looking over Andrew’s shoulder. He chewed the inside of his cheek when they all turned to look at him, and continued after a moment. “The oval frames on the wall are older, you can see the fading around the wallpaper where they’ve been moved recently. Only the new ones feature her. All the pictures of her on her phone are in the same timeframe, and she looks practically identical in them. But the phone’s obviously older, as she has pictures of other people from years before that, all without her in them.” He put his hands in his pockets and looked at the floor once he’d said his piece.
Well now.

Andrew nodded in agreement and walked through to the kitchen, where Detective Seth Gordon was making notes. “Why hello, Gordon.”

Gordon grunted at him. “The fuck do you want, Doe?”

“I’m working.” Andrew replied with a sharp grin of teeth. “Which is more than I can say for you, Seth, if you’re the one who said this was a stranger’s attack.”

Gordon began to bluster, so Andrew spoke over him to Wymack and Josten huddled in the doorway. “She knew her attacker, she let him in.”

“What the—”

“There are two broken glasses here,” Andrew spoke over him again. “Look at the shards, idiot. She was pouring a drink for the guy when he attacked her.” He gestured to the broken glass and smear of blood on the floor.

“Yeah, ‘cause obviously any sane woman would ask the nutjob who kicked in her door if he was thirsty,” Gordon scoffed.

“Easy, Seth,” Wymack murmured with a meaningful glance to the distressed husband in the next room, well within earshot.

Andrew rolled his eyes and crouched on the floor. He reached under a cabinet with a pen and pulled out a ring of glass, holding it up for inspection. “The base of the second glass, you can see the first one there. So. If you take more than a single glance at the boot-print on the door, you can see a tiny blood spot under the heel. I’m sure tests will confirm it to be the wife’s blood, matching this sample here, which could only have been made after the assault. Therefore, she let in her attacker because he was familiar to her. She started getting them both a drink when he attacked her. Once he was done with that, he took something from the front room on his way out, then kicked the door to make it look like a simple break-in.”

“Wait, where’s the evidence for him taking anything?” Wymack frowned, holding his hands up as if to slow down the rapid flow of information.

Andrew huffed impatiently and strode back into the living room, his little audience following curiously. He felt the pale weight of Josten’s eyes in particular as he explained. He was dimly aware his voice was much more animated than usual, and he was speaking a lot faster, but they were all idiots who couldn’t properly see what was so clear to him.

“Look at this place. So neat and orderly, practically OCD. The whole space is mirrored either side of the fireplace. Except for that little table there – there’s a gap. Care to play spot the difference, anybody?”

The husband had followed them through and blinked dazedly. “What?”

“What was in that space?” Andrew asked impatiently.

“Maybe now’s not the best time—” Wymack began.

“What was there?” Andrew asked, louder. He ignored Wymack’s scowl.

Mantlow blinked some more and answered with an irritating slowness. “It was – a ring box, I
think. Amy’s grandmother gave it to her. Why?”

Andrew ignored that and led his crowd to the corridor outside the bedroom. He examined the walls for a few minutes until Josten spoke up again, quiet and curious.

“What’s so important about the ring box? He could’ve grabbed it to pawn the jewellery, on the way out. Abduction’s costly.”

“Nobody would keep any expensive jewellery in a box on display like that, especially not moneyed folk like these lot. Kidnappers don’t take trophies,” Andrew answered him, just a little pleased he was keeping up. “Killers do.”

“There’s no body, genius,” Gordon scoffed.

“There’s no blood anywhere else outside the apartment, either,” Andrew shot back. “We know from the blood pattern in the kitchen it was some kind of neck wound, likely arterial. Pretty difficult to leave no trace with a spurter like that, if he was abducting her, don’t you think?”

“Doe,” Wymack said quietly. “Cool it.”

“You’re certain you’ve been over the whole apartment?” Andrew asked, following a little trail of overlooked blood spatter into the bedroom. The bed gave him pause for a second, cutting through his buzz of focus and energy. It was extremely obvious what had happened there, or at least what had been attempted. The techs hadn’t recovered any semen, though, so she’d likely struggled free before they got to that. He pulled his gaze away and focussed on the walls and floor.

“Every inch,” Gordon blustered. “There’s no way he could’ve hid a body without us finding it.”

Josten eased past them to stand near Andrew, his own eyes narrowed as he took in the space as well. Andrew smiled when he saw Josten’s eyes snap to the far wall with a grim set to his mouth.

“Share with the class, Josten.”

Josten frowned at him, then scuffed his shoe on the wood-panelled floor. “The body is in the safe room.”

“What safe room?” Gordon demanded. “There’s no safe room! Husband said nothing about any safe room.”

Josten pointed to the wall. “The safe room.” He crossed to the bedside table and showed them the discreet switch hidden there and pressed it once after pointing to the slight scratches around it, as if from a desperate woman with sharp nails. He grabbed a little glass pebble from a potpourri bowl and set it on the floor. “The weight of reinforced walls on a middle-storey room makes the floor around it buckle, creating a dip.”

The little audience watched in astonishment as the pebble began to roll towards the wall, which opened with a pneumatic hiss to reveal, naturally, a safe room.

And the ignoble body of Mrs Mantlow.

Andrew watched Josten as the young man rubbed a hand over his mouth, taking in the sight of the sprawled body and pool of blood, before turning very deliberately away to stand against the far wall, where he could no longer see it.

Wymack was busy keeping the anguished husband from going to his wife, but Gordon was watching Josten with his eyes narrowed. “Great,” he said sourly to Andrew. “There’s another freak
Andrew bared his teeth and went to stand with his trembling shadow as the techs rushed in to process the new scene.

“You’re a little bundle of talents, aren’t you?”

Josten kept rubbing at his mouth. He didn’t look especially queasy, just a bit shaken. “You’re not bothered by the body?”

“Not the worst I’ve seen on the job,” Andrew shrugged. “If you’re gonna be sick, do it outside. And if I’m not wrong, you’ve seen worse too.”

Josten huffed and folded his arms across his stomach. “It’s been a while. So this is what you do, huh? Get all excited solving puzzles and pissing off your cop friends?”

“Pretty much. Get used to it, we still need to find the killer, now we’ve got the body.”

“Oh joy.”

About an hour later, they were watching through other side of the interview mirror as Gordon and Wymack grilled the husband over the existence of an apparent safe room he didn’t know about; the guy was giving all sorts of weak excuses about how his wife had overseen all the decorating and he’d had no idea she’d installed a safe room, etc, etc. The case was building up pretty strongly against him, despite all his protestations. Andrew had come down from the rush of the puzzle a little as he watched the man’s body language and took a quick picture of his small, pudgy hands, but he still felt a lot chattier than normal.

“You weren’t bad back there, you know.”

“Hm?” Josten asked.

“Most people just barely look at things. You observed. With the pictures, and the floor.”

Josten shrugged. “You did the same thing.”

“Yes, but I’m the unusual one. You saw how Wymack and Gordon processed things, what they assumed. You saw things the way I do, if a little cruder.”

Josten shrugged again and fiddled with his bag strap. “I was on the run for thirteen years, remember. You learn to notice the little details pretty fast.”

Andrew hummed thoughtfully. “How did you know about safe room weights? Does daddy have one?”

Josten didn’t reply, which was all the answer Andrew needed. He hummed again and turned back to his phone, looking at the pdf of the autopsy report. He wasn’t much of a fan of smartphones, but they came in useful at times like these. Somebody knocked on the little door and Boyd stepped through after a moment, laden down with coffee and a sad smile.

“Hey there. Heard you found the body, kiddo. You okay?”

Josten looked more than a little confused. “I’m fine.”

“Thought you both might want some coffee,” Boyd said, and handed out the carry-away cups. “First case is always rough.”
“I was only gone for six weeks,” Andrew replied calmly as he sipped his.

“I meant for your helper here,” Boyd rolled his eyes. “Seriously, kid, you okay? Dead bodies aren’t fun for anybody, even if a little birdie told me you’re as twisty-brained as Doe here.”

Josten frowned at him. “I’m twenty four, actually. And I’m fine.”

“Oh! Sorry, you look really young,” Boyd laughed. Josten hid another flinch and Andrew slurped more coffee as he watched.

“What do you mean, twisty-brained?” Josten asked.

“Hm? Oh. Well, the observing, deducing thing that Doe does. It’s weird, you know? He’s the only guy I’ve ever met who’s able to think like that, and I meet a lot of odd people on this job.”

“It was all obvious if you just looked properly,” Josten disagreed.

Andrew smiled into his coffee as Boyd gave him a disbelieving look. “See what I’ve been telling you for years, Boyd? You’re all just dumb, face it.”

“Well, see if I get you any more coffee in the future,” Boyd shook his head, though he didn’t seem offended. “Did Gordon treat you alright?”

“As well as ever.”

“Him and Reynolds are on the outs again.”

“No shit. Speaking of.” Andrew nodded as Gordon and Wymack stood and left the room to join them on the other side of the mirror.

“So, uh. Just wanted to say thanks,” Gordon managed through gritted teeth, barely looking at Andrew. “You got us our guy and. We’re grateful. We can take it from here.”

“I don’t think so. Mantlow didn’t kill his wife,” Andrew said calmly, and enjoyed the irritation on Gordon’s face more than he should have. It was the little things that got him through the day, like riling up Gordon and messing with Wymack’s blood pressure.

“Come again?” Wymack sighed as he rubbed his temples.

“Mantlow’s got tiny feet – he’s only a little taller than me, I should know. A size eight at most. The print on the door was an eleven, yes?”

“So what? He wore bigger shoes to throw us off, big deal.” Gordon said.

“Did he wear bigger hands when he strangled his wife?” Andrew asked sweetly, holding up his phone and the autopsy report showing the bruising on dear dead Amy’s neck, her final cause of death after struggling off the bed and into the safe room. Hadn’t been all that safe after all, with her attacker finishing the job before she could close him out.

“Doe.”

“These strangulation marks are indicative of a man much taller than Mantlow, and heavier too. Look at the spacing between the fingers and palm prints, and the size of Mantlow’s little psychiatrist hands. Wouldn’t you agree, Josten?”

Josten jumped at being included, and cautiously nodded. Boyd took a look too and hummed his
agreement. “Probably someone about six feet, I’d say.” The detective chipped in, and waved his own large hands as proof. Gordon scowled at him.

“Then let’s get a list of all the tall, vaguely threatening men in Amy Mantlow’s life.”

***

“Look, Amy was a great gal, really fun to work with, but if you’re here because you think I had something to do with her death…” Amy’s boss was saying with a greasy smile that was probably supposed to be sympathetic. “I’d never do a thing to hurt her.”

“Mantlow said you hit on her at a work party recently,” Andrew said as they followed him into his office.

The man scoffed with another slick smile. “No, no, I just asked her about the plastic surgery, said she hadn’t needed any in the first place. It was a harmless compliment, nothing more.”

“Mmhmm.” Andrew replied sceptically.

Josten caught his eye with a little bob of his head and flicked his gaze meaningfully to the office chair, where a box of new sneakers were tossed carelessly. Size elevens. Andrew raised an eyebrow at him and nodded in acknowledgement while the slimy boss had his back momentarily turned. Nice, Josten.

“Tell us about the stalking charge.”

“Oh, that old thing. It’s really nothing. I asked my neighbour out before I met my wife, years ago. She overreacted.”

“Mmhmm.”

“Look, think what you want,” the guy said grimly. “I was with my wife all night, we were out with friends for dinner for hours, and then we went home together. Check my alibi, you’ll see I didn’t do it.”

***

Josten joined him in the back garden after dinner that night and filched a cigarette from the open pack. Andrew didn’t object, more surprised at Josten actively seeking his company after spending all day together.

“Did they check out her boss’ alibi?”

“Holds water, unfortunately,” Andrew replied dully. They were done for the day, everybody at a dead end for now. The thrill had long worn off. He stubbed out his cigarette and lit another, trying to get a shadow of the feeling from the burn of nicotine. “He’s a creep for sure, but innocent of this particular thing.”

“Shame,” Josten muttered, and lit his stolen cigarette. Andrew watched with interest as he took one long drag to get it burning, blew out the smoke in a careful, incredibly slow cloud, then held the cigarette by his cheek to smell the smoke without actually inhaling it. What the fuck.

“You like what I do.” Andrew stated after a minute, watching his profile in the low light. “You think similarly. You’re smart.”
Josten slid a look his way after a few moments. “Was there a question in there?”

“You don’t add up, runaway. For someone so eager for a bloody, nameless death and an end to everything, you take an odd interest in crime solving.”

“It’s vaguely interesting. You must think so too – you got all hyper at the crime scene. And now you’re crashing from the high. Junkie.”

Andrew exhaled his own plume of smoke, watching it rise into the night sky. “Was there a question in there?”

Josten huffed. “You don’t add up either.”

Andrew rolled his eyes and they smoked in silence for half an hour or so before retreating to their separate rooms to sleep. Andrew shoved the chair under his handle again, but with a little less force.

***

“Why.” Neil whined flatly as Andrew prodded him awake the next morning. “These files are comfortable, you know.”

“I’ve had a breakthrough.”

“Proud of you, don’t care,” Neil yawned. Despite that, he sat up from his slump over the case files Andrew had been poring over for hours since dragging them out of the house at a stupid hour of the morning. The guy had a gleam in his eye again as he sat surrounded by old case files, almost manic as he waited impatiently for Neil to wake up.

“The ring box. You remember the ring box, yes?”

“Yes,” Neil grumbled. He hadn’t bothered asking where they were going or why, earlier, just that he knew he’d have to follow, and had fallen asleep as soon as they got to the precinct archives.

“I have a theory about our killer. You know what kind of killers take trophies? Serial killers.”

Neil looked around them blankly. “That’s what we’re doing here? You’re looking for similar attacks?”

Doe held up a picture of a sad-looking woman. “Meet Eileen Renfroh. Savagely beaten, sustained lacerations, and was strangled almost to death nearly two years ago. There was a sexual component as well, though no DNA was recovered. You’ll notice she looks very similar to Amy Mantlow.”

Neil rubbed at his face. “Tall, curvy, with red hair. You think that’s his type?”

“A small jewellery box was also taken from her home after he left her for dead, and size eleven boot prints were found at the scene. I think I feel a house call in our future.”

Miss Renfroh welcomed them in happily enough, though her eyes lingered on Neil and her smile dropped when Doe started asking about the attack.

“I don’t know,” she answered softly when Doe explained the similarity of the cases. “I can see why you think it might be the same guy, but I don’t know how I can help. He – he wore a mask. I never saw him fully, and it was two years ago.”

“You never know what details are embedded in traumatic memories,” Doe replied with an oddly
cheerful look to his face. “Just tell us anything you can. Did he have a particular scent?”

“N-No.”

“Tall? Tiny? Somewhere in-between? He was large enough to overpower you, but the element of surprise will usually compensate for any size difficulties that way.”

“I don’t know,” Eileen replied in a thick voice, clutching at her crucifix.


Neil frowned at Doe, thinking he was being way too aggressive for no reason.

“Ski.” She replied tightly.

“Good! So you saw his eyes, yes? An assault that close, no more than an arm’s length, you must have been able to see his eyes. You must remember their colour, an attack that personal and damaging.”

“I…”


“Hush, Josten, it’s obvious she does remember and doesn’t want to say,” Doe flapped his hand, a cold, hard look to his face and a twist to his mouth that Neil wasn’t sure how to interpret. “Look at how she’s playing with that cross, it’s classic self-soothing behaviour, pacifying in distress. She’s obviously hiding something about the attack. Maybe she even knew her attacker, hm? Let him in for a drink, maybe?”

“Doe!”

“I’d like you to leave,” Eileen sobbed, fisting her hand around the crucifix as tears spilled.

“You realise that because you protected him two years ago, he was free to assault more women?” Doe badgered, a truly ugly look on his face now. “You have the blood of an innocent woman on your hands now, maybe even more than that. I think it’s about time to come clean, don’t you?”

“Get out!” she screeched. “Get out!”

Doe fixed her with a contemptuous look, then stormed out the door. He had a cigarette in his mouth before he left the room. Neil lingered uncomfortably in his chair; he felt the distinct urge to apologise for his companion’s behaviour, but he was never good with tears or comfort. Especially not with women; he’d never known any who’d needed it.

“I – I’m sorry about him, Miss Renfroh. I’m really sorry.”

She sobbed some more and he awkwardly handed her a box of tissues. “I’m really sorry.”

Ten minutes later, he joined Doe by the car. The fucker looked remarkably calm, smoking away. Neil stole his cigarette and took a long drag. Andrew didn’t fight him for it, watching his face instead.

“His name is Peter Saldua. Her brother’s best friend at school; his parents were abusive, so her family took him in for the last few years of school. She heard from her brother that he’s working for a florist downtown nowadays. You’re an asshole, by the way.”
“I knew it.”

Neil raised his eyebrows. “That you’re an asshole?”

“No, I knew that if I started a fight in there, she’d open up to you once I left. You practically scream sympathetic fellow-victim, with those sad hangdog eyes. Of course she’d open up to you, especially if you defended her against mean old me. Good work. Excellent good-cop/bad-cop.”

Neil counted slowly to ten in German, and then in French to get a handle on his temper.

“I am not, and have never been, a victim.”

“Uh huh. Like knows like, and she knew you.”

“You’re so full of shit,” Neil spat. “You lost your temper for whatever reason and you’re bullshitting me to hide it.”

Doe got out his phone instead of answering. Neil stomped out the end of the cigarette as he listened to Doe’s end of the conversation.

“Wymack, it’s me. I’ve got a strong lead for you. – What? Are you saying he’s in custody? – Shit. Yeah, what’s the address?” He hung up without ceremony and swore under his breath.

“Saldua’s dead. Come on.”

***

Wymack was standing over their lead’s dead body with a tired frown. The frown only deepened when he saw Doe and Neil.

“What’s this I hear about you haranguing witnesses? You know what, I don’t want to hear it right now. I’ll chew you out later.”

“I look forward to it,” Doe said lightly as he stepped around the blood spatter on the kitchen floor.

“What have we got here?”

“Mailman called, said he thought someone on his route had killed himself. The gun was still in Saldua’s hand when we got in, looks like he’s been here about a day at most. We found Amy Mantlow’s ring box on the side here. Turns out Mantlow uses Saldua’s florist service, and he delivered flowers regularly once a week to Mrs Mantlow.”

“Explains why she would let him in, if he was a regular acquaintance,” Neil muttered to himself, though Doe quirked an eyebrow at him approvingly. Neil scowled back – he was so not in the mood for Doe’s approval after the stunt he’d pulled with Renfroh.

Doe sighed as if wounded and turned to the adjacent laundry room with its overturned washing machine, decorated with size eleven boot prints on the tops and sides. “What happened here?”

“Mixed his colours and whites, who cares,” Gordon muttered from the next room.

“Do we have his phone?” Doe asked, apparently ignoring Gordon.

“Not yet, it should turn up,” Wymack answered. “I need to talk to the mailman. You, stay put and behave. Josten, keep him in line.”

“What?” Neil blurted with a jump.
Wymack shook his head and brushed past them both. They poked around Saldua’s kitchen idly. Neil watched Doe examine the washing machine and pick up a prescription bottle of Xanax before turning away and opening up the man’s cupboards, checking the food for anything that could be lifted out of pure habit. He wasn’t going to take anything, but casing the kitchen was almost second nature after all the derelict properties he’d squatted in over the years.

Doe tossed the pill bottle aside irritably, drawing Neil’s attention again.

“You wanted to be the one to catch him, didn’t you?”

“I don’t do this for the credit.” Doe replied shortly.

“Then why do you do it? You don’t get paid for it, I know that.”

Doe favoured him with a poisonous look and didn’t talk again for hours.

Hours later, Neil wandered into the living room after enjoying a luxurious second shower in two days. His injuries were even healing up nicely; he was down to just one bandage on the worst cut. Doe was sitting on the floor, scowling at the news report.

“I’d like to thank the police for finding the man who killed my darling wife. I would have liked to see him stand trial, but I guess at least he won’t be hurting anyone else now.” Mantlow was saying to the presses, a slightly too-thick expression of grief on his face. Neil grabbed a carton of abandoned noodles from the table and started eating them cold. He couldn’t handle normal portions after living on so little for years, but he could nibble and snack.

“She had her mole removed,” Doe said flatly after muting the TV.

“What?” Neil was still pissed with him and didn’t want to make the conversation easy.

Doe gestured to the wall papered with photos of Amy Mantlow. “When she had plastic surgery, the only facial change was to remove her mole. It doesn’t make sense. She loved that mole. In every single picture that wasn’t candid, she turned to display it to the camera, to feature it. Why would she get it removed?”

“You’re obsessing over a dead woman’s mole. The case is over, Saldua’s dead.”

“Another thing – Saldua’s phone records indicate he used his phone near-constantly. And yet three days ago, he just stopped. Nothing.” Doe flapped a sheaf of paper in Neil’s direction, still scowling at the mole photos. “Not a single text or call, incoming or outgoing. His bank records, meanwhile, show quite a few payments made to a Dr Jessop, psychologist. Presumably for sessions, and for writing his Xanax prescription. Only thing is, Dr Jessop died three years ago.”

“So he lost his phone, had a fake prescription and was high off his head when he killed Amy Mantlow. The case is still over, Doe. Why do you care?”

Doe’s face twitched angrily. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“And that’s what’s important, right?” Neil said coldly. “Not that the victim has justice, not that the people he hurt in the past can have closure, not that this thing is over. You just want a puzzle to keep you amused.”

Doe gave him an excellent view of his middle finger.

“You know, I researched you earlier today. You’re a Doe alright, but you were a Spear briefly, and
a Minyard for a few years in college before you changed it back after graduation. I know all about changing identities, and your trail was pretty easy to track. Violent history, stint in juvie, court-mandated drugs. When you got sober, I bet you couldn’t feel a thing at all after years of the good stuff. Is this how you get your highs these days? Hanging around at crime scenes making people think you’re so clever?”

“Shut up.” Doe said quietly, his stare boring a hole in the wall.

Neil felt a grim, petty little twist of satisfaction. “I might be a worthless nobody on the run, but you’re no better than me. So you can get off your high horse, pretending to ‘deduce’ all these things about me and my past. You said before like knows like, and I just bet if you hadn’t got mad, she would have recognised you too. Does your twin talk to you at all after killing that man for you?”

Doe surged to his feet, murder on his face and hands shaking in fists at his side. “Shut your goddamn mouth. You know nothing.”

Neil grinned sharply back at him, blood pounding in his ears and adrenaline setting him on fire. He refused to back down, at last feeling somewhat in control, somewhat in power, after years and years in terrified freefall. Maybe his days were numbered. Maybe he’d given his freedom to this man for nothing more than the chance at some hot meals before the end. Maybe his life was a hopeless wreck. But right now, he was alive, and wild, and feeling something other than fear. Doe could kill him right there and he wouldn’t care. And fuck him for dangling the excitement of deduction over his head the past few days, telling Neil how he was good at it, hinting that he should work with Doe, that he’d enjoy it, that it would give him interesting something to do. Fuck him for offering that, and then turning around and throwing his broken history back in his face, even if he didn’t know the details. Fuck him for slapping those tiny, precious hopes away when he was just starting to believe in them.

“Feels good, doesn’t it?” Doe asked, breathing hard. “Adding it all up. Making sense of it all. Makes you feel strong.”

Neil sneered, acid in his veins.

“You’re looking in a fucking mirror, Nathaniel.” Doe hissed, and Neil recoiled so hard he banged his hip on the table. “Don’t like what you see? Then get the fuck out. Take your chances on the streets. Say hi to daddy for me, won’t you?”

Neil spun on his heel and ran up the stairs. He slammed the tiny door behind himself and fumbled with his picks to lock it from the inside. He shoved the bed up against the door and collapsed in the corner, his breath wheezing too fast in and out of his mouth. He hugged his knees to his chest and sobbed into them, trying vainly to master the surge of terror that hearing his old name had conjured.

Fuck that guy. Fuck him for knowing just how hard to hit. Fuck him and his dangled promises.

***

Andrew stormed into the bar in a truly foul mood. The look on his face must have warned the patrons to stay the fuck back, and he made his way to Wymack with ease.

“Who did you murder on the way here?” Wymack asked, looking him up and down as he nursed a drink.
“Nobody just yet.” He flagged down his usual bartender, who took one look at his face and handed over a large shot of whiskey. Andrew downed it in one scalding, sickening swallow and sat heavily next to Wymack.

“Where’s your jittery shadow?”

“Like I said, yet.”

Wymack snorted. “I refuse to alibi you, just so you know. He seems pretty good at this stuff, so maybe don’t kill him just yet. We could use his brain in the future.”

Andrew snarled a particularly biting German curse and swallowed the next shot Roland silently served him.

“Charming. Anyway, shockingly enough I didn’t call you out here to improve my vocabulary. Here.” Wymack pulled out an old manila file. “This is everything Dr Jessop had on Saldua before he died a few years back, like you asked.”

“It’s dusty,” Andrew said as he flipped through rapidly, scanning each page and committing it to memory easily. The slightest bit of curiosity dulled his anger just a little.

“His widow had everything in storage the past few years. You’re welcome.”

“Looks like Saldua never told Jessop about the attack on Renfroh. Just that he was obsessed with redheads.” Andrew frowned at one particular line in the late doctor’s handwriting and read it aloud. “‘Saldua, now obsessed with his own recovery, has taken to recording our sessions on his phone to listen to them over and over afterwards’. Has the phone turned up at all?”

“Nah, I’m starting to think he just lost it. Look, watch my coat a minute, I gotta take a leak.”

Andrew grunted vaguely as Wymack walked off. He carried on flipping through the folder so as not to give in to the temptation to smash the glass by his hand, pound his fists on the bar – you know nothing, you know nothing, I am not a victim, he did not break me, they could never break me, I’m not broken, Aaron means nothing, Kevin means nothing, fuck them all and fuck Josten especially, he wouldn’t look so smug with my hands around his throat, oh no.

He blinked at the folder, thoughts abruptly derailed.

“Rage.” He muttered blankly.

He was out of the bar in a flash.

***

“Josten.”

“Fuck off.”

Neil heard him sigh and settle by the door. “I’ve got another lead.” He offered, as if they hadn’t mutually torn open all of each other’s old wounds less than an hour previously.

“I don’t care.”

“It’s interesting.”

“I really don’t care.”
“Seeing as you asked, I’ll tell you. Peter Saldua was filled with rage the night he killed Amy Mantlow.”

“I’m familiar with the feeling,” Neil shot back, still hugging his knees to his chest in the dark room.

“Me too, what a surprise. He had some measure of control with Eileen Renfroh – he didn’t kill her. He even managed to act out his sexual urges without complication, and ensured there was no useable evidence of it left behind. He didn’t get nearly that far with Mantlow before he had to kill her. So why did he lose all his control?”

“Maybe she rejected him,” Neil replied after some time, hating himself for being interested. “He made an advance while she was getting drinks, she shot him down, he got mad.”

“Valid theory, but I can do you one better.” Doe sounded cheerful. Neil wanted to punch him, but settled for glaring at the closed door. “Do you know what a Xanax pill looks like?”

“White and round?” He hedged uncertainly.

“Gold star for Josten. More precisely, they’re ovular. Hush a moment.”

Neil heard a dial tone, and then Doe put the call on speaker for his benefit, though it was a bit distorted through the door.

“Gordon, my dearest friend.”

“The fuck do you want, Doe? I was just about to leave.”

“Just one thing, then I promise we can go back to hating each other in peace. The pills from Saldua’s kitchen, they’re in evidence yes?”

“Yeah.”

“Describe the pills to me.”

Gordon sighed and there were sounds of shuffling around and boxes being moved. At length, he replied. “They’re pink and circular, Doe. Happy now?”

“Extremely.”

Neil presumed Doe had hung up from the expectant silence on the other side of the door.

“So?” Neil said sullenly. “Great lead.”

“I’m heading out now,” Doe said in that same cheerful voice. “Stop sulking and come with. I know you’re curious about the switched pills too.”

“I’m busy, so sorry,” Neil sniped.

Silence reigned for some time before Doe spoke again. When he did, the peppy note was gone from his voice. He sounded tired.

“You were right the other day. About Renfroh. I didn’t know she’d open up to you. I didn’t stage that argument. I wasn’t planning on her inferring a shared history with you.”

Neil waited for more, then decided to give him a little push. “Carry on.”
Doe’s snort was loud in the quiet house.

“I don’t like dealing with victims – survivors – like her. It hits too close to home for me, as you deduced. I lost my temper. I don’t like losing my temper.”

Neil uncurled his legs and watched the door, his anger oddly abated by that simple admission. By the honesty offered as apology.

“You did good work, cleaning up after my mess,” Doe said, and there was a soft thump, as if he’d rested his head against the wall. “You’re good at this stuff. I’m not used to having someone around who can keep up. It’s… interesting. You should stay. Not just to be my insurance. You should stay regardless. And that’s all I’m saying, I’m done.”

Neil surveyed the closed door, brain whirring away. He slowly uncurled from the corner and sat by the door instead, knowing Doe was just on the other side of the wall.

“You were right too,” he offered quietly, a slight tremble in his hands. “There is – there is something similar in my past. There’s a lot of nasty shit in my past, to be honest. I don’t like having those things thrown in my face like that. I don’t like people knowing those kind of things about me. And you knew it all without having to search. You just saw.”

Neil hugged himself briefly, fingertips tracing scars through his shirt. “I hate feeling so powerless. I hate having to run all the time. Feeling like a rabbit.”

“So stay, and make a stand for yourself,” Doe replied softly through the door. “I won’t bring those things up again, unless you do. Truth for truth only. Mutual or not at all.”

Neil felt a tiny smile tugging at his lips. “Is that right?”

“Why not. You’re a patchwork parcel of lies and secrets and skills, and I’m not much different. We might work well together. I know Wymack already thinks so.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“I’m not sure, honestly,” Doe said lightly. “Work with me, for now. We’ll see after that.”

Neil looked down at his hands. It might be nice to have something to contribute to, to have the chance to make some kind of mark on the world other than a shallow anonymous grave at the end of a long, desperate sprint. It might be nice to have a place to belong, for a little while. It might be nice to have someone standing at his side for once.

“Okay,” he whispered, then cleared his throat. “Okay.”

“I’m gonna head out now. Are you coming?”

Neil got to his feet and tugged the bed away from the door. With a few swift motions, he had unlocked the door. Doe waited for him on the other side, expression calmly expectant.

“I’ll get my shoes.”

***

“Dr Mantlow!” Andrew called out with a wide, fake grin as he and Josten ran up the hospital steps behind their target. The widower turned around at being hailed, then frowned in confusion as he looked at them both, like he didn’t quite recognise them. “You were Peter Saldua’s last therapist,
weren’t you? You started treating him, oh, just a few weeks before you talked your wife into pointless plastic surgery.”

“Excuse me?” Mantlow frowned.

“Saldua wanted to fix himself. Jessop was his first attempt, you were his second. Lucky that, right. You, a man with a wife he wanted dead, running across him – a man with a history of violent obsession. Only problem was, your wife didn’t quite fit his profile, right?” Andrew continued, his grin as wide as if he were doped out of his head again. “So you persuaded her into changing her appearance. Getting surgery to firm up certain places, fill out others. To change her hair colour, and get rid of her mole.”

“Doe, isn’t it?” Mantlow said coldly, looking at them both derisively. “And Josten? You were at the apartment. You found Amy’s body.”

“The pills came from you, didn’t they?” Andrew continued. “Under Jessop’s name so it couldn’t be traced. Awful lucky his signature was still on file here for you to copy. Sloppy of the hospital, but that’s not the point. He thought he was taking anxiolytics, yes? Something to calm him down, get him happy, soothe away all those bad thoughts. But you were actually giving him steroids. Pushing him into ‘roid rage.”

“I’d never even heard the name Peter Saldua until the police called to tell me he’d killed my wife, and himself,” Mantlow said with far, far too much calm. As if he’d been prepared for this and made his rebuttal weeks in advance.

“Bullshit,” Josten said quietly, eyes narrowed. Takes a liar to know one.

“As my friend says, bullshit,” Andrew nodded. “I imagine you took to meeting him at odd places, odd times – oh, always times and places that would suit him, you always wanted to help him. Handy they never took place in your office, hm? Never an official schedule with your secretary. Never had him on your patient list. Then you arranged for him to come across your wife. Started ordering regular bouquets of flowers from the florist he worked at. You threw him into her path like a loaded gun and just waited for the steroid intoxication to build up in his system enough so he would fire.”

“You’re insane,” Mantlow said with a polite sneer.

Cold anger burned under Andrew’s skin and he leaned in close, speaking in a low hiss. “He was damaged, and trying to recover. And you took advantage of his trust.”

Josten tugged lightly on his sleeve, and Andrew stepped back a bit. No need for an assault charge tonight.

“After you murdered him for doing his part, made it look like suicide, you took his phone,” Josten said, his own eyes cold. Andrew had caught him up on everything on the run over to the hospital. “He’d been recording your sessions like he did with Jessop, and leaving that evidence of your tampering would ruin everything.”

Mantlow looked at them both calmly, a far cry from the bumbling, blinking idiot they’d met at the crime scene. “Imagine, hypothetically, a successful man married to a very wealthy wife, whom he wants to divorce. He knows that in the course of their relationship, he signed a prenup that ensured he would have nothing if he left her, and a living will that gives him everything if she were to predecease him. Hypothetically, wouldn’t it be smarter to trigger the clauses of the second document?”
He gave them a small, smug smile, and walked away. It took every inch of Andrew’s hard-won control to stop himself going after the bastard. It probably helped that Josten was holding the back of his jacket, looking just as furious.

“He knows we have nothing without the phone.” Josten said.

“I think his car would be greatly improved without functional tyres or windows,” Andrew replied through gritted teeth.

“Do you want to spend the night in a cell?”

“Not particularly. They give me backache.”

“Same. Let’s go back. We’ll figure out how to get him in the morning.”

Andrew turned to his grim companion and raised his eyebrows. “‘We’, huh?”

Josten met his eyes calmly, a very slight curve to his mouth. “As long as there’s food and a useable shower. Yeah.”

***

Andrew jerked awake, heart pounding in terror, at the knock on his door. It took a good minute for him to see the room around him, and to release his death-grip on the knives strapped to his arms. It appeared to be just gone six in the morning.

“I’ve got a lead,” Josten said smugly. “Come downstairs, there’s coffee.”

“I thought I locked you in your room,” Andrew called back groggily.

“Can’t hear you, I’m downstairs with coffee,” Josten said merrily.

Andrew spared another minute to rattle off every obscene curse he knew in both of his known languages before getting up and throwing on some day clothes. He found Josten sitting smugly at the table with two cups of fresh coffee, a small pile of toast, and two face-down pieces of paper.

“Those don’t look like much of a lead,” Andrew muttered as he inhaled as much of the coffee as possible without gills.

Then Josten turned both pages over, his eyes bright with triumph and a smile wider than any Andrew had yet seen on his face, one that actually made him look… pretty damn good.

Well, shit.

***

“Ah, Dr Mantlow, so sorry to keep you waiting,” Wymack smiled graciously. “I appreciate you giving me the chance to apologise for the allegations of my consultant and his associate last night. Please, take a seat.”

“I can’t promise it’ll change my mind about suing for harassment, but I’m willing to listen,” Mantlow replied.

“There’s just one thing I wanted to ask, just to clear the air. Did you ever treat Peter Saldua as a patient?”
“You have a funny way of apologising, Captain.”

“It’s a simple question, Doctor.”

Wymack endured his glare easily.

“No.” Mantlow said firmly. “I never treated Peter Saldua. I’d never even met the man. Now if you don’t mind, I have an appointment with my attorney and a lawsuit to file.”

Wymack gestured, and Neil, Andrew and Detective Gordon filed into the room.

“You realise you’re only making this worse for yourself, putting those two in the same room as me again?” Mantlow protested coldly.

Neil watched as Andrew slid one of his papers onto Wymack’s desk in front of Mantlow. “This is a medical form completed by Peter Saldua for another of his doctors.”

“I never treated—”

“My friend Josten here was having trouble sleeping last night, so he very helpfully perused some of the documents I’d taken to examine. He correctly read that Saldua had noted a very strong allergy to rice, to the extent where he had been issued an Epipen in case of exposure.”

“Excuse me?”

“So you can imagine Josten’s surprise when he distinctly remembered seeing a large bag of rice in Saldua’s cupboard,” Andrew continued with a tight smile. He slid over the other paper; a crime scene photo of the contents of the cupboards, rice and all. “He did a bit more digging, and found Saldua’s card receipt for the rice dated exactly three days before his death. He’s very good with the little details, you see. Nervous childhood. We’re working on it. But it’s handy for now, hm?”

“Captain, this harassment is just getting worse and worse,” Mantlow said darkly, making to get up.

Wymack held out his hand, and Gordon not-so-subtly stretched to block the doorway.

“Odd, don’t you think, that Saldua would buy the very thing he’s incredibly allergic to? And on the very day his phone records completely stopped, after months of daily activity? At first I thought he had indeed simply lost his phone, with all its recorded therapy sessions. But then I remembered the washing machine.”

“What the hell does rice and a washing machine have to do with—”

“I was wrong when I accused you of taking Saldua’s phone,” Josten joined in and stepped further into the room to stand at Andrew’s shoulder. “You certainly wanted to take it after killing him. But you couldn’t find it, could you? He’d laundered it, you see. Not in the fun gang way – he’d left it in some dirty jeans, I mean. And when he realised the precious record of all his therapy was being destroyed in the machine, he lost it. Furious with himself and overwhelmed with steroid intoxication, he mangled the machine, spilling out his washing and stomping all over it with his size eleven boots.” Neil let his mouth stretch in a cold smile learned from his father. “And then when he had calmed down a little, he went out and bought a kilo of rice.”

“What you might not know is that rice is a desiccant,” Gordon said from the door, looking smug. “It could absorb all the water from the phone and possibly save the files, if he acted fast enough. Guess what we found when we opened up that bag of rice.”
Andrew silently drew a battered-looking phone out of his pocket, pressed a few buttons, and let the recording play in the silent room.

“I don’t want to hurt her,” Saldua sobbed from beyond the grave. “Her name is Amy. When I see her I just, get these urges, and I can’t…. I don’t want to hurt her! You have to help me, Dr Mantlow, you have to help me, please!”

And then, Mantlow replied. “Shh, it’s okay Peter, I understand, I understand. Let’s try increasing your meds, see where that takes us. I’m here for you, it’ll be alright.”

Andrew ended the recording and smiled serenely down at Mantlow’s ashen, guilty face. There was no buzz quite like cornering a filthy liar with nothing but your own brain. Well, and somebody else’s twisty brain.

***

“Foul!” Neil yelled excitedly, throwing his arms up.

Andrew set him a scornful look. “It’s Exy, dumbass. Every single strategy is foul.”

“Shut up,” Neil grinned, leaning forward in his seat towards the TV. “Knox’ll score off it. Trojans could still win this!”

Andrew took a single, slow glance of the screen. “Nope.”

“You don’t know that.”

Andrew sighed and folded his arms. “Knox will hit to the upper left of the goal. The goalie will deflect towards her dealer, who’ll pass to three, who’ll dodge his mark and pass to six, then to ten, who’ll take a strike to the lower right and win the final point. I’m gonna get my coat.”

“You can’t possibly—”

“Door. Two minutes. Or no pizza.”

Neil scowled and turned back to the TV as Knox stepped up to take the penalty, ignoring Andrew moving around to get his coat. It looked good, looked like it would…! No. And now the dealer had it, and number three was running a feint, and number six was sliding into position, and then up to number ten… the goal lit up red, and two seconds later the final buzzer sounded.

Neil gaped at the screen, appalled.

“Josten!” Andrew called impatiently. “Do you want to get fed or not?”

Neil shook his head in bafflement, then got his coat and joined Andrew at the door. “You’re an asshole.”

“An asshole who’s taking you out for pizza. Come on.”

Neil smiled and followed him out the door. As temporary homes went, this one could be worse.
Chapter Summary

The first of the inbetween chapters to lighten up the load of the cases. Andrew gets a call from Boyd at a very unsociable hour.

“Hm? What is it?” Andrew demanded of his phone, heart still pounding from the shock of being woken by the ringtone, being startled out of uneasy dreams.

“Doe, hey, sorry I know it’s late…”

“Boyd.” Andrew replied through gritted teeth. “It is two. AM. Two whole hours after midnight. Four hours before sunrise. What the actual fuck do you want?"

Boyd sighed on the other end of the line. “I wouldn’t call unless it’s important, you know that. I’ve got a very scared witness here, and I have no idea what language she’s speaking and she doesn’t have any English other than ‘help’.”

Andrew had a horrible idea where this was going.

“You said your new irregular, that Josten guy, he’s a linguist yeah? Do you think maybe…?”

Andrew hung up on him and threw the phone across the room. He spent ten complete seconds glaring at the wall before untangling himself from his twisted bedsheets and retrieving the phone.

We’ll be there in 20, he texted Boyd. This will NOT be a regular occurrence.

Josten was no more pleased at the rude awakening, but he followed Andrew to the station with a minimum of grumbling.

“You’re here!” Boyd exclaimed on seeing them, looking exhausted from his night shift.

“Your grasp on the mechanics of reality and space astound me,” Andrew said flatly. “If any of us can actually really be anywhere in a metaphysical sense.”

“Don’t whine,” Boyd said, his eyes flicking curiously at the two of them. Neither had bothered dressing up much; they were in sweatpants and jumpers, bundled up in coats and gloves. Neither had brushed their hair or the sleep out of their eyes. “Thanks for coming, Josten. How did Andrew get hold of you so fast?”

Josten blinked sleepily at him. “He threw his phone at the wall after you called. It woke me up.”

Thank you so much for that, you oblivious idiot, Andrew thought with a clenched jaw.

Boyd very carefully did not react beyond a polite smile. “Oh, alright then. Thanks so much for coming in so fast, anyway. She’s through here. I really hope you at least recognise her language, I can’t make it out at all.”

Josten yawned wide enough to show his teeth, not bothering to cover with his hand, and plodded
after Boyd into one of the interview rooms. Andrew waited in the corner while Josten started murmuring to her. Boyd stood at his side, arms folded and a smile twitching at the corner of his mouth. Even if Andrew had to crane his neck a bit to see his face properly, gigantic bastard.

“It’s really not how he made it sound,” Andrew said in a bland voice.

“Hey, man, I’m very aware how tight-lipped you are about your private life, and it makes no difference to me either way. It’s not something you have to hide though. I hope you know that, you don’t have to hide it from me. You can be open about that kind of thing, no shame.”

Oh great, coming-out advice from Matthew Boyd.

“That’s nice to know, but we’re not fucking,” Andrew replied without batting an eyelid. “He doesn’t have a place at the moment, so he’s staying in my spare room. Thin walls, light sleeper.”

“Oh. Still, if you ever wanna talk…”

“Nope.”

Boyd sighed and rolled his eyes. “When are you gonna accept that I’m your friend, you tiny asshole? And that I don’t judge anything, literally ever. Except crimes. Because of my job. But you know what I mean, dammit.”

“Good talk, let’s never do this again, ever.”

Boyd raised his arms in frustration and walked away, leaving Andrew in peace. Or, more accurately, to watch Josten talking to the witness in what sounded like two or three different languages. Never mind the scribbles and mimes. He had to admit, now that Boyd had raised the point… Josten had a certain appeal, now he’d had a few decent meals and a wash. Especially all sleep-ruffled, with his stupid hair flopping everywhere. Cowlicks all over. He really did look like he’d just rolled out of bed in a much more fun way.

Fuck you, Boyd.

Josten smiled reassuringly at the formerly-hysterical woman and picked up the notepad they’d been using. “She was speaking Afrikaans. We kinda met halfway in a mix of Dutch and Portuguese, it was weird.”

“Did you get her account?” Boyd asked, sidling up to them again.

“Mm,” Josten nodded with another jaw-cracking yawn and handed the pad over. “You’ll have to get an official translator for her statement, but I’ve got the basics of what she was saying.”

“Wow, thank you so much Josten, I really appre—wait. I can’t read this?”

Andrew snatched the pad off Boyd and snorted. “Josten, you mess. You made your notes in German and French. Idiot.”

“Did I? Oh.” Josten took it back and started rewriting his translation in English, using the top of Andrew’s head as a table. Apparently in his sleep-deprived state he had no idea that was a fast way to lose a lot of blood.

Andrew froze, completely shocked by the audacity. What is happening.

“Ohm,” Boyd smiled knowingly. “Alright then.”
“Shut the fuck up.”

“What?” Josten mumbled with a frown that made his nose scrunch up.

“Nothing.”

“Is this all in English?” Josten asked, waving the paper in front of Andrew’s face.

“Ja, alles Englisch,” Andrew replied just to fuck with him.

Sure enough, he looked incredibly confused for a full twenty seconds. Then he scrubbed a hand over his face and pleaded, “Can we go back to bed now?”

“I fucking hate you,” Andrew muttered as they left with Boyd’s muffled laughter echoing around the empty bullpen.
Neil bounced happily down the stairs of Doe’s house, enjoying the strength in his legs again. Having three large meals a day, a warm place to get lots of sleep, and a sneaking sense of security for two weeks could do wonders for a guy’s physical health, who knew. He’d been on the weak side for the past few months, lost all his muscle tone and general stamina, in the desperate scramble to stay ahead of his father’s men. He’d mostly managed. Well. Until they caught up to him and nearly killed him the week before Doe came back from Stuttgart.

But that was all fine – he finally had the last bandage off. And while he’d given up on thinking he would ever win shirtless competitions years ago, he was glad to feel somewhat whole again.

He paused at the bottom of the stairs and frowned; Doe was already up, sitting on the living room floor surrounded by an arc of files, photos and general piles of paper. He was shirtless, oddly enough. From this angle Neil could see the impressive slabs of muscle on his arms and shoulders, and a couple of tattoos scattered over his spine and biceps, geometric and abstract patterns interlocked with animal motifs. Neil was curious about what was under the perpetual black armbands, but he knew better than to ask. He was more concerned as to the way Doe was swaying slightly in place as he stared at the old photos.

“You’re not dressed,” Neil said instead of a hello. “You said you’d go running with me this morning.”

“Doesn’t sound like me,” Doe groused.

Neil folded his arms and leaned over to have a look at the spread files. “Have you been up all night?”

“I started digging through one of my boxes on old unsolved cases last night after you went to bed,” Doe said with a yawn. “Lost track of time. Still losing track, to be honest. So no running, what a shame.”

“You can’t just do weights all the time in your little gym, you know,” Neil crouched to paw through one of the boxes, casting a glance over the man’s bare back. “You need to balance it with cardio.”

“When you can lift more than a bag of sugar in your skinny little hands, then you can lecture me about gym routines.” Doe replied, flipping some photos around on the floor.

Neil frowned and plucked one from his hands. “The Balloon Man? That’s who you’re looking at?”

“You’ve heard of him?” That at least got Doe’s attention, as bleary and sleep-deprived as it was.

“Mm. I was around the right age, when he was big,” Neil replied. He chewed his cheek for a moment. “Mom was worried.”
That earned a slightly interested glance; over the past fortnight, they’d been offering tiny truths to each other, testing the waters after their argument.

“So was I,” Doe replied casually, meeting him halfway. “But I was in a different state, so. I just heard about it on the news.”

“He took his first victim, what, fourteen years ago now? Adam something.”

“You remember?”

Neil shrugged and crossed his arms over his bent knees, surveying the old crime scene photos. “As you know, my family’s not local to New York, but we were staying here for a couple months at the time. Like I said, Mom was worried. Why are you looking at him now, exactly?”

Doe gave him a slow once-over then turned away. “Heard something on my police scanner app thing last night. Ten year old Mariana Castillo snatched from her bedroom in Queens, with the signature ‘thank you’ balloons left behind in her bed. ‘Balloon Man’,” he snorted derisively. “Very original.”

“Could’ve been the Helium Handyman,” Neil muttered.

Doe snorted again at his little stab of black humour.

“If you heard it on the scanner, you’re not actually on the case then?” Neil asked, resting his cheek against his arms, all hunched over on himself but comfortable, watching Doe from the corners of his eyes.

“No,” Doe sighed. “Child abductions and serial murders mean all sorts of committees and official task forces, so Wymack won’t be able to assign me to the case without the approval of the police commissioner. And he gets into work at eight thirty.”

Neil checked the clock. “Good thing I’m up.”

Doe hummed. “He takes about three minutes for coffee, another six-ish for the bathroom. So I should be getting the call in about ten minutes.”

His phone began to ring and they both jumped. Doe slowly smiled, then picked up. “Or sooner, in fact. Wymack, good morning to you too. Did you catch him before his coffee? See, this is why you’re my favorite. Hm? Yes. Yes. We’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

He hung up and shot to his feet, staggering a little and almost falling over Neil. He blinked down at himself.

“I could’ve sworn I was wearing a shirt earlier.”

Neil shook his head and started making a thermos of coffee for them both as Doe stumbled upstairs to get dressed.

Wymack met them outside the Castillo house, once they were both appropriately dressed and caffeinated for the day. He nodded a terse greeting to them both, eyes sliding over Neil for a second. Neil avoided his gaze as usual, though he could bear to be around the man if he knew it was coming. It was just taking time to adjust to being around somebody the right age, height and general appearance to get him all nervous and tense. Wymack had yet to mention it, though he had to have noticed.
“The girl’s bedroom is round the back,” Wymack started leading them through the garden towards the rather impressive house. “Perp forced the lock on her window around nine thirty last night, took her, left the balloons.”

“Mom’s a painter,” Boyd said as he joined them, looking tired. “She was at a friend’s gallery all night. Dad was getting some wine at the corner bodega around nine forty five. Hey, Doe. Josten, looking good.”

Neil blinked at him, then turned back to where Doe was stopped by a vine trailing around the garden gate. Doe poked at a partially-snapped vine, then rubbed the sap between his fingers.

“That’s freshly broken. The girl, presumably, when she was being taken. Right height.”

“Good, she’s a fighter,” Boyd commented and started writing it down in his notebook.

Doe scoffed quietly, a blank look on his face. “If little kids could actually win fights against grown adults then yeah, wonderful news. Show me the bedroom.”

Boyd sighed and led them into the house through the open patio door. The parents sat in quiet distress on the couch while a camera crew bustled around them. Doe stopped in his tracks fast enough that Neil nearly ran into his back, and only just managed to side-step him.

“What’s this?”

“Parents are making an appeal,” Boyd replied.

“They can’t.”

“What?”

Doe surged forward towards the cameraman. “Look, you can’t do this, it’ll only—”

The cameraman shoved him off impatiently. “We’re live in five, buddy, out of the way. Four, three, two…”

Doe snarled incoherently, then snatched the thermos out of Neil’s hands and splashed the coffee over the camera lens.

“Oi!” The cameraman yelled. Neil sighed. He’d really wanted the rest of that.

“Look, I’m sorry,” Doe said quickly, though he looked anything but, “I’m just trying to keep that kid alive.”

“Who the hell are you?” The woman on the couch demanded, presumably the mother.

“Mr Doe is a consultant with the department, Mrs Castillo,” Wymack said with a slightly apologetic wince. “And his associate, Mr Josten.”

“Look – Daniel Peters, Kayla Jackson, Billy Crawford. Victims two, three and five. The only ones whose bodies were ever found.” Doe said, ignoring the mother’s sob. He was hopped up on sleep deprivation and a new case and Neil just knew he’d be putting up with some shit today. “Last night I discovered a correlation between the rapidity of death and the extent of the parents’ media coverage. I can show my math if you want – or Josten can, anyway, he’s better at it than me – but in summary. The more interviews, the more TV exposure, the faster the children died. So you probably shouldn’t give any interviews if you ever want to see your daughter again. Breathing, that
“Doe,” Neil sighed, rubbing at his temple as Wymack glared at them both. “Christ.”

“Is he right?” Mr Castillo demanded, looking ashen and holding his wife’s shoulders.

“Usually,” Wymack gritted out.

“The correlation fits,” Neil added quietly, hands in his pockets and gaze on the floor. He directed his words mostly towards Boyd, who was more aware of his talent for numbers than Wymack. “I checked it on the way over. He seems to feed off the grief; keep him hungry, you should have a two-day window to find the girl.”

Boyd gave him a smile when Neil darted his eyes up to meet his. “Nice,” Boyd said softly under the cover of the parent’s exclamations. Neil nodded briefly, then sidled closer to Doe, who was rampaging through the kitchen.

“Doing your boy-wonder mathlete thing?” Doe asked as he pulled a bottle of wine from the fridge.

“Shut up,” Neil replied. “Are you stealing that?”

“I prefer whiskey.”

Neil poked about with him, frowning at the odd collection of implements. It was all doubled – two sets of pepper grinders, two knife blocks, two juicers of all things. He flipped through some post open on the side. “Kemper. It was Adam Kemper, the first boy. I remembered on the way.”

“Good for you.” Doe pushed past him, wine in hand, to fidget in front of the husband, who was talking to Boyd.

“—can’t blame yourself,” Boyd was attempting, before he was interrupted.

“Actually, he can.”

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, not for your daughter’s abduction,” Doe flapped his hand at that unimportant fact. “He would have got her somehow or another. But you should blame yourself for impeding our already time-sensitive investigation.”

“I told you everything,” the husband protested.

“Uh huh. Where’s the wine you claimed you were buying last night? You know, your alibi.”

“In your hand,” Mr Castillo frowned.

“Liar. Bodegas put the price tag on the cap, saves stacking time.” He upended the bottle to display the price tag tacked squarely to the base. “You bought this at another time, probably the store a block over where you got the other wines in your fridge, with the same labelling pattern. This one was already in the fridge, providing a convenient cover for what you were really doing. Tell us her name. Or his, I suppose, though you seem pretty straight.”

“I don’t know what you’re trying to insinuate—” Castillo started angrily while Boyd flapped his hands soothingly.

“Don’t try to deny it,” Doe rolled his eyes, then pointed at Neil off to the side expectantly.
Neil glared coolly at him, then cleared his throat. He spoke to the floor, still uncomfortable with
the whole ‘talking to witnesses’ thing. “Your kitchen stuff. There’s two sets for everything, one set
older – the ones you bought with your wife previously – and one set less than a year old. From
when you were living in Long Island on your own, I’d guess, before you reconciled and decided to
stay together.”

“What?” The husband asked, looking baffled. Doe gave him a smug smile and Boyd was frowning
curiously.

“Your post,” Neil mumbled and tugged on his sleeves. “There’s a letter forwarded from a short-
term apartments company in Long Island.”

Doe rested his elbow on Neil’s shoulder – he was so hunched over the shorter man could do it
easily. Neil didn’t really mind, as it drew attention back to Doe and off him, though Doe’s compact
muscular build meant he was quite heavy, leaning on Neil’s shoulder like that. “I had a flip through
your phone, hope you don’t mind,” Doe said breezily, waving the cell he’d swiped out of the man’s
Pocket earlier. “You took a fifteen second call from a Long Island number right before you left the
house last night. Presumably, from the person who brought a third into your marriage and
prompted the separation. They rang, you left. Why else would you lie to the police about your
whereabouts at the exact time your daughter was being abducted? I never have the patience for
shame,” Doe added conversationally to Neil, leaning just a bit harder down on his shoulder. “You
need to work on your eye contact, boy-wonder.”

Neil stepped back out of his reach, letting him stagger for a moment.

The husband gaped at the exchange, shot a guilty glance at his wife, then answered. “When Sara
and I separated, like you say, I dated a co-worker. She called me last night, said she was around and
wanted to see me, but I swear all we did was talk through the window of her car. I only went out
there to tell her to leave.”

“How could you not say anything?” Mrs Castillo demanded, eyes furious.

“Where did you meet her?” Boyd asked mildly and stepped between the couple.

“On the street a few houses down, but I swear she had nothing to do with this.” The husband said.

“Oh, probably not,” Doe smiled. “But if she were waiting for you, she was most likely watching
your house. She could have seen something, like the kidnapper’s vehicle, for instance. Do you see
now the importance of not lying?”

***

Andrew had half his attention on Mr Castillo’s sobbing paramour and half his attention on Josten’s
fidgeting as they sat in Wymack’s office later on that morning.

“Why do you get so weird around witnesses?” He asked in quiet German.

Josten seemed to force himself to let go of his sleeves before replying. “I don’t like being noticed.”
As always, his German sounded just so much more natural than Andrew’s, for all that he’d spoken
nothing but German in his six weeks in Stuttgart with Nicky and his husband. Something to do with
the cadence, Andrew decided.

“You should get over that,” he advised. “You were right, you know. All spot-on.”

“I know. I just don’t like talking to them, having them remember me.” Josten frowned at him.
“What does it matter?”

“You’re more fun when you’re sassing me,” Andrew replied with a twitch of a smile. “You’d probably give Boyd a heart attack if you did it to him, you know.”

Josten tilted his head, confused.

“Never mind,” Andrew sighed in English and turned back to the witness.

“…like I said, we just talked,” the woman dabbed at her eyes. “I thought maybe – but he wasn’t interested. Oh God, when I think that his daughter was being taken, while I was…” She devolved into more sobs and Andrew debated poking at Josten some more, but she recovered her composure quickly. “I pulled the car out to go, headed for the corner, when some maniac ran the stop sign and almost hit me.”

“What time was that?” Andrew asked impatiently. “Oh never mind, I already know. Nine forty.” Wymack and Boyd turned around to look at him and he found he had even less patience than usual for them. “The vine, at the gate. It meant she was awake and struggling when she was taken. All the other victims were chloroformed at the abduction, but he got sloppy with Mariana. Rushed things. Why?”

He turned expectantly to Josten at his side, who predictably glanced at Wymack before down at the floor. “I don’t know, Doe.”

Andrew clicked his tongue and frowned, disappointed. “The sirens, honestly. Listening to my scanner last night, there was a domestic dispute the next street over at almost the exact same time that Mr Castillo and this woman were having their little chat. A squad car was dispatched, sirens blaring.” He deliberately reached out and poked Josten’s cheek, earning him a flash of cold blue eyes and a scowl. *There you are.*

“No better,” Josten snapped, then answered the unspoken question without hesitation, voice louder than usual when around the cops, especially Wymack. “He heard the sirens and thought he’d been spotted. He panicked, grabbed the girl without subduing her, and ran off with her. She grabbed the vines on the way, but he was stronger and broke her grip on them. He stashed her in his vehicle and ran as fast as he could, almost hitting Ms Thomas’ car.”

“Better,” Andrew said, then turned to the cops.

“Do you remember the make of the car, Ms Thomas?” Boyd asked eagerly, pen at the ready.

“A brown van. Really?” Josten said flatly as they walked down the Castillo’s street, examining the parked cars. “Zero points for originality.”

“Practically screams child-napper, doesn’t it?” Andrew smiled and idly kicked at a Mercedes’ tires. He nearly overbalanced but caught himself.

“Why do you want me to talk so much, on cases?” Josten asked, squinting down the street without apparently noticing.

“You’re good at this stuff, I told you. And your masses of emotional baggage are no longer endearing, they’re just annoying when they impede cases.” Andrew informed him. “We have less than two days to find this girl alive, and I’d appreciate it if you made more of an effort to speed things along. Plus, I think better when there’s somebody else to work off.”
“Who did you annoy before I came along, then?”

Andrew shrugged and crossed the street to examine the cars there instead, Josten following faithfully. “Cab drivers, waiters, bartenders. Occasional prostitute. They’re very good listeners, you know. You should try finding one. Get all that grump off your chest.”

“I’m good, ta,” Josten replied sourly.

“I’ve got numbers, if you want them,” Andrew offered with a grin. “Might have to work a bit to find your type, but I’m up for the challenge.”

“What do you think is my type, then?” Josten sighed.

Andrew cocked his head and looked his companion over. His grin widened. “Not sure yet. I’ll figure it out.” He was about to add something about putting socks on doorknobs when a rush of dizziness suddenly hit and he stumbled into a car.

“You don’t look so good, you know,” Josten frowned, his hands half-outstretched as if to grab him. “Did you eat anything before we left this morning?”

“Nah.”

Josten smiled. “No sleep, no food. You’re turning into me, huh?” He dug in a pocket briefly and retrieved half a sandwich wrapped in foil. He handed it to Andrew, who wolfed it.

“You’re a star, Josten. Predictable and weird about food still, but kinda shiny all the same.”

Josten scoffed. “Thanks, I think.”

“Though maybe there’s something to be said for delirium,” Andrew remarked as he examined the small red car he’d tripped into.

Josten followed his gaze. “If this is your idea of a brown van, you’re way more sleep deprived than I thought.”

Andrew grinned. “See, you’re way more fun like this. Note the parking tickets gathering dust – this one’s been here for ages. But there are small skids under each of the tires on this side. And a rather gorgeous paint sample along the side, see?”

“Someone swiped it, budged it along.” Josten squatted by the side of the car, frowning at the long scratch. “There’s brown here, but white and blue mixed in as well. That’s cop white and blue.”

Andrew balled up the foil and bounced it lightly off Josten’s shoulder. “See, who needs sleep. Boyd!”

“What is it?” Boyd asked as he crossed the street after them, having been hanging back to canvass the neighbours.

“You’re looking for a decommissioned NYPD van, probably sold at auction, repainted brown and with a long scrape down the side, hopefully with some red paint if we’re lucky. Issue the BOLO, we’ll find the Balloon Man before lunch.”

The car chase following a hit on the BOLO was kind of exciting, Andrew admitted to himself as he followed Wymack out of the squad car to where Boyd was holding the van’s driver after taking him down in what had looked awfully like a backliner’s body check. It had done the job though;
the guy in the hoodie was wheezing and boneless on the floor, though not seriously harmed. The other cops opened up the van and called out negatives – no terrified little girl in sight.

Boyd flipped the driver’s hood down and grimaced, letting up his grip a little. “Chief, got a problem. This guy woulda been in sixth grade when the Balloon Man took his first victim. Not our guy.”

Andrew frowned, some sense at the back of his brain buzzing persistently away. He darted forwards and pulled the guy’s hoodie down to expose the birthmark on his neck, a match to all those photos still sitting on his living room floor back at the house.

“Exactly sixth grade. Good instincts, Boyd,” He agreed. “This isn’t the Balloon Man. This is Adam Kemper, whole and free.”

***

“Adam,” Boyd was smiling gently in the interrogation room. “Adam, please talk to us. We know who you are, your fingerprints confirmed your identity. It’s okay. You can tell us how you ended up in that van. You’re safe here.”

Adam Kemper just stared at the table, face blank and eyes distant no matter how Boyd cajoled.

Neil eyed Doe as he tapped his feet impatiently, watching through the back of the mirror in the little side room again.

“There’s a psych on the way, but I don’t think it’ll make much difference,” Wymack sighed on the other side of Doe; Neil had the sneaking suspicion the Chief had stood there on purpose, so Neil wouldn’t get jumpy. Boyd and the other cop filed out of the room to let Kemper stew on his own for a bit. “He just won’t talk. The commissioner called his parents, they’re on the way.”

“Should only take a few hours for them to get through the press,” Doe remarked coolly, eyes narrowed as he watched Kemper. “I’m not the only one who thinks it’s no coincidence he’s miraculously turned up fourteen years after his abduction in the very van we know was used to abduct Mariana Castillo, right?”

Neil watched Kemper as well, an uncomfortable feeling in his stomach. He fidgeted with his sleeves again. He was going to stay quiet, but he felt Doe’s unamused glare and sighed to himself. He cleared his throat and pulled the cuffs down over his fingers, held them tight in his palms. Sometimes abductees, they – they learn to sympathise with their captor. Enough time and abuse, you can rewire a kid’s brain like that. Make sure they wouldn’t run. So they’d grow to care for their captor.

“Stockholm Syndrome, you mean,” Wymack said quietly.

Neil kept his eyes down, down. His voice was strained when he spoke again, but he could feel Doe’s solid presence at his shoulder, lending silent understanding and strength. “Mm. Could explain why he was driving the van, why he tried to run away from police. If he’s gained his captor’s trust over the years. If he’s alive, others could be too.”

“Adam was special, his first,” Doe disagreed, though his voice was low instead of the usual manic burble. Almost calming. “The bodies of the second and third victims suggested he rather got a taste for the killing. Only question now is, what role did Kemper play in their deaths? You can compel a child to do all sorts of things, once their head is all messed up.”

At least he hadn’t made Neil say that in front of the goddamn precinct Chief. Neil didn’t know
how the fuck Doe had guessed that particular piece of grime from Neil’s past, but he spared a
thought to be grateful he hadn’t brought it up just to mess with Neil. It was relevant to the case,
that was the only reason. And he was sparing Neil as much as possible, oddly enough. Neil kept
staring at the floor. He couldn’t feel his hands. He didn’t think he could move at all. He was
nothing, nothing but ice.

Wymack sighed, sounding about eighty years old. “Jesus. We don’t have any evidence to hold him
here, you know. We brought him in on driving without a license, but there’s no physical evidence
tying him to the Castillo girl. If he doesn’t start talking soon, we’re gonna have to let him walk
with his parents, and we’ll run out of time to find Mariana.”

“I want to talk to him,” Doe said.

“This is kind of a delicate situation,” Wymack said pointedly.

“And I can be indelicate, I know,” Doe shrugged, his shoulder briefly knocking into Neil’s.
Absurdly, it shook him out of the stasis. Feeling started coming back to his fingers and legs, but he
felt distinctly ill. “If you think I’d do anything to jeopardize the safety of that little girl—”

“Intentionally, no,” Wymack shook his head. “But you’re not known for your cool head, and we’re
talking about an incredibly traumatised young man here, a kid who’s been brainwashed. I don’t
think your brand of rude cynicism would do the trick somehow, Doe.”

“I’ll do it.” Neil said through numb lips. “He’ll talk to me.”

He knew Wymack was watching him, but all he could focus on was the quiet, fierce presence at his
side.

“Don’t let Boyd hear,” Neil asked in German. “I don’t want him to know.”

“I won’t,” Doe replied quietly. “If you can do this, I’ll go running with you for the next week.”

“Seems to me you should tell me something instead,” Neil managed, hugging his chest a bit with
his eyes on the carpet.

“Alright,” Doe murmured. “Think about what you want to know, and I’ll answer.”

Neil nodded, took a slow breath, then walked quickly out of the room before Wymack could ask.
The cop at the door let him into the interrogation room with a nod, recognising him as Doe’s
shadow from the past two weeks.

“Hi, Adam,” He said as he took a seat opposite the young man. He knew the two-way mirror was
at his back and it made his hands shake for a second, thinking of what he was going to have to do,
in front of the Chief, but calmed himself after a brief, panicked moment. Doe was there too.
Watching his back. “My name’s Neil. You can probably tell from my clothes, but I’m not an
officer. I’m not a psych either, or a doctor. So that makes me the only person you’ll meet today
who won’t try to lie to you.”

Adam said nothing, just kept blinking into the middle distance. That was okay. Neil needed a
moment to gather every tiny scrap of courage he’d ever cobbled together and hope it would be
enough.

“The detectives earlier, they told you that the man who took you fourteen years ago was a bad
man. A very sick, very terrible man. A monster. That he hurt and abused you. But they don’t know
all of it, do they?”
There was a slight flicker in Adam’s eyes. Neil could hear his own voice growing bleak and disconnected, but forced himself to continue. “He also took care of you. Put a roof over your head, taught you to drive. Soothed you when you had bad dreams. Looked after you when you were sick. Got you treats when you were good. Loved you.”

Adam’s eyes gradually focused on Neil’s face.

“People like the detectives, they don’t get it. They only see it one way. They see that you were taken, when you were very young. They don’t see how you were being protected. From all the people who would hurt you, if you’d stayed. They don’t see how he needed you, too. How you took care of each other. They don’t get that you had to do things to keep him safe, as well. They wouldn’t understand.”

Neil and Adam blinked at each other, all mirrored stillness and tension.

“How old were you?” Adam asked hesitantly, the first thing he’d said to anyone all day. Like knows like, Doe’s remembered voice whispered in Neil’s ear.

“Eleven. She was keeping me safe, you see.”

“How?”

Neil swallowed. “My mother. I got this trying to help her, you know?” He rolled up a sleeve to show the long, jagged scar running up the inside of his right arm, only a year old. Romero had always been a sloppy fighter, hadn’t expected little Junior to fight back, hadn’t expected him to resist going back to his father. Back to dear Lola. He’d never fought before, after all. “Things weren’t wonderful, with her. She was harsh, but it was to keep me safe from worse, at the end of the day. I wasn’t going to let anybody hurt her. It didn’t matter in the end. But we do these things for the people we care about. I would have done anything she asked, just so I wouldn’t be alone.”

Adam stared at the scar, his hands twitching like he wanted to touch it. Neil waited, his heart in his throat, then tugged the sleeve back down when Adam stayed still. He pulled the cuff tightly into his palm and held on for dear life.

“He brought me donuts,” Adam whispered. “He didn’t have to. He came home every morning and brought me donuts.”

“Of course he did. He loved you.”

“When I cried, he would hold me close.”

“A good father.”

“He didn’t want to hurt me, I know, but I made it difficult…”

“I know, Adam. Did you help him, when he asked? With the other children? When they made it difficult?”

Adam opened his mouth, tears in his eyes, but the door suddenly opened to admit a very pale-faced Wymack. “No more questions. His parents lawyered him up. C’mon, Josten.”

“Bye for now, Adam.”

“I’m sorry about your mother.”
“Me too,” Neil choked out, and ducked through the door as far away from Wymack as he could get without losing skin on the door frame.

He didn’t know where he was walking, who he was passing, all he knew was that he had to get away from that room and all the ugly, wonderful, horrendous memories clawing at his skin. He hugged his ribs, desperate to keep himself from flying apart, and found a blessedly quiet corner, dark and cool and safe. He tucked himself up as small as he could and buried his head in his arms. He smelled smoke and blood and gasoline and couldn’t get it off his hands. It clung to him, like blood to vinyl. But she would never, ever be back, and he didn’t know if his relief or his grief were stronger.

***

Andrew settled into a crouch beside his shadow, watching him warily. He ignored the few people trying not to stare at the shaky young man hiding under the back stairs. He watched Josten tremble and clutch at himself and try desperately to stitch himself back together after tearing himself to shreds. All for nothing, with the arrival of the lawyer.

Andrew tamped down on the slow fuse of anger burning in his gut. He’d known from Josten’s reactions to the case that he was probably too close to it, but he hadn’t imagined all that would come pouring out of the man’s mouth. He’d heard from his own informants in the Wesninski circle that the son had been snatched by his previously-absent mother, that they’d been on the run for a long time to avoid the patriarch. He’d been expecting Josten to fabricate something to get Adam to empathise with him and open up. He’d been expecting something about living homeless, town to town, avoiding the police. He hadn’t expected… any of what Josten had said. Andrew was very good at observing, and spotting liar’s tells. Josten hadn’t even dodged a question. Just laid there with the knife across his throat and slashed it himself, gushing out sickening truth. Andrew hadn’t been asking for him to expose himself so painfully, and he hated the guilt and complicity that twisted his lungs at bringing this about.

My fault. My responsibility.

He thought of a young boy, tugged along by a heavy-handed mother to avoid a murderous family, twisted and warped and told she was his only chance at safety. He thought of that boy throwing himself into a knife fight to defend that two-faced woman, desperate to keep her close so he wouldn’t have to run alone after thirteen fucking years depending on her, and her alone. He wondered what had happened to her body.

I don’t know what truths I have to match all that, he admitted to himself. He’s even more fucked up than I thought.

“Josten,” he said softly. “Neil.”

It took a long time, but Josten slowly lifted his head. His eyes were terrible to see – devoid of any spark of life, any feeling. It was like looking at a corpse.

“You survived.” Andrew told him. “You’re alive.”

Josten didn’t even blink, and Andrew could read his expression far, far too well. It doesn’t feel like it.

“It’s your turn, you know. Ask me anything, I’ll answer.”

Watching him think was a painful process.
“I don’t want to ask,” Josten mumbled.

“Then ask another time,” Andrew said firmly. “But I will not owe you anything, you understand? So think of it some other time. Ask me next week.”

“Next week.”

“Yes.”

Josten closed his eyes, like the concept of the passage of time away from all the hurt, all the pain, was too alien to bear.

“Mariana needs us, Neil. She needs somebody to get her home again.”

Josten opened his eyes again slowly, a vague interest in his face. It wasn’t much, but it was enough to keep him from going under.

“Doe?” he mumbled.

“Mmhmm. Come on, Josten. It’s all spidery down here.” Andrew stood up and extended his hand down.

Josten blinked at it for a full minute, but Andrew didn’t move. Slowly, he stretched his own bony hand and closed around Andrew’s wrist. With an easy shift of his shoulder, Andrew pulled him to his feet.

“Did Boyd hear?” Josten mumbled to his shoes, keeping hold of Andrew’s wrist like he’d melt away without it. His fingers brushed at the edge of the armband, just a little curious.

“No,” Andrew said. “Come on.” He shifted his grip to hold onto Josten’s sleeve and led him back through the corridors of the precinct. Josten followed in his wake, eyes on the floor as he clung right back to Andrew’s cuff. Andrew met everyone’s stares with his own cold look and brought his erstwhile shadow into Wymack’s office. Wymack and Boyd were busy talking to Kemper’s anxious parents, but both turned when they saw Andrew bringing Josten over. He warned them off with a single look and gently pushed on Josten’s shoulders to get him to sit in a chair by the door, not too close to anybody. He took his own seat right beside him and nodded for Wymack to continue.

“You should know, Captain, we’ve already broached the subject of an immunity deal with the DA,” a lawyer was saying. “Adam will be given immunity for any crimes he may have been coerced into committing by the individual who took him, and in exchange he’ll tell you everything he knows. He’ll also help you locate the bodies of the other victims, to his best knowledge. We expect to hear back from the DA by morning.”

“By then it could be too late for Mariana Castillo,” Wymack frowned.

The lawyer spread his hands with a grimace, and Kemper’s parents were stone-faced.

The anger was just begging to be released. “Boyd,” Andrew said tightly and jerked his head. Boyd followed him out of the room. Josten stayed where he was, lifeless and vacant. “I’m not going to let Josten’s efforts go to waste. He got something out of Kemper. Donuts. The Balloon Man brought him donuts every morning after work. He works nights.”

Boyd rubbed through his hair, looking worriedly at Josten. “You really think that’s enough to catch him?”
“I’m going to damn well try,” Andrew said through gritted teeth, following his gaze and hating the helpless feeling in his chest. “Before, the suspect pool was every man in the city. Now it’s every man who works night shifts. Just watch me.”

***

“You’re going to stay up all night again, aren’t you?”

Andrew jumped at the quiet voice behind him, and turned to see Josten standing in the doorway. His face was still awfully blank, but he was looking around, apparently aware of his surroundings. And he was talking again after the past few hours of mutely following wherever Andrew went, clutching his sleeve or the back of his shirt like a lost duckling.

“You can’t stop me, Josten,” Andrew said lightly, though his body was begging for rest. “I’m not going to sleep until I’ve got a name.”

“I’m not going to stop you,” Josten said, eyes flickering over the piles and piles of police boxes, stacked to overflowing with old files. “I’m going to help you stay awake. Mariana needs us.”

“Yes, she does,” Andrew replied firmly. “So are you going to man the coffeepot?”

“No. I’m going to show you a trick I learned in school.”

Andrew felt his eyebrows inching up his forehead without his permission. “Oh?”

Josten seemed eternally immune to innuendo. Instead he stood beside Andrew, took a breath, then sank into a deep squat before popping up again.

“I know how to pop a squat, Josten.”

Josten shot him a flinty look – it was a pale shadow of his usual glare, but Andrew would take it. “My father always wanted me to do well. If my grades were bad, he wasn’t happy. Whenever I had a test to cram for, I’d do fifty of these an hour, keep me focussed, keep me awake. When I was in schools after we left, the habit continued.”

Andrew watched as he did another.

“I never got under ninety eight percent on anything my whole life. Just saying.”

He did another. On the next one, Andrew joined him with a huff.

***

“Josten.”

Andrew lightly threw a piece of bread at the man’s tousled hair. He jumped and sat up immediately, eyes wide and too-alert.

“Weak, Josten. You fell asleep at three.”

“What about you?” Josten yawned and shrugged off the blanket Andrew had covered him with at the table.

“Didn’t sleep, isn’t that amazing? Your trick actually worked. Even if it was just to force me to exercise with you. I see you, sneaky bastard.”
Josten gave him a tiny smile, and Andrew’s lungs eased out of the cramp they’d been in ever since Josten walked into that interrogation room. “You got me. Is there coffee?”

“Even better – there’s coffee and a lead.”

He perked up just a bit. “Tell me.”

Andrew poured them both a large cup of coffee and decidedly ignored the tremble to his sleep-deprived hands.

“When all this kicked off fourteen years ago, the FBI were working the angle that the Balloon Man was an exterminator; Adam Kemper’s family had had the house fumigated just a week before he was taken, and the next two families had similar procedures close to the abduction date. At the time, the FBI interviewed every employee of the local extermination companies, but turned up nothing. They abandoned the theory when none of the other victims’ families had links to extermination, pest control, nothing.”

“Okay?” Josten said, slurping down his own coffee and starting to nibble at the cold toast Andrew had left for him.

“I think they were onto something. I think he was an exterminator, but then changed jobs probably because he’d heard his company was being investigated. See this?” Andrew pushed some crime scene photos towards his sleepy companion. “The parents of victim four had a subscription to this magazine, as do the Castillos. The parents of victims five, six and seven are not subscribers, but all have a next door neighbour who is.”

“So the Balloon Man was an exterminator, now he delivers magazines at night or the early morning,” Josten said. “That’s how he found his victims.”

“Exactly. I called the magazine distributor earlier, and I found the name of the delivery worker for the Castillo’s area. Man called Abbott. Would you believe, he used to work as an exterminator fourteen years ago?”

They shared a slow, sharp smile.

***

“Hey, Josten. You alright?” Wymack asked gruffly as they waited in the surveillance van for the rapid response team to clear Abbott’s apartment, the feeds from their helmets broadcasting on the monitors. Boyd was trying not to hover, but it was obvious he was concerned, even if Doe had somehow kept him out of the room on the other side of the mirror. As promised.

Neil kept his eyes on the bank of monitors, and steadied himself in the feeling of Doe’s shoulder lightly pressed against his own.

“I’m fine. Let’s just get Mariana.”

He saw Boyd and Wymack exchange a look in the reflection of the monitors, but was more aware of the almost accidental way Doe leaned into him just a little, propping him up and grounding him. They didn’t look at each other, kept their identical blank gazes on the monitors, but Neil appreciated it all the same.

Inside the apartment, the team had gone through every room of the shitty little place. It was completely empty, hardly any furniture. In the bedroom, there was a cluster of balloons.
“Smith, focus your camera,” Wymack said into his mic feed. “What do the balloons say?”

*Congratulations*, the balloons assured them. *Well done!*

“Who’s that for?” Boyd asked darkly.

“Us,” Doe replied in the same tone. “For finding him.”

“What’s that envelope?” Wymack asked Smith, frowning at the little package attached to the balloons, grainy through the feed. “Smith, bring it here.”

It was a USB. Boyd cautiously inserted it into an unconnected laptop, wary of viruses getting onto their secure systems. It had a single video file on it, and they crowded around the screen to watch.

Abbott stared through the camera with dead eyes and greasy, grey hair. *You have something that’s mine. You have my son. You know who I am, you know what I can do. I’ve already killed six people. If you haven’t released Adam back to me by noon tomorrow, you can make it seven."

The camera spun shakily to show little Mariana Castillo, alive, hunched over and terrified on a filthy mattress. Her clothes were torn, her cheeks streaked with tears as she stared back at the camera. Neil felt how Doe tensed up at his side, and carefully pressed back into his shoulder, just for a moment.

***

“Please,” Mrs Castillo begged with watery eyes. *Please. Please make the trade. Give us back our daughter.*”

“I’m afraid it’s not that simple,” Wymack sighed, looking a lot older than he was. “We can’t trade one victim for another.”

“Is that really what you think Kemper is?” The father asked hotly. “I saw on the news, the DA gave him an immunity deal! If he’s an innocent victim, what does he need immunity from?”

“The DA felt he had to offer that deal, to compel Adam to talk to us at all,” Wymack said wearily. “I know the media is making a big song and dance out of the possibility of Adam being involved in the Balloon Man’s crimes, but we have no evidence whatsoever to support any of that.”

“So how long do we wait for you to get evidence?” Mr Castillo asked with fire in his eyes. “A week? A month? We only have until noon tomorrow!”

“Has anybody asked what Adam Kemper wants?” Mrs Castillo said in an awful voice. “He’s an adult. If he wants to go back to his ‘father’, why won’t you let him?”

“Victims of abuse can be protective of their abusers,” Doe said softly from the corner. “It doesn’t mean we should throw them back to the wolves.”

“Look, the immunity deal is on the table,” Boyd said in a calm voice, waving his hands a little.

“Then why hasn’t he taken it?” Mr Castillo asked.

“Because he’s been traumatised,” Boyd said. “He’s not talking to anybody, not even his own parents.”

The Castillos shook their heads in disgust and stormed out, but not before the husband got up in Wymack’s face. “If anything happens to our daughter, it’s your head we’ll be calling for in the
“So now what?” Neil asked quietly from his position by Doe.

“We go back to the files, see if there’s any clue we missed about where Abbott is keeping Mariana.” Boyd said grimly.

“No,” Wymack said when Doe opened his mouth. “No, Doe. When his parents hired the lawyer they put up a wall. Nobody from the NYPD is allowed anywhere near that kid anymore. You are not going in there.”

“He talked to me, and I’m not officially affiliated with you,” Neil said, fiddling with his cuffs again.

Now it was Doe’s turn, apparently. “No way, Josten. I’m not putting you back in there.”

Neil ignored the surprised look Boyd and Wymack gave them. “It’s alright. Mariana needs us.”

“No,” Doe said again, firmly. “We’ll go through the files. We found Abbott before, we can find him again.”

Neil felt a bit of anger licking at his insides like flame, burning away the cold apprehension, and sat up straight. He met Doe’s eyes unafraid. “I know it looked bad, yesterday. But I’m not a child. I am going in there, and I am going to get Mariana’s location. We’re going to save her and bring her back to her parents. Do you hear me, Doe?”

Doe stared back at him, quietly fuming. Neither looked away for a long time as the tension in the room ratcheted up unbearably. At long last, Doe tore his eyes away. “Don’t be a fucking martyr,” he spat. “I hate that shit. If you break yourself over this, we’re through.”

“I know,” Neil replied, more relieved than he knew how to express. “I won’t break.”

“Get out of my sight.”

Neil started to reach out, to touch his shoulder, then thought better of it. He slipped past an openly-astonished Boyd and into Adam’s interrogation room before anybody could call him back. He had the bit between his teeth and fire in his gut and he would not break.

“Hello again, Adam,” he managed a smile as he sat down. “Did you sleep okay, last night?”

“Hello,” Adam replied softly, giving him a tiny smile in response, more than he’d given his own parents. “And not really.”

“I’m sure you know by now the cops have identified him, Samuel Abbott. You must be worried about him.”

Adam dropped his eyes, an anguished look on his face. “He’s my dad.”

Neil leaned forward a little. “Is that why you haven’t taken the deal?”

“Would you have turned in your mom?”

Neil breathed through the pain in his chest and rubbed at the scar on his arm absently. “The sooner the cops find him, the better it’ll be for him. He hasn’t hurt the girl yet. I know you love him, Adam. I really do. But you can’t have loved everything he did, the way he hurt you at the start.”
Adam said nothing, though his lip trembled.

Neil thought uncomfortably of the mirror at his back, at who would be listening. He had to trust Doe would protect him. He had to trust that there wasn’t any evidence for what he would say. “Me and my mom, we didn’t settle anywhere for long. We didn’t have a lot of money. Couldn’t get food, a lot of the time. So we did what we could. I did what I could, did what she said, and we survived. It wasn’t good, but we did what we had to do. People will usually follow a starving kid down an alley.” Neil rubbed at his cuticles to stop himself from fiddling with his cuffs and lowered his voice while Adam stared at him guiltily. “He made you help with the others, didn’t he?”

“He’s my dad,” Adam sobbed.

“That doesn’t mean it wasn’t difficult.” Neil reached out and lightly rested his fingers on Adam’s wrist, his voice soft and shaky. “Is that why you didn’t take the deal? You don’t feel you deserve it?”

“I never…” Tears started to flow, and Adam hunched over on himself. He grabbed at Neil’s wrist and Neil did his best not to flinch. “I never knew why it was so important to him. But I loved him, and he was good to me…”

“I know,” Neil soothed.

“Wh-When he asked me to – to help take, to take the others, I… I told him I would. I helped.”

“It’s okay, Adam.”

“No, it’s not!” Adam sobbed. “I know it was wrong, but he asked and he needed me, he needed my help, and I couldn’t let him down… Y-you said yesterday you wouldn’t lie to me.”

“That’s right.”

Adam turned a hopeless gaze on him, tears thick on his cheeks. “So tell me. If I sign that deal, if I turn him in. Do you think it’ll make up for the things I did?”

Neil’s stomach rolled and it was all he could do to keep speaking as his rotten memories screamed in his head. “No, I don’t,” He said softly. “Six children are dead, because of him. To whatever extent you had to help him, you won’t get the blood off your hands.” Neil took a slow breath, holding his eyes. He thought of Doe, offering him a shower and a sandwich and a temporary home. He thought of Wymack letting him tag along on cases and make himself useful. He thought of Boyd always trying to give him food. He thought of a helpless little girl. “But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t try.”

Adam bit his lip so hard Neil thought his teeth would punch through.

“Alright,” he said brokenly. “I’ll do it. I’ll sign the deal. I’ll tell you where they are.”

“Thank you, Adam. Thank you.”

Adam put his head down on his arms and started weeping in earnest, his dark hair flopping down to hide his face. Neil rested his hand on the poor man’s shoulder and turned to nod at the two-way mirror.

***

Andrew bounced a little on his feet as they waited outside Abbott’s second apartment, listening to
Boyd and the others clear the place. Josten was quiet beside him, but his eyes were clear and alert. Josten turned his head to meet his look evenly.

“I told you I wouldn’t break.”

Fuck this guy, seriously.

“I know what I want to ask you,” he continued. “Should I ask next week?”

“Ask me tonight. I don’t like things hanging over my head.”

“Alright.”

They waited in tense silence; the earlier gunshot had startled them both. Goodbye, Balloon Man. Sicko had preferred to shoot himself than be taken in alive. Tell Adam I’m sorry, he’d begged. It niggled at Andrew’s brain, like an itch under his skin. He glanced at Josten again to distract himself.

“You did well, back there.”

Josten’s lips twitched, and a little of the grimness in his face thawed. “Thank you.”

Boyd leaned out of the apartment doorway to give them both a searching look. “Mariana’s okay. She’s terrified, but she hasn’t been hurt more than a few bruises on her arms. You guys can go home, get some sleep. I don’t know what you said to Kemper, Josten, but we couldn’t have got to Mariana alive without you. You did great.”

Josten, surprise of all surprises, met Boyd’s eyes and gave him a very tiny smile. “Thanks, Boyd.”

Oh yep. Boyd looked like somebody had just given him a basket of mewling kittens, a life supply of alcohol and told him he’d won the lottery all at once.

Andrew rolled his eyes and pushed past the emotional idiot into the apartment. He dodged around the cops to Abbott’s body and frowned down at it, that itch niggling away. “Hm.”

“Not what you were expecting?” Josten asked, at his heels as always.

Andrew cocked his head and looked down at the flabby, pathetic corpse. Abbott had been wearing a back brace, surgical scars showing though the centre. “This is the man who kidnapped six children, controlled and dominated them, physically and emotionally abused them. But he looks like he could barely get around these days.”

“No wonder he made Adam help,” Josten murmured.

Ah.

Andrew jogged to the main bedroom, ignoring the filthy pallet mattress in the hallway. The bedroom was nice for its size – a king bed, TV, lamps, wall decorations. Very nice, for a kidnapper. He inspected the pillows, and felt his mouth twist at the dark shade of hair on the pillow.

“What is it?” Josten asked from the door.

Andrew counted to ten very slowly in his head. When he spoke, his voice was tight from barely-controlled rage. “Abbott is not the Balloon Man.”
Hours later, Andrew sat in the dark of Adam Kemper’s childhood bedroom like a vengeful stalker, watching the door with fury bubbling under his skin. When Kemper walked through and flicked on the light, Andrew had to remind himself of what Wymack had told him on his very first case with the man, fresh out of college with a criminal justice degree and in need of some way to get back at the fuckers who’d hurt him. Don’t fucking punch the main suspect.

“Who are you?” Kemper asked, closing the door. He looked surprised, but not afraid.

“I’m Doe,” Andrew replied. “I’m attached to the police, but I’m not a cop. You’ve been talking to my associate Josten a lot, so I thought it was time I said hi.”

“How did you get in?” Kemper asked nervously.

“The window. Sash closings are so easy, you know.”

“What do you want?”

Andrew lifted his chin to stare at the man. “You’re pretty good, you know? Of course you know. You knew just what to do. Knew just how to manipulate everyone around you. You knew everyone wanted to see you as a little boy in need of rescue. You knew all you needed was a helpless look, a tragic inability to talk to anybody, and nobody would look any closer.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying,” Kemper said.

“I pride myself on seeing things other people don’t,” Andrew said, quietly furious. “Nothing gets past me, oh no. But you managed to trick me. And you manipulated Josten into giving away a hell of a lot of his secrets. I’m not sure why. I suspect you just enjoyed making us all dance.”

“I didn’t trick anybody—”

“Don’t lie,” Andrew hissed. “I examined the pillows in that place. In the main bedroom, the only hairs were short and dark. Yours. Abbott’s grey rattails were all over the mattress in the hall. You occupied the master bedroom because you were the master. You became the Balloon Man.”

Kemper stared back at him and the confused look on his face slowly slid away to be replaced by a calm arrogance that made Andrew’s gut churn.

“It must take a huge intellect for a boy to turn the tables on his abductor.”

“You have no idea,” Kemper sneered quietly.

“It was your idea to take more children,” Andrew said, sounding it out just to watch Kemper’s reaction. “You wanted to make someone else the victim, make somebody else hurt like he’d hurt you. To feel powerful again.”

“You’re forgetting the parents,” Kemper said, wagging a finger. Asshole. “Crying on TV, making a spectacle of themselves. When Abbott first took me, I had to put up with a lot. It was hard. But he did let me watch TV, watch the news reports. Watch the parents get hysterical, just begging for the monster to give their kid back. He made them do that. He made them into pitiful things, barely even human. He didn’t care about it, it just made him mad. He didn’t see the power he had. Moron.”

“You got off on it.”
“I guess I really found myself,” Kemper smirked. “It’s not that hard to turn the tables on somebody without even a high school diploma, with an IQ south of ninety. Psychological abuse followed by physical, you know the drill. Or your friend does, anyway. Ask him about it, he’ll enlighten you.”

Don’t fucking punch the main suspect.

“That Neil guy is really messed up, huh?” Kemper laughed quietly. “He was fun. Watching him try so hard to stay in control, making him give up all his nasty little secrets. What a bleeding heart. So painfully loyal. No wonder his mother held onto him, he’s still wrapped around her cold, dead finger. Perfect, lonely little attack dog. Did he cry? I hope he cried.”

Don’t fucking punch the main suspect.

“The trade Abbott proposed yesterday wasn’t even his idea,” Kemper continued, warming to his subject. “It was a contingency plan. If I ever got caught, he was supposed to use the hostage we had, or get another one, to secure my release. The idiot didn’t even have a clue that the police would never go for it.”

“You knew it would give the police incentive to offer you a blanket immunity deal. Must have taken everything you had not to sign it the second it was drafted.”

“Are you going to arrest me, Mr Doe?” Kemper asked in a bored tone. “I don’t think so, or you’d have bigger friends with you. I’m gonna go brush my teeth now. I don’t think you’ll be here when I get back. If it’s any consolation, I don’t think I’ll stay in this city much longer. So many new people to meet, you know. Say bye to your friend for me. Or maybe I’ll ask him along – he seems like he could be persuadable, and I could do with somebody to watch my back. I guess we’ll see. Night night, Doe.”

***

Neil winced at the thumps from the living room as he wandered downstairs for a midnight snack.

“No sleep, again? You’re gonna collapse.”

“I’m running on spite,” Doe replied coldly and threw another knife at the wall. “It’s surprisingly invigorating.”

“Do you have to keep throwing those?”

“It’s the wall or Kemper’s back at this point.”

Neil sighed and joined him in the living room, staring at the knife-studded photocopies of Kemper’s immunity deal. He’d read them through when Kemper had been released, before Doe got his hands on them once Mariana was recovered. “The language is pretty iron-clad. Adam fucking Kemper is completely immune from prosecution for any crimes committed in consort with Samuel Abbott.”

At Doe’s raised eyebrow, Neil explained. “I told you I have survival phrases in a couple of languages, yeah? I count Legalese as one of them. Knowing the local laws was pretty damn important, on the road.”

Doe grunted sourly. “I’ve been reviewing it myself.” Another knife thudded into the wall, tearing a chunk out of the papers.

Neil gritted his teeth and crossed his arms, feeling much the same. He couldn’t shake the queasiness at how easily Kemper had manipulated him, at just how much of himself he’d given
away. For nothing. “I hate it too. It’s disgusting. I hate that he’s walking free, that we handed him a ‘get out of jail free’ card. What are we going to do about it?”

Doe threw another knife. “I’m thinking.”

“Squats would be easier on the décor.”

“Can’t,” Doe bit out. “Overdid it last night, pulled a muscle.” He lightly touched his back and Neil tried not to smile.

“I told you to just do fifty an hour. How many did you do?”

But Doe had frozen, his eyes wide. “Back pain.”

***

Andrew dropped down onto the park bench next to Kemper, ignoring how shaky he felt from the lack of sleep and food and squinting in the dawn light. “Hello again.”

“You look like shit,” Kemper smirked.

“Thanks. Listen, before you go on your merry way, I wanted to ask you about William Crawford. Number five. Parents called him Billy.”

“Blonde boy. Cried a lot,” Kemper said.

“I’m sure you could reminisce all day. Though it wasn’t your cleanest work – police found him three days after he was taken, barely buried. Scavengers had uncovered him.”

“Yeah, we buried them deeper after that. Wait, let me rephrase, in case you’ve got a wire,” Kemper drawled. “Mr Abbott made me bury them deeper after that.”

“Whoever had the idea, it was a good one. The police found skin under Billy’s nails, did you know? Definitely came from one of his attackers. We ran the DNA against Abbott’s this morning. What do you think the result was?”

“Is that supposed to scare me?” Kemper raised his eyebrows. “It was probably mine. So what? Abbott made me do it, and I’ve got immunity.”

“Yes, you do,” Andrew agreed. “Immunity for any crimes committed in consort with Abbott. Thing is, Abbott wasn’t wearing that back brace for fun. He broke three vertebrae falling off a ladder, it’s why he had to change jobs. He was in hospital recovering from the surgery the entire time Billy was missing.”

Kemper’s face was very cold. “I have an immunity deal.”

“For any crimes committed with Abbott, I remember, I have a fucking photographic memory,” Andrew shot back, starting to smile. “But you took Billy on your own, didn’t you? What happened – you get bored while your chewtoy was in hospital? You took him, abused him, and murdered him all on your own. I bet Abbott was proud.”

Kemper jumped as four cop cars slowly pulled into view.

“I called them right after I found out where you were,” Andrew smiled, leaning back against the bench. “You’re welcome to run, I’m not really in any shape to chase you right now. But cops don’t like being manipulated, and there’s an awful lot of them waiting there. You might as well go
“It was only one murder,” Kemper spat, eyes darting as a small army of cops began to advance for the arrest. “And Abbott abused me, that’s on record. I’ll get out soon, and I’ll come for you. Oh, no, wait.” He smiled coldly. “I’ll take your damaged little friend, instead. I bet he’d beg real pretty on his knees and cry out for his mommy.”

Andrew met his eye and gave him a razorblade smile. “You can try.”

Boyd stepped up and laid his hand heavily on Kemper’s shoulder, his normally cheerful face still with cold wrath. “Adam Kemper, you are under arrest for the murder of William Crawford. You have the right to remain silent…”

***

“You didn’t ask your question,” Doe reminded him tiredly as they sat smoking in the back yard.

“I know. Things were busy yesterday. Do you want me to ask now?”

Doe nodded, for all that he looked like he was about to keel over.

Neil watched him smoke for a moment, trying to think when he was oddly distracted by the man’s grim face as he blew smoke out into the garden.

“What does my father have on you?”

Doe didn’t reply until he’d finished his cigarette, eyes bleak. Neil knew he would answer, and waited.

“You know how I ended up getting sober. After Drake. I went to a secure rehab facility called Easthaven, down in Columbia. There was a doctor there called Proust. Lovely man. Had a penchant for abusing his patients. I can endure a lot, but not what he did. Not after Drake. Never again. I promised him if he touched me again, he wouldn’t live to regret it.”

Neil waited silently, already feeling ill at what Doe was leaving mostly unsaid.

“I didn’t know the good doctor had a peeper cam in his office. No doubt so he could jack off to his favorite sessions again and again. I don’t break my promises, so. There was a rather incriminating record of how he died.”

Doe tapped out another cigarette and closed his eyes as he took a long starting drag, a little frown creasing his eyebrows. He pursed his lips and pushed the smoke away until there were only wisps clinging to his teeth. He opened his eyes again.

“I assume you know about your father’s bosses. The kind of people they are.”

“Mm.” Neil was too smart to say the name.

“I was on the Exy team with Kevin Day for a couple years, at Palmetto. He was raised by those people until they broke his dominant hand and he ran away. He promised me something to live for once I got sober, so I gave him my protection against them in return. That pissed quite a few people off, but they didn’t have anything on me until Easthaven. They made it very clear to me that they would use the tapes to put me away somewhere they could continue Proust’s ‘therapy’ if I didn’t let Kevin go. I told them to go to hell, but Kevin ran back to them in a heartbeat. Fucking martyr.”
Neil let that sit in the respectful silence it deserved.

“They still have the tapes. Once I graduated, I changed my name back to Doe, as you know. I came here instead of staying in South Carolina, falsified a couple documents. You know how it is. I didn’t tell anybody where I was going. Just dropped off the map. They haven’t caught up to me yet, and I’ve been working with Wymack to try and bring the whole stinking castle down, your father’s lot as well.”

“What about your family?” Neil asked quietly. “Your twin?”

“What about him? We only knew each other a few years anyway, it’s not like he misses me. He’s probably glad I’m not around, to be honest. Didn’t get on.”

“Don’t you have any other family? Who were you visiting in Germany?”

Doe glanced his way with a small smile. “Smart. I’ve got a cousin there, Nicky Klose. He doesn’t know we’re related – his family was estranged from Aaron’s way before they found out about me, they never met, and he moved to Germany right out of high school. I found him online, started a penpal thing. I visit occasionally, keep tabs on him. He’s happy there, and perfectly ignorant of any of this shit.”

Neil looked blankly out at the gravel patch. “Thank you for answering. I want to ask another. You don’t have to answer.”

Doe hummed permission.

“You’ve been keeping me housed, training me to do what you do. Supporting me when I needed it, protecting me too. You’ve been doing all this because I make things interesting, I get that. It helps having a partner on the job and we work well together. I know that. I know you like having somebody around after being on your own the past few years. I know you see me as some kind of friend. And that’s… that’s so much. I like being here, and learning, and the job, and weirdly enough spending time with you.” He turned back to look Doe full in the face. “If my father knocked on the door right now and said he was going to give those tapes to Wymack – would you give me over to him to buy him off like you planned? Would you be able to?”

Doe’s cigarette had burned right down to the filter before he looked away. “Should’ve shot you on sight.”

“Probably,” Neil smiled, watching his profile and feeling like he was floating in the clouds.

“I’ll figure something out about your father,” Doe muttered and got to his feet. “If you breathe a word of any of this to Wymack or Boyd…”

“You know I wouldn’t.” Neil smiled up at him peacefully. “Thank you, Doe.”

“Shut up, Josten.”

He turned on his heel and stomped away, leaving Neil to finish his own cigarette. By the time he had and gone into the living room, he found Doe passed out cold on the couch. Neil smiled and lightly tossed a blanket over him. *Sleep well, Andrew.*
EXTRAS - Shopping Trip

Chapter Summary

Neil gets some new clothes at long last.

“I really don’t see why this is necessary,” Neil frowned as Doe started piling simple, monochromatic shirts into a basket.

“All your clothes are awful.” Doe said blankly. “Half of them are barely holding together at the seams. These are all cheap and plain, won’t stand out in a crowd, so don’t have a fucking breakdown over it.”

“Yeah, but…”

“Josten. You look fucking homeless.”

“There’s a reason for that,” Neil replied coldly.

Doe rolled his eyes. “Don’t be dense. You don’t need to fade away. You’ve got a place with me, and a kind-of job. You can’t represent the NYPD looking the way you do, Wymack’s made that very clear. You’ll freak out the witnesses. So shut the fuck up or I swear I’ll buy you stuff in neon.”

Neil felt his face twist automatically, imagining the stares that would get. “I like my clothes. I’ve had them a long time.”

“I’m not saying you have to get rid of them,” Doe sighed and picked up another stack of shirts. All washed-out colours, but good quality and warm-looking. “Though that red shirt with all the stains should be burned. Just wear these when we’re on cases so Wymack gets off my ass about it, alright?”

Neil shoved his hands in his pockets, still feeling uneasy about the whole thing, but knew this wasn’t a fight worth winning. He walked beside Doe quietly as they worked the store over thoroughly, one section to another. He watched as Doe picked out items seemingly at random and without thought, but Neil could see a definite pattern. Doe was getting things that would fit him properly instead of hanging large, in dense fabrics and warm layers. Things without art or words on them, usually just plain block colours in faded or dark tones. A couple of striped things, but nothing flashy. Things with snug collars and long sleeves, pants and jeans that had enough stretch in the legs that he could run in them if needed. Sweatshirts and hoodies that could be layered and bundled in lots of combinations with everything else. Two sets of exercise gear that he could mix around for warmth or cooling off.

He was putting a lot of thought into this.

When they were about to leave the shirt section, Neil reached out and pulled one off the rack himself, a dark red tee to replace the one Doe had mentioned. He dropped it into the basket without a word, and Doe didn’t acknowledge it either.

He did at least let Neil pick out his own underwear and socks, though it was a close call.
They left the store both laden down with bulging bags, and Neil had to take a moment to assure himself that this was okay. He didn’t need it all to fit in one bag. He could leave them folded up in his little room in Doe’s house, and come back to them at a later point. He could leave things someplace. He’d been getting used to leaving his duffel behind when they went to crime scenes, but he still trusted all the locks in Doe’s house more than he was willing to abandon the habit completely.

“Wait here,” Doe commanded in a bored voice and left him with all the bags by a small water fountain, slipping easily into the crowd of the mall.

Neil tried to ignore the way people subtly stared at the shabby young man with a huge number of bags, sitting on his own. He occupied himself looking through the bags instead, telling himself over and over that these were his.

Doe reappeared eventually with a small box in hand. He sat down without a word next to Neil and unpacked the box – it was a smartphone. Neil didn’t pay much attention as he booted it up and started tapping and swiping away at the menus, more preoccupied with touching the fabrics of his new shirts. All new.

“Here,” Doe grunted after about ten minutes, holding the phone to him.

Neil took it absently and kept it held out, waiting for Doe to take his new phone back. Doe blinked at him for a moment, then pinched the bridge of his nose.

“It’s yours, jackass.”

“What?”

“Nothing fancy, compared to a lot of new models. It’ll do calls, texts, basic internet, open most files. The camera can be useful on cases. I’ve programmed in the numbers for me, Boyd and Wymack.”

“I don’t…”

“I don’t care what you do with it,” Doe said, a note of impatience in his voice. “Just keep it charged and keep it on you, in case somebody needs to get hold of you. Understand?”

“I’ve never had a phone before,” Neil blurted, startled into truthfulness. “I didn’t need one, my father said. And my mother didn’t want anybody tracking us, so no phones. I just…” he frowned down at the shiny black case and turned it over in his hand, wincing a little at the finger smudges already covering the screen.

“Don’t freak out about it.”

“Where do you get your money?” Neil frowned. “Wymack doesn’t pay you, but you always have money. And bills for the house can’t be easy, even if you own it already. Do you have a mortgage to pay off?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“How much did you spend on all this today?”

“Don’t worry, Josten. It’s fine.”

“Don’t tell me not to fuss about money,” Neil snapped. “Homeless, remember? Just tell me.”
Doe gave him a measured look, then inclined his head a little in agreement. “Alright, keep your shirt on. I’ve got savings, I worked all through college and I was there on a scholarship with everything paid, so I didn’t spend on much. Changing your name does wonders for debts anyway. I do some freelance work under pseudonyms as well. And jobs from wealthy snoops, big companies, that kind of thing. It’s enough.”

Neil watched his face for a minute, then reluctantly nodded.

“As for today, yeah, it’s more than I’d normally spend in one hit. But it’s not gonna wipe out my account, and I know you need it, so don’t stress.”

Neil looked down at the phone, already warming in his hand. “I’ll pay you back for this,” he muttered.

He had the distinct feeling Doe wanted to tell him to leave it, but after a moment just hummed acknowledgement. Seemed they were both picking their battles. They left the mall soon after that, and Doe wordlessly vanished into his home gym.

Neil took the bags into his little room and spent quite some time removing tags and folding everything into neat piles against the wall. He looked down at his comfy old sweatshirt, third-hand and thrifted when he’d got it, and was abruptly aware of every threadbare patch, old stain, and ragged seam. It looked grubby and almost shameful in a way he’d never noticed, after handling all his new clothes.

With slightly shaking hands, Neil changed his clothes top to toe. Before he could freak out, he walked downstairs and curled up on the couch to watch the news, new phone heavy in his pocket. As he watched the news anchors chatting, he pulled the neck of his new shirt up over his chin to rest under his nose.

It all smelled so new, and rubbed soft and gentle against his skin. Snug and warm and all for him.

The phone vibrated and he nearly fell off the couch. It took a few tries, but he managed to navigate the screen and open the little message.

*Hi Josten, it read. It’s Det Boyd here :D doe said he got you a phone, congrats!!!*

Neil blinked down at it for some time, then very slowly typed a reply.

*hi boyd this is neil*
Neil came back from his morning run tired and a little shaky but pleased; he’d managed an extra quarter mile from his record last week. He paused in the entryway of the house and slowly stretched out his legs, smiling just a little at the slightest amount of muscle tone coming back in his calves and thighs. He was well aware of how skinny and malnourished he was even without Doe or Boyd’s occasional comments, and he was pleased to be looking different after a month with Doe.

The house was quiet as he stretched, but Neil was getting used to the precise qualities of the silences Doe inhabited. He couldn’t hear a single thing other than the slight hum of electronics, so he tested himself like Doe was always doing, and tried to identify where Doe might be. He searched back through his memory and examined what he could see of the hall and kitchen – the kettle was in its usual place, with a little bit of steam condensation around the spout. So, Doe was awake and had made coffee recently, probably in the last half hour. There was no food laid out, and equally no plates drying on the sink rank. Neil couldn’t smell any remnants of smoke, and the back door seemed closed. The air didn’t feel humid at all, or any warmer than he remembered from earlier, so the shower hadn’t been used. There wasn’t anything on the table, no post or newspapers or old files. Their coats were hanging matching and untouched by the door, side by side.

He was distracted by that for a second, smiling at the simple, domestic sight. Doe had insisted with the weather turning wintry that Neil would need a proper coat; then when Neil wavered, just got him the same one as his own in a slightly larger size, saying it had a good number of pockets which was good for cases. A couple of pairs of shoes were tucked under the coats, casually scattered and nudged into each other from wherever they’d been kicked.

It all looked shockingly normal.

So, anyway. It seemed obvious that Doe was definitely in the house, had been awake and moving around, though hadn’t started any work yet. Neil couldn’t hear the faint mechanical sounds that would mean he was lifting weights in the back room, or any music or radio chatter from the study where Doe kept his screens and old police scanners. Doe could be in his bedroom, but Neil knew he preferred to spend his time out of there during the day. He put all the evidence together with what he knew of the man, and deduced that Doe must be sitting in the living room on the couch with his coffee and a book. He hadn’t had breakfast yet or done anything other than stumble down for coffee, not even his morning smoke.

“Did you die in the hallway?” Doe’s voice drawled, just as he came to that conclusion.

Neil stepped into the living room and smiled smugly to himself; Doe even had a blanket over his legs as he read.

“Amazing, you’re alive,” Doe said, flicking his eyes briefly over Neil before turning his page.

“I did an extra lap today,” Neil said as his ‘good morning’.
“Fascinating,” Doe replied in the most bored voice Neil had ever heard from his mouth.

“Have you had breakfast?”

Doe grunted a negative and turned his page again. Neil started getting matching plates of toast and cereal together, a little habit they’d fallen into recently that Neil was forbidden from mentioning. He handed Doe’s over to him and they sat quietly on the couch until they’d eaten. Doe appeared absorbed in his book, and Neil was happy just to share the moment; the slight burn in his legs and lungs, the warmth of the house soothing his clammy skin, the pale light through the windows, and the quiet sounds of Doe reading peacefully, no tension held in his frame or any concern other than his book.

“You smell,” Doe muttered eventually, though without heat. “Go shower.”

Neil was about to do so when Doe’s phone started ringing. They both blinked at it for a minute, then Doe put it on speaker with a cautious frown. “Yes?”

“Good morning, Andrew,” A woman’s voice replied serenely. Neil’s eyebrows shot up – he’d never heard anyone call him anything other than ‘Doe’, even Boyd and Wymack. “I hope I’m not calling too early.”

“I was up.” Doe replied shortly, almost rudely.

She didn’t appear annoyed. “Good. I’m with a friend, and I think he could use your very particular help, if you’re not loaded down with cases. Will you come?”

Doe considered it for so long that Neil was wondering why the woman didn’t ask if he was still there.

“What’s the address?” Doe asked reluctantly.

***

They stepped out of the cab and started walking towards the large house hidden behind trees, huddled into their coats in the crisp wind.

“So who is this woman?” Neil asked.


Neil watched him for a minute, realised he wasn’t going to get anything else, and followed him up to the front door. Doe rang the doorbell and kicked at the doormat while they waited.

A shy young woman opened the door, her long hair hiding her face and a long instrumental bow in her hand. She kept the door mostly closed, peering at the two of them warily. “Hello?”

“Doe and Josten. Walker called us here?” Doe said.

“Oh, yeah, she said. Renee!” She called softly, then gestured for them to come inside. Neil noticed she kept back from them just far enough to be out of arm’s length, but not so far it would be noticeable to anybody who wasn’t used to the impulse themselves. She hovered awkwardly for a moment, then left them alone in the hallway without another word. After a few moments, the low, sweet tone of a cello could be heard through the house. Doe cocked his head with a raised eyebrow, listening to her music without comment.
Another woman came down the stairs, all neat skirts and starched blouse and pastel-rainbow hair. She walked up to them with an easy smile and put her hands without hesitation on Doe’s shoulders, squeezing lightly.

“Andrew, thank you for coming,” She said. “How are you? You’re looking well.”

“Hi, Renee,” Doe sighed, and reached up to squeeze her wrists back. Gently, though. Neil had the curious feeling he was witnessing a very reserved hug. “And, you know. Working. This is Neil Josten, he’s training with me for the moment.”

She turned that serene smile on Neil and he checked his own impulse to back away. Her smile seemed to flicker a moment but she didn’t acknowledge it. She didn’t reach out to him, not even to shake hands. “Neil, it’s good to meet you. Andrew’s never had a trainee before, you must have caught his interest. He probably hasn’t said anything about me, has he?”

“Um. No?”

She smiled wider, though her eyes were firm and assessing. “I’m Renee Walker, I do a lot of work liaising between the police and support networks for survivors of violent crime. Andrew and I have crossed paths on cases before. Here’s my card.”

He took it numbly.

“Don’t try it,” Doe said, though his mouth twitched. “You are not seducing this one into your wishy-washy prayer-circle bullshit.”

Neil expected her to get angry, but she just turned a distinctly fond look on Doe instead. “I’m glad you’ve found a friend, Andrew,” she replied sweetly. “I’m happy for you.”

Doe raised his eyebrows scornfully and looked around the hallway. “What are we doing here?”

“Ah.” She sighed, and the sunny smile dimmed a bit. “Yes. This is the home of my friend Ken Whitman, we go to church together. I noticed he was looking stressed and down recently, so I offered to lend an ear to his troubles. When he told me what was going on, my first thought was of you. I hope you can help him, Andrew. I don’t know who else to go to.”

Doe looked at her seriously for a long moment, then jerked his chin. “Lead on.”

She brought them into a comfortable looking study, where a clearly distressed man was waiting, wringing his hands. He looked like he hadn’t slept a full night in weeks. Renee made the introductions, and they all sat down. Ken scrubbed his hands through his thinning hair.

“Where’s Eva?” He asked Renee.

She rested a hand on his shoulder sympathetically. “She went to her room to practice, Ken. It’s alright. Please tell my friends here what’s going on. I’m here for you, and Eva too.”

“Alright, alright.” He took a deep breath and focussed on Doe. “Two years ago, my daughter Eva used a fake ID to get into a club. A man named Brent Garvey slipped something in her drink. He took her to his apartment, and…” He screwed his eyes shut and rubbed over his face as his voice cracked.

Neil very carefully glanced at Doe, seeing the minute ways his shoulders and face had tensed up. He looked as blank as ever, untouchable, but Neil knew his tells by now. He looked back to Whitman and found Renee’s eyes on him, calm and considering as she watched him watching Doe.
“The next morning, Eva told me everything,” Whitman said with a shuddering sigh. “I took her to the police and they found Garvey, she picked him out of a line-up. After he was charged, two other girls came forward. He got a deal, pled guilty for a reduced sentence. It was supposed to be over.”

“But not for Eva.” Doe said shortly.

“It was hard for her,” Whitman agreed, looking miserable. “She cut off contact with her friends, stopped going to school. Even tried to hurt herself. I found her a therapist, did everything I could. Things started to get better. She was recovering, started playing again, even said she might be ready for college next year.” Whitman gave a tiny, shaky smile, looking proud and amazed for a moment before his whole face clouded over. “A few months ago, I got a package in the mail.”

Renee reached beside him on the couch and handed Doe a padded envelope. He opened it and pulled out a letter and a DVD with a carefully empty look to his face that had Neil’s stomach churning. The DVD was labelled *xoxoxo Eva xoxoxo*. Doe stared at it, then wordlessly handed the letter to Neil.

He opened it without needing to be asked and read it aloud, his own voice quiet. “Mr Whitman, you will transfer $10,000 to the listed account or other copies of this video will be posted online and released to the media. Your daughter will be a star.” Neil took a short breath and continued grimly. “Do not go to the police. Do not attempt to identify me. If I’m arrested or physically harmed in any way, I have a failsafe in place, an associate who will release the video for me.” Neil folded it back up in disgust.

“Eva had come so far,” Whitman said in a thick voice. “I didn’t want to see her get hurt again.”

“You paid,” Doe stated.

“Yeah. But then a few weeks later…”

“They asked for more.”

Whitman nodded at him. “I paid, again. I just wanted it all to go away. The third demand came in a few days ago. I didn’t know what to do, how to make all this stop. I reached out to Renee.” He smiled shakily at the woman, who put her arm around his shoulders comfortingly.

“Can you help, Andrew?” She asked in a soft voice very much at odds with the steel in her gaze. The hair on the back of Neil’s neck shot up in an ugly shudder.

Doe was silent for long minutes, staring blankly at the DVD in his hands. Neil watched him anxiously, knowing this would strike him much more painfully than he thought Renee could know.

“You don’t have to,” Neil murmured in German. “If it’s too close. We could ask Boyd to look at it unofficially. Figure something out.”

Andrew didn’t answer him or give any sign of having heard him, but he put the DVD back in the envelope, which went into his coat with careful, precise motions. He looked to Whitman with ice in his expression.

“We’ll find the men responsible for this,” He promised coldly. “The failsafe too. Then we’ll destroy every single trace of this foul recording.”

He shot to his feet and was out the door before Neil could do more than register his words. Neil scrambled after him with a garbled goodbye to Renee and Whitman, and caught up with him.
halfway down the street. He was walking fast and breathing hard as he flicked his lighter impatiently and ineffectively at the cigarette in his mouth.

“Doe—”

“Don’t.”

“Alright, I won’t say anything,” Neil replied quietly, then plucked the cigarette and lighter from his hands. He lit it easily, took a quick drag to get it going, and handed it back. “Just let me help.”

Doe looked at him steadily. He nodded once.

***

“You think that’s him?” Josten asked as they sat in a rented car much later that day, practically that night, watching as a man with a shaved head and bruises to his temple locked up his apartment and headed off.

“Mm.”

One of Andrew’s irregulars had traced the account number listed on the letter, identified the owner as being registered to the address they were watching.

“Charles Milverton,” Josten muttered, watching the man walk away. “I’m surprised how easy it was to find him.”

“He must be confident in the protection of the failsafe,” Andrew said shortly. He didn’t want to talk, didn’t want to say anything at all. But Josten had objected to the silent treatment very quickly, and managed to extract a deal that Andrew would talk to him about the case if Josten wouldn’t try to get all touchy-feely about the whole thing. “I’ll go in, assess the threat, find the identity of his failsafe. Once we have them both, we’ll destroy the evidence simultaneously.”

Josten handed him a small earpiece and twisted its pair onto his own ear. “Okay. Be careful. And talk to me.”

Andrew left him in the rental car to watch the street and slipped into the apartment with a few rapid swipes of his picks, gloves hiding his fingerprints from any surfaces. He nearly jumped out of his skin when something nudged up against his shins. He scowled down at the small pack of animals twining around his feet and meowing.

“Another reason to hate Milverton,” he muttered spitefully to the mic on his earpiece. “He keeps cats.”

“Of course you hate cats,” Josten replied. Andrew thought he might be smiling. “I don’t know why I’m surprised.”

Andrew stepped over the crowd of felines – he absolutely did not bend down to scratch one or two of them behind the ear – and started prowling the apartment.

“See anything?” Josten asked after a few minutes.

“Laptop. Could have used it to burn the DVD.”

He opened it up and searched through the filing system and hidden folders until he abruptly found far more than he was looking for. He felt his muscles lock up and his hands start to shake.
“Doe?” Josten asked in his ear when he’d been quiet for some time. “Talk. What’s going on? Am I gonna have to fight the cats away from eating your corpse? They do that, you know. Creative creatures. I’m really not sure why you’d dislike them.”

Andrew wanted to punch something at the goddamn way that Josten’s quiet rambling, his warm voice, could get him to unfreeze and focus again. “Whitman said the man who raped his daughter had two other victims.”

“Mm.” There was a faint rustle as Josten presumably got the police reports in front of him. “Tracy Bender and Karen Pistone.”

“There are videos of them here as well.”

“You think he’s blackmailing their parents too, not just Whitman?”

“Among others,” Andrew replied grimly. “Quite a few others. There are dozens of videos on this hard drive.”

Josten made a throaty noise of disgust, then suddenly gasped. “Doe, he’s coming back. Must have just got groceries. Get out of there, now. He’s heading for the door.”

Andrew had started moving as soon as he heard that gasp. He had all the files closed and the laptop shut by the time Josten had finished speaking and headed quickly for the back door, picks in hand. The back door’s handle started to turn.

Andrew backpedalled and hissed, “You could have specified the back door.”

“What? He’s coming in the front.”

Andrew whirled and ducked into a closet, heart pounding as he heard both doors start to open. “Say nothing,” he whispered carefully, hearing Josten’s rapid breathing through the earpiece, no doubt starting to panic about what was going on.

He watched silently through the gap in the closet door as Milverton came in the front and picked up a cat to fuss with it. He sat down with the cat at the laptop and opened it up, cooing to the thing as he clicked and tapped.

He watched as a man in a mask, all in black, eased silently through the back door. Gun cocked. BLAM. BLAM. BLAM.

Josten gave a rapidly-muffled gasp in the earpiece, no doubt having heard it from Andrew’s end. Andrew stayed completely still, hardly daring to breathe, hoping and wishing that the shooter wouldn’t see him through the door gap he couldn’t now close without drawing his attention. He watched frozen as the shooter started to haul away the lifeless body and the laptop too, dragging Milverton out of the back door with a couple of grunts of effort.

Andrew blinked.

Breathed purposefully into the earpiece to let Josten know he was alive. Listened to Josten breathe back. I’m here, I’m here echoed back and forth.

Counted slowly to a hundred to see if the shooter was returning. Nudged a cat away when it meowed at him. Grabbed whatever papers and electronics he found. Slipped out the door and into the passenger seat beside Josten.
“Doe? What’re you doing here? You okay?” Wymack asked in surprise, seeing Andrew sitting in his darkened office way past normal working hours. “Where’s Josten?”

“He’s outside,” Andrew replied quietly. “I wanted us to talk privately.”

Wymack didn’t bother to hide the concern in his face as he sat down slowly on the other side of the desk. “Okay, Doe. What’s going on?”

Andrew pulled the DVD out of his coat pocket and handed it over, his fingers feeling covered in slime even through the gloves, just from touching the damn thing.

“What is this?”

“Play the video,” Andrew replied, feeling blank and hollow and empty in a way he hadn’t felt in years. He was nothing. Ice. He wasn’t even sure he was in his body at all.

At the moment he was glad of it.

Wymack gave him a grim, considering look, then booted up his laptop and inserted the DVD. Andrew kept staring at the wall over the man’s shoulder, barely blinking or breathing. Wymack gritted his teeth and forced himself to watch the entirety of the video with the gruelling tenacity of a cop with a job to do.

Halfway through, Andrew had to close his eyes. The noises were too much. Too much. He blocked it all out, cast himself into the oblivion of nothingness. It cloaked him, protected him from those noises and all the horrible, crawling sensations slithering over his skin, old pain suddenly sharp and brutal, deep inside, even though he stayed perfectly still. The nothingness kept him safe. Kept it all at a distance. It was still far too close, but the nothingness was all he had to fight against it all.

The snick of the DVD being ejected meant he could open his eyes again.

“You want to explain why you made me watch the brutal rape of a teenaged girl?” Wymack said in a tightly-controlled voice that spoke volumes.

“So you would understand the stakes.” Andrew replied. His lips felt numb and his voice was dead in his throat, flat on the air, devoid of anything and everything as he explained the circumstances of the DVD, the letter, and the case he’d agreed to take on. “I identified the blackmailer earlier today. I went to his home. I found evidence that he had similar recordings of upwards of a dozen young women.”

“And you’re here to turn in this evidence?” Wymack asked slowly.

“I am here to seek counsel.”

That made Wymack blink.

Andrew forced himself to carry on, each word like a needle jabbed in his skin. “I know we don’t
always get on, Wymack. But I appreciate your work. I appreciate how you let me work. I appreciate the deal we made when I first came to you.”

Wymack nodded cautiously. “Yes, I know.”

“You also know I avoid rape cases where I can.”

Wymack watched him grimly.

“I can’t think objectively about them. It’s too personal. So I need your advice.”

Wymack slowly pinched the bridge of his nose, no doubt inferring away. Andrew had no emotion to spare his dramatics, or his misplaced paternal instincts.

“Hypothetically, the blackmailer was killed tonight by a man in a mask, who also took the laptop with all the recordings. Hypothetically, I witnessed it while I was in his home.”

“Doe – Andrew. If you know anything about a murder, you have to report it. You know that.”

“There would be consequences. The blackmailer’s failsafe, an accomplice. If he hears that the blackmailer had been killed and his copies of the tapes taken, he will release his own copies of that tape, and all the others, into the world. It could ruin the recovery and lives of all those women. If the failsafe learned of the man’s death.”

“You want to keep it a secret?” Wymack sighed.

“Only until someone with enough motivation,” Andrew slowly raised a shaking hand to indicate himself, “Could identify the failsafe and secure the files.”

“Obviously you want to find this accomplice more than the killer, but what if they’re the same person?”

“Then all roads lead to Mecca,” Andrew replied dully. He was nothing, he was nothing… “Keep it a secret for now. Let me do this.”

***

“Hey,” Neil said quietly once they got back to the house, the door firmly locked behind them. Doe had been silent and grim ever since leaving Milverton’s house, even more withdrawn on the way back from the precinct. “I’m here.”

Doe didn’t acknowledge him, just stood in the middle of the kitchen clutching at his arm bands hard enough to make his knuckles creak, his eyes dead and far away.

“Hey,” Neil said again, standing square in front of him. He carefully held his hands up, a good foot away from Doe, nowhere near touching, just there. “I said I wouldn’t ask. And I’m not gonna. But I’m worried about you. Let me in. Let me help.”

Doe just stared and gripped at himself.

“What do you need?”

Doe stared right through him, then very slowly unfolded his arms and held them out. “Take the knives away from me,” He said, each word slow and painful.

Neil swallowed down everything he was feeling and did as he was asked, carefully peeling the
armbands away. He didn’t mention the scars hidden underneath, said nothing, kept his fingers away from touching any bare skin. He slid the knives out of their sheaths and secured them in the gun safe. Then he slowly worked the armbands back onto Doe’s arms until everything was covered again, as if he’d never seen.

Doe went back to clutching himself.

“Do you need to talk to anyone? Is there anyone I can call?”

“I want Bee,” Doe replied, then blinked rapidly. “No. No Bee. Don’t call Bee.”

“Okay,” Neil promised, though he knew he probably should ignore that and find this ‘Bee’ regardless.

“Renee.”

“Okay,” Neil said again. He fished the card out of his pocket and called the number without hesitation. Doe needed him. “Renee Walker?”

“Yes, who is this?” She replied.

“Neil Josten. We met today. Doe’s – Andrew’s friend.”

“What’s wrong?” She asked, all light and airy sweetness gone. She was all diamond.

“He needs you.”

There was a heartbeat of silence. Then, “Stay with him until I get there.”

They mutually hung up and Neil watched the impossible stillness of Doe’s face. “Doe. Andrew. Come with me.”

Neil started walking slowly back into the living room. Doe followed robotically, and copied him when Neil sat on the couch. Neil got the blanket off the back of the couch and folded it up close to Doe’s hand. He got the book and put it on Doe’s other side.

“You’re safe,” he said firmly. “I’m here, I won’t let anybody harm you. You gave me a home – now let me guard your back.”

Doe’s gaze gradually drifted to lock onto Neil’s eyes. Neil had no idea what he was doing other than it felt right and it was somehow getting through the bleak horror of Doe’s eyes.

“I will protect you. Nobody will harm you. You are safe. I will keep you safe. You don’t need to retreat, you don’t need to shut down. I’m here, and you can rely on me. Stay here with me. I’ll protect you.”

“Runaway,” Doe muttered blearily.

“I’m not running,” Neil answered firmly. “I’m done with that, remember? I’m here.”

“Pipe dream.”

Neil blinked – he had no idea how to interpret that. So he just said, “I’m here,” over and over until Renee knocked frantically on the door. He was reluctant to leave when Doe was apparently anchoring himself by staring into Neil’s eyes, but Renee didn’t have a key and as far as he knew, couldn’t pick locks. He darted to the door to let her in, barely glanced at her, then sat back down
“Oh,” Renee sighed when she saw, sounding almost in tears. “Oh, Andrew. I’m so sorry I brought this on you.”

She sat on the floor at his feet, small and dainty and non-threatening, and started to talk about a potential apocalypse strategy, of all things. Neil was about to object, but he noticed how Doe’s tightly-clenched fists began to uncurl, and he kept quiet. He watched as Renee talked for hours without pause, even when her voice grew hoarse and raspy, about the strangest things. He watched as Doe slowly came back to them, reeled carefully out of stormy waters on the slimmest of lifelines. Watched as Doe set his hands around the blanket and book instead, and gave a very tiny nod when Renee spoke.

He listened to her for another minute, then spoke. “We’re wasting time.”

Renee gave an exhausted smile.

“Josten, get the files from the car. Renee, sleep.”

Neil searched his face for a long moment, then stood. He retrieved all the papers Doe had snatched from Milverton’s house and started to spread them out around the couch. Renee curled up in an armchair without another word and fell right asleep. Neil had just started reading one of the papers when Doe’s hand closed around his shirt.

He looked at Doe in surprise; Doe was staring down at the files as if absorbed, but his hand held tight. He lightly pushed at Neil’s chest and Neil mirrored him without thinking, holding onto his shirt as well. Doe didn’t push him away. They locked eyes, and Neil knew it to be a painful admission of thanks. Of trust.

He nodded, and let go when Doe did.

***

“It’s hard not to imagine the shooter was one of the people Milverton was blackmailing,” Andrew said and handed Josten some coffee on the early side of dawn. “Wymack raised the possibility it was actually his accomplice, the failsafe.”

Josten nodded thoughtfully and ran his finger down the column of the encrypted ledger he was holding, eyes flickering rapidly over all the numbers. “If the killer was one of Milverton’s victims, wouldn’t he be worried about the failsafe?”

“It’s possible he decided the failsafe was a bluff. But we can’t take that chance.”

Josten hummed and started writing down the occasional name and number on a nearby notepad. Andrew watched him closely, his words from earlier unforgettable. He couldn’t remember the last time anyone had looked at him and seen someone worth protecting for his own sake. He couldn’t remember anyone except for Renee ever looking at him, knowing all his pain, and simply deciding to help instead of being appalled and repulsed and afraid.

He remembered very vividly his former teammates’ reactions when he got out of Easthaven, how fidgety they’d been, how careful not to mention anything that had happened. He remembered their fear, but no longer aimed at him — *if Andrew Minyard could be raped, then it could happen to anybody.* How they had looked at him and seen something bizarre and twisted and broken, not a real person in need of help, just something to avoid. He remembered Kevin’s silent horror, while he was there. He remembered Aaron’s silence, the distance that had only grown. He remembered
sitting on Bee’s couch wondering if anybody aside from her actually cared that he still couldn’t sleep properly, and if she only cared because it was her job.

And yet. Josten.

Josten knew far more than any of them. He knew about Proust. He knew about the tapes, and the Moriyamas. He had to have seen the scars on his arms. He probably guessed that Andrew’s time in the foster system had been nothing but painful in the same ways.

But he wasn’t leaving. He wasn’t disgusted. He didn’t look at Andrew with a quiet horror about what had been done to him, hadn’t ever. He didn’t see a victim or a broken patchwork man. He just saw Andrew. And he’d stood between Andrew and the pain and promised to keep him safe when it felt like everything was crumbling.

*Who the fuck are you to promise me something like that.*

He shouldn’t want to lean on this man so much. He was a living time-bomb and the clock was ticking down, just waiting for his father to catch up to him. If Andrew knew what was good for him, he’d get the fuck out of the blast zone.

“Let’s go to prison,” He said instead.

“Hm?” Josten looked over at him in confusion, then his expression cleared. “Oh. Brent Garvey? You think Garvey could be the accomplice with the backups?”

“Mhmm.”

“Mm,” Josten replied, a little quirk to his mouth. “All he’d need would be a smartphone or a computer with access to a cloud account. Difficult, but not too difficult to get hold of in prison. And even if he isn’t, he might know who the failsafe is.”

*Somebody with a face that pretty shouldn’t be so smart.*

Renee stirred in her chair, thankfully distracting him from that irritating line of thought. Josten got up quickly on the pretence of making some tea for her, but Andrew knew avoidance when he saw it.

Interesting.

Renee smiled at him when she woke up, and he nodded back. She might have landed him in the viper’s pit with this case, but she knew it, and she’d pulled him out when needed. They were square, as far as Andrew was concerned, and knew she read it in his face.

She got up to join Josten in the kitchen, and Andrew watched with detached interest. He had the vague thought that if he could record their conversation, he could teach a masterclass on haptic communication. Josten was always minutely edging away, avoiding engaging with her or making eye contact. She stood firm, respectful of his boundaries, but so obviously wanting to reach out and hug him. It was in the little tilt of her head and the twitch of her fingers, the way she leaned toward him every time he spoke. Andrew couldn’t hear their words, but he could read their body language easily. He surmised that Renee was thanking Josten for calling her and for looking out for Andrew, while Josten denied it being any special thing. He guessed she also told him to keep her number for if he ever needed to chat.

The real surprise was when she asked if she could touch Josten, and he reluctantly agreed. She hugged him the same way she hugged Andrew – at arm’s length. He stood there awkwardly for a moment, then tapped her fingertips. She let him go with another smile and he dodged upstairs to get ready for the day.

Andrew raised an eyebrow at her when she turned around and she gave him a mock-innocent look
in reply. Andrew snorted and drank more coffee.

***

They still had the car rented for the purpose of staking out Milverton’s apartment, so Andrew drove them to the prison instead of getting a cab or public transport.

“Ask me something,” Josten said halfway through. “We’re unbalanced. Ask.”

Andrew considered it for the length of a block, thinking what might be equal to letting Josten see his old scars and fault-lines creaking wider. “Why are you so afraid of Renee?”

“You won’t like my answer,” Josten warned.

“I want it anyway.”

Josten sighed and turned to look out the window. “She reminds me of one of my father’s people. Her name is Lola. I was ten when she started taking an interest in me. It was all a game for her, messing with me. Lots of mind-games. Stroke and slap, you know. She was trying to break me down, mold me into someone more like my father.”

“Did she touch you?”

“Sometimes,” Josten murmured. “She liked how young I looked, she said. Unspoiled. Mostly she’d undress me and stare. If I fought or struggled, she’d bring out the knives. She’d always be smiling.”

Josten would have had to deal with her for a year before his mother appeared on the scene and abducted him. He knew how long a year like that could last. I guess we’re as messed up as each other.

“We’re equal now.” He said, instead of giving empty platitudes.

Josten nodded, and they spent the rest of the drive in silence. Yet more secrets and weapons carefully traded. It was starting to feel oddly like security, instead of mutually assured destruction.

***

“Mr Garvey,” Doe said as they walked into the prison’s hospital ward to see the man who was more bandages than human. “I’d heard that child abusers have a rough time in prison. I’m so glad that’s not just rumor.”

“Who are you?” The mummified man replied in a surly voice.

“I’m Doe, this is Josten. We consult for the NYPD.”

“Eh look, if this is about the guys who jumped me I already gave their names to the guards.”

“We’re here to talk to you about Charles Milverton,” Neil shook his head. “And before you say you don’t know him, we’ve just come from the warden. We know he visited you a couple months back.”

Garvey shrugged and squinted at them through the bandages over his face. “Yeah, he’s friends with my dad. Wanted to see how I’m doing, and all.”

“Is that why you gave him your rape tapes?” Neil asked coldly. “Family VHS is too old-school
these days, I guess.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Garvey denied with a grimace.

Doe stepped forward just a bit, hands in his pockets and apparently unthreatening with his short stature, ruffled hair and purple bags under his eyes. When he spoke, his voice was all quiet knives in back alleys, lighters held close to skin, a chokehold less than a breath away from deadly force. “I’ve seen the tapes, Garvey. I have one in my possession. I’m very seriously considering telling everyone here about them before we leave. I imagine one or two of them have young daughters or sisters. Maybe they won’t wait to find you in the yard next time. Maybe they’ll come see you in your sickbed instead, make sure you’re recovering just fine.”

Garvey blanched and Doe bared his teeth in a feral sneer.

Neil lightly touched Doe’s sleeve and curled his fingers around it. Doe turned his wrist just a bit and Neil’s fingertips nudged against his skin. His pulse was going strong and hard, like a war drum.

“We already know you gave Milverton the tapes,” Neil took over. “We just wanna know if you have access to any else of his blackmail materials.”

“Other materials?” Garvey asked hesitantly, eyes on Doe’s chilling expression.

“Milverton had an accomplice,” Neil said. “Someone who’d release the tapes if he were jailed or killed by his extortionees.”

“Oh, the failsafe,” Garvey nodded. “Yeah, I know. He told me all about it when he came to see me. Said if I went to the police and told them he was blackmailing me, this guy would release the tapes.”

“He was blackmailing you?” Doe cut in with a frown.

Garvey snorted humourlessly. “I didn’t give him the tapes. I had them in an old storage unit; when I got arrested, I couldn’t keep paying the fees, so it went to auction. Milverton put in the highest bid, said he bought old units all the time. Got a lot of dirt that way.”

“Let me guess, you have a parole hearing coming up,” Doe said blankly. “It’d be a shame if they heard you’d kept evidence of your crimes to jack off to later. You poor thing.”

“Look, I’m sorry, but I can’t help you,” Garvey said with an anxious smile. “I’m not in on it with these guys. I’m the victim here.”

Neil caught Doe’s wrist as his arm lunged. Garvey cringed back and Neil held tight, though he knew how much Doe hated to be touched.

“Andrew, don’t,” Neil said sharply. “He’s really not worth it.”

Doe turned a murderous look on him, but Neil held his eyes calmly even if his arms were shaking a little with holding back the power and force of Doe’s punch; that guy really pressed way too much in his workouts.

“Come on, let’s leave,” Neil said.

“Let go of me,” Doe said through gritted teeth. Neil released him immediately but didn’t look away. Doe shoved his hands back in his pockets and Neil wasn’t sure if he was glad the knives had
been left behind in the safe; Doe wouldn’t be able to use them on Garvey or himself, but he’d also noticed how Doe would touch the loaded sheaths when he was unsettled. He knew a comfort behaviour when he saw one, when the strap of his duffel was worn and ragged from his own clutching hands. “Do not do that again, Josten.”


Doe’s eyes bored into his for a few heavy seconds, before he turned away. He gave Garvey one last contempt-filled look, then barged his way out of the room. The drive back to Doe’s house passed in silence as Doe fumed and wrestled with himself. Neil left him to it, knowing he probably felt scraped raw by the whole situation.

“Can you drop me at the precinct?” He asked quietly when they got near.

Doe raised an eyebrow at him.

“I want to talk to Boyd about something. Not you, or anything personal. Promise.”

Doe said nothing, but he pulled up beside the precinct instead of passing it. Neil hesitated with a hand on the door release. “I’m sorry about grabbing you,” He said to Doe’s uncaring profile. “But I’m not sorry about stopping you. You’re worth too much to get picked up on an assault charge like that.”

Doe kept staring out at traffic, ignoring the few blared horns for his car lingering in the drop-off spot. His hands tightened a little on the steering wheel.

“Come back soon. Now get out of the damn car.”

Neil obliged and tried to ignore the surprised, tender feeling under his skin at hearing Doe’s admission to wanting him nearby as he watched the car pull out into traffic. He raised a hand in a wave he wasn’t sure Doe would see in his rearview mirror.

Walking into the precinct was easier than it had been the first time, but it still made his skin crawl to be surrounded by so many cops. Even if most of them recognised him by now and offered vague, polite smiles or gestures. He nodded back to them and made his way to Boyd’s desk. He stopped when he saw Boyd wasn’t alone; he was sitting with another cop, a short Black woman with close-cropped hair and a deadly smile spread wide over her face as they chatted.

Boyd spotted him hesitating outside the bullpen and grinned widely. “Hey Josten!”

Neil approached cautiously, eyes flickering over the woman. “Hi, Boyd,” he replied quietly.

“Where’s Doe at?”

“Just me right now,” Neil shrugged.

Boyd’s eyebrows shot up. “You guys okay?”

“Huh? Yeah, we’re fine,” Neil said. “Private case. It’s being a bit tricky.”

“Ah,” Boyd said with a grin and waggling eyebrows that Neil didn’t have a clue how to interpret. So he just blinked until the expression left Boyd’s face. “What can I do for you, Josten? I’d like to ask if this is a social visit, but I do actually know you.”

Neil felt himself wince at the unexpected flare of guilt in his stomach. He’d never stuck around the
same group of people long enough to feel guilty over neglecting them. He didn’t know if he wanted
to feel guilty over Boyd’s hurt feelings. “Sorry,” he offered, dropping his gaze down to his shoes.
He found the already-fraying edges of the cuffs on his new hoodie and tucked them into his palms.
“Sorry.”

“I was mostly joking, kid,” Boyd replied gently. “It’s alright, we’ve both got jobs to do. But text
me back a bit more often, yeah?”

Neil darted a glance at his face and found only a smile and kind eyes. He hesitantly let go of his
cuffs. “Okay.”

“Anyway, where have my manners gone,” Boyd grinned and turned to the woman beside him.
“Josten, this is Detective Dan Wilds of the Vice squad, who also happens to be my fiancée. Dan,
hun, this is Neil Josten. He’s working with Andrew Doe at the minute, you’ve heard me talk about
him before.”

“Ohh,” the woman said, her own eyebrows rising a bit. “So you’re the guy. Nice to meet you,
Neil.”

Her handshake was firm and no-nonsense, her whole bearing quietly strong. Her smile now was
welcoming and bland, but Neil still felt on-edge. He wished Doe were at his shoulder.

“You too. Congratulations on the, er. Marriage thing.” He said awkwardly, unable to meet her eye.

“You and Doe are both invited to the reception, by the way,” Boyd added. “As long as you can get
him in a suit for it. I assume neither of you wants a plus-one invite?”

Neil opened his mouth to reply, but found all his words had dried up. The casual offer, the
friendship, had him completely floored. He seized on the only vaguely normal thing about Boyd’s
statement instead. “What makes you think I can get him to do anything?”

Boyd waggled his eyebrows again. “I’m sure if you ask nicely and assure him you’ll be going in
one too, he’ll go with it.”

“I’ll ask,” Neil said doubtfully, thinking Boyd was severely mistaken if he thought Andrew would
be consoled by not being the only person wearing a suit. Didn’t everybody wear suits at weddings
anyway? Not that he’d been to any since he was a very small child, but he thought that was right.
Or maybe that was funerals? He shook his head to clear his nonsense thoughts. “Um, I need your
help with something. If you’re not busy.” He flicked a glance at Wilds, who had been watching
their conversation with a clear gaze and a small smirk.

“Oh, I should get back anyway,” she shook her head. “Nice meeting you, Neil. Matt, if you don’t
take out the trash before I get home I’m divorcing you.”

“We’re not even married yet,” Boyd grinned up at her as she stood. “You can’t threaten me with
that for another few months.”

“Damn, guess I’ll have to go through with it just to officially divorce you. What a pain. See you
later, babe.”

Neil looked away as they shared a brief kiss and nodded to her as she passed.

“So, what’s up?” Boyd smiled.

“I need your help running down a name,” Neil replied and sank down into the chair, relieved to be
getting to work.

“And you don’t want Doe’s help because…?”

Neil fidgeted with his cuffs again. “He’s got a lot on at the moment. I don’t want to bother him with it unless it actually leads somewhere.”

Boyd gave him a long look, then shrugged and turned to his computer. “Alright. What’s the name?”

“Abraham Zelner. I think.”

“What do you mean you think?”

Neil shrugged. “You know I’m good with numbers. I’m good with codes, too. I’ve been working on something for our new case, and I’m pretty sure I found the key but I’m not a hundred percent. So it could be a legit name, or I could be fooling myself and it’s a coincidence. I just wanna check if it pans out before I tell And—Doe about it.”

“Well, let’s see what we’ve got on record then.”

***

Andrew counted his breaths as he pulled himself up on the bar fixed at the top of the doorway, drawing himself completely off the floor until his chin was level with the bar. He counted them out again as he slowly uncurled his arms until his toes brushed the floor. The burn of the exercise in his arms and back was enough to keep his mind quiet, the aimless anger kept at bay. He knew he should be working, should be taking advantage of Josten’s absence to get some thinking done without distraction, but when he’d sat down with Milverton’s papers again all he could think about was greedy hands, hushed voices, and a young boy with his face pushed into his pillow trying not to cry out.

He snarled as his biceps gave a warning shudder, and carefully dropped back to the floor. He lay down instead, laced his hands behind his head, and started doing sit-ups. At least working out was helping to clear his head a bit. Running on no sleep, yet again, and trying to cope with all the slimy memories this case was mercilessly hauling back into his head… it was all piling on top of him and he hated how it was muddling his thinking and making this case so much murkier. Josten shouldn’t have grabbed him, laid hands where he knew he wasn’t welcome, especially considering the past few days. But Andrew was honest enough with himself to know he shouldn’t have put Josten in that position, either. He should have had better control of his temper. This case had him close to the edge and he didn’t like the drop waiting for him.

As long as he was pushing his body, his mind would give him a break. He could feel the strength he’d worked for years to build, his own solidity and assurance of safety. The catch of his lungs and soreness of his muscles were reminders of his control. Every rep, every heartbeat, every minute spent on improving himself brought him closer to clarity.

He worked out until his whole body was trembling with the effort and he was soaked in sweat. He paused to catch his breath and stretch out, and as soon as he stopped moving the memories were there, waiting. He gritted his teeth and looked down at himself, down at his bare chest and arms. He turned his arms over and surveyed the scars with a grimace. The silky-dangerous need was back as well, whispering earnestly that it would help blank everything out, help put everything back in focus.
He traced a fingertip over the scars and shook his head firmly. He’d promised himself no more of that, and he wouldn’t break that promise. He wouldn’t.

God, he wished he could see Bee just once more.

And that he could just fucking concentrate on the damn case.

The front door opening and closing intruded on his tangled thoughts and he listened out for the rustling of Josten putting his coat on a hook and kicking off his shoes. Thunk, thunk, they hit the wall. If the asshole got mud on the wallpaper he’d be cleaning it off with his bare hands.

“Doe? You around?” Josten called out.

“Gym,” Andrew called back and picked up a towel to pat himself down. He didn’t bother with his discarded shirt or armbands; he was so far from caring about Josten seeing him shirtless – he’d seen it before, anyway.

Josten leaned against the doorway as was his habit and gave him a quick once-over. “Good workout?”

“Not really,” Andrew muttered and rubbed the towel over his slick hair. “Good sleuthing?”

Josten’s lips twitched. “Not really. We’re invited to Boyd’s wedding reception, apparently. We have to wear suits.”

Andrew had the idle thought that Josten might scrub up nicely in a suit, what with being so skinny and leggy. He pushed it away and caught the water bottle Josten tossed to him. “What were you asking Boyd about?”

“I thought I’d decoded a name from Milverton’s ledger,” Josten shrugged, eyes vaguely following Andrew as he gulped water and patted himself dry. “There was no information attached to it – no bills, credit history, prior charges, nothing. A vague mention of somebody in a newspaper, but it’s the only thing, and it’s years and years old. And there’s no record of anyone by that name in the NCIC or DMV databases. So it’s either a fake name, or it was nothing and I haven’t actually decoded the ledger at all.”

Andrew whisked the towel over his arms, then laced it around the back of his neck and held onto the ends, thinking. Irritatingly enough, his brain was actually working again, now Josten was around to distract him.

“Which do you think it was?”

Josten chewed his lip, his teeth leaving little white indents that blushed dark pink after a moment. His gaze seemed stuck on Andrew’s arms. “I’m not sure. I want to say I decoded the thing, and that the name is correct, but that could just be my pride.”

“Or instinct,” Andrew pointed out. “Countless studies have shown that gut instinct is more accurate than we’d like to think. What first drew you to the decryption, to that name?”

“There were regular outgoing payments to whoever is listed under that name, once a month, exactly ten percent of whatever variable amount Milverton had coming in as payment. It seemed like a good rate for a blackmailer’s assistant, a cut of whatever job was current.”

“Reasonable theory,” Andrew replied. He watched Josten watching him, wondering what the fuck he was staring at. “Stick with it. We both know you know your shit about aliases and fake
identities. Run it down. Let me know what you find.”

“Alright,” Josten gave him a quick, shy little smile. “I will.”

Andrew was not prepared for that smile. Luckily, his phone started going off and he answered it in relief. “Captain, Chief, Wymack. Hello.”

“…Hi, Doe,” Wymack replied cautiously on the other end.

“I’m putting you on speaker.”

“I’m here,” Josten said once Andrew held the phone out between them. “Um, Josten, that is.”

“Yeah, I figured. Listen, a call came in from a night watchman at a construction company. Saw some suspicious activity.” Wymack said. “The responding officers found a perp trying to dump a corpse in wet cement foundations.”

“A classic,” Andrew muttered. Josten grinned silently at him, then rubbed at his mouth as if trying to wipe it away. Andrew watched his face for a moment, feeling oddly soothed to be sharing a dark little joke with him again, like they usually did on cases.

“Victim was shot three times in the chest, perp claimed he did it because he was being blackmailed.” Wymack continued. “Some hypothetical bells started going off.”

“Mm,” Andrew replied, frowning. “What was the victim’s name?”

“Charles Milverton.”

“Shit,” Josten muttered, stepping just a bit closer. Andrew wondered if he was aware of it.

“I take it that’s your guy.”

“Hypothetically,” Andrew said. “Don’t suppose the perp confessed to being an accomplice, did he?”

“No, his name’s Anthony Pistone, and he’s still waiting on his lawyer before he’ll talk any further.”

“Karen Pistone,” Josten said, his eyes meeting Andrew’s. “Garvey’s second victim. Her father.”

Andrew nodded.

“It gets worse,” Wymack sighed. “Pistone’s attorney is already spinning the story to the media, trying to get public support and attention. So the news that Milverton is dead is officially out.”

Andrew swore in German, and blinked when Josten said the exact same thing. They’d obviously been spending too much time together recently.

“I figure there’s nothing holding you back from working with us on this officially, now the investigation’s started,” Wymack said after a startled beat. “Are you two coming in to watch the interview?”

Andrew checked the time. “Mm. We’ll be there in half an hour, I need to wash up.”

“What were you—”
“Never you mind,” Andrew replied, just to be difficult, and hung up. The small bit of pettiness helped him claw his way back to centre, helped him think that this was just another case. He could snark with Josten and passive aggressively needle Wymack, just like normal. Nothing personal to muddy the waters. Nothing at all.

Once he was showered and dressed, they picked up their coats, hanging side by side, and stepped into their shoes standing next to each other. “Ready?” Josten asked as Andrew patted his pockets down to check for his keys and wallet.

“Mm.”

“I’m here, remember,” Josten said. “If you need me.”

Andrew watched his face briefly, then jerked his chin at the door. “Move your ass, Josten.”

They watched through the two-way mirror as Wymack drew answers out of Anthony Pistone. He’d been blackmailed just like Renee’s friend Ken Whitman, then decided to place his own sting operation after the latest email. He’d left the money in loose bills in a bag under a park bench, then followed Milverton home to get his address. He’d taken a day or two to plan, then executed his plan and blackmailer all at once.

“Where’s the laptop now?” Wymack asked.

“Smashed,” Pistone shrugged after a glance at his lawyer. “I stomped on it and tossed it in some dumpster.”

“The ME report says there was some post-mortem damage to the victim’s face?” Wymack asked, brows raised.

“Ah, yeah,” Pistone agreed after another furtive look at his blank-faced lawyer. “When your guys came at me, when I realised I couldn’t get away – I looked down at his face. It was like he was looking right back at me, you know? Like he was laughing at me. After everything he’d done to Karen, and the money… I snapped. Lifted my boot up, and…yeah.” Pistone cracked his knuckles and lifted his chin. “He’s got enough face left for an open casket. More’n he deserves.”

“We’re done for now,” Wymack said and got to his feet. “There’ll be more questions in about half an hour, so sit tight.”

Wymack joined them in the side room without ceremony, though he searched Andrew’s face a bit as if looking for the trembling disassociation he’d last seen there. Andrew blinked back at him composedly, feeling the slight touch of Josten’s arm against his shoulder.

“Is that the guy you saw the other night?”

“The man I saw was wearing a mask,” Andrew replied. “But the height and weight are the same. Plus, you’ve got your confession.”

“You’re usually happier when we’ve got a killer dead to rights,” Wymack said.

“The man’s an idiot. He’s put all of Milverton’s victims, including his own daughter, at risk. For all we know, those tapes are out and viral on porn sites already.” Andrew shook his head in disgust.

“Still, his motive is sympathetic to a jury,” Wymack rubbed the back of his neck. “He plays his
cards right, the DA won’t ask for more than manslaughter in the first. He’ll be out in three and a half years.”

“I wish I had that name figured out,” Josten muttered.

“You’ll get there,” Andrew said calmly, though he felt far from calm about those videos being released.

“What’s this?” Wymack asked.

Andrew kept his mouth closed to force Josten to answer. Josten shot him a dirty look and half-turned towards Wymack, though he stayed pressed just a little into Andrew’s shoulder. “Doe took an accounting ledger from Milverton’s house the other night, it seems to track his blackmail money. It’s encoded, and I’ve been trying to get the names off it so we could track the failsafe and any other victims. It’s, uh, not going well.”

Andrew didn’t miss the appraising look Wymack gave Josten, the slight smile at actually being spoken to without his eyes on the floor or words a tangled mess. “Hm. Do you want our guys to have a crack at it? We’ve got our own experts on this kind of thing, y’know, Doe.”

“Those victims deserve as much privacy as they can get,” Andrew replied firmly. “Especially now. If your team get their eyes on it, you’ll have cops out questioning everybody in that thing and making a huge amount of noise. Let us handle it. Josten can figure it out. He’s only had his hands on it for a day. And we’ve been busy.”

“With what?”


Wymack gave him a narrow glance but didn’t retort; Andrew’s attempts at winding him up were working, but he was obviously holding back his temper. Probably remembering the way Andrew’s hands had shaken after they had watched the video in Wymack’s office. God dammit. He had survived and gotten out of the foster system, he’d survived Drake, he’d taken care of Proust, he was no victim. And he was having an awful time coping with this case, but he would not be pitied.

“Andrew, if you need to talk—” Wymack began in a careful tone, but to everyone’s surprise Josten stepped forward. He put his body between Wymack and Andrew and stood as tall as he could, meeting Wymack’s eye.

“Don’t,” He said in a precise, cool voice. “You don’t get to ask, or know.”

“What are you doing?” Andrew asked in German.

“I told you I’d protect you,” Josten replied calmly. “I’ve got your back. Do you want to go?”

Andrew watched him stare Wymack down, no hint of submissive tension now. No ghost of his father looming, just the pure strength that had got him through thirteen years on the run, doggedly living another day and then another to spite everybody else. It was almost eerie to see – Andrew had been used to being the protector, the guard dog, the viciously barbed shield. He didn’t know what it was to shelter behind someone else, but he thought it might look a bit like this.

He swallowed hard and touched Josten’s back lightly, a tiny brush of fingers. “I’m alright,” He said in English, voice low and carefully blank.

Josten stood back at his shoulder without another word. Wymack gave them both an assessing
stare, then shook his head and walked back into the interview room to try and hammer out the
details with Pistone and his lawyer.

Andrew’s phone started to ring once they were alone.

“Somebody’s popular today,” Josten remarked lightly.

Andrew didn’t bother replying and picked up instead. “Hello, Renee.”

“Good evening, Andrew. And Neil too?”

“Yes, me too,” Josten affirmed as Andrew switched to speaker.

“I’m calling because Ken has received another demand. He’s rather distraught and I don’t know if
I can console him. I hate to pressure you, but have you identified the blackmailer?”

Andrew frowned and gripped the phone hard. “Sit tight, we’ll be there in twenty minutes.”

“Thank you, Andrew.”

“Oh huh.”

***

“What do you think this means?” Josten asked quietly in the dead silence of Ken Whitman’s office
half an hour later.

Andrew propped his chin on his knuckles and stared some more at the laptop screen. “I think I’ve
never been more thankful for the general scum that is the human condition.”

Renee made a reproving noise from where she was sitting with her arms around Whitman, who had
been puking on and off since their arrival.

“The failsafe would have had all the details of the operation, all the victims, all the footage, all the
contact details. Milverton’s murder has been all over the news for hours now. But instead of
releasing the material as he was supposed to – he’s taking over the business instead. Shrewd. And
it means that all the material is still secure. Nothing has been released yet.” Andrew explained.

Josten hummed thoughtfully. “I’d better get back to work on that ledger.”

“I’ll stretch out for squats,” Andrew replied, and they shared a small smile.

***

Well, he said that, but when they got back to the house and the piles of paper, he started to feel like
the walls were closing in on him. Having Josten at his side and at his back was definitely helping,
but his brain was a merciless monster at the best of times. He’d be reading through a list of
Josten’s possible keys for the encryption, trying to help, when he’d have a sudden spike of terror
that left him breathless. He’d be trying to concentrate on Josten’s mutterings, only to hear other
voices and feel phantom bruises on his wrists. Rage would boil up unbidden, to be replaced by an
awful blankness that made the room seem to lose colour.

“Doe,” Josten said quietly after some time, and Andrew realised he had been closing off again.
With effort, he pried his hands off his forearms and sat up straight. “Do you need Renee again?”

“No,” Andrew said with a shaky exhale. “I’m gonna make a phone call. I might be a while.”
“Do you want me nearby?” Josten asked.

Andrew stood up and considered him solemnly. Josten stared right back, strong and calm. Andrew hated the weakness he felt in wanting to crumble, to lean, to be held up by this man. He swallowed it all down and skimmed his fingers over Josten’s shoulder.

“Just stay down here. I’ll be back.”

Josten held his eyes, then reached up and touched his fingertips to Andrew’s for just a second, the smallest possible point of contact. “I’ll be here.”

Andrew turned away before he gave into the urge to punch him for saying such things. He locked himself in his bedroom and paced the floor for a few minutes, staring at his phone screen. He took a slow breath, sat on his bed, and called the number.

“This is Betsy Dobson’s office, may I ask who is speaking?”

“Hi there, Bee,” Andrew replied quietly. He closed his eyes at the sharp intake of breath on the other end of the line. “Been a few years, huh.”

“Andrew?” His ex-therapist asked in amazement.

“Mmhmm.”

“How – why – where have you been? Are you alright? Are you safe?”

“I’m safe. I’m not doing too great right now, though. I wanted to talk to you again. If you don’t mind.”

“Of course I don’t mind, Andrew,” she assured him warmly. “I was very worried when everyone said you’d vanished after graduation. Aaron said he’d tried calling you but your number was disconnected. We – we thought you might have done something drastic. I was very worried.”

“I did something drastic alright, but I’m still alive and whole.”

“That’s good to hear. Will you tell me where you’ve been?”

Andrew fiddled with the end of his armband and considered what would be safe to tell her. Even reaching out like this could put her in danger from the Moriyamas, if they found out he was talking to old contacts. But he needed to hear her voice, needed her steady guidance again.

“I won’t tell you most of it,” he said eventually. “Kevin’s bosses have been making trouble. I don’t want to endanger you.”

She sighed, a note of real sadness in her voice. “Oh, Andrew.”

“I’ve been making a life for myself though,” he continued. “Like you always wanted. Not quite what you thought, I guess, but I’m alright. I’m working with the police.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Gotta use that degree somehow. It’s not bad. The cases are interesting.”

“You always liked your puzzles,” she replied, almost fondly. “Do you have friends, wherever you are? People to rely on?”
“Mm. Yeah. One or two.”

“I’m sad it’s such a small number, but I’m happy you’ve found them, Andrew. Have you been in contact with Aaron at all?”

“No. And you can’t tell him about this call, either.”

She gave a sad little chuckle. “I don’t have his current details, Andrew. He never wanted to open up to me, remember, didn’t want to stay in contact. It’s been years, anyway. I wouldn’t know how to reach him even if it was safe to do so.”

Andrew bit the inside of his cheek and hated himself just a bit for asking, but he couldn’t help it. “Do you – do you know where he went, after graduation?”

“I know that he went to medical school in Chicago, and Katelyn moved with him. I don’t know anything else. I’m sorry, Andrew.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Andrew replied. “That’s not why I called, anyway.”

He heard a faint tapping noise, and bit down on the swell of something resembling nostalgia. She always tapped her pen when preparing for their sessions. He could almost see her office now, the neat way her desk was arranged, the accolades on the walls. His ornaments on her shelves. He wondered if she’d kept them. He wondered if she’d stopped dyeing the grey in her hair, if she had new tics he’d never seen. He wondered if she still took her cocoa with a sprinkle of nutmeg and a dollop of condensed milk.

“I’m working a serial rape and blackmail case,” he said eventually. “It’s difficult to deal with. I’ve avoided these cases up to now, but I couldn’t duck out this time. I’m struggling, Bee.”

“I’m so sorry, Andrew.”

“I’ve got a lot better, since graduation,” he said quietly. “I didn’t forget our sessions. I’ve done a lot of things I was scared about. I’m feeling again, most of the time. I thought it was all fading behind me, finally. But then the minute I started working this case, it just… I feel like I’m back there again. And it doesn’t even matter which ‘there’, because they were all awful.”

“Are you losing touch with the present?”

“Mm.”

“Do you have anyone with you who can help support you?”

“Mm. Yeah.”

“Are you experiencing self-destructive urges?”

Andrew took a shaky breath. “I was. I asked my, er, housemate to take my knives away. He’s been helping. I told him about – about Drake. And Easthaven.”

“He sounds like a good friend, for you to trust him with that information.”

“Mm.”

“Is he with you now?”

“He’s downstairs.”
“Good. For the immediate moment, I’d advise you to let him ground you. Stay in the present as much as you can. Let him help you, as it sounds like he’s been doing. Focus on the now, and on how far you’ve come. Focus on the life you’ve made for yourself. The very important work you’re doing, that you chose all on your own. Focus on your own safety and agency. Focus on the friendships you’ve made, and connections you’ve enabled. You are not that scared young boy anymore, Andrew. You are a man with a place in the world all your own, and nobody can take that away from you. Not even yourself.”

He rolled his shoulders and took a slow, measured breath the way she’d taught him.

“Setbacks are to be expected,” She continued. Her voice was as steady and calm as he’d remembered, and he let her words sink under his skin. “It’s very difficult to cope with them, and to resign oneself to their happening. It is undoubtedly distressing, especially after a long period of steady recovery. I know you probably feel as though your progress has been undone. But all the steps you’ve made to this point are still there right behind you. You wouldn’t be where you are without each and every one of them. You might feel stalled on your path, but you’ve still come so very far. Now is not the time to give up hope. There are still more steps to be taken.”

Andrew took another few breaths and imagined himself sitting on her couch, with a cup of cocoa in his hands. But it didn’t quite fit right – he couldn’t slip into the skin of his younger self just like that. He imagined watching his younger self sit and listen to Bee, bored from apathetic court practice and battling the chasm inside himself. He imagined sitting in her place and telling his younger self what would happen to him. He imagined telling himself that he would get his own house. That the nightmares would only come with specific triggers, not every night. That he’d find something to catch his interest and help him start to feel again. That he’d go on a few dates, when he was ready, and let somebody touch him under his clothes. That it hadn’t worked out with those men, but it hadn’t been terrifying and scarring either. That maybe he still had his knives, but he didn’t sleep with one under his pillow anymore. That he would find a boss and colleagues who appreciated what he could do, and seemed to want to get to know him better.

He imagined his younger self sneering in disbelief. It made him want to smile, because none of it would be a lie. This will be your life in just a few years. This is my life, and it’s not so bad. Who’d have known?

Bee was still talking, more assurance and sweet guidance. Her words sank into his mind and soothed away the snarled, twisted edges of memory until they rested quiet and still once more. He’d known for years that he’d accidentally folded Bee into the hollow place that used to belong to Cass, but he no longer cared if that was pathetic, to feel so attached to his therapist. She eased his fears and reminded him of his strength, and he didn’t want to lose her again.

“I missed you, Bee,” he murmured when she paused for breath. “See, I’m getting better with the emotions thing, and expressing them.”

“I’m very proud,” Bee replied, sounding just a little emotional. “I’ve always been very proud of you, Andrew.”

“I never thanked you for our sessions,” he said. “They were all that meant anything to me, after Kevin left. Thank you.”

He heard her breath hitch and knew she’d started crying. He wondered if she’d ever thought of him like a son.

“And thank you for this call, too.”
“Do you feel more settled now?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Andrew, don’t disappear again– no. I mean to say, I would really appreciate it if you kept in contact with me. I know you can’t tell me much about your life now, and I’m not your therapist anymore, but I would like to hear from you. I would like you to call when you’re struggling, and when you’re happy. I would like to hear that you’re doing okay.”

Andrew chewed his cheek some more. “You can’t tell anybody you’ve heard from me. You’ll be in danger.”

“I know that, Andrew. Please call.”

Only she could get away with using that word on him.

“I will, Bee. I promise.”

“Goodnight, Andrew. Sleep well.”

“You too.”

He hesitated a long moment before hanging up. He took another ten minutes to breathe and process and feel before heading downstairs again. His body felt light, and his mind was quiet. Not blank, like it used to, but simply calm. Josten looked up at his arrival, eyes searching his face. Andrew looked back for a minute, then crossed to the couch and wrapped himself up in the blanket still lying there.

“See you in a few hours.”

“I’ll be here,” Josten said with another small smile. Andrew fell asleep to the sound of his pen moving over paper, busy and thoughtful and clever.

***

Neil should have known by now that there was no way to boil Doe’s kettle without waking the neighbourhood.

There was a muffled groan from the couch, but all Neil could see of Doe was a fluffy tuft of blonde hair peeking out over the top of the blanket. “You’d better make me one too,” he called groggily.

“Already on it,” Neil smiled to himself, and fetched Doe’s usual mug from the draining board. Doe joined him at the kitchen table when both mugs were ready. He was rumpled and sleep-creased, but his eyes were alert and bright.

“Did you stay awake all night?”

“Yep. Do not underestimate the squats.”

Doe raised an eyebrow and flicked a look southwards without comment.

“I think I’ve found Zelner.”

Doe made a show of drinking half his coffee before putting it down and bracing his chin on his hands. “Amaze me, boy-wonder.”
Neil grinned excitedly and bounced just a bit on his heels. “Okay, right. So I decided to stick with it, like you said, assuming that Zelner was an accurate decoding and it’s a fake name. It got me thinking about my own previous names. My mom was always paranoid about leaving no trace, but our names always had patterns, whether we realised them or not. It’s just human nature. Hers were hybrids of famous women she admired and women that dad had cheated with. Mine were usually book characters. I kept my middle name, though. That always stayed. That was what she called me when we were alone.”

“Am I allowed to ask?”

Neil hesitated for a long minute, then nodded. “Abram.”

Doe nodded once. “Joseph, for me. Cass – my foster mom for a while – called me AJ sometimes.”

“Cass Spear?”

Doe nodded again. They gave each other a moment of silence.

“Well, patterns,” Neil continued. “I looked up that newspaper piece I told you about – a minor lawsuit about customer service, nothing much. But it looked like this Zelner guy settled immediately, at the first opportunity and without actually getting the courts fully involved.”

“I have yet to be amazed. Plenty of people would just take the money.”

“Patience, Christ. I thought that too, but being a paranoid fuck myself, I thought maybe he settled because he knew his identity couldn’t stand up to scrutiny. Especially if he’s a professional con, and pulled stuff like this all the time.” Neil smiled and watched Doe’s lips twitch minutely. “I did some more digging into minor inconvenience lawsuits in the same general area over the past couple years, which would result in quick ‘please go away’ handouts for the defendant from big corporations. And I started to see a pattern. Abraham Zelner, Brad Yates, Cory Xavier, Declan Winchell to name a few. First name ascending, last name descending. Not a very complex code, honestly, and I’m kind of pissed it took me this long to find it.”

“So you found his pattern,” Doe acknowledged. “Do you have his actual name?”

“Hold on a minute, I’m getting there,” Neil grinned. “Two of the reports had photos. One of them was from Ethan Varner, suing about steps with uneven treads that caused him to fall and a great deal of trauma, et cetera. Another is from Stuart Bloom, about five years ago, who sued a cinema chain for not having proper bathroom ventilation and causing an asthma attack and distress. They’re the same man, head to toe. But Stuart Bloom doesn’t fit the pattern. I think it’s because it was his real name, his first lawsuit, before he realised it could be a lucrative con. Abraham Zelner doesn’t have any records, but Stuart Bloom certainly does. He lives in Staten Island.”

Doe finished his coffee, his gaze weighty. “Well.”

“Are you amazed?”

“Slightly impressed.”

“I’ll take it,” Neil grinned happily, and finished his own coffee.

***

Two hours later had them standing furtively outside Stuart Bloom’s apartment.
“Do you want me to do it?”

“No, I’ve got it,” Neil huffed, peering at the lock with picks in his hands.

“Sure?”

“I’ve got it.”

“We’ve been standing here for nearly four minutes. I am getting less and less impressed.”

“Shut the fuck up and let me hear the damn thing.”

Doe clicked his tongue but waited for him to open the door. He got it on the next attempt, and opened the door with a grand, sarcastic sweep of his arm. Doe gestured just as excessively for him to go first, and they were ready to bicker about it all day until a pungent wave of something awful accosted both their noses.

“Cat litter,” Doe said hesitantly. “A lot of cat litter.”

They glanced at each other, then stepped inside shoulder to shoulder. Their shoes crunched irritatively on the inches of cat litter strewn all over the floor, and they hadn’t made it more than a few steps before they had to cover their noses and mouths.

“Stuart Bloom?” Doe called, though he didn’t sound hopeful. They followed the foul stench to the bathroom and rapidly backpedalled when they saw the corpse in the bathtub, in a rather unfortunate stage of decomposition.

“Cats eating the body would be better than this,” Neil coughed as they waited outside for Wymack and his forensic team to show.

“I’d take the smell for the usable evidence.”

“I’ve seen a lot of bodies, but that was rank.”

“There’s a bush right there in need of nutrients, if you’re feeling generous about making a donation,” Doe suggested.

“No thanks.”

“Suit yourself.”

Neil scuffed the pavement with his shoes for a couple of minutes. “You seem better today,” he ventured.

Doe folded his arms. “I called Bee. My therapist at Palmetto State. I did sessions with her once a week for five years.”

“Oh,” Neil blinked in surprise. Then he frowned. “But your trail – won’t people find out you contacted her?”

Doe tilted his head just a bit, his eyes keen. “You know, I shouldn’t be surprised that you pick up on that and not the fact I had a long-term therapist.”

Neil shrugged. “Well, you obviously needed her, if talking has helped you get more back to yourself. Why would I care that you had therapy beyond your court order?”
Doe kept watching him. “Most people don’t react so casually to mental illness.”

“And I’m such a paragon of health myself,” Neil returned.

That made Doe snort at least. “She would have had her hands full with you,” he said in something like agreement, and Neil wasn’t sure if it was meant as an insult or compliment or simple statement. “She knows not to tell anyone about the call.”

Neil nodded thoughtfully. “Was it good, talking to her again?”

Doe looked away, off towards the cop cars pulling up. “Yeah.”

Neil looked down at his feet to hide his smile. “I’m glad you’re feeling better, Andrew.”

“Chief,” Doe nodded to Wymack as he drew close. “Excellent news. We found Milverton’s failsafe. But he’s been murdered.”

“This had better not be a pattern,” Wymack rubbed his temples.

“He looks like he’s been here about a week,” Doe continued without batting an eye, a shadow of his usual case-mania glowing through faintly. “There’s a boot print on his chest – the killer must have submerged him in the water and drowned him. Rather than dismember him to properly hide the body, Milverton instead covered the ground in about a decade of cat litter to hide the smell as much as possible.”

“Wait, Milverton?” Wymack frowned. “Why not Pistone? He killed Milverton, he would’ve had motive to kill Bloom too.”

“It always comes back to size in the end,” Doe said with a small grin. “The boot print on Bloom’s chest looks about a six or an eight. Pistone is a twelve. Also, the cat litter. It’s the same brand as Milverton used for his pests; I recognise the smell pretty vividly. Check his credit history, you’ll find a large purchase of it in the last few weeks.”

“Any idea why Milverton would kill his partner in crime?”

Doe shrugged. “Bloom wanted a raise? I’ll figure it out. Aren’t you going to tell Josten what a good boy he is for cracking the code? He did a really good job, you know.”

Wymack gave him a flat look, then gave Neil a tight smile. “Good work, Josten.”

Neil looked down at the ground and nodded. “Thanks.”

“But now we have the really interesting question – if Bloom hasn’t taken over the blackmailing business, who sent those new demands?”

***

“Minimalist. I like it.” Neil commented as he came into the living room.

Doe made a rude noise like a raspberry from where he sat on the floor, glaring up at the blank wall he usually had covered in case photos and documents.

“I put it all up, took it down again. Put it up, took it down.”

“Not helpful, I take it.”

***
“I’ve been through it all, so have you,” Doe said, and ran his hands through his hair in frustration. “We need new data to move forward. Dead end.”

Neil went back into the hallway and rummaged through their coat pockets until he found a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. He rattled the carton at Doe expectantly, who stood up and followed him out to sit on the back step. They lit up together and Neil slowly realised that Doe was sitting so their shoulders were pressed together in one long line down their arms. He smiled into his fingers and didn’t mention it; he’d noticed Doe reaching out to him more often in the past weeks, and days especially. Nothing major, just fleeting touches. For a man who hated being touched, he sure didn’t mind being touchy himself. And Neil… Neil realised he liked it. In Baltimore, the only times he had been touched had been to hurt or damage. With his mom, it had just been to pull him close when they were in danger, or punish him for disobedience. Doe’s touches were an entirely different kind of animal.

Neil’s phone buzzed in his pocket and he jumped just a bit, still startled by the thing. He pulled it out and read the message.

*Hey Josten, hows things? W said the name panned out, congrats!! Hows doe doing? U guys ok? Any thoughts on suits?*

Neil blinked at it for a few long minutes and was about to just put it away again when he remembered Boyd’s comment at the precinct. He laboriously typed out his reply.

*Hi boyd. Things are okay thank you. Yes but he was dead. We’re stuck right now. Okay though. Doe is doing better. Hold on, ill ask again.*

*That is the longest reply you've ever given me, holy shit Josten :DDD*

“What?” Doe asked in a sigh, gusting out pale smoke that billowed for a second. Neil turned his attention back to the phone.

*Do you want to go to Boyd’s wedding thing?” Neil asked.*

Doe considered him thoughtfully, smoke slowly leaking from his parted lips as he thought. “There had better be a bar.”

Neil smiled and turned back to his phone. *He says yes as long as theres a bar.*

Boyd’s reply was very quick. *I knew he’d say yes!!! Ur a miracle worker Josten :DDD*

*I just asked. Neil replied.*

*You just won me 50 bucks!!!*

Neil frowned, then typed out a small string of question marks, a texting habit picked up from Boyd. Boyd only replied with lots of smileys, so Neil thought it was okay to put his phone away again.

Doe’s phone pinged instead, and Neil wondered if Boyd wanted to talk some more. Doe saw his curious look and handed him the phone. “Milverton’s autopsy report, which would be great new data if I hadn’t been there when he died.”

Neil scrolled through it anyway, as he hadn’t had the dubious honour of seeing the man die. He paused on the attached photos. “Hmm.”

“What?” Doe asked in a sigh, gusting out pale smoke that billowed for a second. Neil turned his attention back to the phone.

“When Wymack said that Pistone stomped on Milverton’s face, I kind of assumed the damage
would be all over. To get rid of his smile, or whatever. But it’s just on one side.”

“What?” Doe asked again in a sharper tone, leaning close to look at the screen. He absently braced his arm on Neil’s knee as he did so. “They’re gone. His bruises, to his head. There were patches of them right here.” He touched his own temple with the hand holding his cigarette. Neil plucked it from his fingers so he wouldn’t singe his hair. “Almost like they were targeted.”

***

“Mr Pistone, such a pleasure to see you again. I was so glad to hear you’d made bail this morning,” Doe smiled as they sat in Wymack’s office the next morning.

Piston shrugged and smiled, his hand braced on the leg crossed over his knee. The tracker bolted around his ankle was too bulky to be hidden by his pants leg, not that he seemed to mind. “Thanks. My attorney said you have some more questions for me before I go home?”

“Yes, we do,” Wymack nodded. “Remind us, when did you first identify Charles Milverton as your blackmailer?”

“A few nights ago, like I told you.”

“Hm,” Wymack said, lacing his fingers together on his desk. “We now have reason to believe you actually crossed paths before that.”

Doe gestured to Neil with a brief smile, so he joined in. “Charles Milverton was savagely beaten four months ago, so bad he had to go to an ER. He said he was mugged, which is why there are photos, but we reckon he lied about that. He couldn’t give a consistent description of his attackers, which everybody thought was because of the concussion, but we think he was covering for somebody. For you.”

“Excuse me?” Pistone asked with a frown.

“We think you tracked him down a lot sooner than you’ve said,” Doe took over. “You found him and beat him until he gave you an offer you couldn’t refuse: a piece of his business. See these gashes, left temple?” He took out one of the incident photos and pointed at the prominent marks of fists, and the indents of a complexly engraved ring. “These wounds have a striking resemblance to your ring, right there. They left scars, in fact.”

Pistone looked down at his hands and flexed his knuckles, the ring in question flashing light with the motion. “You wanna guess how many of these are out there? Yeah, the indents look the same, but it was somebody else with the same ring as me, I’m telling you.”

“Milverton now had two partners,” Neil added. “His failsafe Stuart Bloom, and you. Somebody had to go – it’s not smart to have more people splitting the pay packet, especially not in such a risky business with people ready to sell out their daughters or partners for some hard cash. Milverton murdered Bloom. Maybe you put him up to it, maybe he just liked your attitude better. Either way, you took over his position as the failsafe.”
“These are theories, Captain Wymack,” Pistone’s lawyer said forbiddingly. “You’re gonna need proof for all of this.”

“I agree completely,” Wymack gave a genial smile. “Which is why we conducted a thorough search of your client’s business and home this morning.”

Pistone blanched and Wymack pulled a laptop out of a drawer in his desk. “This is Charles Milverton’s laptop. You told us you smashed it, threw it in a dumpster. Funny thing, we didn’t find it in your desk – we found it in your brother’s.” Wymack’s lip curled just a bit. “He’s already confessed to being your partner, the Bloom to your Milverton. He sent the new demands while you were in custody, to further bolster your alibi. So, it looks like you’ll be spending a few more decades in prison than we originally thought. I hope you have a good answer for your daughter on why you went into business with the men profiting off her abuse, and the abuse of others like her. You can be sure your fellow inmates are gonna want to know as well. Best get your story straight on that one. Word is Brent Garvey is having one hell of a time in there.”

***

“Thank you, Neil,” Renee smiled as he handed her a carry-away cup of hot tea. “Very kind of you.”

“It’s no trouble,” he replied with a quick shrug. His eyes darted to her face for a moment and then away, though he mastered the impulse to back away and stayed near to her. She seemed to see his struggle and gave him a very gentle smile.

“I can’t thank you and Andrew enough for all you did on this case,” She said over the rim of her cup. “You both did amazing work. I can see why he took you on.”

Neil smiled cautiously down at his feet, holding onto his cuffs but not worrying at them.

“I hope we can be friends someday, Neil.” She continued, not apparently put off by his silence. “I hope you can come to trust me, in your own time. And you have my business card, if you ever want to talk in a more professional capacity.”

Neil nodded slowly. “I hope so too. Thank you.”

He looked up as he heard Doe’s footsteps approaching them. He was putting away his phone and swallowing down the last drag of his cigarette as he walked. He crushed the butt underfoot when he was done. “That was Wymack,” he said calmly. “The laptops have been put in the secure evidence locker, and all hard copies and DVDs and extra versions of the tapes have been incinerated. He witnessed it himself. It’s done. Those recordings will never see the light of day.”

Renee beamed at him and Neil heaved a sigh of relief. “I’m surprised you didn’t want to witness it yourself,” Neil commented in quiet German.

Doe gave him a long look, then turned to lead them into the school hall. “I’ll burn my own tapes. I’ll save it for then.”

Neil smiled and fell into step at his shoulder, Renee at his other side. They made their way through the chattering crowd of pleased parents and bored children until they found their seats.

“You made it!” Ken Whitman exclaimed at the three of them.

“Of course, Ken,” Renee smiled at him and briefly squeezed his hand. “We wouldn’t miss it for the world.”
“And you two, as well,” Whitman said, looking around her at Doe and Neil. “Thank you both. For everything. Thank you so much. I can never…”

“You can repay us by letting us know the next concert dates,” Doe interrupted him, his face bored and blank.

Whitman looked uncertainly at Renee, who just smiled and patted his hand. Whitman nodded and turned back to the front as the lights began to dim, and the crowd took their seats.

The school principal walked on stage with a microphone in hand and a wide smile plastered on his face. “Ladies and gentlemen, family members and friends. I’m very pleased to welcome you all to our winter concert recital. I did have a whole speech planned, but I’ll let our young stars get on with their show. To open the evening, I have the great joy of introducing Miss Eva Whitman, on cello. Take it away, Eva.”

He stepped off the stage to the audience’s polite applause while the curtains pulled back to reveal Eva in the spotlight. She looked small and scared and her hands visibly trembled. Then she saw her teary-eyed father and Renee in the audience, and it was like the sun smiled on her. She straightened her shoulders, waited a beat, and then began to play.

Neil didn’t know much about music or classical technique, but he knew what he heard was beautiful. It soared around the room and thrummed deep in his bones, and it was like the whole room was holding its breath. Halfway through her performance, Neil glanced at Doe. He was watching avidly, his full attention on the brave young woman on stage, and there was a very small, calm smile on his lips.
“You’re horrible,” Josten muttered as he strained against the handcuffs.

“Time’s ticking,” Andrew reminded him with a nod to the timer.

Josten muttered a curse and stretched his fingers. There was a faint click, then he triumphantly held up the handcuffs. “Ha! Still beat your best time.”

“That was pure luck,” Andrew shook his head. Josten smirked and dangled the cuffs in his face, making them jingle.

“Face it, my fingers are lighter than yours, Doe. Just ask me for lessons already.”

Andrew watched his face as he smirked, trying to ignore the light in Josten’s eyes and the way his cheekbones seemed to jump out whenever he smiled, and he was smiling a lot more these days. He looked away after a moment to the messy pile of handcuffs and padlocks scattered over the kitchen table. He sorted through the pile and selected a padded set with a tricky lock. He sat down in the chair and laced his arms around the back of it, wrists together.

Josten smiled some more and obligingly closed the cuffs around his wrists. He handed Andrew the bobby pin they were practising with instead of actual picks – to make it more challenging, after it became obvious they both knew too much about lockpicking – and reset the timer.

“Three, two, one.”

Andrew set to work, his eyes almost closed as he concentrated on the delicate sensations of his fingertips and palms, the pressure and slip and catch of the pin against the lock. The kitchen was quiet as Josten watched him and kept an eye on the timer, and Andrew felt oddly at peace.

A knock on the door startled them both and Andrew nearly dropped the bobby pin. “Get the door, would you.”

“Mmhmm,” Josten bent to press the pin more firmly into his grip, a quick little touch, and wandered off to the hallway with one cuff still around his own wrist. “Oh hi, Boyd,” he said in surprise, and Andrew rolled his eyes even as he fought carefully with the stubborn lock. “What are you doing here?”

“There’s an Exy game on tonight and I don’t have to work for once, thought we could watch it,” Boyd’s voice carried through to the kitchen. “Uh. Josten. Why are you wearing a handcuff?”

“What? Oh, we don’t have a case, so we’re having a competition. Come in.” Josten replied. “You can judge.”

Boyd followed him through and Andrew acknowledged him with a grunt as he curled his fingers, feeling the pin start to catch at last. Josten perched on the table nearby and tapped a finger
obnoxiously on the timer.

“Well that’s a kink and a half,” Boyd remarked, eyebrows up near his hairline and gaze on the heap of restraints and locks.

“I collect locks for practice,” Andrew rolled his eyes again. “It’s not for BDSM, relax.”

“If you say so, man, no judgement here.”

“Stop that,” Andrew told him, then caught sight of Josten’s quietly baffled expression. “That’s a sex thing, Josten.”

“Oh,” Josten said, flushing just a bit and looking instead at the pile of handcuffs.

“Educate yourself on your own time, just wipe the internet history when you’re done,” Andrew replied. “I know far too much about you as it is.”

His face was definitely turning an interesting shade, Andrew noticed.

“No need,” Josten muttered. “Not interested.”

So what does interest you? Andrew wanted to keep pushing, to figure out a few more of Josten’s unbalanced equations, but he knew enough about the insides of closets that he didn’t want to push too hard, just in case. Boyd pointedly said nothing as he scrolled on his phone.

“Here we go,” Andrew said into the brief silence, and finally got himself free. He tossed the cuffs to Josten and flexed his fingers.

“Still too slow,” Josten smiled, and twirled them around his thumb absently.

“Show me then,” Andrew challenged. “If you’re so speedy at it.”

Josten quirked an eyebrow and stood. He turned his back and waited for Andrew to secure him in the cuffs and twitched his fingers for the bobby pin.

“Three, two, one,” Andrew said quietly, and leaned against the table to watch as Josten’s hands spun into motion. His fingers were graceful and deft, feeling his way around the lock with ease and seeming to know instinctively when to push and prod.

He hummed to himself in satisfaction, and the cuffs popped open in under a minute, demolishing Andrew’s time handily.

Boyd gave a low whistle and Andrew frowned.

“This was one of the reasons you took me on, yes?” Josten grinned, teasing just a bit without seeming to realise it. “I’ll teach you if you ask nicely.”

“Fuck off,” Andrew muttered, turning the cuffs over in his hands as if expecting a secret key to have appeared.

“You two really need better hobbies if this is what you do when you’re not on a case,” Boyd remarked smirkingly. “Are we gonna watch that game or not?”

Josten nodded eagerly and led him into the front room, chatting about which teams were playing and what their chances were. Andrew stayed behind to clear the locks and cuffs back into their usual suitcase home, thoughts ticking over.
This could be a problem.
CASE - A Family Affair

Trigger Warnings: this case is based off season 2 episode 5, which deals with murder and assassinations. Additional warnings for general violence, panic attacks, discussion of drugs and drug addictions, discussion of suicide, mentions of past csa (though no more than previous chapters). This case is relatively light in comparison to the previous ones, go figure. As always, any concerns, please contact me at my tumblr and I'll be more than happy to chat with you ;)

“I’ll take it,” Neil nodded to the stallholder, who grinned, took his money and wrapped the gift up in tissue paper. “Thanks.”

She waved him off cheerily and he tucked the little package into his pocket. He tried not to burn his lungs on the cautious, embarrassed heat pulsing in his chest. He felt more than a little silly with the impulsive buy, but he didn’t regret spending a little of his precious hoard of money on such a small thing, particularly because he thought Doe might like it. He chewed the inside of his cheek as he walked quickly through the market; it was winding down now, almost time to close this late in the afternoon, but the potential for crowds still made him nervous. Especially out on his own – over the past three months, he’d gotten so used to having Doe at his side he honestly felt a little unbalanced now, as if he would tip over without Doe’s solid presence to nudge him back to centre.

But Doe had needed to go into the precinct at late notice to help Wymack sort some old files, nothing that needed Neil’s presence, so he’d wandered out to the little craft market the next block over.

Neil picked up two coffees on his way back, knowing how terrible the precinct pot got towards this end of the week – some jackass kept adding grounds without removing and washing the right parts, Neil suspected it was Gordon – and that Wymack and Doe would probably want something better than mud to drink when they were done.

He spotted Doe standing outside the precinct, off to the side a bit and looking down at his phone as he typed away. The dusk light glinted off his pale hair and Neil thought for a moment it was too chilly to be outside without his usual coat, but figured Doe had probably needed a cigarette break.

“Hey, Andrew,” Neil called as he crossed the road to him. “I got you a coffee.”

Doe’s head snapped up and Neil almost tripped over his own feet at the sick lurch of vertigo. He looked like Doe. Mirror image almost. But it was not Andrew Doe.

“What did you just call me?” The short, blond man demanded aggressively, his eyes wide. “The fuck did you just call me?”

Neil dropped the coffees as the man surged forward and grabbed his shirtfront, shaking him hard. Neil could only manage a sick wheeze as the man shoved him up against a wall. Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck…

“Hey! I’m talking to you!” The man yelled, uncaring about the stares he was starting to attract.

“I – I don’t – I just——” Neil stammered as panic got his bones humming. He couldn’t stop staring at the man’s face, so similar to Doe’s but so completely different. He felt sick, he wanted to run, he didn’t know what was going on but he was not a fan.

The man made to shake him again and Neil’s long-honed survival instincts finally drove the panic
from his head. He shoved back against the man’s chest, kicked out at his feet, and twisted out of his reach as the man stumbled and cursed. Neil skittered over the fallen and leaking coffee cups and wished he had a knife to keep the guy back as he pursued.

The guy yelled again and the world whited out for a second as Neil’s brain tore him back to the past, to hot knives and cruel taunts and gunfire and gasoline and we have to get away, Abram, run, run!

“Hey!” A voice broke through sharply, wonderfully familiar. Then, in a tone of sick confusion, “Aaron? The fuck are you doing here? You can’t be here. You can’t.”

Neil clung to the hands that he’d just realised were holding his shoulders, stopping him from bolting like his body was urging, and took a rattling breath. The world came back into trembling focus, starting with Doe’s hands on him. The twins were staring at each other in matching disbelief. Neil watched Doe’s throat bob as he swallowed hard.

“A-Andrew,” Neil stammered out breathlessly. “The cops. Cameras. It’s not safe, not safe. We have to – we have to go, we gotta go…”

“Breathe,” Doe ordered him firmly, though his eyes never left his brother. “Are you hurt?”

“N-No, not really.”

“Take three breaths and then we’re going.”

Neil nodded and forced himself to take slow, calming breaths. Once he’d taken the third, Doe’s eyes flicked to his lightning-quick and he moved his hands away, putting them back in his pockets. Neil stepped back a bit out of his personal space and looked cautiously at the other man.

“I thought you were dead,” the man – Aaron – choked out eventually.

“Surprise,” Doe muttered dully. “Come on, we can’t do this out here. Follow.”

Doe spun on his heel and sped towards a cab stand while Neil and Aaron followed in his wake, keeping a cautious distance between them as they followed Doe into a cab. Nobody talked and everybody stared in what had to have been the most uncomfortable short journey of the cab driver’s life.

Doe led them into the house and locked the door firmly behind the three of them. He handed his coat wordlessly to Neil and jerked his chin at his erstwhile brother. Neil hung up their matching coats and shadowed them into the living room, lurking uneasily in the doorway. Doe was pacing a bit, restlessly shifting on his feet and clutching at his armbands and biceps. Aaron just stared.

“How did you find me?” Doe asked eventually, eyes fixed on Aaron’s face.

His brother gaped. “I didn’t. I thought – I thought you were dead,” he said again. “After graduation you just vanished and never contacted anyone, we couldn’t find any trace of you. You were just gone and I thought – I thought…”

Doe stopped abruptly, a sick look on his face. “You thought I’d killed myself.”

Aaron made a strangled noise of assent and Doe looked away at last, a grim tension to his jaw. His scatty gaze flickered over Neil.

“Do you want me to go?” Neil asked in hesitant German.
Doe shook his head sharply. “Stay. And don’t bother, Aaron speaks German too.”

Aaron looked between them both, wide-eyed and shocked still. “Andrew – Andrew, I have so many questions. Where have you been? What have you been doing? Why did you vanish? Why didn’t you call me?” His voice cracked and he coughed to clear it. He looked to Neil as well. “And who the fuck is this?”

“I…” Doe swallowed hard and appeared to switch to the easiest of those to answer. “This is – this is Neil. He lives with me. We work together.”

Aaron’s gaze flickered fast between them, back and forth and back and forth. He clenched his jaw for a moment and nodded to Neil. “Sorry I shoved you.”

Neil gave a jerky shrug and pulled his cuffs into his palms, holding tight.

“Breathe,” Doe reminded him in a low voice.

“I’m fine,” Neil muttered back. Doe snorted but seemed to relax just a fraction, clutching less desperately at his armbands.

Aaron ran his hands through his hair raggedly. “Andrew, what the fuck? Why… why?”

“It’s complicated,” Doe replied tightly.

“So simplify it.”

Neil watched as Doe dropped his gaze to the floor and fidgeted with his armbands, shoulders tense up by his ears. He opened his mouth a few times and clicked his jaw shut each time. A frustrated growl snarled in his throat and Neil wondered if the two had ever exchanged a word after Drake’s death so many years ago. He wondered if Doe even knew how to talk to his brother.

He reached out and hesitantly touched Doe’s arm. “It’s okay,” he said quietly.

“It’s not okay,” Doe shot back, but leaned into his touch for just a second. He scrubbed over his face and then lifted his chin to look at Aaron again. His voice was ice-cold but he was speaking. “It’s Moriyama shit. And Easthaven shit.”

“What about Easthaven?”

Neil caught the angry jerk to Doe’s shoulders and firmed his grip. *I’m here, I’m here.*

“I killed one of the doctors there,” Doe spat. “There’s a record of it. The Moriyamas have it and they were using it to blackmail me and Kevin.”


“None of your business,” Doe shut him down hard. “I needed to get out of their line of sight. So I vanished. Didn’t think you’d care if you never saw me again. You certainly didn’t care the rest of the time at Palmetto.”

This time Aaron had to look away. Neil squeezed just a little before letting go. Doe glanced at him but didn’t tell him to leave. The air in the room felt thick and trembling with the weight of years of distance and unspoken words, old memories crowding close. Neil hoped his presence could try and dilute a little of it, at least for Doe. He stepped out of the doorway and into the room, closer to
Doe’s side.

“But what have you been doing?” Aaron asked the floor.

“Putting together a case to get the whole lot of the bastards locked up for good. What were you doing at the station?”

“You’re a cop now?” Aaron shook his head in disbelief. “I was – I was in town for a medical conference and I got mugged. I was gonna file a report when this guy walked up and called me by your name.”

“Some detective you are,” Doe muttered. “We’re not even dressed alike.”

“Why would I have thought it wasn’t you? I figured you’d changed out for some reason.” Neil replied, watching the two of them. “Thought a suspect must have roughed you up or something. I dunno.”

“Idiot,” Doe said and turned back to his brother. “A medical conference?”

Aaron glanced up hesitantly. “Yeah. I’m a medical intern, now. At University of Chicago Medicine. The ER, mostly.”

Doe stared at him for a good few minutes. “Congrats,” he said blankly, at length. He nodded to the wedding ring on Aaron’s hand. “Katelyn still?”

Aaron immediately started fiddling with it. “Y-Yeah. Three years now. She’s, uh. A phD now. And pregnant.”

Doe blinked rapidly and took a slow breath that Neil didn’t think Aaron noticed. “How far along?” He asked almost neutrally.

“Three months, we haven’t had a proper scan yet,” Aaron replied as if shocked his brother would ask. “Why – why do you care?”

“I don’t, our deal finished at graduation,” Doe said immediately, kneejerk. “Aaron, you can’t tell her about me. You can’t tell anyone. You’ll put everyone at risk – you, me, her, everyone we’ve ever known. The Moriyamas are looking for me, I know it.”

Aaron’s expression flickered into something sad and regretful, and was about to respond when Doe’s phone started ringing, the tone assigned to Wymack and work. He swore and shoved a hand through his hair before answering. “Wymack, what is it.”

Neil leaned close enough to listen in and Doe wordlessly tilted the phone so he could hear better.

“Got a case, obviously. Would’ve told you in person but you ran off. Josten okay? People were saying he got in a fight outside the station.”

“I’m fine,” Neil replied, and heard Wymack’s unamused huff.

“Figures you’re listening too. Anyway, are you coming in or not, Doe? It looks related to the W’s.”

Neil’s whole body twitched and Doe grabbed his arm to keep him close. He gave his twin a long look. “Yeah, we’re coming in. Give us half an hour.” He hung up without waiting for Wymack’s answer.

Aaron had a wounded look to his face. “You changed your name back to Doe?”
Doe’s jaw worked a bit. “It wasn’t personal. Mostly. I didn’t want to be traced.”

Aaron looked like he couldn’t find the courage to say what was on his tongue. Doe sighed impatiently. “Look, just – stay here for now. When do you go back to Chicago?”

“Two days.”

“Stay in the house, don’t go outside until we get back,” Doe ordered. “There’s food, and TV, and stuff. Just stay here for now.”

Aaron nodded slowly, still baffled by Doe’s apparent lack of apathy. “O-Okay. I’ll be here when you get back.”

Doe nodded tightly and fetched their coats. “Don’t go through my room. Or Josten’s.”

“I won’t.”

Doe stared at his brother for another long minute, obviously stalling, then shook his head and steered Neil out the door.

Wymack waved them into his office when they arrived and shut the door firmly behind them. He handed over a case file and sat down at his desk heavily while Doe flipped through it.

“Our dead guy is Leo Banin. Killed when his motorcycle veered across the road into an oncoming minivan four days ago; the driver of that vehicle was also killed,” Wymack stated.

“No mystery there, head wound is the cause of death and why we have helmet laws,” Doe replied. “Why are we here?”

“Because the day he died, he murdered somebody else.” Wymack said grimly. “According to his obit, he was happily married, a deacon at his church and a residential nurse at a retirement home. But before that, he was a member of the Wesninski clan.”

Neil felt a sick shudder roll down his spine at the name and closed his eyes for a second. Doe pressed a hand between his shoulder blades until he stood straight again. Wymack raised his eyebrows a bit but didn’t comment on it, just continued briefing them.

“The ME found in his autopsy that Banin had uniform lacerations on his palms, but he was wearing gloves at the time of the crash. The wounds looked fresh, so naturally suspicions were raised. The ME brought it to me, and they looked a hell of a lot like garrotte wounds to me. So I asked Gordon to run Banin’s fingerprints through our systems – Leo Banin started life as Vitaly Andropov, a Polish national who came over to the US about twenty years ago and was a known affiliate of the Wesninski outfit. He was a hitman, specialty with garrottes, who’d been linked to a number of killings for over a decade.” Wymack sighed and rubbed at his jaw. “No hard evidence, as always, but we knew it was him. However, the murders he was associated with stopped in 2005 and all traces of him vanished. Later that year, Leo Banin sprang into existence. Got a quiet life as a nurse in Queens, got married, hadn’t been heard of since. We’d assumed Andropov was taken out by his former bosses years ago, until his body washed up in the morgue. Looks like he wasn’t completely retired, judging by the wounds on his hands.”

Doe blinked slowly at Wymack and passed the file to Neil. “You think he didn’t cut ties with the family? You think whoever he killed on the day of his death, it was done by order?”

“It’s a possibility.”
“Well, unless you’ve got a freshly garrotted corpse I’m not aware of, or a missing person’s file, you don’t have a case,” Doe pointed out. “This is all speculation.”

“Which is why I want you to talk to the assassinurse’s wife,” Wymack said, and leaned forward to brace his arms on his desk. “Doe. If he was still affiliated with the family, if he was still involved – this could give us a break. This could help us get to Wesinski. And you know as well as I do he’s the attack dog of the main branch. We take him out, we’re one step closer to getting those bastards behind bars. I can’t officially investigate this without probable cause. So does our deal still stand?”

“Obviously,” Doe replied derisively.

Wymack nodded and looked to Neil. “I assume by now that Doe’s told you about the Wesninskis and Moriyamas, and what we’re doing about them.”

Neil nodded mutely.

“They’re dangerous, kid. If you don’t wanna get involved, you can sit this one out,” Wymack said as kindly as he could. “I can find a different case for you in the meantime, you could tag along with Boyd or Gordon.”

“I’m staying,” Neil said firmly, though he couldn’t quite meet Wymack’s eye as he said it. “I’ve got my own reasons for wanting them taken down.”

Wymack gave him a long, measuring look, then raised his eyebrows at Doe. “And when were you going to tell me your shadow’s affiliated with them?”

“He’s not, and I wasn’t,” Doe replied nonchalantly. “That particular bit of history is above your paygrade, Captain. Don’t pry.”

“Is whatever it is going to be a problem on this case?”

“No, Captain,” Neil said, quietly but firmly. “It won’t interfere.”

“It better not,” Wymack said darkly. “Now go get me some evidence, Doe.”

***

“Was he familiar to you?” Doe asked in quiet German as they walked from the subway station to Banin’s – Andropov’s – house.

“No,” Neil replied. “But they never talked business around me, and Mom took me pretty young. If he was associated with the family, he wasn’t high enough in the organisation to meet with Nathan, or for me to see him.”

Doe nodded thoughtfully.

“Are you doing okay?” Neil asked in return.

Doe’s mouth twisted. “It was supposed to be a clean break, to protect us both. The Moriyamas would have no cause to go after him if they knew I’d vanished and wasn’t in contact.”

“But now he’s here,” Neil continued for him. “And he knows where you are, what you’re doing, and his wife is vulnerable and pregnant. Either of them could be pressured to give you up, or to coerce you.”

Doe grunted an affirmative. “And you? Having a breakdown yet over the case?”
“Not yet,” Neil smiled just a bit.

“Good. Only one of us can have a breakdown per case, I’ve decided,” Doe said. “Otherwise we can’t be a functional duo. I’ve booked Fridays and the weekends, you can take the work week.”

“Generous of you,” Neil smiled properly.

Doe’s gaze flicked to his face and then away again, fast. “You have weirder issues than me, you need more space for them.”

“I’ll do my best to keep to the schedule then.”

“See that you do.”

Neil looked down at his feet for a moment. “You really won’t give me up to Wymack? If he knew who I used to be, he’d want me to help with his case. He’d want to use me as a witness. I know things that could help build your case up real fast.”

Doe didn’t reply for a few minutes. When he did, it was almost hesitant, as if he were surprised by his own words. “It would put you in too much danger. So no.”

Neil didn’t have an answer for that, so he lightly held the cuff of Doe’s sleeve instead, eyes on the pavement. He could feel Doe’s eyes on him but couldn’t meet his gaze. Doe’s hand shifted slowly until he was holding Neil’s wrist, fingers resting along his pulse under his sleeve.

They walked like that for a couple of strides before letting go and finishing the walk to Mrs Banin’s house; she opened the door wearing full black and invited them inside. Once they explained their reasons for being there, and for her husband’s body not being released from the morgue yet, she took up her crucifix and blinked tears away.

“I can’t believe Leo was a killer,” she said thickly, her own Polish accent strong. “No, no. He was a good man, a good husband. I knew he came here to get away from a bad life in Poland, and a bad start in the US. But he found his faith, and me, and he said the past was the past. A fresh start.”

“Were you aware of his real name, Vitaly Andropov?” Doe asked.

She smiled and shook her head. “To me, he was Leo. That was all that mattered.”

“Can you think of anyone your husband may have… wanted to hurt?” Neil asked delicately. “Someone he’d argued with?”

She shook her head again. “You don’t know my husband. Talk to our neighbours, our friends. He was a wonderful man. An hour before the accident, he – he called me. To say he loved me.” She paused to wipe her eyes, blotting them with a much-used handkerchief. Neil looked around at the room to give her grief some privacy, taking in the many bouquets of flowers, no doubt from the memorial service the day before.

“Did he give you that necklace?” Doe asked, looking at the ornate crucifix clutched so tightly in her fingers, like a rosary.

“We met at church,” she agreed. “Whatever you say he was, that was the past. Finding God changed him. He was a wonderful man.”

“I see he got a medical administration degree a year ago?” Neil asked with a gesture to the certificate on the wall.
Mrs Banin smiled proudly. “It was our dream to open a senior care centre. He had partners, we were finding investors. This was his life.”

“Respectfully, Mrs Banin,” Doe said as tactfully as he could, which wasn’t much, “Your husband was a killer in Poland – he has a file in Interpol – and was thought to be a professional hitman once he moved to the US. A few days ago, he killed again. There were clearly other things in his life you weren’t aware of.”

“That may be true,” She nodded again. “But I cannot help you with your investigation. Leo was a good man, a good husband, a good Christian. I do not believe he killed anyone, and I know nothing about his past life. If you don’t mind, I’d like you to leave now. I have a meeting with my pastor about the funeral soon.”

***

When they got back to the house, they found Aaron had fallen asleep on the couch, so they moved to Andrew’s study to get to work. Josten was calling up on a lead a few hours later when Aaron wandered in, apparently woken by their voices.

“Thith methhage is for Travith Hardwick,” Josten was saying into the phone, with a heavy lisp and peculiar accident. He glanced to Aaron, then Andrew, but carried on. “Thith is Manny Tarkanian. I have a huge renovation a-and it needth to move fathtt. I hear you’re the bethh builder in Quennth. I-I’m gonna textht you my contact info. Pleathh get in touch. Thank you.”

“Who is Manny Tarkanian, and why does he have a lisp?” Aaron asked, staring at Josten once he’d hung up.

“Childhood sledding accident,” Andrew answered, a little off-balance to have Aaron in their space. He’d been so wrapped up in the case he’d almost forgotten the brother asleep on the couch. So he dived back into work, hoping it would get the sick fear out of his chest. “But let’s not get caught up in the backstory of an alias. You should be asking: who is Travis Hardwick?”

Aaron blinked at him in confusion.

Andrew clutched his arms and started to explain the case, reaching for some semblance of normality while the twin he’d hoped never to see again stared and breathed in this space that had become so vital and personal for just himself, and then to share with Josten. Once he’d explained the brief outline of their case, he rubbed his hands together and rocked a bit on his feet. “Firstly, 76 percent of all murder victims know their assailant. We tend to get whacked by the people closest to us – family, friends, spouses most often, business associates. It also appears that Mr Banin, formerly Andropov, had indeed resigned his profession as a contract killer, making it even more likely the victim is someone he knew. These are bereavement cards from the memorial service.” He gestured at the array of notes spread on the desk before him.

“You stole those from the widow’s house?” Aaron asked eventually. He looked numbly surprised that they were having any sort of conversation, never mind one about murder and assassins and detective work.

“I was hoping to find out which of ‘Leo Banin’’s closest associates hadn’t left condolences. If one of his friends didn’t leave a card, they might be the victim we’re looking for.”

“But – you don’t know who his friends are,” Aaron asked, clearly confused.

“We know some of them,” Andrew said brightly, and ignored the way Aaron gaped at his tone of
voice. “His partners in the nursing home plan – all but one sent a note to his wife. Travis Hardwick. A quick internet search shows he’s a small-time contractor with very poor reviews, the kind likely to skip out on a job halfway through. Very frustrating, if he’d done that on the project that the Banins were putting all their life savings towards. Would almost make a man homicidal, don’t you think? Josten here had the bright idea to call him, and at present, Travis Hardwick is either very difficult to reach, or very dead.”

Aaron didn’t reply for a long time, just stared at his brother’s face. Andrew stared right back, trying hard to stay focussed on the case. He noticed Josten fidgeting in his chair a bit, an uncomfortable witness, but ignored him for once.

Aaron rubbed at his face and when he took his hands away he looked… clinical. Closed off and analytical. It wasn’t an expression Andrew had seen on him before. “Andrew, are you high?”

Andrew felt his face twisting in a scowl. “No.”

“Don’t bullshit me,” Aaron said, in full doctor mode. “You were never this energetic or expressive off your pills. What are you on? I can get you to a good rehab centre, I promise.”

Rage curled in Andrew’s stomach but he fought to stay in control. “Oh, that’s nice. And rich, coming from you.”

“He’s not on anything,” Josten pitched in, a dangerous note in his voice.

“You stay out of this,” Aaron said coldly. “You don’t know anything about my brother.”

“I think I know more than you do, actually,” Josten shot right back, getting out of his seat with hands shaking not from fear, but from anger. “You haven’t seen him in years – you don’t think maybe he’s expressive because he’s learned to move on? That he’s started healing without you in his life? That he’s found something to motivate him?”

“Stand down, Josten,” Andrew muttered, and tugged on his shirt. “Thanks and all for jumping to my defence, but I can handle this one on my own.”

Josten gave him a searching look, then seemed to deflate a bit. “Do you want me to go?”

Andrew hated the little flush of gratitude in his chest, hated how he liked that Josten knew how to read him. He hated the way his hand pressed to Josten’s back for a second, and tucked it into his pocket where it would stay put for once. “Yeah.”

Josten nodded and left them to it, though he made no effort to avoid bumping Aaron’s shoulder on his way past.

“I’m not high,” He said coolly once they were alone. “I haven’t taken anything stronger than aspirin since I got off those fucking drugs. You know how much I hated being medicated, you really think I’d voluntarily go back to that? Fuck you, Aaron.”

“I know addiction’s an awful thing,” Aaron set his jaw and folded his arms. “I know while you were on them, you needed cracker dust and a lot of whiskey to ease withdrawal. I know they might as well have been opiates, with the dosage you were on. I know how hard it is, you know I know that. And I’ve seen too many addicts in the ER the past few years. You’ve got the jitters, and sober we both know you’re a hollow shell.”

“I used to be,” Andrew replied. “I couldn’t feel a goddamn thing after I got sober at first, alright? Is that what you wanna hear, Doctor Minyard? In college I had nothing to live for, nothing to want,
nothing to keep me going except spite and the remnants of our deal. And even then I wasn’t
tempted to get high again, because at least nothingness was honest, was mine, was in my control
after the drugs left me without it for so many years. I wasn’t feeling anything, and it was a fucking
relief after the overwhelming rollercoaster those drugs had me on.”

Aaron had gone pale but Andrew didn’t let him speak. He drew on Bee’s words and held Aaron’s
eyes. “You only knew me as a wreck of a teenager, and I bet when you thought of me since, you
thought about all the things I never told you, all the nasty little secrets you never got to hear. Well
I’m a proper adult now. I have a job that gives me purpose and a home I made for myself. I have a
few friends, and a housemate who understands me. I’m getting myself better and fuck you for
thinking me being happy could only be because of drugs. This anger right here is a hundred
percent authentic, brother dear, and if you don’t believe me I’ll give you a fucking urine sample.”

Aaron eventually shook his head and looked at the floor. “I don’t want a urine sample.”

“Good,” Andrew said harshly, and strode past him to join Josten where it was quiet and calm in the
kitchen. They sat out the back door and smoked in silence, hip to hip and shoulder to shoulder.

“That sounded like it went well,” Josten murmured once Andrew had stubbed out his second
cigarette and lit another.

Andrew rolled his eyes and took a deep drag of his new cigarette.

“He can have my room while he’s here,” Josten offered quietly. “I don’t mind, I’ll take the couch.”

Andrew nearly dropped his cigarette in surprise, and turned to stare at his partner. “You do mind,
you’re almost as possessive about that room as you are your duffel bag.”

Josten shrugged. “He’s your brother. I’d assume family takes precedence.”

Andrew hated himself just a bit for saying, “No. He’s the guest here. It’s your room, your home.
He can go on the couch.”

He didn’t miss Josten’s little hitch of breath, or the way his cigarette trembled in his fingers for a
second. He reached out and set his hand on Josten’s knee – goddammit, why wouldn’t they just
stay in his pockets – and squeezed hard for a second. Stay, it begged. Stay. Please, stay.

“You know I’ve never had a home before,” Josten mumbled, his voice thick and wet.

“I’m well aware that you’re a walking tragedy.”

“Thank you, Andrew.” Josten’s hand trembled as he rested it on Andrew’s wrist, shy but sure. His
palm was warm even through the armbands, and for once Andrew’s skin didn’t crawl at being
touched. Andrew took a quiet breath and told himself to get a grip. It was nothing. It meant
nothing.

“Yeah, yeah,” he muttered long minutes later. “I’m going to bed. We can keep chasing Hardwick in
the morning.”

***

“Ah, I found the tape,” Travis Hardwick’s secretary said the next morning. She put it in the player
and pressed play. “You can see Leo – one of our clients, Leo Banin – followed Travis out to his
truck that day. What is it you think happened to Travis?”
“We don’t know that anything has,” Josten said, looking her in the face for once. Andrew tried not to feel pleased that he was doing much better with witnesses these days. “We just want to make sure he’s okay.”

“So, an unexpected three-day absence from work and you didn’t think of calling the police?” Andrew asked as he rifled through drawers. His lip curled just a bit at the not-so-hidden skin mags in the top drawer. Straight guys, honestly. I bet that girl’s sixteen at most. Ugh.

The secretary shrugged. “Clients are in here every month bitching about something or other – the work’s late, money’s missing, whatever. Travis pisses a lot of people off alright? And Leo was really scary that day but Travis kept saying it was all under control. I didn’t worry ‘cause a little while later I got a text from him, said he was heading to Jersey.”

“Jersey?” Josten asked.

“He has an uncle out in Newark, figured he went to borrow money. It’s happened before,” the secretary scoffed a bit. Josten rewound the security footage and squinted at the screen, watching the confrontation between Banin and Hardwick.

“Pouring the concrete today,” Josten murmured after his third rewind.

“Wait, did he just read their lips?” The secretary asked in amazement.

Andrew ignored her and stood by Josten. “The construction site for Banin’s nursing facility,” Josten murmured, for Andrew’s ears only. “Difficult to imagine a better place to hide a body than the foundations of a building.”

“I do love a classic,” Andrew agreed, and enjoyed Josten’s furtive little grin more than he should.

***

“It’s a shame, really,” Andrew sighed once they arrived at the construction site, squinting in the early morning sunlight. “The world will never know what a retirement facility run by a born-again assassin would look like.”

“Yeah, the world just loves to rain on your parade what with all this murder,” Josten replied dryly. “Look, there’s Travis’ truck.”

Andrew went to investigate while Josten headed over to a dark patch of concrete, neatly dodging around the mess left everywhere.

“If he did leave here, he didn’t use his own vehicle,” Andrew mused and peered in the windows.

“He could be under here,” Josten called, crouching down by the cement. Andrew definitely did not notice that his legs looked good in those jeans. “The concrete here is still a bit wet.”

“Could be they were working overnight.”

“Or that Banin poured a fresh patch over the body.”

“No, sorry,” Andrew disagreed and looked around. His gaze fixed on a shabby motel on the next street over. “Travis isn’t under that cement.”

When they picked and unlocked one of the motel’s room doors, Andrew was mostly expecting some sort of debauchery, but Josten clearly wasn’t from his scandalsized little gasp at all the naked
women in the bedroom. Travis Hardwick yelled in surprise and the women shrieked, though they seemed more concerned with seeing if they were cops than the fact of their nudity, judging from how none of them hurried to cover up.

“Travis, you’re alive,” Andrew smiled, ignoring all the flesh on display as Travis struggled out of the bed, not bothering with underwear. “That certainly makes a change – usually our leads are decomposing at this point in the case. How nice.”

“You guys cops?” The man demanded in a heavy Jersey accent.

“No, no, unclench,” Andrew assured him. “Ladies, could we have a minute with this jackass? You’ll have him back in one piece, I promise.”

They grabbed up their clothes and filed out, though Andrew saw how most of them eyeballed Josten and his blushing face, a few reaching out to tousle his hair and press suggestively against him while he stammered and edged closer to Andrew. How precious. Andrew snorted; he was having serious doubts as to whether the runaway had ever so much as looked at a porn magazine on the run.

Then he sobered, remembering Josten’s tacit admissions of his mother beating him senseless if he’d ever gotten distracted, his talk of being stripped and stared at as a child. *Don’t laugh at him,* he told himself, feeling vaguely ashamed. *It’s not his fault if he’s uncomfortable with nudity.*

To distract himself from that unsettling train of thought, he skimmed down to Josten’s wrist for a moment and tugged him closer. Josten smiled gratefully, his eyes too large and full of emotion for Andrew to process.

“You guys definitely ain’t cops?” Hardwick asked again with a nervous laugh. Andrew shook his head and gestured to their lack of uniforms and badges. “Oh man!”

“We’re private investigators,” Andrew said, disliking the lie but knowing it had to be done. “We need to know everything you can tell us about your client Leo Banin, and then you can get back to – whatever.”

“Oh yeah, right. Right, Leo. What’s up, he in trouble with his missus or something?”

“He died a few days ago.”

“Oh. Oh, shit. Poor guy.” Hardwick looked taken aback for a moment, then glanced nervously at the very obvious lines of coke on the bed stand. He was jittery and unfocussed like he was on a rush, for sure. “So how’d you guys know I was in here anyway?”

Andrew glanced at the coke as well and put his hands in his pockets, unaffected. “There’s a concert ticket in your truck’s passenger seat, and the date and time suggested you survived your angry visit from Banin. After the show, you returned to the building site for a bit of quick cement work to keep up the premise of your business, and you’ve been here ever since. There are no tracks behind your truck wheels, you see. Anyway, since then you’ve been locked in here absent from the office, snorting cocaine and underwhelming a host of cheap prostitutes. I really hope you used condoms. From the look of that rash – yikes.”

“I wouldn’t say underwhelming,” Hardwick laughed again, grabbing at his very on-display dick and balls like he was scared they’d drop off if he didn’t hold them.

“Sure, buddy,” Andrew replied with a cold glance southwards. Josten muffled a snort into his hand and Andrew felt his lips twitch. It was worth looking at this guy’s scrawny, sickly body to make
“Josten laugh. “Your secretary showed us a video of Leo confronting you outside your office. Care to tell us about that?”

“Yeah, he was pretty angry,” Hardwick shrugged and absently scratched at his nasty rash, apparently too high to care what he was doing. Ugh, Andrew thought, and kept his eyes firmly on Hardwick’s face. “I’d just told him his nursing home was pretty much kaput. We ran outta money."

“You don’t appear to be completely desperate,” Andrew nodded towards the stack of bills beside the cocaine, obviously payment for the girls.

“No, I was until Leo pushed some on me, and I told him, twenty five grand wasn’t gonna bail us out, but hey, all cash spends the same, right?”

“He gave you twenty five grand?” Josten repeated in disbelief. “In cash? And you didn’t think that was odd?”

“Well duh, kid, I’m no idiot,” Hardwick rolled his eyes and kept on scratching. “He said it was from a loan shark. Tell ya the truth, I felt kinda bad taking it, ‘cause it wasn’t gonna get the nursing home off the ground, but hey. Dog’s gotta eat, right?” He laughed. “Figured I’d live it up on Leo’s dime, seein’ as he wanted me to take the money so bad.”

“Did he tell you the loan shark’s name?” Josten asked.

“Nah. Hey, what’re you doing?” He cried, as Andrew darted around him to grab a fistful of the stack in a plastic evidence bag. “That’s my money!”

“Actually, it’s Leo Banin’s money, and I’m only taking a grand of it. C’mon Josten, let’s leave this gentleman to his after-party.” He shoved the bagged cash in his pocket and took Josten’s wrist, pulling him out the door and past the bored-looking prostitutes with the hungry eyes. “Ladies, he’s all yours, though definitely get yourselves checked later. That is one gross man.”

“You wanna say why you’re so sure the money’s stolen?” Neil asked later that morning as they waited for Gordon to finish up his phone call. “I know Hardwick said it was from a loan shark, but…”

“Take a look,” Doe said and passed one of the bills over.

Neil held it up to the light and turned it over a few times. “Well, it looks old. Maybe from the 90’s?”

“Twenties like that don’t last in circulation more than four or five years before being recalled and destroyed.” Doe told him. “One old bill, that’s rare. A stack of old twenties from a loan shark? Unlikely to be legit.”

Gordon hung up with a scowl. “You were right,” he groused. “My friend at the Bureau says these bills were flagged. The cash you found was taken in a bank robbery in 2001. Looks like the guys who did the job are still locked up, but half the cash was never recovered.”

“We think it was recently distributed by a loan shark.”

Gordon grunted. “Russell Gertz was a name that kept popping up in the original report, Feds suspected the stolen cash ended up with him but couldn’t make a case. Gertz is a moneylender,
used to run a bookies. Collared twice but never indicted.”

“Cautious man,” Doe remarked. “Waited over a decade to put his dirty money on the street.”

“Or maybe Banin garrotted him and took it,” Neil muttered in German.

“True,” Doe agreed with a cheery smile. He switched back to English. “Is there an address for Gertz?”

“Not a current one,” Gordon shook his head and took a gulp of coffee. “He’s got a judgement against him for unpaid parking summonses, but City Marshals can’t find the guy. What’s this about, anyway? You usually bother Boyd with your bullshit. What makes me so lucky?”

“Private case,” Doe waved a hand. “Very confidential, et cetera. And Boyd’s busy with wedding plans, he’d be useless right now. How did Reynolds take the news, hm? Has she started dropping hints to you to get a move on yet?”


Doe laughed as they walked away, and Neil followed easily by his side.

***

Doe was having a silent, awkward lunch with his brother when Neil gave a triumphant cry and dashed into the kitchen, papers in hand. Doe looked up from his plate with a tolerant little half-smile and Aaron looked baffled at the very sight.

“It’s official, I am in every way superior to the New York City Marshals,” Neil announced proudly.

“Doesn’t take much,” Doe said. “Amaze me, boy-wonder.”

Neil grinned at their little joke and waved his papers. “I found Gertz. His sister Ida owns a nail salon in Bushwick. Somehow the business has thrived for over twenty years, despite being in a really industry-heavy part of town. Sounds like a front, unless construction workers have got really into manicures the past ten years, in which case I apologise for being so close-minded.”

“Hm,” Doe hummed and hid his smirk by having another forkful of pasta. “Nice, Josten. Have you eaten anything?”

“Huh? No, I don’t think so.”

Doe rolled his eyes and kicked out the spare chair. “There’s more on the stove, grab a plate. We’ll head out to the salon once you’ve eaten.”

Aaron looked between them both as Neil sat down, then shoved his plate away. “Okay, I’m not even gonna ask what’s going on with you two.”

“We’re friends,” Doe said, eyes on his food and voice almost casual. “That’s not such an alien concept, is it?”

Neil kept his attention on his food to hide the rush of confusion that prompted. We’re friends? We’re really friends? He thinks we’re friends?

“No,” Aaron said slowly. “I guess not. It’s weird for me to see, but whatever. I need to go back to Chicago tomorrow, Andrew. Are we gonna talk about anything other than your case before I go?”
“What do you wanna talk about? It’s a couple years too late to talk about Tilda.”

Neil didn’t miss Aaron’s flinch and tried to eat as quietly as he could.

“Just – just anything of substance, Andrew. When I thought you were dead, I… I regretted so much. I wanted you in my life when Higgins told me about you, and I still do now. I don’t want to let you walk out of it again.”

Doe stabbed a bit at an errant bit of chicken. “I walked out of it to protect you, you moron. If the Moriyamas find out you know where I am, they won’t hesitate to come after you or Katelyn, or whatever kids you end up having. They’ll torture and kill you if it means they can get their hands on me and my work, and the evidence I’m collecting against them.”

Aaron scowled and gestured to Neil. “What about him? You don’t seem worried about him getting mixed up in this shit.”

“Josten was neck-deep in this way before I met him, and don’t deflect. You really want to put your new family in danger by keeping me in your life? It’s better for the lot of you if you forgot you’d ever run into me. Just go home and forget all this. Have a nice life, and try and be a better parent than Tilda.”

Aaron thumped his fist on the table impotently and Neil tried not to flinch. “Dammit, Andrew, of course I want to keep them safe! But I don’t want to lose you again. I won’t tell a soul about you or your weird little life here. But I’m not gonna let you vanish again. You’re gonna keep my number in your phone and call every so often. If you don’t, I’m gonna travel out here once a month and show my face around your precinct, get all your co-workers confused and start looking into your background and untangle all the lies you’ve told them. You want that?”

Doe scowled and licked sauce off his fork. “Was that actually a threat? Did you actually grow a spine sometime in the past few years? Colour me impressed.”

“I had enough spine to cave Drake’s skull in, or did you forget that?”

Doe went completely still and Neil wrestled the urge to punch Aaron in the mouth.

“Do not,” Doe said, very quietly, “Mention his name to me ever again.”

Aaron seemed to realise he’d crossed one line too many and raised his hands in surrender. “Okay, okay. Look, Andrew. Just call me every few weeks. That’s all I want. I won’t tell anybody about meeting you, not even Katelyn. I promise.”

Doe levelled a heavy stare at him. “We both know what you’re like with promises, Aaron.”

“I’m not a messed-up teenager anymore either, Andrew. I can keep this one.”

“You’d better,” Doe said softly, darkness in his eyes. “Because I can’t protect you anymore, especially not all the way out in Chicago.”

Aaron nodded grimly. “I know.”

Doe finished his meal, and Neil did the same. Aaron pushed the rest of his around his plate until Doe got tired of it and divided it up between himself and Neil without a word, giving Neil the larger portion. Neil caught Aaron’s surprised smile and manage to relax just a bit.

“Do you still like ice cream?” Aaron asked hesitantly once they were done.
“Mmhmm. Do you still like energy drinks?”

“Mmhmm.”

They shared a cautious nod, then Doe got to his feet. “Josten, c’mon. We’ve got a loan shark to harass, if he isn’t dead. Aaron, stay here. We’ll be back later.”

***

“Alive, again,” Doe murmured in surprise when they got to the nail salon. “Seems like the one time we really want a body, everyone’s alive. I don’t know how to feel about this.”

“Poor thing,” Neil replied with mock-sympathy.

Doe ignored that and walked up to the loan shark reclining in the middle of the empty nail salon. “Mr Gertz, I’m Doe and this is Josten. We’re consulting detectives for the NYPD.”

Gertz looked them both over briefly and made a show of turning the page of his newspaper. “That’s nice.”

“And that’s some lovely bruising on your arm,” Doe said cheerily, pointing at the dark plum-and-apple stains wrapped around his forearm. “But no ligature marks on your neck. We thought maybe Leo Banin had been by with some wire, but looks like you were attacked by somebody else. Must be nice to have so many friends.”

“Leo who?” Gertz asked, brows raised.

“Oh come on, you know Leo. You loaned him twenty five grand just a few days ago.”

“Sorry, don’t know what you’re talking about. You wanna ask me some questions, you’re gonna have to go get some real cops. Bye now.”

“You just want us to go so you can empty out your autoclave,” Neil shook his head and pointed at the little sterilising oven off to the side. “Funny, it’s not actually plugged in. Even funnier, they don’t usually have padlocks on them. Didn’t realise emery boards and nail clippers were so valuable these days. Is that where you keep the money you bought from that bank job in 2001? Or are you smart enough to keep it somewhere more remote?”

Gertz gave him a narrow look and slowly closed his newspaper.

Doe grinned and rocked on his feet. “I’ve got a deal for you, Mr Gertz. Tell us everything you know about Leo Banin, and we won’t tell the City Marshals where you are.”

Gertz sighed and glanced at the door, then lowered his voice. “Alright, alright. Leo, he took care of my mom before she passed. He worked at the home, y’know? He was a bit preachy, but a nice guy. At least until he learned what I did, then of course I was the devil.”

“Yet he came to you for a loan,” Neil pointed out.

“Yeah, he needed fifty grand to get his own nursing home project back on track. He had no collateral, so I gave him twenty five on account of how good he was to my mom. Now you know what I know. Bye.”

“Nah, not quite,” Doe persisted. “We still don’t know how you got all those bruises.”

“I fell,” Gertz said shortly. “I have vertigo.”
“Uh huh.” Doe replied, and leaned in a bit closer. “Why don’t you go get a pen and paper so you can keep your story straight when you’re in custody, yes?”

“Alright, hold on, hold on,” Gertz frowned. “Right, okay. A couple days after I got a visit from Leo, I got another visit from a guy called Romero Malcolm.”

Neil heard himself choke on his own spit and took a few rapid steps back.

“Yeah,” Gertz said grimly, his own face pale. “I guess you know about him huh?”

“Neil,” Doe said in a low voice. His hands were outstretched as if to catch, and Neil forced himself to step forward instead of back. Doe rested a hand firmly between his shoulder blades and watched him.

“Romero was the one who caught up to me and Mom,” Neil forced out in shaky German. He tapped at his forearm, and the long scar hidden under his sleeve. “He’s in the inner circle. Chief of the muscle.”

“It’s Sunday,” Doe reminded him. His hand was heavy and warm and rubbed small circles over his back. “You’re not allowed to freak out until tomorrow, remember. Weekends are my time.”

Neil laughed weakly and leaned into him, knowing his whole body was shaking. Doe let him, not budging an inch. He was something solid and real, fierce and unmoving. Neil took slow breaths until he felt somewhat calmer, but didn’t move away. Doe watched him a minute longer, then turned back to Gertz. He kept his hands on Neil.

“A Wesninski enforcer was here?”

“Don’t say that name,” Gertz hissed, eyes darting around. “But – yeah. Romero knew I’d loaned Leo money. Don’t ask me how, but he knew. He wanted me to help track Leo down. I, uh. Didn’t think it was such a nice thing to set one of those guys on one of my clients, ‘specially one who was so good to my mom.”

“So you resisted, and he nearly broke your arm to get you to play along.”

Gertz nodded, looking sick and defeated. “Turns out I didn’t have anything more’n what he already knew. He had Leo’s home address, his phone… everything. I got my arm mangled for nothing. And that’s the whole story, honest.”

“Hm. Don’t skip town, Gertz. See you round.”

Doe steered him out the door and was on his phone in a flash, ignoring Gertz’ frantic calls about keeping his word. “Andrew Doe for Captain Wymack,” he informed the connecting service.

“You’re not gonna give him a running start?” Neil asked, holding tight to his cuffs and wishing he were wearing more layers; it felt like everyone could see through his clothes to the scars littered all over him.

“What?”

“Gertz.”

“I’m calling about Banin. Gertz just told us the Wesninskis were here cracking bones looking for Leo. A few hours later, he dies. Even if you believe in coincidences, that one’s a bit of a stretch.”
“Why would – why would they want to kill one of their own? Did they think he was spilling secrets?”

“We just don’t know right now,” Doe admitted, “But coincidence or not, that motorcycle crash was ruled an accident. I think it’s about time we looked at the crash site ourselves, with some proper help. Ah, Captain! Quick update for you on the W case. Can you meet us at the crash site?”

***

“Do you have a body?” Wymack demanded as he got out of his car, pulled up at the crash site.

Andrew winced. “Not yet.”

Wymack raised his hands in frustration. “You know I can’t touch this case unless there’s a body, Doe. I can bend the rules and ask you to look at it unofficially, but my hands are tied. We gotta keep everything about this as above-board as possible if it’s gonna stick in court down the road.”

“I know, just listen. Apparently Leo’s old friends found out hiding in New York, and we’re pretty sure they chose this spot for a reunion. We just talked to a loan shark Leo borrowed money from, and he told us a Wesinski solider by the name of Romero Malcolm came looking for him the day he died. We found some cigarette butts over there, and I’m reliably informed this is the particular brand Romero favours.”

“And where’d you get that insight?” Wymack sighed, eyes on Josten.

“Privileged information, boss,” Andrew replied with a tight smile. Wymack rubbed his temples wearily. “We also found some bullet casings. There are some tyre tracks over there that indicate Banin left the scene in a hurry. You would too, if Romero Malcolm were shooting at you.”

“So what the hell was Banin doing out here in the first place?”

“We’re not sure yet,” Andrew shrugged, “But the headline is that the crash that killed him and the driver of the minivan was no accident. The highway patrol saw no reason to look this far back, so they missed the bullet casings. They also missed the bullets lodged in the telegraph pole and fence, over there.” He pointed, and Wymack turned to look, measuring out the angles with his seasoned eyes. “The shots must have cause Banin to swerve, and crash. You should put out a BOLO for Malcolm. Now he can be wanted on suspicion of two wrongful deaths, not just being a general asshat.”

“Alright, Doe, just… slow down a minute. We need to be sure.”

Andrew rolled his eyes and lit up while Wymack had a little walk. He offered one to Josten, but he shook his head and watched Andrew smoke instead. Weirdo. Probably still unsettled from finding Romero’s ones earlier, though.

Wymack paused where he was kicking at the grass verge. “Doe!”

Andrew hurried over, Josten at his shoulder. “What?”

“Found the body for you.”

Andrew peered down the verge and saw the sprawled corpse, inexpertly hidden. The neck wound was wonderfully clear. “A garrotted body! Finally. Never thought I’d be so glad to see one.” Josten leaned over to look, then reeled back. “Josten?”
“It’s Romero,” Josten gasped, a terrible fear washing all the blood from his face. “A-Andrew, it’s Romero.”

Andrew dropped his cigarette and clapped a hand to the back of Josten’s neck as he started hyperventilating. “Josten, breathe. Breathe with me. You’re okay, he’s dead. You’re safe. Neil, you’re safe. I’ve got you.”

Josten wheezed horribly and staggered, so Andrew pulled him down to his knees and sat with him. “Neil, Neil stay with me,” Andrew said, ignoring the tension in his own voice. “Stay here with me. It’s Doe – it’s Andrew. You’re safe, I promise. Stay here with me.”

Josten groaned and closed his eyes, hands fluttering at his cuffs and Andrew’s arms. Andrew let him paw and tightened his grip on the back of his neck.

“He’s dead, Neil, he’s dead and he can’t hurt you anymore. You hear me? You’re safe. You’re with me, I’ve got you.”

Josten shuddered and made a retching noise, so Andrew pushed his head to the side and grimaced as he sicked up on the asphalt. Andrew didn’t let go of him. His fingers found their way into the curly hair at the nape of Josten’s neck and wouldn’t leave. He put his other hand between Josten’s shoulder blades and rubbed firmly as he heaved.

“Get some water,” Andrew ordered without taking his eyes off Josten’s trembling form.

Wymack muttered something unflattering but walked back to his car.

“I’ve got you, Abram,” Andrew murmured quietly, and Josten shuddered again though it seemed more in relief this time. “Can you hear me, Abram?”

“Yes,” Josten whispered brokenly.

“Good. Are you done throwing up?”

“I think so.”

“Straighten up, and take slow breaths. I’ve got you.”

Josten did as he was told and rested back on his heels, taking slow gulps of air with his eyes still closed. Andrew rubbed a little at his scalp, only half-aware of what his fingers were doing. He was more distracted by the dark red roots starting to show – he needed to touch up his dye job, but Aaron’s abrupt arrival into their house had likely scattered his patterns.

“You’re safe.”

Josten nodded slowly, then slumped sideways until he was leaning against Andrew’s shoulder. Andrew swallowed down the unfamiliar urge to put an arm around his shoulders and let him lean instead.

“Sorry,” Josten whispered. “I took your Sunday.”

“I’ll have to take one of your weekdays to balance out,” Andrew replied. He tried very hard not to be relieved that Josten was recovered enough to make jokes. “I’m thinking next Thursday, how does that match up with your diary?”

“I can work with that,” Josten replied.
Wymack came back and handed down a bottle of water and some napkins. “Alright?” He asked gruffly.

Josten nodded shakily and started washing his mouth out.

“I thought you said this wouldn’t interfere with the case,” Wymack folded his arms and frowned down at the pair of them.

“It’s not,” Andrew said, hand still stubbornly in Josten’s hair. “Respectfully, Chief, butt the fuck out. He’ll be alright, just give him a minute.”

Wymack muttered insults and paced. “So, last time I checked, dead men couldn’t pull triggers. If Romero Malcolm didn’t shoot at Banin, who did?”

***

“Shower and brush your teeth,” Andrew ordered when they got back to the house and pushed Josten up the stairs. “Drink water, and when you’re feeling okay again, come back downstairs.”

“Thanks, Andrew,” Josten muttered quietly.

“Yeah, yeah,” Andrew replied, hating how he was avoiding meeting Josten’s eyes. Get a goddamn grip. “Get your head on right, then talk to me.”

He left Josten at the bathroom and went back to the kitchen, lighting up before he got the back door open. He grunted a hello to the twin at his kitchen table, a book and cup of coffee in front of him.

“Things okay?” Aaron asked cautiously.

Andrew blew a long plume of smoke out the back door. “He had a panic attack at a crime scene. He’ll be fine.”

Aaron joined him at the back door, hovering awkwardly. “So. How’s your life? Apart from cases.”

Andrew gave him a flat look. “Peachy.”

“Would it kill you to work with me for once?” Aaron grumbled. He rubbed through his hair. “I’m trying, here. You got a girlfriend?”

Oh, right, Andrew thought as he took another slow drag. We never had that particular heart-to-heart.

“No,” he replied as blankly as he could. “Girls aren’t really my thing, turns out. Funny, right?”

Aaron blinked rapidly, a handful of emotions running fast across his face. He seemed to settle on something like sadness. Andrew just knew he was thinking about Drake.

“Don’t even go there,” Andrew warned him. “I worked it all out in my head years ago, did all my agonising and got over it. You don’t get to be upset if I’m not.”

Aaron sighed and chewed his lips as he thought. Andrew wondered which particular brand of snide homophobia he was going to go for. He hadn’t been shy about his opinions all through school and college, after all.

“Oh, right, Andrew thought as he took another slow drag. We never had that particular heart-to-heart.

“No,” he replied as blankly as he could. “Girls aren’t really my thing, turns out. Funny, right?”

Aaron blinked rapidly, a handful of emotions running fast across his face. He seemed to settle on something like sadness. Andrew just knew he was thinking about Drake.

“Don’t even go there,” Andrew warned him. “I worked it all out in my head years ago, did all my agonising and got over it. You don’t get to be upset if I’m not.”

Aaron sighed and chewed his lips as he thought. Andrew wondered which particular brand of snide homophobia he was going to go for. He hadn’t been shy about his opinions all through school and college, after all.

“Okay,” Aaron said, a pained twist to his mouth. “You got a boyfriend, then?”
Excuse me?

Andrew shook his head.

“What about Josten?”

“What about him?”

Aaron raised an eyebrow condescendingly. “Come on, Andrew.”

Andrew rolled his eyes and settled himself with the sweet burn of nicotine. “I’m pretty sure Neil’s not into anybody or anything, period. So no.”

“Do you want him to be into you?”

“No.”

“Uh huh.”

“What’s up with this speech, then? What’s your angle? I’ve been looking forward to this fight for years, and you’re not even gonna try? Show some team spirit, Aaron,” Andrew said, flicking his burned-out cigarette into the old flower pot.

“I know I said some dumb shit, alright?” Aaron huffed. “But I like to think I’ve grown up a bit and met more people and learned a few things since then. And I’m trying, here. I’m really trying. So I’m not gonna talk shit about you liking guys, or whatever. Sorry to ruin your fun.”

“Can’t rely on you for anything,” Andrew muttered and shook his head. “What’re you gonna call the kid, once they’re born?”

Aaron seemed surprised by the change of subject but didn’t object. “Mary for a girl, Stephen for a boy. After Katelyn’s parents.”

“And if it’s twins? You know twins tend to run in families.”

“Then Michael and Janet are up for grabs too. We weren’t gonna do the whole ‘matching’ thing.”

“Good,” Andrew nodded. “That bullshit sucks.”

“That it does,” Aaron sighed with a very small smile. “I’ll send you a picture when they’re born.”

Andrew nodded slowly and ignored Aaron’s shocked look; he clearly hadn’t expected anything other than scorn. Be proud of me, Bee. I’m all grown up and using my emotions.

His phone started to ring and he picked up absently, putting it on speaker out of habit. “This is Doe.”

“Hi there Doe, its Dr Hawes, the ME. I’ve just finished up the autopsy on your verge-body.”

“Hit me.”

“Alright,” the doctor agreed amiably. “The garrotte wound is exactly as thick as the cuts on Leo Banin’s hands. Wire from headphones, if I had to guess.”

“And? The tox report?”
“Banin was on a carefully managed mixture of anxiolytics and heart meds, blood-pressure related.”

“Thanks.” Doe hung up and tapped the back of his phone thoughtfully.

“Hm.” Aaron muttered.

“What?”

“Almost-certified doctor, right here,” Aaron reminded him sarcastically. “You want my opinion?”

“I’m sure you’re gonna offer it anyway.”

“Thing is, you can’t just take a handful of fluoxetine and wash them down with ACE inhibitors and hope for the best. Those kinds of meds need a careful balance, and probably regular dosage tweaks and check-ups too, liver function tests, the works. Your victim would have needed a psychiatrist to prescribe the anxiolytics, and a medical consult for the blood pressure meds, and they both would’ve have to communicate on his case.” Aaron rattled off easily, looking comfortable with his knowledge and experience. “You might want to track one or both of them down, see if they heard anything about your victim’s associates during visits. Could help you catch your shooter. Just saying.”

Andrew narrowed his eyes and tilted his head a bit, considering. “Hm. Might be useful to have a free medical consult just a call away.”

Aaron smiled tiredly. “I’ll take that.”

***

“I’m sorry, Dr Glassman is still on a call,” the PA said, obviously not sorry at all as she fielded a couple of different callers and pointedly ignored Doe’s glare. “He may be a while, sirs.”

“He understands we’re part of a police investigation, right?”

She smiled sweetly at them both, gestured to the chairs, and took another call.

“Unbelievable,” Doe muttered as he sank back in his chair.

“You’re sure this is the doctor that wrote Rom— Malcolm’s scrip?” Neil asked quietly. Despite brushing his teeth a few times, he could still taste vomit whenever he tried thinking about Romero, and Romero being abruptly dead.

“Mm. Wymack sent men to Malcolm’s last known address, and apparently Dr Glassman’s name was clearly legible on a pill bottle for fluoxetine.”

“I can’t imagine him being on anxiety meds,” Neil shook his head.

“Even seasoned killers probably need help dealing with the nightmares,” Doe shrugged. “And if not, maybe he just had a pill habit to deal with the stress. Who knows. Certainly not us, as it looks like hell will freeze over before we get into that office.”

Neil twitched his eyebrows in response.

“Look, Dr Glassman has a patient due in five minutes, could you maybe come back in an hour?” The PA said, not really making it a request.

“No I cannot,” Doe said flatly. “I will be dead by then. I’ve been struggling with suicidal
tendencies for years and I think today’s just done it. Does that window open? Got a knife handy, or a noose? Any will do at this point.”

The PA slowly rose to her feet and gave them her best smile, though her eyes screamed murder. “I’m required by law to take you in to see the doctor if you make a threat like that. But you already knew that. Right this way, please.”

“You’re an asshole,” Neil reminded him as they passed into the office properly.

“Take it up with my psychiatrist,” Doe muttered back with a quick grin.

“Mr Doe, isn’t it?” Dr Glassman said with distaste as they seated themselves. “A police consultant?”

“That’s right, and this is my partner Neil Josten who I’m very pleased to say has just cured my overwhelming depression.”

“Congratulations,” Glassman said sourly. “Please leave.”

“Sorry for lying,” Doe said, obviously not a bit sorry, “But this is important. We’re after a member of the Wesninski crime syndicate. You treated him – Romero Malcolm.”

Glassman sighed. “Look, you’re smart enough to know that threatening suicide would get you in here, you must be smart enough to know that doctor-patient confidentiality prevents me from—”

“Yes, yes, very boring,” Doe interrupted him. “We know. But that only applies to living patients, and happily enough Malcolm is very much dead. Garrotted by a nurse he was trying to assassinate, actually. Exciting stuff.”

Glassman opened his mouth in shock. “What?”

“We know you were his doctor, Glassman,” Neil said. “We know you prescribed his meds. You must have known details about his work.”

Glassman looked around nervously, getting that sweaty sheen people tended to get whenever the Wesninskis were even vaguely mentioned. “I… I didn’t want to treat Malcolm. He just showed up one day and said he had problems. When I realised who he was and who he was working for, I was just too scared to cut ties.” Glassman swallowed nervously and smoothed his tie. “He was very careful about what he said here. He never gave any incriminating particulars. But – there was one name that came up multiple times. Marko Zubkov. I eventually figured he was a… a known partner, in whatever Malcolm was doing. Please, that’s all I know. I don’t want them to come after me.”

***

“Zubkov?” Doe asked quietly as they tugged on Kevlar vests outside their suspect’s apartment.

“It’s familiar,” Neil replied even more softly, eyes darting. “I must have heard him mentioned, but no specifics come to mind. Definitely never met him.”

“Alright. You okay?”

“I’m good.”

Doe nodded and sighed, looking down at his vest. “I don’t see why this is necessary.”
“You saw the rap sheet – Zubkov’s got a history of extortion, racketeering, and was the prime suspect in three missing persons cases.” Neil reminded him, and reached out to adjust the fit of Doe’s vest without pausing to think about it. “He’s almost certainly carrying, and getting shot is not fun.”

“You’ve been shot before?” Doe asked quietly.

Neil paused in tugging on the straps. Slowly, he reached up and tapped his own chest, just on the edge of the vest close to his collarbone. “I was lucky enough to get away with a scar. Wear your vest, Doe.”

Doe met his eyes and nodded once.

Gordon called for his team to assemble, and they charged the door with Neil and Doe at the rear. Zubkov was sat on his couch with a rug over his lap and looked supremely unfazed by the arrival of upwards of ten officers in his home.

“Marko, you look cozy,” Gordon smiled. “Mind if I see that hand?”

Zubkov rolled his eyes and put both hands in plain view above the blanket. He turned off the TV and gave them all a cold once-over. “What is this?”

“It’s a murder investigation,” Gordon said. “A man you knew as Vitaly Andropov. Where were you three nights ago?”


“You’re gonna have to – if not here, then at the station.”

Zubkov clicked his tongue and smiled bitterly. “Impossible. The doctors say I’m not supposed to walk. You wanna know where I was?” He whipped off the blanket to show an impressive amount of bandaging on his right leg. “I was in hospital, being operated on after I got mugged. I lunged for the bastard, he stabbed me twice. If you don’t believe me, call the hospital.”

***

Neil looked up as the front door closed later that evening, blinking his eyes into focus. “How’d it go at the hospital?”

“His story checks out,” Doe replied irritably, kicking his shoes into the wall. “Three nights ago, he limped into the ER with two stab wounds and a tourniquet tied just below his groin to stop some serious bleeding from his femoral artery, was in surgery and the recovery ward until he checked out last night. Claimed a mugging, et cetera.”

“Police report?”

“Scanty at best. Responding officers took a statement and a photo of the wound. Here.” Doe tossed the folder onto the kitchen table and leaned on the back of Neil’s chair. “How’s it going in here?”

 Neil sighed and turned back to the laptop screen. “There are over seventy men with family ties in the NYPD’s photo database. And those are just the one’s who’ve been arrested. The real number of family enforcers and general thugs is likely three times that number, at least. The person who shot at Banin might not even be in here, and I don’t recognise any of the ones who are.”

“That’s depressing,” Doe said sourly.
“Pretty much, yeah.”

“Where’s Aaron gone?”

Neil waved a hand vaguely towards the bathroom so Doe settled in to wait, perching on the edge of the table. “Did Wymack say anything about me?”

“No.”

“He must suspect something.”

“Oh he’s definitely suspicious,” Doe agreed with a grim smile. “But he won’t push unless you come forward first. He’s alright like that.”

“What exactly is your deal with him, anyway?” Neil asked.

Doe shrugged. “I help him out on cases when he needs me, we build the Moriyama case together, I do unofficial snooping when he can’t be caught bending rules, and he agreed not to look into my history or find my real name. It’s worked out pretty well.”

“Huh.”

“You need to do your roots again, by the way.”

“Oh. Thanks,” Neil ran a hand self-consciously through his hair.

“It’s a nice colour,” Doe offered after a moment, apparently offhand but Neil knew his cues by now. “And you don’t look so much like your father that people would instantly recognise you. Especially as you’re dead in the system, and the last photo of you was from your tenth birthday.”


They heard Aaron coming back downstairs and Doe dug in his pockets. “Hey, Aaron. I got your stuff back.”

Aaron caught the wallet, phone and watch on reflex, though he gaped. “Oh – thanks. How did you…?”

“I have contacts in the local groups,” Doe shrugged. “Wasn’t hard to find the guy who’d worked you over. Be more careful in the future and don’t gawk like a tourist.”

“Right,” Aaron muttered as he put his belongings back in his pockets.

“Aaron, you’re some kind of doctor,” Doe said breezily, and slid the folder towards him. “Do you reckon a man with those injuries could’ve snuck out of a hospital for a few hours?”

Aaron gave him an unimpressed look and opened the folder. “No,” he said decisively.

“He wouldn’t be the first person to sneak out of hospital, I’ve done it myself.”

“You’ve never had these injuries – as far as I know, anyway,” Aaron shook his head. “If he’d put any weight on that leg so soon after surgery, he’d have popped his stitches and bled out in minutes. This tourniquet saved his life, no doubt about it.”

“Wait – the tourniquet.”
Neil grinned and set his chin on his hands, watching Doe’s *eureka* smile light up his face. “Here we go,” he muttered to Aaron, and completely missed the suspicious, assessing look Aaron gave him.

“What if the attack on Banin wasn’t the first one the Wesninskis attempted,” Doe said slowly, eyes bright. “But the second?”

***

“Thank you for waiting, Mrs Banin,” Wymack smiled the next morning as the group of them joined her in the conference room. “We know you’ve been here quite a while.”

“I owe you more than patience,” she smiled back. “Your officers have been very kind to me. They said you had more questions?”

“Yes, we do,” Doe got to his feet and uncovered a three-foot square blow-up of Zubkov’s mugshot. “Is this a man?”

She blinked at them all in confusion, then nodded. “Yes, obviously it is a man.”

“Does he have a face?”

“Well, yes,” she nodded again, clearly baffled.

“Thank you, Mrs Banin,” Wymack smiled and gestured through the glass door. Outside, Gordon nodded and wheeled a furious-looking Zubkov away.

Mrs Banin looked between his retreating wheelchair and the photo, a dawning apprehension on her face. “I don’t understand. Who was that man? Why did you show me his picture?”

“Oh come on, you know Marko Zubkov,” Doe rolled his eyes. “You saved his life when he tried to kill your husband the first time round and failed dismally. Do you recognise this?” He held out the picture from Zubkov’s hospital report. “That’s the tourniquet you tied after Leo stabbed him. It’s the same fabric as your curtains.”

“We were wondering how the Wesninskis found your husband after so many years in successful hiding,” Wymack said. “But the answer was right there. You told them. You let Zubkov into your house on Wednesday, the day before the motorcycle crash. Only old Leo was a lot more capable than you thought, certainly more than a match for Zubkov even without the element of surprise. Leo fought him off, stabbed him, and ran. You came home expecting to find a tragically murdered husband. Instead, you got a mobster bleeding out on your carpet.”

“The tourniquet you rigged up saved his life, so congrats on that I guess?” Doe took over with a shrug. “You told us your husband called you just before he died, but it wasn’t to tell you he loved you. It was to say he’d been attacked, it wasn’t safe, and you should meet him somewhere remote so you could both get away. You then hatched a plan with Romero Malcolm, an old buddy of Zubkov’s. Malcolm would get there first, lie in wait, you would meet with Leo and distract him so Malcolm could attack him.”

“It must have shocked you, seeing your husband in action,” Neil pitched in quietly as she stared at them all in horror. “Dispensing so easily with Romero. Shocked and scared you, because he knew you were in on it by that point. So, you picked up Romero’s gun, and fired as he sped away. You missed, but the shots were enough to cause the crash and kill both your husband and an innocent woman.”
“No,” Mrs Banin said firmly, tears in her eyes. “This is an outrage. I loved my husband. That man out there, I’ve never seen him before in my life!”

“Right,” Doe nodded. “So you won’t mind that he just saw you looking at a picture of his face and nodding to questions from the police?”

She gaped at them. “Why are you doing this? Why are you trying to get me in trouble?”

“The reason we had you waiting so long this morning was so we could search your home,” Wymack explained. “We got a warrant and found the evidence of the attack. Bullet holes in the wall and bloodstains in your carpet. You covered the holes by moving photo frames around, but you missed a bit of the blood in the carpet.”

“No, no,” she shook her head some more. “If what you say is true, and there was an attack, these men, these mobsters, they cleaned it.”

“I’m sorry, they hung new pictures on your walls and you didn’t notice?” Doe asked. “You can either keep lying to us, or you give us Zubkov. If you don’t, we’re gonna let you both go, and we’ll keep building our case. Good luck dealing with the Wesninskis on the outside. They won’t be happy you got one of their highest ranking officers killed.”

She pressed a hand to her mouth in fear and took a slow breath. Her next words were addressed to the table. “Leo had his secrets, but I knew enough. I forgave. That’s what we are taught to do. But not him.” Her lip curled. “He couldn’t forgive me when he found out what brought me to the church. I needed money when I was young. I did… movies. To pay to come to the US, I had to. One of his friends saw these films and then it was over.”

She looked back up with a righteous anger blazing in her eyes. “Leo asked me for a divorce. We put every penny, every scrap of savings into that nursing home, and now he wants to leave me? And I will have nothing? When I forgave him for murder? No. No. I knew there was a price on his head, from the old days. So I made the call. God forgive me, but I still don’t regret it.”

As Wymack began the process of arresting her, Doe turned to catch Neil’s eye. “I told you. Almost always the spouse.”

Neil raised his eyes to the ceiling.

Once Mrs Banin had been taken away, Wymack joined them in his office with a sigh. “Good work, you two.”

“Can we use it?” Doe asked.

Wymack nodded and crouched to lock the completed file away in a hidden safe under his desk. Neil saw enough to know there was a small collection of infinitely valuable folders and files in there before Wymack locked it again.

“Romero Malcolm’s death is a good, solid lead. We can use his involvement to start picking apart the inner circle, one member at a time.”

Wymack raised his eyebrows at them both. “And if you come across any more privileged information about this, Doe, I’d appreciate being kept in the loop.”

“Yes, Captain,” Doe smiled. “You’ll hear right away.”

“Don’t lie right to my face, Doe, it makes my teeth hurt.”
“Call, okay?” Aaron insisted as he stepped into his cab later that morning. “Or I swear I’ll be back.”

“Send me the photo,” Andrew countered.

Aaron rolled his eyes and shut the door after himself. He gave his brother one last, long look before the car pulled away to take him to the airport.

“And you didn’t stab him even a little bit,” Josten murmured in mock-amazement. “I’m so proud.”

“Shut up,” Andrew muttered and led the way back inside to the gravel garden. They smoked in content silence for some time until Josten reached into his pocket.

“I got you something, the other day. I kind of forgot about it until now.”

Andrew raised an eyebrow and unwrapped the little bundle curiously. He held in his palms a miniature version of the solar system, complete with orbit rings for each planet. It was made of brass and looked like it was hand painted.

“I noticed you always look up at the stars when we smoke at night,” Josten shrugged, a little colour in his cheeks. “Figured you’d like it.”

Andrew rubbed a thumb over the tiny little Earth and cleared his throat. “I like it.”

*This means nothing.*
“Hey, good work man,” Boyd smiled as he sauntered up to Neil’s side.

“Thanks,” Neil replied with a small, cautious smile. Together they watched the latest criminal be escorted away to the cells after a hard fortnight of chasing. Everyone involved in the case was exhausted, including himself and Doe, but it was satisfying to see the twist being locked up at last.

“Where’s Doe gone off to?”

“Phone call,” Neil replied with a shrug that masked the little jump in his pulse. Andrew had picked up his brother’s call without fuss or protest, and Neil was happy for him. For them both.

“Ah. Hey, listen,” Boyd said, and scratched behind his ear. “A bunch of us are going out to a bar for drinks once shift’s over to celebrate the end of the case. You wanna come? Dan’ll be there, and Gordon said Allison is gonna show so you can finally meet her too. It’ll be fun. You in?”

“Uh,” Neil said, because he needed more time to think. Strangers and an unfamiliar place and loud music and alcohol and being alone and questions all seemed like very bad ideas and had anxiety crawling up his throat.

“It’ll be fun, we’ll all get a bit drunk and get to know each other better,” Boyd smiled. “We hardly see you outside of cases, it’s like you only hang out with Doe or something. Come on, Josten. Let loose a little? For me?”

“Uh.”

“What is it? We don’t bite, I promise,” Boyd said. His smile was starting to slip and guilt joined the anxiety in Neil’s mouth. He wanted to spend more time with Boyd and his fiancée, but the idea of doing it in a bar was too much, especially if he was going to be on his own.

He was trying to come up with an excuse that wouldn’t sound rude when Andrew stepped back inside, tucking his phone into his pocket.

Matt followed the direction of Neil’s eyes. “Oh, okay. I’ll ask, but he always refuses these kinds of things. You want him to come with?”

“What? I don’t care if Andrew’s there.” Neil denied automatically before his brain caught up with his mouth. He winced as Doe raised his eyebrows, clearly having heard him.

“Gee, thanks,” Doe said and put his hands in his pockets. “Do I want to know?”

“I was just inviting Josten to come out drinking with us,” Boyd explained cheerily. “I was asking if he wanted you there before he’d say yes.”

Doe flicked a cool look Neil’s way, apparently uncaring. Neil saw the question in the slight tilt of
his head. Do you want to go?

Neil lifted his shoulders just a bit and fiddled with his sleeves. Maybe?

Doe looked at him for another minute, then turned back to Boyd. “Where are you all going?”

“That bar Eden’s, I think? To start with anyway.”

Doe hummed in slight approval and a little spark lit him up for a moment, to Neil’s confusion. He didn’t know what that meant at all.

“What time?” Doe asked.

“As soon as shift’s over.”

Doe rubbed a thumb over his lip thoughtfully, then looked at Neil. “I’ll invite Renee along so you won’t be on your own when I’m not there,” he offered in casual German.


Doe shrugged and looked away for a second, still rubbing his mouth as if it were bothering him. “I might be out of sight for a while. There’s someone I want to talk to at Eden’s. If Renee’s there, will you be comfortable going?”

“Um. I think so. Yeah.” Neil said, and smiled quickly at him. Doe looked away again and dug his nails into his lip briefly. Then he put his hands firmly back into his pockets.

“Okay,” he said blandly to Boyd, whose eyebrows shot up. “We’ll be there. Can Renee Walker come too? Haven’t caught up with her in a while.”

“Oh, sure!” Boyd grinned. “The more the merrier! I can’t believe this – neither of you ever come out with us, and now we’ve got you both! Amazing.”

“Don’t piss yourself in excitement,” Doe drawled. “Eden’s is a good place, that’s all. Nowhere else does the whiskey I like.”

“Sure, okay,” Boyd laughed and nudged Neil’s side. Neil blinked up at him confusedly, so Boyd ruffled his hair. “See you guys there!”

The evening found Neil sitting down by Andrew in one of the booth seats as they waited for everyone else to turn up. He plucked at the shiny black shirt he was wearing, which billowed loosely on him. In contrast, the jeans were really tight on his legs and hugged low on his hips as the length was a bit too short. He didn’t know if he liked it very much, but they were loaned from Andrew’s wardrobe. He didn’t want to be rude and say they didn’t fit properly.

“Are you sure about this?”

“You fit in with the crowd better,” Doe explained, glancing over him again. “You can’t turn up to a bar in sweatpants and a hoodie, Josten.”

“I guess so,” Neil said, looking right back at Doe, who was dressed up a bit himself. He was wearing a tight black tee that showed off the strong curves to his arms and shoulders, and nicer jeans than he usually wore. He’d completed the look with big stompy boots and the ever-present armbands over his forearms. His tattoos peeked out from under the short sleeves and Neil had spotted one of his chest ones, half-displayed by the wide neck of his tee curving down over his
collarbones. All the tight black clothing made him look a bit dangerous. And a bit… something else that Neil couldn’t name. The longer Neil looked at Doe the more it felt like his ears were burning, though, so he looked back down at his glass of soda. “Thanks.”

Doe raised his glass of whiskey in reply and took a sip.

Renee joined them shortly after that, a little dressed up as well in a pretty dress the colour of sunflowers. “Hello,” she beamed at them both, and they each got up to exchange an arms-length hug with her. Neil didn’t flinch at the sight of her smile or the touch of her hands and bit down a little rush of pride. She sat on his other side, though she was careful not to crowd him. “You’re both looking well.”

They chatted quietly among themselves and Neil felt his anxious heart calming. Renee was newer to his life than Doe, but she’d met up with them several times now since the Whitman case, and tended to come over to Doe’s house at the weekend if they weren’t all busy. It was taking time, but Neil was getting more comfortable with her. She was always very careful to keep her distance when he needed it and didn’t push him to explain any of it. He thought he could appreciate why she and Doe had become friends in the first place. The thought of having her beside him to fend off questions was surprisingly calming.

Boyd showed up with the rest of his friends and whooped excitedly when he saw the three of them. “Looking good, you two, damn. Doe, what the fuck?”

“What?” Doe replied calmly and casually folded his arms over his chest. It made his arms look beefier, Neil noted from the corner of his eye.

“Nothing, you just…” Boyd grinned and shook his head. “Didn’t think you’d put in the effort, that’s all. Anyway. Hi there, Renee!”

“Hello Matt,” she smiled back sweetly. “It’s good to see you again.”

Gordon and Dan Wilds said hello to her too, and the unknown blonde woman in glamorous clothes exchanged fond cheek kisses. They all said hello to Doe, who nodded and sipped his whiskey quietly. Then their attention turned to Neil and he felt cold sweat start on the back of his neck, especially with the curious way Dan and the new woman – Allison, he presumed – were looking at him. He knew it was different, that they weren’t Lola and they weren’t really looking at him like that, but he couldn’t help the tension in his shoulders. He said hello to them politely and sipped his drink to give him an excuse not to talk to them.

Doe shifted just a bit in his seat and his thigh pressed along Neil’s for a second, warm and firm. Neil looked at him without moving his head, from the sides of his eyes through his lashes, and summoned a tiny smile. Doe met his glance for all of half a second before he looked away with a slight jerk of his head, off towards the bar area. Neil didn’t know what that meant either and was about to ask what was wrong when Dan started asking him about the case.

He managed to talk about the case with enthusiastic input from Boyd to cover his frequent stammers and silences, and with Renee there to redirect the conversation when Dan or Allison tried asking more personal questions. They took the hint, but it seemed like Allison especially wanted to keep pushing. He learned she was an attorney and was looking to head up her own firm once she had enough staff scouted. That was how she and Gordon met – he’d had to present evidence at a case and they’d hit it off, apparently, talking shit about how badly the defence were doing their jobs and making it real easy for Gordon’s evidence and Allison’s fiery cross-examination to convince the jury. They were all over each other in the booth, uncaring that they were in public. When they’d all had a few drinks, Allison hopped into his lap to let Dan get out for another round
and stayed there, her arms around his neck.

Neil had never seen Gordon looking so relaxed or happy. Though, he also knew from Boyd’s gossip that their spats were a horrendous thing to behold. He supposed they would be, with her being court-trained in arguing and him being so grumpy and stubborn all the time.

For his part, Neil talked when asked questions and managed to have small conversations with Renee and Doe while the others were more enthusiastically engaged. Though Neil noticed Doe kept glancing at the bar, watching the bartenders at work. He tried to figure out if there was a pattern to it, and saw that he was waiting on one particular man to go on break. Shortly after the bartender in question handed over to his replacement, Doe nudged his knee again and swallowed the last of his whiskey. He pointed his thumb vaguely behind himself.

“I’ll be back later,” he said blandly.

“Okay,” Neil nodded. He was curious but knew if Doe wanted to tell him, he would. “I’ll be here.”

Doe slipped away while the others were distracted by Boyd recounting a joke. Neil watched as he moved smoothly through the crowd, his hair bright against his dark clothes, and walked through a ‘staff only’ door without drawing any attention. Neil turned back to Boyd’s story and shuffled a little closer to Renee.

He found himself slowly able to relax in their presence even without Doe at his side. Renee and Boyd smiled widely at him whenever he joined in their conversations, and it gave him a bit of courage to keep doing it. Gordon was being pleasant than Neil had ever seen him now he had his girlfriend to distract and flirt with him, and Dan was very nice once he could steady himself past her intimidating confidence. Allison was still an unknown, and he didn’t want to be caught alone with her, but Renee was there to field questions and Boyd kept checking in on him with questioning smiles.

It was okay. It was kind of fun. They ordered a round of cocktails and Neil split a non-alcoholic one with Renee, enjoying the wild fruity taste and playing with the miniature umbrella bemusedly. When Neil offered a slightly snarky comeback to Dan’s comment, Boyd looked astounded and so, so proud. It made Neil feel warm from the top of his head down to his toes, and he grinned back with his teeth all on show.

It was around then that Doe returned, sliding back beside him without a word. He leaned back against the seat of the booth and sipped from a fresh glass of whiskey. His hair was a little mussed, but Neil didn’t think too much of it. Doe met his curious glance and tilted his head. Neil tucked the umbrella behind his ear, into his hair.

“What d’you think?” He asked, turning his head this way and that to display it with a happy smile.

Doe watched him for a solid minute, his gaze heavy. He took a long swallow of whiskey before he said anything, and his jaw looked clenched tight. “It’s an improvement over your old clothes at least.”

Neil frowned at the distinct lack of humour in Doe’s reply. “Is everything okay?” He asked quietly in German. “Did your conversation not go well?”

Doe held his eyes again and turned a bit to prop his arm against the back of the seat, and rested his temple against his knuckles as he thought. “I was trying to solve a problem,” he eventually replied, each word careful and slow. “I don’t think it worked.”
Neil chewed his lip as he thought, taking in Doe’s relaxed body language but odd words. He felt like an answer was just out of reach, but he didn’t really know the right question for it either. “Can I help?” He asked instead.

Doe shook his head a bit, eyes locked onto Neil’s. Neil didn’t know what to make of it – Doe was sitting so casually, as if he were perfectly at ease and satisfied and calm and maybe a bit sleepy, but there was something strange in his gaze that Neil didn’t recognise. He couldn’t look away either.

“Well,” Neil offered once the silence began to feel odd, “I’m here if you change your mind. Okay?”

“Mm,” Doe replied, and finally looked away to take up his drink again. He didn’t talk again for the rest of the evening, not even to Renee, and Neil didn’t know what to do except let him retreat. It didn’t seem like something unpleasant had stirred up bad memories, or anything like that. He just seemed… closed off.

The little party broke up close to midnight and all promised to get together again soon. Neil walked with Doe back to the house and joined him out back for a quick smoke. When Doe handed him a lit cigarette, his fingers kept reaching up until he gently plucked the umbrella from behind Neil’s ear.

“Oh,” Neil said and felt his face warming – he’d forgotten he’d put that there. He must have looked very odd sitting with it in his hair all night.

Doe met his eyes for a moment, then solemnly put it behind his own ear and blew a smoke ring out into the night. Neil grinned and leaned against his shoulder contentedly. It was fine. He was sure whatever was bothering Doe would pass soon enough. He just had to be there in the meantime. And in that meantime, they had smoke and the warmth of each other from shoulder to hip to knee, and it felt oddly like home.
Andrew checked around the car with a few quick glances, then walked confidently up to the driver-side door. He pulled a thin, wide strip of metal, a slim jim, from the inside of his coat and worked it deftly between the window casing and the door frame, wiggling it down with decisive motions until it was inside the car door mechanism under the window. He checked around himself, gave another few quick sweeps, and jumped as the car alarm started shrieking and honking.

“Shit,” he muttered but kept at it, looking around for witnesses as he worked the slim jim impatiently and pulled it up when he felt it catch. It took precious seconds, but the locks disengaged and he slid into the driver’s seat. Wasting no time with the alarms still going off shrilly and a quick grab and twist, he detached the panelling under the steering column.

He swore again as his short reach meant he couldn’t properly see what he was doing and he felt a bead of sweat roll down behind his ear. He sorted through the wires with fingertips made sensitive from extensive lock practice, but he couldn’t see all the colours without stopping his hands and craning down under the wheel. The hard plastic wheel dug into his chin and jaw as he stretched.

Weeeewoooo weeeeeeooow weeeeewoooooo…

“Shit,” he breathed, and darted glances out the windshield. The alarm had been going off long enough to draw attention, if the car had been in a more populated neighbourhood, and the noise was scrambling his thoughts. His fingers were getting damp with stress-sweat and his neck ached from the strain.

He growled and let go of the wires. “I can’t do it. Just shut it off.”

Josten grinned from where he’d been sitting casually in the passenger seat and clicked the key fob, silencing the alarms. The sudden quiet was blissful. Andrew thumped his forehead against the steering wheel in frustration and sat back upright.

“Can’t let the noise get to you,” Josten advised smugly.

“I know, I know.”

“But you did better with the lock this time,” Josten said, waving his hand at the door. “It only took you ten seconds.”

“What’s your record?” Andrew asked.

“One second.”

Andrew raised an eyebrow coldly, and Josten smiled. He looked just a bit sheepish. “I was in a hurry, so I smashed the window with a rock. I think my record with a slim jim was… five seconds? I think? It’s not all that important.”
“Ugh,” Andrew muttered in disgust as Josten’s smug grin made a reappearance. “You’re the worst.”

“I was a fantastic criminal, excuse you,” Josten grinned. “That’s why you hired me, right?”

“Shut up.”

“Didn’t you used to have a GS or something? Some kind of fancy-ass sports car? I’d’ve thought a motorhead like you would be jacking cars left and right,” Josten said in mock-surprise.

“Shut the fuck up.”

“Ohh I get it now,” Josten continued, his eyes bright and his smile wide. “You like the cars too much, you don’t want to hurt them. That’s why you’re so bad at this. You’re just too sensitive.”

“I will staple your lips shut.”

“Sure, sure, is that before or after lunch? You know how I get when I’m hungry.”

“How’s a knuckle sandwich sound?” Andrew said. Josten laughed, his head tilted back and his eyes closed a little. It was a quick thing, no more than one or two ‘ha’s and rapidly swallowed down, but it had made Andrew nearly trip into a wall the first time it happened. He was more prepared this time. But he still found himself watching the smooth curve of Josten’s throat and the angle of his jaw and yanked his eyes away. Fuck’s sake.

“Seriously though, it’s just practice,” Josten smiled with a hint of a laugh still lurking. “I mean, I got good because my life was in danger, or ‘cause Mom would beat me to hell if I did it wrong. You’re doing really well seeing as you only started learning like two weeks ago.”

Andrew was quietly startled with how easily Josten said that – his secrets were usually kept so close, and anything remotely related to his mother always made him close down and curl in on himself. Andrew didn’t draw attention to it in the hope Josten would keep being smiley and happy.

“Where’d you get this car, anyway?” Andrew asked instead and looked around the interior for clues.

Josten shrugged nonchalantly. “Stole it.”

He held Andrew’s gaze for nearly thirty seconds before his poker face cracked. “Relax, relax. No felonies today. You remember the case last month with the body in the car compactor?”

“This may come as a shock to you, but I have a photographic memory.”

“Do you really, you never mention it,” Josten shot back with an innocent expression. Andrew snorted – it was quite fun lording the fact over Josten when he forgot where he’d put things down – and gestured for him to continue.

“Well, the owner of the lot said he owed us a favour for getting him off the suspect list, so I swung by and asked if I could take one of the doomed cars out for a spin before it gets crushed later. He said I could keep it until six, if you want to keep practising, and he said he’d let me know when he has some more to spare for us.”

“Huh,” Andrew muttered and looked down at the wires again. “Smart. Show me which wire I should have gone for.”
They spent another ten minutes going over hotwiring technique before Andrew’s phone started ringing. It was an unknown number so he picked up a bit cautiously, though he put it on speaker.

“This is Andrew Doe. Who is this?”

“Doe, hi there. It’s Reynolds, Matt gave me your number. Your house is real shitty.”

Andrew frowned down at the phone. “Your hair is ridiculous and overstyled. Are we just trading insults or is there a point to this?”

They heard her scoff on the other end. “The point is, I’m waiting outside your house and it looks shitty. Where the fuck are you? Boyd and Dan said you hardly leave the place between cases, what gives?”

“I’m out committing auto-theft,” Andrew replied bluntly. “So sorry.”

She laughed. “Yeah, right. When will you be back? I might have a case for you.”

“Well, those are the magic words,” Andrew muttered. He looked around – Josten had driven them here and he had been asleep on the way. “Josten, where the fuck are we?”

“About ten minutes out from the house,” Josten replied.

“Oh, Neil!” Allison said. “Didn’t know you were there too. Get your cute butt and Doe back here, alright?”

“Um. Sure.” Josten said awkwardly.

“Sit tight,” Andrew said, and hung up before she could say anything else.

Josten refused to tell him the directions until he successfully hotwired the car. What a jackass.

“What took so long?” Reynolds demanded from outside his house, where she’d been perching on a low wall. She looked extremely out of place – dressed to the high nines, immaculate hair and makeup, six-inch stilettoes that made a tall woman needlessly giant. She’d already had nearly a foot on them both in her bare feet. And the neighbourhood wasn’t rough or dicey, but it wasn’t fancy either. “That was way more than ten minutes.”

“Take it up with him,” Andrew said and jerked a thumb at Josten.

She frowned at them both, then at the car parked up on the kerb. “Wait,” she said. “You were joking about committing auto-theft. Weren’t you?”

“It’s not stolen, don’t worry about it,” Andrew said as he walked past her. He got his keys out of his pockets and let them all in with a wave of his arm. “What’s this about a case? You want coffee?”

“Dying for some,” Reynolds sighed and helped herself to the couch.

“I was talking to Josten.”

“Don’t be pissy, Andrew,” Josten smiled and followed him into the kitchen.

“She called my house shitty,” Andrew objected mildly, but got three mugs out of the cupboard. He was a little distracted that Josten had used his actual name so casually – he’d been doing that more frequently, when they were alone or between cases. Andrew wasn’t sure how to feel about it; he’d
gone strictly by ‘Doe’ for the past few years, let it become a mask of itself. He didn’t know if it was intentional on Josten’s part or not.

Once they were all sitting in the living room with coffee warming their hands and stomachs – Reynolds on the couch, Andrew in the armchair with Josten perching on the armrest – Reynolds took a breath and pulled a face.

“So. Dreadful news: I heard from my father this morning.”

“Really?” Andrew asked mildly over the top of his mug.

“Ha,” Reynolds said. “Not the man himself, of course. One of his minions.”

Andrew saw Josten’s head tilt out of the corner of his eye. Reynolds clearly saw it too and grimaced. “My family disowned me and cut me off from my inheritance when I decided to go to law school instead of being the picture-perfect useless model daughter they wanted. Haven’t seen or spoken to my parents since then. Fuck them.”

“Reynolds Resorts, sound familiar?” Andrew commented.

Josten tapped his nails against the mug. “Oh. I didn’t realise. I’ve never been in one of them, way too fancy and expensive.”

“Yeah, fleabag motels and underpasses were more your thing, right?” Andrew said.

“The height of luxury,” Josten said with a tight grin that said he was willing to joke about it with Andrew, but not super comfortable doing it in front of someone else. Andrew lifted his chin a bit in acknowledgement and sipped his coffee. Reynolds must have been looking at them funny because Josten sighed and gave his own short explanation. “I was homeless for most of my life, is what he means. Anyway, what about your father?”

She still looked curious, but that little fact seemed to have put an embarrassed stopper in her questions for the moment. “Anyway. His minion said he wants us to meet with one of his many scumbag lawyers and discuss a possible criminal investigation, as I have experience in the field.”

“You can’t hate lawyers, you’re a lawyer,” Andrew pointed out.

Her eyeroll looked almost painful. “Oh, please. I’m a criminal prosecution attorney, not some slick corporate shyster. Knowing my father and his disregard for ethics and environmental concerns, this man is a shyster’s shyster.”

Andrew squinted at her. “We’re not friends,” he said and finished his coffee. “We barely associate with each other. We have a few tenuous links, that’s it. Why bring this to me? Why not just go with Boyd or Gordon?”

Her smile was cold and cutting. “That’s exactly why, Doe. I don’t know what this man wants or who he is to my father but if he wants investigative or legal advice from me after all these years, there has to be some other motive. I don’t trust him not to have done something shady and want a lawyer in his pocket before the trial,” she sneered. “And I don’t want to be implicated by blood if anything does turn up. I’m obviously too close with Seth, and I’m friends with all his colleagues at work. You, however, I don’t give two shits about but I also know you’re very good at what you do, and you won’t be bought out or pressured. No offense, et cetera. Plus, Matt said you don’t have any cases on right now. How do you feel about keeping up with the bills on this place?”

Andrew watched her for a minute, then folded his arms. “Alright, I’ll bite. This’ll be twice my
usual fee if we have to deal with lots of legal bullshit. From you, not your daddy.”

“Sure,” she said with a careless flick of carefully-manicured nails. “Send me the bill when we’re
done. You ready to go now? I’m meeting with the shyster in an hour.”

Andrew blinked at her for a second, then sighed. “Josten, be a star and run the car back to the lot,
will you? I feel like this’ll take more than a few hours.”

***

“Impressive,” Doe muttered as the three of them stood in a huge office halfway up a skyscraper,
looking out at the panoramic view of New York City more than twenty stories high.

Reynolds scoffed dismissively, no doubt used to such sights, but Neil edged closer to the window
and blinked out at the view.

“I know,” he said softly. “I could look at this all day.”

“Hm?” Doe looked over to him with a confused little crease between his eyebrows. “No, not that
shit. I was talking about the glass.” He knocked his knuckles on it gently. “Bulletproof, even this
high up. Six-inch glass-clad polycarbonate. Nice. And very expensive.”

“That’s really what you’re looking at? Not the amazing view?”

“Obviously,” Doe replied, and turned his back sullenly on the window to stare at the office wall
instead.

Neil just looked at him until he relented and muttered in German, “I’m not good with heights.”

“Oh,” Neil said, and stood with him facing away from the view, close enough to knock shoulders.
Reynolds looked at them both with pursed lips but said nothing.

An older man in a well-tailored suit stepped into the room followed by an elegant young woman a
few minutes later. “Ms Reynolds, the stories really don’t do you justice.”

Reynolds gave him a brilliant smile that didn’t reach her eyes, but she graciously shook his hand.
“Mr Armistead. This is Mr Doe and Mr Josten, consulting detectives of my acquaintance.”

“Did you know ‘shyster’ is derived from the German ‘Scheisser’, meaning ‘one who shits’?” Doe
asked brightly as he shook the offered hand. Neil sighed and shook hands without comment.

“…And this is my assistant Rebecca,” Armistead said composedly after a beat.

“So, let’s cut to the proverbial chase,” Reynolds said. “How much slime will I and my associates
have to wade through in order to help you? My father’s minion said you were in need of criminal
law advice, you work for him, and he values you – three reasons to assume this will be vile.”

Neil tried hard not to smile at her confidence and gall. He was sure if he’d said something half as
insulting, he’d get punched in the mouth.

“Actually, I was hoping you might be able to help Rebecca.”

“It’s my sister Callie,” Rebecca explained with an anxious twist to her mouth. “She went missing
about six months ago. I’m worried her husband may have done something to her.”

Rebecca fussed with the computer at the top of the board table and switched on the projector. She
inserted a memory stick and pressed play on a video. A young woman sat in front of the camera, not quite comfortable talking into it.

“Uh, I guess I should start with ‘I’m sorry’,” the woman said on the video, and leaned forward in her chair. Neil watched closely and knew Doe was paying attention too. “I hate that I can’t say these things face-to-face. It’s just… I don’t love you anymore, Drew.” The woman, Callie, offered a sad smile to the camera. “And it hurts to say that, you don’t know how much. I care about you, I want you to be happy, but I need to be happy too. I thought I could tough it out and give us more time, but… but then that woman got pushed in front of a subway train the other day. The woman with the flowers. And I dunno, but I couldn’t stop thinking about her.”

Neil looked away briefly as he saw Doe pull out his phone and start typing away. He rapidly found an article about a woman pushed in front of a train.

“Life is too short to stay with someone who doesn’t make you happy,” Callie announced decisively. “So I’m going away for a while. I don’t know where and I don’t know for how long. But I know I need to do this. Maybe, someday, you’ll find it in your heart to forgive me.” Callie smiled, and the video stopped on a still of her reaching for the camera.

Rebecca sighed, her eyes on her missing sister and her hands twisting in her cardigan sleeves. “When my brother-in-law Drew first showed me the video, I didn’t question it. Callie had always been a little… fragile, I suppose. Packing up her stuff and hiding for a while, that sounded like her. But then the days start turning into weeks, and I got suspicious.”

“The marriage was troubled?” Reynolds asked calmly.

“Callie had left him once before,” Rebecca nodded unhappily. “That was about a year and a half ago now, about a year before she went missing.”

“What happened?” Reynolds asked.

“I don’t know.” Rebecca lifted her arms in agitation. “Callie didn’t even tell me she’d done it until a few weeks later, and they were back together by then. I tried to get her to talk about it, but she said it was all in the past. She was like that.” Rebecca smiled sadly and blotted at her eyes. “She kept everything bottled up and private. So, when she didn’t return my calls after Drew showed me the video, I wasn’t surprised.”

Armistead gently squeezed his assistant’s shoulder. “After a few weeks, Rebecca went to the police. They tried to locate Callie via her cell phone, credit card, emails, but they came up empty. She hadn’t used any of them since before she disappeared.”

“They questioned Drew, but he managed to convince them the video was authentic.” Rebecca said.

“Oh, you think it’s a fake?” Doe asked, perking up a little.

“I think things were bad between Drew and my sister,” Rebecca admitted to the floor. “He could’ve forced her to make the video so that, after h-he killed her, he could show it to the police and convince them she’d run away. Which he did. There’s also the trunk.” She flicked open a picture of a big old wooden sea chest, complete with leather and brass buckles and straps. “It was our grandmother’s, and my father willed it to me before he died. My apartment is tiny, so I let Callie keep it at her place. The deal was, she would give it to me if I ever moved.”

“Go on,” Doe said blandly, eyes examining the trunk for a moment before flicking back down to his phone. Neil frowned and nudged his shoulder, then gave an encouraging nod to Rebecca.
“Right, well. The first time I went to see Drew after she disappeared, I realised that the trunk was
gone too. He claimed that she took it with her, but I know she would never do that. I told the police
that I think he – I think he killed her and used the trunk to get rid of her b-body.” She pressed her
hand back against her mouth as more tears spilled.

“I’ve had the firm’s top investigators on this for months,” Armistead took over kindly as he handed
Rebecca some tissues. His eyes moved cautiously from Reynolds to Doe and back again. He didn’t
seem to register Neil as really being there, which was alright with him. “They haven’t managed to
come up with anything. I happened to speak to Mr Reynolds the other day, and he recommended I
reach out to you, as you’ve become so highly regarded in your field.” This last was smilingly
addressed to Reynolds, who smiled back from habit.

“Would you excuse us for just one moment?”

“Of course, of course,” Armistead said, and Reynolds led Neil and Doe outside to a smaller office.

“My father’s floundering and fishing at the same time,” she huffed once they were alone. “While
I’m glad this isn’t some horrendous sex trafficking conspiracy or we’re-killing-endangered-species-
for-a-waterpark thing, the case seems pretty open and shut to me – unhappy wife cuts ties and runs
away to create new life away from douche husband. That woman could not be more wrong about
her sister’s video, it certainly wasn’t made under duress.”

“What?” Neil frowned when Doe nodded in reluctant agreement, though he was still on his phone.

“The human face, Josten, is like the penis,” he announced in a bored voice. Neil felt his face start
to burn. “Or so said the great personality theorist Silvan Tomkins. The point being – the face, like
the male member, has a mind of its own. It betrays us on an almost daily basis, advertises our
secrets to those who want to look real close. I’m sure you see the analogy here.”

Neil wrinkled his nose. “Leave me out of this, thanks.”

Doe rolled his eyes briefly. “The woman in that video was utterly calm when she filmed it.
Actually, seemed pretty excited to move on. Facial minutiae, Josten, tell me what you remember
about that.”

Neil scowled at him for a moment, then thought back to the video. “Her jaw muscles were relaxed,
not tight,” he said slowly. “Her nose wings weren’t dilated. There was no tension around the eyes
or brows and her lips were relaxed. When she talked about moving on, her eyelids rose and her
cheek muscles lifted.”

“Excellent,” Doe smiled, and Neil smiled back.

“Nose wings?” Reynolds asked.

Doe tapped the side of his nose and turned back to Neil. “We have an opportunity here, Josten.
More precisely, you do. I think this would make a wonderful first case for you.”

“First case?” Neil frowned and held onto his cuffs. “Wait – you want me to find Callie Burrell on
my own?”

“Mnhmm,” Doe rocked a little on his feet. “Every good investigator needs to be able to find
people who don’t want to be found. Usually, dangerous criminals with weapons and paranoia
issues. Mrs Burrell is merely a wife grown tired of her husband. It’s a case with training wheels.”

“You can’t be sure she’s okay,” Neil protested with a hot flash of panic. “There might be
“Maybe, maybe not,” Doe allowed, then lightly tapped Neil’s chest. “Your job to find out.”

“Are you angry with me about something?” Neil asked, uncaring that it was in English or that he sounded far too needy and rattled for his own pride to handle. “Have I done something wrong?”

He twisted his hands in his sleeves and desperately searched Doe’s face for answers.

“What? What, no, Josten, no. No, no. This isn’t some kind of punishment, I promise. Hey, hey.” Doe frowned in concern and reached out to hold Neil’s wrists. He squeezed gently and Neil searched his eyes and tried to slow his panicky breathing. “Neil. I’m saying you should take the case because you’re really good at this, and you can handle a solve on your own. Breathe.”

“I don’t want to be on my own again,” Neil admitted with his throat feeling so tight it was like he was being strangled. “I – I don’t… I can’t handle that again.”

“Oh,” Doe said quietly, and squeezed his wrists again. “Oh, I see. I’m not chucking you out on the street, Neil. I’m not saying you’re completely alone on this. I’m not saying you’re not allowed to talk to me or see me. I’m saying you can work the case in the house, and if you want my help I’ll be there, but you’re smart enough and skilled enough to do the investigating solo. Not alone, just solo. And you can come home and we’ll have dinner and smoke out the back. Okay?”


“Okay,” Neil said to his shoes and took a slow breath to calm down. His face started to heat from embarrassment. He was suddenly aware of Reynolds standing a couple paces away, staring out the window to try and give them some privacy.

“At least it’s a weekday,” Doe said after a moment. “All yours.”

Neil could feel his lips twitching up despite himself. “Told you I’d try to keep to the schedule.”

“I appreciate that,” Doe said dryly. “You alright now? You understand?”

“Mm,” Neil nodded briefly and turned his hands so he could brush the insides of Doe’s wrists just above where the brmbands ended at his pulse point. Doe’s heartbeat was steady and determined and he let the heat of Doe’s skin burn into his own. His voice was small and quiet when he spoke. “Thank you, Andrew.”

Doe took a few moments to reply, and as he thought his thumbs swept lightly along Neil’s wrists too. “It’s fine. You’ll be doing this one solo, but we’re still a team.”

“What will you be doing, while I’m looking for Callie Burrell?”

“I’ve got a case of my own,” Doe said, and let go of him to fiddle with his phone again. He showed Neil the article he’d been looking at.

“Oh, that’s the woman Callie mentioned in her video,” Neil said and skimmed the first page.

“She was murdered just days before Callie ‘vanished,’” Doe said and scrolled through the article a few times. “The man who pushed her was never found. Death by subway train is especially gruesome. I think I might as well try to find this man, don’t you? He seems like a nasty piece of work.”
”Hmm,” Reynolds said, drawing closer. “Well, when either or both of you turn up evidence and an arrested suspect, let me know and I’ll take the cases. Sound like a deal?”

Neil met Doe’s eyes and smiled faintly. “Sounds like it.”

***

“Curious case, this one,” Andrew commented across the room as he read through articles published at the time, sitting on the lounge floor with papers all around him and stuck up on the walls. It was getting on in the evening, but they tended to do most of their work late anyway.

“Hm?” Josten asked from the kitchen table, similarly surrounded as if they were lone islands. Ha.

“Man approaches woman. Man gives woman flowers. And walks away, only to return a moment later and push the woman in front of a train.”

He gestured at the TV, where footage from a surveillance camera had been silently playing on a loop for the past hour. Josten blinked over at him, a pen tucked in his curly hair – it was getting down to past his jaw now, Andrew noted – and another held in his teeth.

“Pushers tend to be lunatics of the raving variety,” Andrew continued when it was obvious Josten was just going to look at him. “This guy, not so much. He takes great care to keep his face angled away from the platform cameras – he’s cased it. Speaks to premeditation.”

Josten frowned at the TV and took the pen out of his mouth. Andrew waited for his input and was surprised by the result.

“Do you want my opinion? Are we working that together? I thought we were doing solo work on this one.” There was no hint of snideness or frostiness in his tone, just genuine confusion. I don’t understand, have the rules changed?

Andrew rubbed at his eye absently. “Well, yeah. I’m mostly thinking out loud. I told you I think better when I’m talking. This is still my case though, don’t think about snatching it.”

Josten smiled at him, soft and warm and settled by having the boundaries set again. “Alright then. Guess I’m a step up from waiters and prostitutes.”

“Always, Josten,” Andrew huffed and turned back to the piles of paper. “At least I know exactly what he looks like.” He held up a drawing made by a police sketch artist, showing a very vague and generic-seeming man with sunglasses, a hood and indeterminate facial features under it all. He was white and had a bit of facial hair, but even that was half-assed at best.

Josten looked between the sketch and Andrew’s calm expression for nearly a minute. “I can’t tell if you’re kidding or not.”

Andrew stood up and skipped through the footage until it showed a still of the man slightly turned away from the camera. “I reached out to the witnesses whose descriptions generated that sketch. Completely useless of course, especially with regards to the patch on his jacket, here.” Andrew tapped his own shoulder and pointed to the still. Josten obligingly squinted at it. “Looks like some sort of logo.”

“I can’t tell what it is, the resolution’s too grainy,” Josten offered. “You think you can find the guy from a patch on an old jacket?”

Andrew shrugged and walked over to lean his hip on the heavily-laden table. “Stranger things,
Josten. How goes the search for Reynolds’ father’s lawyer’s assistant’s sister?”

Josten snorted in dry amusement and shuffled his papers around. “Well, I went through everything the firm’s investigative team put together and so far, nothing. I mean, if she’s really hiding from her husband, she’s doing a damn good job.”

“That’s high praise, from you.”

Josten grinned up at him, all bright eyes and shy teeth and rumpled hair.

“Have you spoken to the husband yet?” Andrew asked, more to fill the pause than because he didn’t know.

“No, I called his art gallery today, and he’s out of town until late tonight.” Josten frowned and tapped the pen against his lips thoughtfully. “I’m gonna go in tomorrow and feel him out.”

Andrew watched him for another long minute. *God damn it.*

“When you talk to him, you’ll identify yourself as a consulting detective, not a police attaché, not as my trainee. A detective in your own right,” he said as calmly as he could. “You haven’t done that before. Exciting, right?”

The flash of panic in Josten’s expression said otherwise. “But, Andrew, I—”

“Solo,” Andrew reminded him quietly and firmly, “But not alone. I’ll be here when you get back from the gallery.”

Josten chewed on his lips and looked down at his hands. Andrew waited him out patiently.

“I – I know you said this isn’t a punishment,” Josten said hesitantly. “But I still feel like you’re pushing me away. I don’t understand. I liked how we worked before. Why does it have to change, why now?”

Andrew had several answers waiting, and sorted between them rapidly. He perched on the corner of the table and thought about a young boy being psychologically fractured into submission and deference, about that boy being abducted and kept under strict control, learning complete dependency as survival and trusting the hard decisions to somebody else by default. Being told he couldn’t survive on his own. Having a year completely alone and looking over his shoulder after his mother’s death. The fear in him when Andrew had suggested working separately, the fear of being abandoned.

He reached out and lightly tugged a curl away from Josten’s eyes. “Because you might have learned to stop running, but you’re still hiding. You’re very capable of doing this, and you don’t need to shrink behind me. Learn to stand for yourself and put the rabbit away for good. Work the case, and put your trust in yourself for once. I know you can do it.”

“I think I’m a better criminal than detective, honestly. You’re the one who makes all the leaps and connections.”

“Self-doubt looks terrible on you,” Andrew informed him, and gave his hair another tug. “We’ll see by the end of the case who’s right. Spoiler alert, it’s going to be me because you know I think you’re good at this, and you know I don’t lie.”

Josten looked up at him again to meet his gaze and leaned his head a little towards Andrew’s hand like some kind of cat. *Touch-starved idiot,* Andrew thought, though he wasn’t entirely sure which.
of them he meant as he twirled the lock briefly in his fingers. Calm certainty was getting slippery around Josten these days.

Josten didn’t say thank you, or anything at all. He just gazed up at Andrew as if there were a hundred scintillating answers written on his forehead. Completely trusting and at ease. Andrew met his stare out of reflex and found it increasingly hard to look away.

***

The next morning, Neil loitered outside an art gallery and tried to talk himself into going inside. He fiddled with his clothes self-consciously; he’d made sure to dress nicely, in the best clothes Doe had got for him for casework. He knew, in his head, that he looked professional in smart, close-fitting jeans and a nice shirt with an odd little waistcoat-thing Doe had insisted on, as well as his coat and a scarf against the cold wind. He was blending into the crowd, at least, which Neil was much more worried about than whether he looked fashionable or not.

But regardless of whether he looked smart enough to darken this doorway, he still felt nervous and jittery to be on his own, without Doe’s steady presence at his shoulder.


He was debating whether to get some coffee to help his nerves bear up when a very fashionably-dressed man in his late thirties started walking towards the gallery doors. Neil darted forward to intercept his path and took a quick breath. He made sure to smile nice and easy, but his words came out a lot faster than he intended.

“Mr Gardner hi there I’m Neil Josten a consulting – uh,” *shit shit shit* “A consulting – I’m assisting with an investigation into the disappearance of your wife I was wondering if I could ask you some questions if you’re not busy.”

He swallowed down the sickly taste of shame and defeat and tried to keep smiling. Years on the run, blending in, spinning perfect lies, all deserted him on that particular phrase. Maybe he really was too stupid to work on his own, without his mother or Doe. He couldn’t even say a simple phrase. *Stupid stupid stupid.*


Gardner led Neil through the building – lots of big open spaces with art on the walls, Neil didn’t even pretend to know enough about art to do more than glance at it all in search of lines of sight and escape routes – to his office, which was all glass walls and fancy desk ornaments, with a view onto the street outside. Neil tried very hard to feel like he was allowed to stand on the expensive-looking carpet and not feel like homeless street trash. He tightened his grip on the phone and small bundle of keys in his pockets to help him smile.

*Solo, not alone.*

“Can you tell me about your relationship with your wife, before her disappearance?”

Gardner sighed and sat down at his desk with a sad frown. “I thought we were good, honestly. I mean, every relationship has troubles, right? But I thought we were facing them as a team. I thought things were good.”

“I’m sorry,” Neil offered belatedly after a beat of silence.
Gardner nodded and rubbed the back of his neck. “I thought Callie leaving me was the worst thing that could ever happen,” he admitted, “But I was wrong. The worst part was realising that – that Rebecca thought I’d hurt her.”

Neil nodded sympathetically. “Do you think it’s strange that Callie hasn’t tried to contact you or Rebecca since you left?”

“Yeah, of course I do,” Gardner sighed. “But do I find it stranger than her packing her things one day and leaving me a – a vlog about it? No.”

Neil had no idea what a vlog was. Luckily Gardner didn’t seem to need much prompting.

“She’s always been a very complicated person. But I loved her with all my heart, and I took my marriage vows seriously. For better and for worse, sickness and health and all that. I was committed to us. I’m still heartbroken she didn’t feel the same, and that she’d done this to me again when I thought we had things back to normal.”

Neil hummed as sympathetically as he could and gentled his tone the way Boyd did around scatty witnesses. *When digging for answers about something tricky or personal, phrase a fact you already know as a question, Boyd had instructed him once, and they’ll confirm or deny it easily. If you wait for them to bring it up naturally they’ll probably lie or avoid the truth and waste everyone’s time.*

“Rebecca mentioned that Callie left you once before?”

“About a year and a half ago,” Gardner nodded hesitantly. *Thank you Boyd, Neil thought. “It was just for a couple of days, but still… it was devastating. That time, she called me. I begged her to come home, told her whatever was bothering her we could work it out together. I guess I got through to her. She came back.” Gardner smiled sadly. “I thought we were good.”

“And you didn’t know what caused that at the time?”

“No,” Gardner said and spread his hands resignedly. “And she wouldn’t say afterwards, either. She didn’t like to dwell on the past, she always said.”

At least that checked out with what her sister had said, Neil mused.

“And this disappearance was just as much a surprise as the last?” He pressed as carefully as he could.

“I don’t know. I guess not as much seeing as it was the second time, but I don’t know what caused it this time either. She seemed a bit distant?” Gardner replied. “A little depressed – something to do with that woman who got pushed in front of a subway train.”

“The one she mentioned in the video?”

“That’s the one.”

“Rebecca mentioned something about a trunk,” Neil said blandly and watched his face.

“It didn’t go missing,” Gardner insisted with a little bit of heat. “Callie took it with her. I don’t know how many times Rebecca has to hear it before she believes me. I just wish I could make her understand that I want Callie back, too.” His voice cracked a little but he didn’t bother trying to tone down the sadness in his voice. “Not because I think our marriage can be saved – I think even I have to admit that ship has sailed now. But because I love her, and I’m worried about her. I want to tell her that it’s okay, that I want her to be happy. Even if happy means – somewhere else, someone else.”
He took a shaky breath and wiped at his overflowing eyes. Neil held out a tissue box automatically and looked away as Gardner blew his nose and wiped his eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Gardner said once he was somewhat controlled again. “It’s just – it’s been so hard without her.”

“Thank you for your time, Mr Gardner,” Neil said quietly. “I’ll leave you to your day, and I’ll be in touch if I have any leads.”

“Thank you, Mr – Josten, wasn’t it? Thank you.”

Neil nodded and closed the door gently behind himself as he left. He heard Gardner blowing his nose and walked a bit quicker. Grief was always messy – and he was afraid if he stood too long in Drew Gardner’s grief, it might be catching. He rubbed at the scar under his sleeve and stopped the recording he’d been making on his phone.

Once he was outside the building, he dialed Doe. He picked up halfway through the first ring.

“Josten, everything alright?”

“Remember how you said yesterday you thought Callie Burrell was probably okay?” Neil opened with as he crossed the street and hopped on a bus.

“Distinctly.”

“Well I’m pretty sure her husband killed her.”

***

“…But because I love her, and I’m worried about her. I want to tell her that it’s okay, that I want her to be happy. Even if happy means – somewhere else, someone else,” Drew Gardner’s emotion-choked voice said from the portable music dock on the kitchen table between Neil and Doe.

Neil pointed at it with a teaspoon. “That’s a recording of the interview he gave to the police when Callie went missing earlier this year. He said the exact same thing to me this morning. Verbatim.” He pulled out his phone and keyed up the recording. They listened to it in silence as Doe sipped his coffee. Neil knew they both heard the near-identical inflections and intonations in the man’s speech, that Doe probably heard even more than he did.

Once the recording was finished, Doe lifted his hooded gaze to rest on Neil over the top of his mug. “And because he repeated himself, you think he’s a murderer.”

“No, it’s not just because he repeated himself, it’s just that what he said sounded so rehearsed. Like – like he’d come up with a story and stuck to it,” Neil insisted. He knew his leg was jiggling in agitation but he felt restless, excited. Maybe this was a shadow of the rush Doe felt on cases, he mused.

“Perhaps it’s lodged in his brain because he’s had to repeat it over and over again,” Doe suggested coolly, and pointed at Neil with his pinkie from around his mug handle. “To the police, his friends, to Rebecca, to his colleagues, to you…”

Neil scowled. Doe rolled the warm mug between his palms and thoughtfully pressed his lips together for a moment before replying. It made them go snow-pale and then flush crimson immediately, Neil noticed.
“I’m not poking holes,” Doe continued. “You may very well be right. I just want to be sure you’ve thought this through, and you’re aware of other interpretations.”

Neil stopped watching his mouth and frowned down at the table. “There was something about this guy, something I didn’t like. It was all very… slick. Even the crying felt crocodilian.”

Doe watched him right back for a short while. “Alright. Let’s say your assessment of the man is correct and he’s an unhinged killer. That would mean the stakes of this ‘training wheels’ case have been considerably raised. Would you like me to tag in?”

Neil’s heart jumped at the thought of teaming up again, not having to work this alone, being able to melt back into the shadows where it was comfortable… and pulled himself up short. He remembered Doe’s unshakeable confidence in him, his trust.

Time to stop being the rabbit.

“No,” he said after a minute. Then, more firmly. “No. Thank you. It’s my solo case. Don’t pinch it.”

Doe’s gaze seemed to weigh heavier on his face and there was a tight, satisfied curve to the corner of his mouth. Neil caught a flash of teeth before he took a last glug of his coffee to hide it. Neil looked down at his hands with his own smile, more shy than sharklike. His heart was thumping like a rabbit’s, but maybe he could use the adrenaline to fuel his brain instead of his feet for once. He liked the idea of it, at least, and that might be enough for the moment anyway. Until he felt more certain of himself.

“It’s still my case,” Neil said, and watched Doe from the corners of his eyes. “But can I ask your opinion on something?”

Doe flicked his fingers in assent and waited.

“If it were your case – what would your next step be?”

“I’d need to verify whether my intuition or the suspect’s story held more water. It’s important to have clarity on the initial impressions, you remember all your reading about the veracity of gut feeling?”

“Mmhmm, not photographically, but well enough. Instinct is almost always right.”

“That’s your step. So, how are you planning to take that step?” Doe asked and leaned back in his chair with his arms folded casually across his chest. Waiting to be amazed, no doubt.

Neil studied his face and shoulders as he thought, chewing on the inside of his cheek. It took him a good few minutes, but Doe seemed content to wait patiently for as long as it took. He probably had ten plans already made, but Neil had one of his own slowly blooming to life. All his own.

“Do you have any burner phones?”

Doe smiled again in approval and got up. He led Neil upstairs to one of the storage closets and got up on a step-stool to pull down a big cardboard box sitting on the top shelf. He put the box on the stool and gestured expansively at it.

Neil lifted off the top and felt delight squirm inside him. It was absolutely filled with old phones, all pre-paid, utterly discardable, completely untraceable, and wonderfully battered. He took a minute to sift his hands through them and knew he was grinning like an idiot. This box was a
What he would have given for a box like this all those years on the run… he’d never been allowed a phone, had no one else to call, after all. But he’d daydreamed about having one, after seeing all the kids his age spending so much time with them. The idea of a throwaway phone had held sway on him for several years, and he’d fantasised about sending texts to the kids he’d known briefly and chucking the phone before his mom found out. Having secret conversations, something private and his.

“Don’t pick your favourite, just pick one,” Doe said sarcastically after a moment. The twitch in his lips said he was amused by Neil’s pleasure, though.

“So you collect these as well as padlocks, then?”

“Maybe, maybe not. Maybe I just like old junk. Pick your phone already, Josten.”

Neil had a sudden thought. “If you had all these, why did you buy me a new phone? Which I’m still gonna pay you back for, by the way. As soon as I have the money.”

Doe waved that off as inconsequential. “These are all dinosaurs, and were bought to be thrown away or destroyed. That’s not what your phone is for.”

Something hesitant and delicate pooled in Neil’s stomach at all the implications of that simple statement. He looked down at the box, which was infinitely safer than getting locked in another peculiarly intense stare-down with Doe, and picked out an old flip phone with a scratch across the case. He bounced it in his palm and flicked open the screen then snapped it closed just for the noise. Then he powered it up and slowly typed out a message on the tiny screen and sent it to Drew Gardner.

I know you killed her. I know what you did with her body.

Doe peered at the screen and read the message upside down. “Gaslighting?”

“Just gonna rattle him a little,” Neil replied. “I’ll monitor him for the rest of the day, see if he gets shaken up or not, change his routines at all.”

“Hm. Good strategy.” Doe nodded, and got up on the stool again to put the glorious box away. Neil watched it go with a sigh and followed him back downstairs. Doe paused at the bottom of the stairs and held Neil’s shoulder to steady himself as he pulled on his shoes, then his coat.

“Off somewhere?”

“Police station to question a suspect,” Doe replied as he buttoned up his coat. “You’re not the only one who’s made progress on their investigation.”

***

“Yeah, I recognise her.” The man in the interrogation room nodded at the still photo taken from the security footage. “She was in the news a few months ago. Got pushed in front of a train or something?”

“Indeed,” Andrew replied and folded his arms on the table between them. “But that’s not how you know her, is it, Mr Samuels? I mean, you worked in the same office building together. Before she died. She was a secretary, and you’re a custodial engineer in the building.”

Samuels’ mouth fell open in a surprised ‘o’. “That’s – that’s right. Gosh, I forgot. I see so many faces there every day, you know how it is. Sometimes I see them all in shops or restaurants and it
takes me ages to pin down where I know them from.”

“I’m sure,” Andrew agreed blandly and flicked a glance to Boyd, who was casually taking notes in his little book. “Do you remember seeing her around the subway platform? I arrived at a theory last night. The man who killed Ms Tully had been on the platform before, he’d studied it and knew where all the cameras were, how best to avoid being caught in them. So I began looking at the footage from the days and weeks preceding her death. You’ll never guess who I saw following her, on more than one occasion.”

Andrew raised his eyebrows and flicked the remote at the screen set up in the corner; the grainy images began to play out.

“Now, this was recorded ten days before her murder. There’s Ms Tully. And – there’s you.” He pointed at a figure leaning against a concrete pillar close to Ms Tully, in nondescript clothing. He was peering around the pillar every so often with a small object in his hand. “If I’m not mistaken, that’s a cell phone you’re carrying. You’re being discreet, but you are filming her.”

“You have a record, Mr Samuels?” Boyd asked coolly, looking up from his notepad. “You were arrested on a stalking charge in Florida in 2009.”

Samuels’ gaze darted between them nervously and he raised his hands. “That was a misunderstanding.”

“Was this a misunderstanding, too?” Boyd asked and looked him up and down. “What are you, six feet, about 185 pounds? So was this guy.” He pulled out the grossly insufficient sketch of their suspect. “Put a fake beard on you, some sunglasses, be hard to tell the difference. What d’you think?”

Samuels swallowed. “I think you make an excellent point. But I would never have hurt Vivian.”

“Yes, of course not,” Andrew smiled. “Nor would you have stalked her, or recorded images of her on your phone. You clearly respected her too much to do any of that.”

“Alright, fine,” Samuels sighed. “You’re right, I was there that night. And I was in disguise – but I didn’t kill her. I thought she’d seen me following her a few nights before, so I started wearing a hat and scarf that covered my mouth. I’m there,” he gave a queasy smile and nodded at the screen. “I’m just – not in frame.”

“Convenient,” Boyd drawled, unimpressed.

“You don’t get it,” Samuels said, looking a bit desperate as if he could hear the cell door closing already. “I was there that night, too. I can prove I didn’t push her.”

Ten minutes later and Boyd sat with him in a conference room to watch the footage from Samuels’ phone. Andrew worked his way through a coffee and caramel muffin and Boyd ate a protein bar. They watched as Samuels panned the camera about a bit to properly record every inch of Vivian Tully as she chatted on the phone, admiring the flowers she’d just been given by a stranger. Then, the same stranger came back just as the subway car was about to pass through the station. Tully’s brief screams were awful, and they could clearly hear Samuels sobbing in grief, oh God no, and other bystanders yelling. The pusher slinked away in the chaos and Andrew stopped the recording.

“What d’you think?” Boyd asked somberly.

“It’s Samuels’ voice, that’s for certain,” Andrew replied. “The question is whether the video’s been manipulated in some way. If it hasn’t, did Samuels orchestrate the pushing? Did he hire an equally
“Well we’re holding onto him either way but eventually we’re gonna have to charge him or cut him loose.”

Andrew hummed acknowledgement and tapped his fingers impatiently against the table; he was riding the usual high of an intriguing puzzle, but it felt a bit muted without Josten at his shoulder, offering dark humour and criminal insight and a brain working just as fast. Not that he didn’t like working cases with Boyd – they had a good working relationship, something close to respect and friendship, if he admitted that much, and Boyd was certainly the brightest detective in the precinct. It just felt… different. He kept expecting to turn and see Josten standing close by.

“I was hoping the new angle would shed some light on the identity of the pusher, but as luck would have it, his face isn’t seen from this camera either. Nor the patch on his jacket – wrong side of the body.”

“Patch?” Boyd asked.

Andrew’s phone started buzzing and he answered it immediately after a quick check of the ID. He steadfastly ignored the pleased spark in his chest. “Josten. Still surveilling?”

“Patch?” Boyd asked.

Andrew’s phone started buzzing and he answered it immediately after a quick check of the ID. He steadfastly ignored the pleased spark in his chest. “Josten. Still surveilling?”

“Patch?” Boyd asked.

Andrew’s phone started buzzing and he answered it immediately after a quick check of the ID. He steadfastly ignored the pleased spark in his chest. “Josten. Still surveilling?”

“Patch?” Boyd asked.

Andrew’s phone started buzzing and he answered it immediately after a quick check of the ID. He steadfastly ignored the pleased spark in his chest. “Josten. Still surveilling?”

“Well not everyone can have a job as fun as ours, Josten,” Andrew smiled. “Have patience though – there’s no branch of detective work as important or neglected as the art of tracing footsteps.”

“I know, I know. I’ve still got a few hours left, I’ll track him home and see if he does anything weird after work. I’ll be late back, probably.” He interrupted himself to yawn and Andrew indulged a moment of imagining him waking up, relaxed and tousle-haired and smiling.

“Stupid,” he told himself, and cleared his throat.

“Say hi to Renee for me.”

“Wait, what?”

“Stakeout’s exhausting and mind-numbing, and you’ve been at it all day. I reached out to Renee earlier, she’ll be coming by to take over for a few hours so you can rest. She should be there soon.”

“Are you serious? Thank you,” Josten said, his voice light and happy and surprised.

Andrew hung up on him rather than dwell on that. He kept eating his muffin with Boyd’s considering gaze on him.

“Solo cases, huh?” Boyd said eventually.

“Mmhmm.”
“How’s he holding up without you?”

“Pretty well, considering.”

Boyd smiled. “I’m not offended that you miss him, you know. I’m a big boy, I can take being second-best.”

Andrew rolled his eyes in reply and sucked caramel sauce off his thumb.

“It’s nice working cases with you again though,” Boyd continued undeterred. He was very well used to Andrew by now. “I really like Neil, and he’s great to have around. But I kind of missed us being partners, you know? You spend all your time with him. And I know we never really hung out outside of work, but… you know? I still consider you my friend, even if you don’t like to admit you feel the same, and I missed talking with you.”

Andrew shredded the muffin case and reasoned his way through the reactive instinct to push away and shut down that had controlled his relationships for so much of his life. He thought of telling Bee about this conversation later and it gave him the strength to reply.

“Yeah. It’s good to be working together again.” He held Boyd’s gaze briefly, willing him to understand the admission.

Boyd’s gentle smile said that he did. And, displaying the brains that Andrew valued, he didn’t try to push the particular issue any further.

Andrew started the footage over again and watched the crowd, looking for any possible accomplices. “The busker, there,” he frowned after a few more watches.

“Hm?”

Andrew pointed him out – a young man playing violin on the platform a few yards away from Samuels. “He’s playing… Paganini’s 24 Caprices, Opus 1, Number 11.”

Boyd raised his eyebrows incredulously. “I can’t hear anything over the subway car arriving. How do you know which piece he’s playing?”

Andrew tilted his head back in his seat and slanted Boyd a casual look. He offered a little bit of trust and something personal in return for Boyd’s earlier admissions. Tit for tat was much more comfortable than emotional speeches. “I’ve been more into classical music lately. Cello, mostly, but strings in general are pleasant. I recognised the bowing and fingering from a recital the other week.”

“Oh,” Boyd grinned, looking far too pleased. He understood. Andrew was reminded again why he’d chosen Boyd to work with in the first place. “So what does it matter what he’s playing?”

“It doesn’t, really. What matters is that he stops right in the middle, not even at the end of a movement. Right in the middle of a bar. Then he packs up his case and high-tails it just before Tully is pushed.”

Boyd frowned and rewound the footage at half speed. “He was looking at the pusher. He recognised him, maybe he knew what was about to happen.”

“We find our busker, we find our pusher,” Andrew finished with a tight grin.

***
Neil jumped slightly as Renee knocked on the window of the car, another borrowed from the compactor lot. He unlocked the passenger door for her.

“Good evening, Neil.”

“Hi, Renee. Thank you for coming out tonight. And Andrew says hi too.”

She smiled sweetly at him and he managed to smile back. “It’s no trouble, and I always find this kind of thing interesting. Is that the man you’re observing?”

Neil followed her gaze back to the art gallery across the street and handed her his pocket binoculars. “Yeah. He’s just closing house at the minute, he’ll be leaving in about an hour I reckon.”

“Hmm. How are you, Neil?”

His first instinct was to say he was fine and quickly turn the conversation onto her, but he’d been working on his skittish behaviour around her. He thought for a minute, then gave a proper reply that only made his hands shake a little. “I’m alright, thank you. It’s a bit difficult working on my own, but I’m handling it. Things are good.”

She watched him for a moment, then smiled again. “Neil, can I touch your hand?”

He bit his lip. Not Lola not Lola not Lola. She’s safe.

He nodded cautious permission, and she reached out to very gently squeeze his fingers. His heart raced and stumbled with instinctive fear but he held still, telling himself that everything was fine. She let go after a second and folded her hands in her lap.

“Thank you,” she said simply. “And I’m proud of you.”

He nodded and took a minute to breathe slowly, looking out of the window where it was safe. “How are you?” He asked once he was calm again.

“It’s been a tough week,” she sighed as they watched Gardner potter about his office. “I’m working with a young woman who’s been through something very similar to me, and it’s difficult to be objective. I’m trying, for her sake, but you know how it goes.”

Neil nodded – she’d disclosed her own rough childhood to him a little while ago, when she started hanging around Doe’s house more often. Knowing her secrets made it easier to be around her, but he still didn’t know how to comfort anyone. Doe, maybe, but that was different. Panic started in his chest; he didn’t know what to do, what to say, how to help. Useless, useless…

But then an idea struck.

“Renee,” he asked nervously, “Can I touch your hand?”

She blinked at him in surprise, then held her hand out to him wordlessly. He steeled himself, then squeezed her fingers the same way she’d done to him. He let go quickly and retreated into his hoodie, tucking his hands into the front pocket. He felt a bit ill, but pleased that he’d tried.

He glanced at her quickly and felt guilt scorch him when he saw her eyes glistening with tears. He was about to apologise for hurting her feelings when she shook her head.

“Thank you, Neil. That really means a lot to me.”
He nodded and passed her a packet of tissues. So many tears today, he thought absently, and went back to staring out the window.

Once she’d composed herself, she took a sip of the water bottle sitting in the console between them. “You know, I’m here so you can rest. Why don’t you sleep? I’ll wake you if anything happens.”

They shuffled around briefly so Renee was in the driver’s seat and Neil laid out in the back, head pillowed on his coat. Despite her presence, he managed to drop off easily after years of practice.

Unfortunately, his brain could be a real bastard sometimes.

He was a young boy again, trapped in the Baltimore house whose huge rooms echoed screams and cries and the walls seemed to bleed viscera from all the horrors they’d witnessed. He was locked in his bedroom and cowering back against the bed as Lola advanced. Her hands were larger than life and her nails were blood-red and pointed as they snatched away his clothes and tossed them far out of his reach.

“Don’t fight me, pet,” she crooned in his ear and ran her nails down his chest, digging into the few scars he already bore. “I’ll make it good for you if you don’t make a sound.”

He whimpered and cringed away from her but her arms encircled his naked, vulnerable body and pulled him flush against her, all suffocating curves and knives and wiry muscles. She laughed and scratched livid lines down his chest and back and he chewed his lip until he tasted iron. It did no good to fight, he’d learned that long ago, but he couldn’t control his squirming and the tears that threatened.

“Shh, sweet thing, don’t make me ruin your pretty face,” she said and pushed him down onto the bed. Her perfume enveloped him in a sickly cloud and he coughed as her hair fell across his face. She held him down and licked at the iron burn on his shoulder, still raw and healing, until he cried out. Then she bit him in punishment and the knives came out.

“Oh, look what you made me do,” she pouted as she traced bloody lines over him, her fingers slick with his blood. “No matter, a young boy just needs a kind touch, doesn’t he? Shh, shh…” Her hands reached down, down, until he kicked at her out of reflex, ashamed, horrified, confused, helpless. Her eyes were hungry and her hands ravenous and he was crying and screaming, screaming…

“Run, Abram!” His mother screamed, and suddenly he was a few years older, fleeing for his life through a bullet storm with his mother’s iron-grip on his arm. They ran until they found safety, a new home, a new city. Then her fear turned to fury. “What were you thinking?” she hissed, and her hands were like rocks raining down on him. “Going out on your own? This is why I make the decisions, Abram! You just can’t protect yourself, you can’t!”

“I’m sorry, Mom, I’m sorry,” he whimpered and held still under her blows. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry…”

“Don’t ever run out of my sight again, you hear me?”

“Yes, Mom, I promise.”

She sighed, and then her next breath was choked with blood. Waves crashed outside the car. “Don’t stop,” she wheezed as blood oozed thick and sluggish over her hands. “Keep running. Never stop. Promise me, Abram. You won’t last on your own unless you do what I say. Say it back to
“I promise, Mom,” he said, his voice deeper now with age but no less scared. “I promise. I’m no good on my own, I know. I’ll do what you said, I promise. Mom…”

Flames licked at his hands and face and salt tears evaporated under the heat but there was no one to tell him to stop crying. He was all alone, cut off, abandoned, useless, stupid, alone…

“Neil?”


He took a hard swallow and ran his hands through his sweat-damp hair, twisting it in his fingers. It hung lank and distressing at his cheeks and at the back of his neck, but he spotted an abandoned elastic band in the pocket on the back of the driver’s seat and roughly scraped his hair back from his face and off his neck into some kind of bun. He scrubbed over his face and looked cautiously into the front seat.

Renee was watching him in the rear-view mirror and for a second the feeling of her eyes on him made his skin crawl. It’s okay, he told himself firmly as he pushed upright. It’s okay, Renee is safe. It was just a nightmare. She is not Lola.

“Are you awake now, Neil?” She asked calmly.

He grunted an affirmative and rubbed uneasily at his shoulder through his hoodie; his burn scar was tingling with phantom bites. A quick look out the windows confirmed it was later at night, and they were no longer outside the art gallery.

“Where are we?” He asked. His voice was reedy and uncertain, and he coughed a few times to clear it. Renee passed him back the water bottle, holding the neck only so he wouldn’t have to touch her fingers. As he downed the rest of the bottle, he wondered what she’d heard. If he’d whimpered and begged for Lola to stop or wept for his mother. She said nothing, and when he glanced her way again the usual sweet front had vanished. She was the hard-eyed woman who had talked Doe down from his trauma and had killed a man to protect herself, the woman who worked day in and day out with trauma survivors of all stripes. There was grim understanding in her gaze, and nothing resembling judgment or pity.

“We’re at a self-storage facility, Neil. Your mark, Drew Gardner, headed here after work. He talked to the manager and walked in that unit there.” She pointed and they watched the unit for a minute until Gardner walked back out, wheeling an old sea chest on a trolley.

“That chest,” Neil frowned and leaned forward between the seats. “It belongs to his sister-in-law. She thinks he used it to get rid of his wife’s body – he swore Callie took it with her when he left him.”

“Wait, are you saying there’s a body in that trunk?” Renee asked seriously.

“I sent him a text this morning to rattle him, said I knew what he’d done with the body, and now he’s getting that chest out of storage. Yeah, I think so,” Neil said quickly, his heart jumping and breath catching with mingled fear and excitement. I was right, I was right.

“We should call the police.”
“No, not yet,” Neil hissed as they watched Gardner load the heavy chest into the back of his car, lock it and walk back to the office. “He’ll be long gone with the evidence by the time they get here. I can break into the car though and get photos.”

He reached under the seat with shaking hands and pulled out the slim jim he’d stashed there in case there was time to give Doe another lesson.

“Neil, just hold on a second—”

“You don’t think I can do this?” He shot back tightly, nerves a-jangling. His mother’s voice screamed in his ears and his younger self was whimpering but he could do this, he could do this, he could prove her wrong, he could handle himself, he was right and he could prove it.

“I know you can, Neil, but this is too risky—“

He bailed out of the car before her words could unravel his confidence and stole up to Gardner’s car. He checked around for half a second before neatly inserting the slim jim and working his arms in one smooth, fast motion. The locks disengaged with a sweet click and he lunged under the steering column to unlock the boot.

He hurried around to the back, flung up the boot and stashed the slim jim in his belt-loop. He attacked the buckles on the chest and got to work with his picks on the main lock, hands shaking with nerves and determination.

“Hey!” An unfamiliar voice shouted, and Neil nearly dropped his picks in fright. He spun around and flinched back automatically from the tall, heavily-muscled security guard running towards him. “Step away from the car!”

Neil obeyed with a horrible, sinking feeling in his stomach. Gardner ran out of the office, no doubt alerted from the shouting.

“What’s going on here?”

“I saw this man breaking into your car, sir,” the guard said.

Gardner stepped forward again to get a proper look at Neil, then his eyes widened. Neil supposed he looked very different from earlier, dressed in sweatpants and a baggy old hoodie and still shaking and sweaty from his nightmare. He looked a lot more like a criminal or junkie than a detective, that was for sure. “You! You’re the one who came asking me about Callie this morning.”

Neil clutched the hems of his sleeves as tight as he could and forced his flinching, frightened body to turn to the security guard. “Please, sir, I’m a consulting detective and I’m investigating this man, I have reason to believe he murdered his wife and hid her body in this trunk,” he pleaded.

“What! That’s a lie!” Gardner yelled.

“There’s an easy way to see if I’m right – ask him to open it.”

“Excuse me? I don’t have to open a damn thing,” Gardner protested.

Neil looked to the guard desperately and saw the doubt starting to cloud his features. “His name is Drew Gardner, there are articles on the disappearance of his wife, he was the lead suspect. She went missing six months ago, the same time as this trunk. Please.”
There was a heavy pause as both Neil and Gardner stared at the guard, who was looking increasingly nervous about the whole situation. Neil heard sirens coming closer and knew the guard would have alerted the police to a potential theft.

“Sir, open the trunk please,” the guard said eventually, a hard look to his face as he watched Gardner.

Gardner looked nearly apoplectic. “Are you kidding me? This kid’s obviously nothing more than a con-artist, look at him!”

“If he’s wrong, you ain’t got nothing to hide,” the guard said staunchly, then gestured to the squad cars rolling up. “You can either open it up for me, or for them.”

Neil grinned at the guard and some of his fear eased a little. Gardner swore but unlocked the trunk and pushed up the lid. Neil and the guard leaned closer, and Neil was so certain he was about to see a body he held his breath against the stench.

*I was right, I can do this, I’m a detective, I can do things on my own...!*

The trunk was empty.


“Happy now?” Gardner asked viciously, and the guard frowned at Neil. *No, no, no...* the guard pushed him up against the car and cuffed his hands behind his back as the cops pulled up.

“What’s going on here?” One of them called as he jogged over.

“Some con-artist trying to steal a trunk, sir,” the guard said in a disgusted voice. Neil closed his eyes. He wanted to be sick.

“Okay, we’ll take it from here,” the cop said. Neil didn’t hear his rights being read or register being pushed into the back of the squad car. He hunkered down against the phantom blows of his mother’s hands. *I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I don’t know why I thought I could do it on my own, I’m sorry...*

***

Neil got up from the cot in the holding cell when Doe appeared outside, looking in on him through the bars with a curiously pleased cast to his face.

“I paid your bail,” he said calmly. “You’ll be released back into society shortly, though Wymack wants to ‘talk’ tomorrow. Something about professional behaviour and misconduct, something boring like that.”

“Thanks,” Neil replied, subdued, and hugged his arms over his stomach. He couldn’t bear to meet Doe’s gaze, too ashamed of his stupidity.

“I spoke with Renee before I headed over,” Doe said. “She told me what happened tonight.”

“I fucked up. I’m sorry.” Neil bit his lip and shook his head. “I don’t think I’m cut out for this solo thing after all.”

“You took a chance,” Doe corrected. He tilted his head a little, considering Neil. “Fortune often favours the bold.”
“Not tonight.”

“You were right about the trunk, though. It was the same one Rebecca mentioned, the one Gardner swore he had no idea about. And yet he was taking it out of a storage locker.” Doe smiled just a little and bounced on his feet. “If it had contained her body, you were quite right to try and get evidence before he destroyed it all.”

“But it was empty, not even any bloodstains,” Neil sighed. He sat down on the bed and rubbed at the scar on his forearm miserably. “I was wrong. I took a stupid risk and blew everything.”

“Do you want to hear what he was doing with the trunk?”

“Might as well.”

“According to the statement he gave to the cops who arrested you, he sold the trunk shortly after he received the video from his wife,” Doe said, still smiling. “Partly out of spite, partly because running an art gallery isn’t as lucrative as it used to be. He knew it was worth several thousand dollars and sold it to a collector.”

“He could have told Rebecca that months ago,” Neil said and stared at the floor.

Doe shrugged. “He knew what he’d done was wrong – it wasn’t his to sell. Apparently your visit, and the threatening text, inspired him to come clean. He thought the text was from Rebecca, and the idea that she was so certain he’d killed her sister that she’d resort to such tactics, was more troubling to him than punishment for his actual transgression. So he reached out to the guy he’d sold it to and bought it back. He was picking up the trunk from the collector’s storage unit so he could deliver it back to Rebecca. There’s a paper trail to confirm it.”

“I was so sure I was right, and she was in that trunk,” Neil muttered and looked back to Doe, who was still smiling away. “What’re you so happy about? I was wrong, I made a huge stupid mistake. I should have waited and looked into the paper trail. I was rash and oblivious and a better criminal than detective after all. I was more concerned with being right than with the truth. You should be angry with me, I’m angry with me.”

Doe smiled wider and leaned against the bars with his arms casually folded, resting his temple against the cold metal. His gaze was amused and… proud?

“Given the many givens, your hypothesis was good. There was a good chance there was a body in that trunk, and you took the risk. Rabbits don’t take risks – they hang back, wait, and run away safe and sound. You trusted your gut.”

“I was wrong.”

Doe had the cheek to chuckle, just for a moment. “You were wrong about a trunk. That does not mean you were wrong about him being a potential murderer. You can’t let these little setbacks rattle you so much.”

Neil looked back down at his hands, seeing blood under his nails for a second. “I just keep thinking that if you were the one to break into the car, she would have been there,” he admitted softly. “But because it was me…”

“No, wrong,” Doe replied, still irritatingly calm and pleased. “I wouldn’t have been able to break into the car at all, especially under that kind of pressure. I would have had to run, and would know nothing about the deception surrounding the trunk, or be standing here with one possible theory disproved and others made more plausible because of it. Believe it or not, this is a step forward,
and you’ve actually cast doubt on Gardner’s truthfulness and the reliability of his statements. There’s now probable cause to investigate him more thoroughly.”

Neil looked up at him and read amused certainty in every strong line of Doe’s body, trust and friendship and home. Doe didn’t care that he’d been arrested or made a mistake – he cared that Neil had tried, had taken a risk even if it hadn’t paid off. He cared that Neil had been working the case according to his own instincts instead of relying on Doe.

Neil stood and leaned against the bars on the other side of Doe, facing him like a mirror image. He leaned his head against the bars and met his eyes, trying to soak in his certainty and confidence.

“You’re doing that staring thing again,” Doe murmured. His eyes flickered lazily over Neil’s face, lingering on his mouth for a few moments. Neil guessed he’d bitten a sore into his lips from all his worrying.

“So are you,” Neil replied just as quietly. “You really don’t think I fucked up?”

“No, I don’t. And I told you, self-doubt is a very bad look for you.” Doe reached out and snaked a hand through the bars to settle on the back of his neck. Neil couldn’t help the relieved sigh, or the way his eyes closed and tension dropped out of him at the touch. Doe’s thumb brushed over his carotid and settled there, feeling out his heartbeat. “Renee said you had a nightmare in the car. Are you okay?”

“I will be. It was just old shit. Working on my own kind of – set it off, I guess.”

Doe hummed thoughtfully and Neil knew Doe was watching him, but he kept his eyes closed and tried to absorb as much warmth and strength from Doe’s hand as he could. He didn’t need to watch his back – Doe was watching it for him.

“I have another errand to run tonight before we can go home,” Doe murmured eventually. “In the morning, I propose we begin working both cases together. You help me find my subway pusher, I’ll help you find Callie Burrell.”

Neil opened his eyes just a bit, looking at him from under his lashes. “Do you not trust me to finish the case on my own?”

“No, I know you’re more than capable of closing it on your own,” Doe disagreed calmly. “I also think I might have pushed you too far and too fast about working solo, all things considered. It’s not punishment or lack of trust – it’s help being offered. You helped me with the Whitman case when it was too much for me. Let me do the same for you.”

Neil watched his face for a long minute, considering all his features and the balance of them. He noticed a very small scar running down through Doe’s eyebrow, almost imperceptible if they hadn’t been standing so close. He guessed it was from the fight that landed him on medication back in high school, from setting right some homophobic assholes in the club he’d worked at. He looked, and wondered.

“You’re trying to protect me.”

“If you want that.”

“Accepting your protection is the same as hiding behind you,” Neil said carefully, walking the fine line suspended between both of their pride so as not to hurt either of them. “I want to keep working it solo, I know I can do it. But I’d appreciate your insights until I’m more confident.”
Doe held his gaze and they breathed together thoughtfully. Neil could feel Doe’s pulse through his palm, and knew his own was being picked up loud and clear. It felt curiously intimate, and his face began to heat under Doe’s calm scrutiny. Doe’s gaze dropped to Neil’s mouth again and he swallowed, feeling nervous for some reason.

“Alright,” Doe said lowly. “If you’re sure.”

“Yes, Andrew.”

They were close enough that Neil saw the goose-bumps shiver up Doe’s arm and neck at his reply, but had no time to wonder what had caused that reaction. Boyd called Doe’s name from the other end of the corridor and Doe let his hand drop casually back to his side.

“Leaving now,” he called back coolly, then stood up straight. Neil mimicked him and raised his eyebrows in question. “They’ll release you as soon as the paperwork is done. I’ll see you back home later, alright? I have a busker to find.”

Neil nodded and leaned on the bars to watch him walk away. It felt like the warmth from Doe’s hand had spread to his stomach and taken up residence in his lungs, turning into something soft and molten and comforting. He didn’t know what that feeling was or what it meant, but he wished Doe hadn’t had to leave.

***

“That looks like him,” Boyd said as they walked for the third time down another street still filled with clubbers and restaurant-goers, bundled up in their coats and scarves to hide from the cold November wind late at night.

Andrew squinted at the busker in question across the street and listened to the piece he was playing. He nodded agreement and they crossed the street towards him.

“Bach? Why Thaddeus, you’ve gone commercial. For shame,” Andrew grinned. The busker stopped playing immediately.

“How do you know my name?”

“Your many citations for performing on subway platforms,” Andrew replied happily. “I’m assuming those are the reasons you’re now performing up above in the sun?” He squinted up at the night sky, the stars too obscured by light pollution this close to the city centre. “Or moon, I guess.”

“Ah, you’re cops,” Thaddeus grimaced and started packing away his violin.

“No, no, he is,” Andrew said and nodded to Boyd, who rolled his eyes. “I’m just a concerned citizen. Does the name Vivian Tully mean anything to you?”

“Nope, buddy.”

“Maybe her picture will, she was on the news a few months ago,” Andrew suggested, and got out his phone to play the recording Samuels had made, showing Thaddeus clearly in the background. “You were there the night a lunatic pushed her in front of a train, we can see you right there.”

Thaddeus shifted from foot to foot uncomfortably, looking at Boyd with clear anxiety. “Yeah, okay, I was there. But I only heard about what happened on the news, I wasn’t around when it actually went down.”
“Of course not, because the minute you saw the pusher you ran like hell. Right in the middle of Paganini. You know him somehow, and we’re rather curious about that.”

Thaddeus rapidly shut the clasps on his violin case and started walking away. Andrew waved for Boyd to stay back and planted himself in front of Thaddeus before he could get too far. He lowered his voice and leaned into his space a little.

“You do know what I’m talking about, and the sooner you tell me the connection, the less likely I’ll be to tell Detective Boyd here that you’re also a pickpocket. Moonlighting, in fact.” He grinned up at the sky for a second.

Thaddeus clenched his jaw and tightened his grip on the violin case.

“You’re actually very good,” Andrew said. “I was watching you earlier when we were further up the street. Fiddling must keep those fingers nimble, hm? I liked your distraction technique, with the handkerchief? I’m a bit of a dab hand myself, you see. Useful sort of skill.”

Thaddeus sighed and fidgeted with the case some more. “Look, I didn’t know the guy, okay?” He hissed. “I just knew his face. I’d seen him on the platform a few nights before, tried to lift his wallet. But he cottoned on and grabbed my wrist. I panicked and punched him. He fell, I took off. When I saw him the night he killed the girl, I was just worried he was gonna call the transit cops on me so I booked it. Alright?”

“So he was on the same platform before, you said?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Thaddeus agreed, looking all around and casually down at Andrew once or twice.

“You’re checking out my coat right now, aren’t you?” Andrew grinned. “Thinking of where you can infiltrate it.”

Thaddeus laughed nervously. “Sorry, okay? It’s a force of habit.”

“Of course,” Andrew agreed. “To a pickpocket the coat is much the same as a bank vault to a safecracker. You have to study it, find a way in and out without being detected, examine all the angles. So – the pusher. He had a patch on his jacket shoulder, right here.” Andrew tapped his arm. “Do you remember what it looked like?”

***

“If you feel like you have to, don’t,” Neil read from the blown-up picture of an old patch the next morning. “So your busker picked this out from an image search?”

“Mmhmm, nice guy actually. Name of Thaddeus. Now we bring this to the public’s attention and hope it, in conjunction with the sketch, shakes anything loose.” Doe replied, leaning his chair back on two legs.

“That’s a bit of a long shot, isn’t it? Especially after six months. You’re lucky this guy still remembered the patch.”

“It was a pretty weird patch to be fair. And it’s what makes the puzzle so interesting,” Doe shrugged and smiled up at the ceiling.

“You’re happy about something.”

“Mm. Thaddeus was quite interesting – talented violinist and an excellent pickpocket.”
“Should I be jealous about my spot as your trainee?” Neil joked lightly, smiling at Doe.

Doe’s gaze slid to him for a moment and something about his smile seemed to soften. He looked away again and let his chair rest back on all four legs. “No,” he said quietly, unruffled. “You don’t need to be jealous.”

Wymack opened the door to the conference room they were sitting in. Neil shrank down in his chair a little at the tired look to his face, reading disappointment and stress and knowing he’d put that expression there with his stupidity.

“She’s arrived and he’s in my office,” Wymack said to him. “If you apologise, promise to pay for the damage you did to his car and refrain from any further harassment – he’ll drop the charges against you.”

“I wouldn’t accept those terms, if I were you,” Doe advised.

“Well he’s not you, and I’m well aware how little you care for apologising about your harassment. Do you remember Richard Mantlow at all?” Wymack said.

Doe made a dismissive noise. “Mantlow was guilty, if you recall. And Josten’s instincts have been telling him the man is a liar and a murderer,” Doe continued. “I trust him on that. And you know there was a good chance that chest had a body inside – if Josten hadn’t acted, in the way he saw best at the time, we might never have seen that trunk again with its Schrödingerian occupant.”

“Thank you, Andrew; but I don’t need you to defend or protect me, remember,” Neil said in quiet German. “It’s my responsibility, and I don’t want a criminal record attached to my name.”

Doe rested his cheek in his palm, propped up on the table. “You don’t need to apologise to him,” He said stubbornly. “You are a detective and you were doing your job. Mistakes get made and car damage happens sometimes. A cop wouldn’t have to apologise like this.”

“But I’m not a cop, and I’m only just barely a consulting detective. Besides. If I refuse to apologise and back down he’ll be on the lookout for me,” Neil pointed out, feeling his mouth twitch. “If I apologise and act all remorseful and promise to leave him alone, he might drop his guard.”

Doe grinned into his hand, eyes sharp. “That’s much better. Have you stopped being the rabbit?”

“I’m certainly trying,” Neil replied, and Doe grinned wider.

“Mark the day, everyone.”

“Are you two about done?” Wymack asked tartly.

“Yes, yes,” Neil said and got to his feet. “I’ll apologise.”

***

Neil rang the doorbell to Rebecca Burrell’s house later that morning and glanced back to where Doe was waiting in the parked car; Neil was going to teach him some more of the finer points of carjacking once this was done. Doe was smoking out the window and lazily waved his cigarette in acknowledgement, then made a shooing gesture at him.

Neil smiled and turned back to the door as it opened. “Ms Burrell? I’m Neil Josten, we met the other day.”
“Oh, please come in, have a seat,” she said pleasantly and welcomed him into the living room. He perched on her couch and looked around absently as she got them both a glass of water. “Did you want to ask me more questions about Callie?”

“Actually, I came to apologise,” he said soberly. “I got a bit too aggressive with the investigation last night, and I’m afraid myself and Mr Doe will not be able to remain on the case.”

“Oh,” Rebecca said. She put her hand to her throat and frowned down at the table. “But… you were pretty much my last hope to find out what happened to Callie. The police won’t do anything more after six months, and I can’t prove anything about Drew now the chest has turned up… Oh God, Callie.” She took a shaky breath and pressed her hands to her eyes. “I just want my sister back.”

“I’m very sorry,” Neil said, feeling real guilt rather than the fake regret he’d adopted for Drew Gardner. “We can’t keep investigating officially, but we won’t stop looking either. I’m really sorry.”

He looked away uncomfortably as she began crying in earnest, distracting himself from his uselessness by looking at all the pictures and ornaments on display.

One in particular caught his eye – it was an old one of Callie and Rebecca sitting by a river with fishing rods. They were both laughing and grinning, but what had drawn his attention was the large canvas jacket Callie was wearing, with a distinctive patch on the shoulder.

“Um – Ms Burrell?” He fetched the picture to examine it more closely, tilting it towards the light to read the words half-visible on the patch. “Where did Callie get this jacket, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“That?” Rebecca sniffled. “You mean Drew’s jacket. It was cold out that day, he let her borrow it. She called it his hippie coat; he got it at a rally in college or something. That was a really nice day we had.” She smiled sadly and took the photo from him to admire it, tears still flowing down her cheeks.

“This might sound strange,” Neil said cautiously. “But has Drew ever had a beard?”

“Yeah, for a while,” Rebecca shrugged. “Real pathetic one, though. He shaved it off around the same time Callie disappeared. Said he didn’t want to be the same man she’d left, or something. King of dramatic gestures, is Drew. Why? Is it relevant to anything?”

“I think we might be able to keep investigating,” Neil replied, and did his best not to flinch when she grabbed his hands in wordless thanks.

***

“Let’s start with what we know,” Andrew said and rubbed his hands together as they both stared up at the wall; it was decorated with notes from both their cases with a distinct three inches of clear space between the two sides. Andrew stood on his side facing Josten across the gap. “Vivian Tully was murdered six months ago by a bearded individual wearing a jacket with a hippie patch.”

“We know that Drew Gardner wore a beard at approximately the same time. He also owned a jacket identical to the one worn by the killer.” Josten replied promptly, pointing at his photos on the wall. “Several days later, Callie Burrell records a video in which she says Tully’s death made her decide to leave her husband for the second time.”

“Thanks to you, we now have reason to believe that Drew Gardner was the pusher who killed
Vivian Tully,” Andrew nodded and smiled at him. “And now we get to the theoreticals. What are the odds it would affect his wife so much that she leaves him? Is it possible that’s what he was counting on? If so, what kind of stupid-ass plan is that? I mean, how could he know that killing Tully would affect his wife so profoundly and specifically?”

“I don’t know,” Josten frowned up at his side of the wall. “Maybe I’m wrong about this, too. Maybe it’s just a coincidence about the jacket – those patches are old but that kind of vintage style is coming back into fashion, Boyd was telling me. Or it could have been donated by Gardner or Callie at some point after the fishing trip and picked up by your pusher and there’s no link at all.”

“I know I’ve told you how grating I find self-doubt,” Andrew said flatly and folded his arms. “If you’re going to wallow in self-pity and ruin a perfectly fascinating puzzle, go do it in your room and let me have fun, you absolute downer.”

“Do I need to remind you that I made a mistake last night that got me arrested? I’m just trying to think this through instead of rushing ahead again.”

“Don’t backslide into the Leporidae. Do I need to remind you that you made a discovery today that may ultimately solve both cases?” Andrew shot back. “Do you want to mourn the former or celebrate the latter? Because I, for one, am fully engaged in this.” He gestured at the wall challengingly, holding Josten’s eyes.

“I want to solve this,” Josten replied quietly but firmly.

“Oh good!” Andrew exclaimed sarcastically. “Right, two events. Event A – murder by subway train.” He tapped his own chest. “Event B – a woman’s disappearance.” He reached out and tapped Josten’s chest lightly. “Event A cannot reasonably be said to have any effect on Event B. Yet it defies reason that the two are not connected.”

“We know Vivian Tully is dead,” Josten picked up the thread and tapped Andrew’s chest back, then his own. “We strongly suspect Callie Burrell is dead. Drew Gardner, who has no discernible link to Vivian Tully, and therefore no motive, is the most likely suspect for her death. He does, meanwhile, have motive for his wife’s murder – their troubled marriage, financial issues, personal problems – but no apparent crime.”

“The question still remains,” Andrew said. “What are the odds the murder we think Gardner is responsible for on the subway platform would compel his wife to leave the marriage for a second time?” He reached out and touched both their chests again, flattening his palm against Josten’s sternum and keeping it there. “How does A lead to B?”

Josten looked down at his hand, then back at the wall. His eyes were far away and his mouth moved minutely as he thought, as if he were talking to himself. After a long five minutes of silence, Josten’s gaze snapped back into awareness. He smiled and gently took hold of Andrew’s hand. He pushed it back against Andrew’s chest and held it there, his own hand warm and gentle and sure.

“What if B led to A instead?”

***

“I don’t know how many times I have to tell you people, I didn’t kill my wife!” Drew Gardner cried wearily in the interrogation room that evening.

“Technically, that’s only one of the murders we’re accusing you of,” Doe said brightly. He pushed forward a still of Callie Burrell on the platform, holding her flowers, and the vague sketch of the
“This is the woman Callie talked about in her video,” Gardner said in confusion. “You think I had something to do with this?”

“Six months ago you had a beard like the one in that sketch, and the height and weight descriptions match. You also owned an army jacket with a distinctive patch on the right shoulder – as seen to be worn by the pusher in this footage.”

“I gave that jacket to Goodwill a long time ago,” Gardner sighed and shook his head.

“Did you give them your beard as well?” Doe asked. “Or did you shave it off so you’d look less like the man who murdered Vivian Tully? Earlier today, when my associate Mr Josten here suggested you might also be the pusher – I was confused. And that doesn’t happen very often.”

He looked over at Neil and smiled brightly. “But in my defence, the sequence of events as I understood them made no sense. You chose a woman at random and shoved her to her death. Several days later, the crime inspired your wife to leave you and solve all your marital problems in one swoop. Now, the odds that the first leads to the second – astronomical. Then Josten recalled that your wife had left you before.”

“The video,” Neil said at Doe’s gesture to step forward. “You claimed that Callie left it for you six months ago, but that was another lie. She made it for you a year and a half ago, the first time she left.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Gardner shook his head again.

“Pretend for a second I’m right,” Neil said and folded his arms. Doe raised his eyebrows minutely as if to say go on. “The video is 18 months old. In it, Callie references a woman pushed in front of a train holding flowers. ‘The woman with the flowers’, to wit. Logically, that would mean that 18 months ago there was another woman who died in the exact manner of Vivian Tully.”

“Her name was Anna Peters,” Boyd chipped in, and turned over a newspaper report with a grieved sigh. “She was standing on a platform in Harlem when two teenagers started messing around, and accidentally bumped her over the edge. It was a big story, covered by a lot of media outlets. Most of them mentioned that Anna was on her way to the hospital to visit a sick friend, holding flowers picked from her own garden.”

“Interesting, isn’t it?” Neil said. “The man who murdered Vivian Tully inexplicably gave her a bouquet a minute before he killed her. You gave her those flowers. Why? You thought you’d figured out a way to kill your wife and get away with it. You’d use the video she made for you the first time to explain her disappearance. All you needed now was a subway pushing in the present so the video would make sense. A pushing involving a woman holding flowers just a few days before Callie’s disappearance. Vivian Tully.”

“This is insane,” Gardner said wonderingly. “You’re just some – some know-nothing nobody with a crazy story. You want me to be guilty, so you’ve constructed this elaborate fiction to accommodate your theory.”

“You’re sticking to your story then?” Boyd asked. “On the record, you’re saying that you received that video from your wife six months ago?”

“I am repeating that on the record,” Gardner said loudly and clearly towards the voice recorder in the centre of the table.
“Well, we rather hoped you would,” Boyd said smoothly. “We were granted access to Callie’s emails this morning. Obviously, you also had access to those emails because you needed to prove the video came from her. You deleted the original email from her account – the one she sent a year and a half ago. You then re-sent it when the time was right. The thing is, we found it archived and all the metadata stored in the email company server.”

“We know and can prove beyond reasonable doubt that you received that video 18 months ago, a few days after Anna Peters was murdered, and that you killed Vivian Tully and Callie Gardner.” Neil said. He lifted his chin proudly and met Gardner’s gaze without a trace of doubt. “I’m not a know-nothing nobody with a crazy story, Mr Gardner. I’m Neil Josten, consulting detective, and I was right.”

***

“Better that time,” Josten said as Andrew climbed in the driver’s side and started rifling through the wires.

“Let me concentrate,” Andrew muttered, and felt out the right wire by touch. He pulled hard, and the shrill alarms cut off mid-squeal. He waited a second to see if anything else was going to happen, then settled smugly back into the seat when nothing did.

Josten raised his eyebrows and slowly clapped. “Wow.”

“Don’t be an asshole,” Andrew replied, but he wasn’t nearly as annoyed as he pretended. Josten wasn’t fooled, either.

They both looked down as their phones pinged simultaneously. Andrew got to his first and hummed at the message. “Renee’s coming over for dinner later.”

“Oh, cool,” Josten smiled. He bit his lip after a moment and spoke with as much grace and tact as a twelve year old. “If you want me to – uh – get out of the house for a bit. While Renee’s around. I can do that. I didn’t really think about it before, but. Um. I can do that, if you want some privacy. Together.”

Andrew watched him in vague disbelief as he squirmed uncomfortably. He was tempted to leave him to stew in silence, but decided to put him out of his misery, the oblivious idiot.


“I’m sorry?” Josten frowned in confusion. “Did I say something wrong? Boyd was saying… I dunno. I just thought maybe I’d not noticed?”

“Renee and I are mutually disinterested in that, and that’s never going to change.”

“Um. Well. Okay then. Sorry for bringing it up.” Josten said, and fiddled with his cuffs in embarrassment.

Andrew looked out the windshield and tapped his thumbs quickly on the steering wheel, in time with his heartbeat.

“I’m gay,” he said, as flatly and emotionlessly as he knew how.

“Oh, okay,” was all Josten had to say on the matter.

Andrew couldn’t help himself – he glanced at Josten, needing to see what was going on over his
face. There was no rejection or confusion or suspicion, and he met Andrew’s look with a small smile.

“I’m not *out* at the precinct,” he forced between his teeth, hating the word – hating the implications of otherness, strangeness, abnormality. But hating the fact it was still necessary in his life even more. “Don’t tell people.”

“Of course not. It’s not my business to say anything if you don’t want me to.”

Andrew nodded once and went back to staring out the windshield. He could feel Josten’s gaze on his face, staring away, but said nothing.

“What’s it like?” Josten asked eventually in a quiet and calm tone. Andrew heard the other question buried under the words, the question about balancing trauma and sexuality. He heard the careful delicacy and respect Josten was trying to offer him, stark contrast to his earlier clumsy attempts.

Andrew fingered his armbands and kept his gaze resolutely on the street. “Isolating,” he muttered to both questions. “A lot of work with not much payoff, it feels like most days. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Okay. I’m sorry I assumed, earlier.”

Andrew nodded again once and buzzed his window down so he could light up. He let the smoke and nicotine steady him and got through two cigarettes before Josten broke the quiet to make them balanced again.

“I don’t know what I am. I don’t think I’m the same as straight men, but I don’t think I fit anywhere else either. Maybe it was Lola, maybe it was Mom’s paranoia, maybe I’ve always been like this, but I just don’t… feel that way about anybody. Never have. I feel… wrong, sometimes.”

“Look up ‘asexual’ and ‘aromantic’ when we get home,” Andrew suggested blankly. “Might help, might not.”

“I will.”

They sat in silence for nearly ten minutes, giving each other space to adjust and centre themselves again. Andrew slowly puffed through another cigarette before checking his watch. He stubbed it on the outside of the car door and flicked the butt away.

“C’mon, or we’ll be late for our pay check. You haven’t heard Reynolds scream when somebody makes her late, let’s not expose you to that today.” Reynolds had slam-dunked the case just that morning; their evidence and her examination had sent Gardner flying into jail. He should be getting processed into his new cell right about then, Andrew knew.

Josten snorted and clicked on his belt as Andrew started up the car with a slightly more aggressive rev than was necessary. “*Our* pay check? Last I remember, I solved both cases with only minimal supervision. I reckon we should split Allison’s money eighty-twenty.”

“Sixty-forty,” Andrew bartered. “Seeing as I paid your bail.”

“Seventy-thirty,” Josten argued, just to be difficult. Andrew rolled his eyes and took the next corner slightly fast just to make him clutch at the belt. A slow smile worked its way onto his face as he drove. Things were okay. He might even have a fit of sentiment and say they were good.
Renee and Andrew spend some quality time.

Slight trigger warning for remembered rape (non graphic), and discussion about Robin Cross and her backstory.

“You’re in good form today,” Andrew panted as he ducked beneath a vicious swing of Renee’s arm and dodged back from her whip-fast kick.

“Thank you,” She replied with a blinding grin and a rabbit punch to his solar plexus.

He grunted and spun away, then used his momentum to kick her legs out from under her and pin her to the ground. He twisted her arms up behind her and leaned his knee on her thighs.

She laughed breathlessly and relaxed in his hold. “That’s four to you, five to me.”

He let her go after a second and helped her to her feet. They had a short break to wipe sweat away from their faces and hands, and Renee tied her hair back more tightly into a ponytail. He smirked to himself as he watched her gulp water – she was a far cry from her usual neat, conservative blouses and long skirts in gym shorts and loose white tank over a pink sports bra, all of them damp with sweat and bedraggled from fighting for the past hour. Her crucifix and other jewellery were piled up in the corner of the room with his armbands and both their shoes and change of clothes. Her legs and arms had scattered bruises on them from his fists, and under his clothes he was much the same. He always thought she looked better like this, but then he knew his opinion on the matter didn’t count.

He plucked at his own tee and sweatpants, feeling overheated and gross but satisfied with their fight. He shook out his hands and rubbed his knuckles briefly; Renee had asked for just fists today instead of knives and he was a little out of condition, with his knuckles starting to swell and bruise. He’d ice them later, no big deal.

“Again?” Renee asked with a dangerous glint in her eyes as she stood in a loose fighting stance.

He raised his fists and let her come to him, deadly quick and coldly furious. His brain dissolved into the adrenaline rush of attack, defend, brace, block and his thoughts narrowed down to the desperation of their bout. She was hitting harder than usual today and even his greater advantage of strength wasn’t helping him much; she didn’t seem to care how hard and punishing he hit back as long as she could get close inside his guard and land stinging blows on his head, chest, softer areas – ouch – and legs. His focus was all on her shoulders and hips as they struggled, watching for muscle tension and shifting of weight, but he got occasional glances of her face in his peripheries. She was grim and angry, a hard light in her eyes as if every blow were personal and she wouldn’t stop until he was bleeding out on the ground.
He knew she wasn’t really fighting him, so he didn’t take offence to the way she was fighting. She paid him the same courtesy when he called her for these afternoons of careful violence. It was a hard balance to strike between rough enough to be satisfying and careful enough not to actually damage, but they’d had this arrangement for a few years now and they were used to it. They trusted each other’s strength and control.

Her punch to his jaw snapped his head back and he stumbled off-balance – they usually avoided facial hits so as not to get odd looks or awkward questions at work. She pursued him as he retreated, relentless and vicious and he could do nothing but block her increasingly fast blows, battering his arms until she bodily flipped him with a wrestling hold around his waist and slammed him to the ground. He tried rolling and getting his knees under him but she drove a knee into his kidneys, prompting a pained gasp. She snarled something under her breath and grabbed his hair, shoving his face hard into the padded floor. Old fear spiked in his chest and he struggled with less of his usual control. She grabbed his hands and pinned them to the ground when he reached for her, slamming his wrist bones hard enough to shiver up his arms and for a horrendous moment he was back in his dorm room at Palmetto, concussed and bleeding as Drake—

“Yield,” he cried hoarsely, and she sprang off him instantly with a shocked gasp of her own.

For the space of five breaths, he couldn’t move, could only lie there with his wrists above his head, holding onto an imaginary headboard. He could taste blood on his teeth from her hit to his jaw, could imagine it pooling under his ear in Aaron’s pillow...

Then he took one more slow breath and straightened out his fingers. He got his arms under him and pushed away from the floor to sit instead, loosely holding onto his ankles as he sat cross-legged. He blinked and rolled his neck to get rid of the last lingering feelings of being held down. He ran his tongue over his teeth and swallowed the blood; his lip was split and bruised, would probably swell up soon enough.

Renee wordlessly handed him his water bottle and armbands. He pulled them on quickly, despite knowing he’d need to wash them later to get the sweat out of them, and felt his heartrate slow at the reassuring weight of his knives. Renee sat with him, close by but not crowding. He glanced over at her as he sipped water; she looked miserable with guilt and angry with herself.

“I’m sorry,” she said when he met her eyes. “I didn’t mean to go that far. I forgot myself. I think we should stop for today.”

“It was an accident,” he said blankly. He didn’t feel alarmed anymore, or panicked, or hurting. Everything felt distant, numb. He wanted to hate that too-familiar feeling, after living the last few years mostly free from it, but the emotion was too far away for the moment.

“I’m very sorry, Andrew.”

He nodded and finished off the rest of his water. It wasn’t the first time something like this had happened, and not just to him. It hadn’t happened in a while, though; for all that they were both fighters, close-quarters brawling could hit a lot of potential triggers for them both. It was one of the reasons they did this, after all. He forced his thoughts outward and looked around at the padded and mirrored walls of the small private gym room, set up for boxing or martial arts practice. He categorised his aches and bruises, and slowly breathed in the scent of both their sweat and the plasticky padding. His clothes were damp but soft on his skin, and his knives were heavy and familiar sitting over his scars. He grounded himself in the moment as Bee had taught him, and imagined she was here too to talk him out of his memories. He imagined hot cocoa and pictured glass figurines sparkling in the sunlight until the last of the old fear was gone, put away in a locked box for another day.
“Buy me some cake later and we’re even,” he said eventually. “Tell me what brought this on.”

Renee sighed and sipped her own water. “This is strictly in confidence. It’s a girl in my newest group,” she started to explain, eyes grim on her hands. “She was kidnapped when she was very young and held captive and abused for years. She only escaped when her captor decided she was too old for him, and made her help get a younger child in exchange for her freedom. The child was found dead recently. She was struggling before that, but now I’m afraid the guilt may be too much for her. I don’t know how to help her, and it’s killing me.”

Andrew thought briefly of Adam Kemper and pushed the association away. “It’s not your job to wave a magic wand and fix her.”

“I know that. I just wish there was more I could do,” Renee fretted. “I’ve been praying for her, and she’s come to church with me a few times. She seemed to find it peaceful, at least, though I don’t think she’s religious. I just… this job, Andrew.” She sighed and shook her head. “Sometimes I’m reminded just how cruel the world can be, and I feel so useless.”

“I know somebody who’d say it’s the people, not the world.”

She smiled weakly and nodded acknowledgement. “I hate feeling so useless with her. With most of these kids I can relate in some way, or point them in the right direction, or just listen to them. With her… I’m not giving up on her, but I don’t know what else I can do. Sometimes I feel like my faith is being tested,” she confessed with a frown. “When I talk to her about God’s love and how it helped me, she said she doesn’t understand how a God can exist that allows so much pain. Sometimes I catch myself agreeing, and it shames me that I falter.”

Andrew watched her thoughtfully; the numbness was breaking down now, worn away by his concern for her distress, and what her problem child must have gone through.

“I’m told faith isn’t supposed to be easy. That it’s part of the definition, or something.”

Renee smiled a little stronger at him. “I’m sorry, I know spirituality isn’t your thing. I didn’t mean to bring all this in here with me today.”

“I’d rather you moped at me in here than implode in the middle of a meeting. It’s fine.”

“Thank you, Andrew. I appreciate that, and today. And I’m sorry again for going too far.”

Andrew nodded and ran his fingers lightly over his armbands. He felt more centred, and his brain was buzzing with vague curiosity about this girl. He wanted to ask her name, see if he could investigate her abductor and maybe bring him to justice, but knew Renee wouldn’t breach confidentiality. He knew if he started looking into it himself she would consider it a violation as well, so he reluctantly let that idea go. If the girl wanted him investigated, he knew Renee would recommend him immediately. “Is she still turning up to meetings?” He asked instead.

“Yes,” Renee sighed. “She’s withdrawing, though.”

“Does she still talk to you?”

“Mmhmm.”

“Then maybe you are helping,” he pointed out blandly. “She might just want somebody she trusts nearby. Let her therapists stitch her back together – your job is to support her. And it seems like you are.”
Renee chewed her lip. “Do you think so?”

“Well I don’t know her, but if she’s not cutting herself off from you she must still want to talk. And you’re good at your job, and you care way too much about all your kids. She’ll pull through.” He gave her a calm look, holding her with his eyes.

She smiled tremulously and fiddled with her hair a bit. “Thank you, Andrew. I still think you might benefit from coming to a meeting every so often.”

He scrunched up his nose in derision and she laughed softly, well used to his attitude. “I don’t need it. And I’m not a teenager, either.”

“I didn’t necessarily mean as a participant,” she said. “Though that might be helpful on the harder days. I meant as a guest speaker. I think you could do a lot of good with these kids.”

He couldn’t help it – he snorted. “Yeah, right.”

“I’m serious,” she said with another gentle smile. “It’s been a joy to see you come so far in your own recovery in these past few years I’ve known you. You could be a source of inspiration to these young people – when you were younger, didn’t you want to know it was possible to get better?”

Andrew’s face twitched and he grunted noncommittally. When he’d been younger, he hadn’t wanted anything at all, other than maybe an end to the incessant nothingness of everyday life. He couldn’t imagine anyone wanting to know about his coping methods, unwise as they’d been. He didn’t think anyone could find inspiration from just… existing and finding a good therapist who did her job properly and waiting until things started to improve on their own. He wasn’t role model material.

“Well, think about it anyway,” Renee said and got to her feet. “It’s up to you. Shall we get some coffee? And cake for you, obviously.”

“That’s more like it,” he muttered as he stood as well. They gathered their things from the room and separated at the changing rooms to shower and get dressed. He lit up once they were outside the gym and headed to a little café, bags over their shoulders. He exhaled the first drag in a long plume of smoke and watched it blow away in the wind. He picked up the thread of an earlier conversation about the logistics of reseeding the world after nuclear fallout as they drank, and enjoyed two large slices of fudge cake on Renee’s dime.

“Thank you for today,” she sighed contentedly as he walked her to the subway station.

“Call me again if it gets bad,” he replied and squeezed her shoulder briefly.

She gave him a sweet smile and lightly kissed his cheek before walking off to her platform. He snorted at that bit of foolishness and made his way back home, where he found Josten curled up on the couch under Andrew’s blanket.

“Hm?” Josten mumbled as he woke, blinking sleepily up at Andrew. “What time is it?”

“Five,” Andrew replied and put his workout clothes in the washer, along with whatever bits of laundry he and Josten had waiting to go in as well.

“Oh,” Josten frowned. “I only meant to lie down, I didn’t think I’d fall asleep like that. How’s Renee?”

Andrew sat beside him as Josten rubbed the grit out of his eyes and ran a hand through his messy
hair. “Better now. She says hi.”

“Nice of her,” Josten smiled. “Let me see your hands?”

Andrew held them out for inspection and watched as Josten gently prodded the joints and flexed his fingers to check for fractures. His floppy hair fell down over his eyes again and Andrew just barely resisted the impulse to run his hands through it. As Josten stroked over his hands, Andrew thought that maybe Renee had been onto something. He certainly hadn’t dared hope anything like this would ever happen to him when he was younger. Maybe… maybe he had something to contribute to her little groups after all.
“I present to you the human condition in all its sordid glory,” Doe announced with a sweeping gesture to the very full holding cells.

“It’s a bunch of guys in a cell,” Neil replied. “We have a finite number of Friday nights in our lives – why are we spending one here instead of getting dinner or watching an Exy match or basically anything else?”

“What is it with you and stickball,” Doe muttered in mock-amazement. “And we’re here because it’s Friday night. That’s when the holding cells are at their busiest. You have a golden opportunity here to practice your skills, Josten. Each of these men, whether they realise it or not, is telling you the story of how they got here. It’s written in their bearing, their faces, their clothing.”

Neil pushed his hair out of his eyes – he would need to get it trimmed soon if he didn’t want to buy hairbands. He watched the men in the nearest cell pace about or sit on the benches in various states of sobriety and cleanliness. Then he looked around at the busy bullpen bristling with cops.

“So you want me to look at these guys and tell you what they did. There are like twenty cops in here.”

Doe held his gaze with a challenging lift of his eyebrows, looking buzzed from the challenge. “You find that intimidating, Josten?”

Neil scowled and turned back to the cells, looking over their occupants critically. He pointed at one man sitting down in the corner. “Plaid shirt, very nervous, obviously never been in jail before. Keeps fiddling with his wedding ring, feeling guilty about the hooker he picked up earlier.”

Doe grinned and made a quiz show ‘ding’ noise.

Neil pointed at another. “Popped collar college douche – drunk and disorderly, probably high on something from the sweating and dilated pupils. He’ll dry out in a couple hours and get bailed by a rich parent.”

Ding, ding.

Neil looked to another – an old-ish man covered in obscure tattoos who simply stared emptily into space. Neil faltered, looking him over top to toe.

“Want a hint?”

“No.”

“His crime involved a litter of purebred Yorkshire terriers,” Doe said helpfully, grinning away.

“I said no hints.” Neil frowned, looking for any traces of dog hair or accessories on the man and finding nothing. “…This might take a while. I’m gonna get some coffee. You want any?”
“Nah.”

Neil shrugged and started towards the instant coffee machine in the hall. “Hey,” one of the scantily-clad women in the other holding stalls called to him with a grin. “Do me next, poppet?”

“Solicitation,” he called back easily, and she laughed. He brushed off the little itch of unease at her assessing gaze and turned his attention to the coffee. He’d just secured a cup of questionable brown drips when a tall, well-built man came up to him, all easy smiles and handsome features.

“Gotta warn you, if you hit 'latte’ you won’t recognise what comes out,” the man said with a pleasant smile.

“I just got a coffee, thanks,” Neil replied with a quick, polite twitch of lips. He held the cup close in his hands and wondered who this guy was and what he wanted.

“Oh, I’m Detective Craig Baskin, I work a lot of weekends,” the guy offered cheerily, and held out his hand.


“You’re one of the consultants, right?” Baskin smiled, looking right in Neil’s eyes and shifting a bit closer. Neil nodded. “You work with the guy – you know, the short and angry one?”

Baskin made a measuring motion with his hand at about his own elbow height and Neil snorted quietly. “His name’s Andrew Doe.”

“Right, right! Slipped my mind for a minute there.” He laughed and leaned against the vending machine by the coffee machine. Neil mastered the urge to back away at the man’s lack of personal space, knowing it wouldn’t be polite. “Listen, um, I know you guys usually work the stuff Captain Wymack calls you for, but I caught this string of robberies in the West Village. Um, someone’s knocking over falafel carts.”

Neil raised his eyebrows, amused at the way the man laughed and rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. “It’s not the crime of the century, and it shouldn’t be that hard to clear, but we’re stuck. So, I thought I’d, uh, maybe hit you up, get another perspective. I hope that’s not too much to ask.”

He gestured at Neil’s cup of coffee. “I could always take you out someplace that has real beans so we could talk it over, whaddya say?”

Neil considered it as he took a sip of the regrettable coffee. “Mm. Sure, why not. Me and Doe would be happy to take a look at it for you, we haven’t got anything else on right now.”

“Oh,” Baskin replied, looking a little surprised for some reason. Then he smiled and leaned a bit closer. “I said hi to that guy once, he said I’d interrupted his train of thought and spent ten minutes chewing me out about it. I was thinking maybe, just you? We could work the case together, if you like. How about it, Neil?” He grinned easily, eyes hopeful. “It’d be nice to get to know you outside of work, you know?”

Neil didn’t understand what this guy’s deal was, but he seemed friendly and the case might be interesting. Another sip of the ‘coffee’ decided him and he smiled shyly up at Baskin. “Um. Okay, sure.”

“Awesome!” Baskin grinned. “I’ll just – uh – get the case file for you. I’ve got somewhere to be right now, so coffee tomorrow maybe?”

“Yeah, okay.”
“Great!” Baskin looked entirely too enthused about the whole thing as he walked away with a wave, but Neil supposed he was just relieved to have some help on his case. He tossed the rest of his coffee away with a grimace and went back to Doe, who gave him a cool look.

“What?” Neil asked.

Doe seemed to be debating how to answer, then shook his head and turned back to the cells.

“Nothing. You have any more ideas about terrier man?”

Neil sighed and got back to work, though it was an alright way to spend a Friday night, with Doe at his shoulder and his hands on an interesting puzzle.

They were at it for about an hour until Wymack got a call, then shot out of his office after a few seconds. “Boyd, Doe, Josten, with me,” he snapped pale-faced.

“What is it, Captain?” Boyd asked even as he scrambled for his coat.

“Some nutjob tried attacking my wife,” Wymack said as they left the precinct. “Apparently he was looking for me, I don’t know. I want you running point on this, Boyd.”

“Of course, sir,” Boyd said firmly as they all piled into the car. Neil exchanged a look with Doe and kept his questions to himself through the fast, tense drive to Wymack’s house.

When they got there, Wymack went running through the tape to the house and Neil, Doe and Boyd hung back to talk to the responding officer at the scene.

“Michaels, hey,” Boyd said to the man. “I’m gonna be working this one, can you give me the rundown?”

“I’m Jim Monroe, I live across the street,” the guy said.

“Hey Boyd,” the man replied, and gestured to the witness he’d been talking to. The man was dressed in workout clothes and heavily built with arms to rival Doe’s, and Neil noticed a military-style tattoo on his bicep. He thought briefly of the ones he’d seen on Doe, then told himself to focus as the witness started talking.

“I’m Jim Monroe, I live across the street,” the guy said.

“As in James Monroe?” Doe asked with a quirk of eyebrows.

The witness grimaced and rolled his eyes. “Yeah, like the fifth president. My dad was reading his biography when I was born. Anyway, I was working out in the garage earlier and heard some gunshots from the Wymack house. Then I saw a guy wearing a mask come running out, and he was halfway down the street by the time I got over here.”

“Can you describe him?” Boyd asked, writing it all down in his little notebook.

Monroe sighed and shook his head. “He took off his mask while he was running, but he was almost a hundred feet away and his back was to me. He had dark hair? Wish I could tell you more. Abby’s a sweet lady, and I got nothing but respect for David.”

“There’s blood on this car,” Neil said, looking at the vehicle that presumably belonged to Wymack’s wife; there was a smudge on the driver-side window, as if somebody had banged into it in the dark.

“Yeah, Dr Wymack said she grabbed up a gun when she realised she wasn’t alone in the house, ran away from him and fired off a few warning shots from the bedroom,” Michaels filled them in.
“Brave lady. Said she hit him, and there’s blood on the floor in there, but he could still run so she probably grazed him.”

“Boyd,” Another officer called from the house. “She’s ready to talk.”


They followed him through to Wymack’s house, looking all around at the place as they made their way to the kitchen. Wymack was sitting at the table holding the hand of a woman with long blonde hair and a kind face, though she looked understandably stressed. Wymack was appearing calmer now he knew his wife was okay, but they held each other’s hand as if afraid to let go.

“How’re you holding up?”

“I’m still a bit rattled,” she replied wryly and squeezed Wymack’s hand tighter. “It’s good to see you, Matt. You haven’t been over for dinner in ages. How’s Dan?”

“Oh, she’s in fine form,” Boyd smiled. “Going out of her mind a bit with wedding plans, but otherwise good.”

The woman – Abby Wymack, Neil supposed – smiled vaguely back at him then looked at himself and Doe. “Hello.”

“This is Andrew Doe and Neil Josten, our consultants,” Boyd explained as they leaned against the cabinets and nodded polite hellos. “They’ll be helping out on this case. Do you feel ready to talk, Abby?”

She took a steadying breath and nodded, so Boyd sat down on the other side of the table with his notebook out.

“It just seemed like it happened so fast,” she said in a tightly-controlled voice. “He was already inside when I came home, sitting in the living room. I don’t even know how he got in.”

“You didn’t have the alarm on?” Wymack asked, quiet but intent. His eyes flashed and jaw tightened when Abby shook her head regretfully; it had the feeling of an old argument.

“He had this mask on,” Abby continued composedly. Neil was quietly impressed by the steel in her – she’d been through an incredibly traumatising event, and she was holding it all together admirably. He thought briefly of his mother, then shoved the memories away hard and leaned a bit on Doe’s shoulder. “I could describe it to a composite artist. He had a Glock handgun, a .21, I think. He was six-two, maybe 170 pounds, and I would definitely recognise his voice if I heard it again.”

She paused to tuck her hair behind her ears with hands that didn’t shake at all. “He kept saying, ‘where is your husband?’ Over and over. I ran to the bedroom and locked the door to buy myself some time. David keeps his spare gun in a locked safe in the bedroom, a .38, so I loaded it and fired three times through the door when I heard him trying to break down the door. I heard him cry out in pain and run back down the stairs and out the house. I opened the door, saw the blood, and that’s when I called 911.”

“You’ve been incredibly brave, Abby. I can think of some cops who would’ve lost their cool in that situation, but not you,” Boyd said with a small smile. At that kindness, Abby’s lip suddenly trembled and her calm mask almost crumbled. Wymack leaned in and gently kissed her hair, his hands soft and protective as he held her close. Neil quickly looked away, embarrassed to see such tenderness from his gruff boss, in his home. It felt far too intimate to be observed. For some reason
he thought of Doe rubbing his back as he’d puked after seeing Romero Malcom’s body, how he’d held Neil’s neck in the holding cell after breaking into Drew Gardner’s car. He decided his concentration was shot from not having any decent coffee, and it was getting late.

“Before tonight, had either of you noticed anything odd?” Boyd asked gently once Abby had regained her composure, though Wymack kept his lips pressed to her hair. “Cars you didn’t recognise, anyone who seemed unusually interested in the Captain?”

Abby shook her head, and Wymack sat back a bit with a complicated expression on his face. “No,” he said quietly. “But I’m not living here at the moment.”

They shied away from each other awkwardly, both a bit flushed and uncomfortable. Boyd blinked rapidly a few times and seemed to think twice about his next question.

“For how long?” Doe asked dispassionately into the sticky silence.

“About a month,” Wymack replied tightly.

Boyd took that down in silence and Neil fidgeted with his cuffs, stressed from the tension in the room. Doe lightly plucked at his sleeve in a quiet suggestion to calm down. Officer Michaels knocked hesitantly on the door frame.

“Dr Wymack, your mother just got here. She’d like to see you.”

“Ah, we’re done for now,” Boyd offered. “I’ll let you know if we have any more questions, Abby.”

“Thank you, Matt,” Abby replied with trembling dignity, and left to see her mother.

Wymack got to his feet, closed-off and business-like once more. “Now look, my wife’s the victim here and I’m the intended target so obviously I can’t interfere in the case or give any orders. So let me be clear I’m not speaking as your boss when I suggest you rush the prints and serology. If this guy’s got a vendetta against a cop, there’s a good chance he’s in the system.”

Boyd nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Wymack started to leave, and Doe followed him out. Neil hung back, but he could still read Doe’s lips from inside the kitchen.

“Captain,” Doe was saying quietly, his expression blank but respect in his posture. “You know Josten and I will devote our full attention to this case. We might need to access your files – personal and professional. There’s a good chance we’ll need to examine your life very… intimately.” Doe tilted his head a bit. “Would you be comfortable with us knowing that kind of information? Considering our deal, and your extension of that to Josten?”

Wymack sighed and nodded. “I trust you, Doe. Just – do whatever you have to and help Matt catch this guy.”

Doe narrowed his eyes minutely, and Neil knew he wasn’t comfortable with such an unfair exchange. “I’ll give you a few answers at the end of this, if you want.”

Wymack gave him a considering look, then nodded before leaving to talk to Officer Michaels. Neil turned away before Doe caught him ‘eavesdropping’ and went to talk to Boyd.

***
“Did you know Wymack turned down a promotion that would have made him the youngest detective in the NYPD?” Josten asked later that night as they sat sifting through Wymack’s professional files and personal items, spread all over their living room. “He didn’t want to work for Internal Affairs.”

“Mm,” Andrew replied as he looked through Wymack’s laptop. “He’s also, judging by his emails, surprisingly tolerant of forwarded videos of kittens sneezing, among other things.”

Josten snorted and Andrew sneakily replayed the last one with the sound off. Josten looked down at the folders in his lap and fingered the pages listing Wymack’s qualifications and achievements in the police. “He never talks about any of these things. Like here – his father died in a prison riot a decade ago. I noticed he doesn’t talk about his family, or have any personal pictures in his office, but still. I guess it’s not too surprising he has his own secrets to keep. I mean, no one knew he was separated until tonight.”

Andrew watched Josten’s wistful expression as he leafed through the pages. “I knew,” Andrew disagreed, and shrugged at Josten’s surprised look. “He’s been arriving earlier in the morning, leaving later, stopped bringing homemade lunches or taking personal calls.”

Josten frowned at that. “He’s your friend, shouldn’t you have said something to him?”

“Why would I?” Andrew replied blankly. “His work hasn’t suffered – if anything, he’s been more productive, and our relationship is strictly professional. He keeps out of my personal shit, I keep out of his.”

Josten gave him a sceptical look that spoke volumes, and Andrew swallowed down a little hit of annoyance; Josten was getting far too deep under his skin these days, and could spot his white lies too easily.

“Honestly, I’m surprised it’s taken this long for his marriage to falter,” Andrew continued doggedly. “He’s an excellent detective.”

“What does that have to do with it?”

“Detection is a calling, not a job,” Andrew replied, gesturing between them. “Doesn’t exactly leave time left over to maintain the elaborate ruses of a relationship, never mind the intricate torture of marriage.”

Josten was frowning properly at him now, looking just a bit hurt for whatever reason. “That’s really how you feel?”

“How else would you describe it?” Andrew replied, tapping his nails on the laptop. He huffed derisively, his thoughts dark with memories of his many foster parents, how Steven would lash out at his wife and kick her out of the house then go to Andrew’s bedroom to feel better, the fights between Cass and Richard that had made it all too easy for Drake to get him alone for an hour, of Aaron’s old girlfriends, the broken promises and Katelyn’s interference. “‘Dating’. ‘Marriage’. An unnatural arrangement which forces its participants into unhealthy proximity. An accumulation of petty fights and resentful compromises which slowly transforms both parties into howling, neurotic versions of themselves who can no longer stand each other.”

“I think you’re biased,” Josten said quietly, looking down at his hands.

“And your parents were such paragons of wedded bliss?”

Josten flinched, and Andrew’s annoyance instantly transformed to sickly guilt. He rubbed over his
face and gave a long sigh. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to – sorry.”

Josten shrugged and picked at his sleeves.

“Yeah, I am biased. And it’s hard not to be resentful when I know it’s something I can never have,” Andrew said shortly.

That made Josten look up at least. “What do you mean? I thought same-gender marriage just got legalised a little while ago?”

Andrew glanced away from him back to the screen, his heart stuttering a little at the easy acceptance Josten gave him that had never faltered since their conversation about it. “No, not that. I meant because I can’t let people in. I can’t – I don’t like to be touched. Or have these kinds of long emotional conversations, or give up my work or my past. Hard to imagine anyone sticking around for nothing.”

He folded his arms and traced over his scars through his armbands. He’d made progress with the few guys he’d ‘dated’ in the past few years, tolerated their hands during sex, but there had always been a line that they got frustrated at not being able to cross, either physical or sentimental. When they’d asked for more, turned it into a deal-breaker, it had been easy to end things. It was much simpler just to get off with Roland when he wanted to without bothering with all the ‘dating’ shit.

Josten just kept looking at him, a little sad now instead of annoyed. There was no pity in him, just understanding. “Well, neither do I,” he offered back. “I’d like to think it’s possible, though.”

Andrew kept his gaze on Wymack’s emails.

“I’ve been looking into those labels you told me about, before,” Josten said hesitantly. “Found some message boards or whatever. People sharing their experiences. I saw some posts about people who aren’t into sex or romance at all, but they’ve found somebody who gets that and makes them happy regardless, or somebodies. Like a… a life-partner, I think one person said. I don’t know. It’s all still a bit confusing to me. But maybe it’s not so impossible.”

Andrew didn’t reply. Josten got up and carefully perched on the arm of Andrew’s chair, smiling down at him hesitantly. “I’m sorry you feel lonely. I don’t know if it means much, but I’m your friend. I’m here.”

You’re a fucking pipedream is what you are.

Andrew sighed and squeezed Josten’s wrist briefly in thanks. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore right now.”

“Well, I found about twenty cases so far with perps that fit the description Dr Wymack gave us,” Josten said, fidgeting absently with Andrew’s sleeve. “I’ll keep sifting through the captain’s old arrest records, if you want to take a look at them.”

“No, not necessary,” Andrew replied and forced his thoughts back to the case. “I was fairly certain that listing Wymack’s enemies via his casework would be pretty pointless, and now I’m all but positive. The kind of criminal the captain pursues tends to be intelligent, malicious, methodical. The kind that knows attacking a policeman or being branded as a ‘cop-killer’ is very inadvisable for a life on the run. I believe we’re hunting a different kind of person – we’re looking for a rash, hot-headed idiot. Someone like Dustin Bishop.”

“And who is Dustin Bishop?” Josten asked, and leaned into Andrew’s shoulder a bit to see the screen as Andrew navigated through the emails. Andrew ended up with a hand on Josten’s knee,
not that Josten seemed to notice or particularly mind. His arm curled casually over Andrew’s shoulders to support his leaning, his hand dangling down over Andrew’s collarbones. It felt distractingly… nice.

“There was little of interest in the inbox, so I started going through Wymack’s spam folder,” Andrew replied once his thoughts were more in order. “Bishop has been sending the captain fan letters, I suppose you could call them, for a while now. They get more personal and entitled over time.”

“Hey buddy, can I still call you buddy even though you never write back?” Josten read aloud from one of the more recent emails. “I don’t know what your problem is, but I know I’m getting upset. Sounds like a stalker.”

“Sounds like the sort of person to catch a bullet during a botched home invasion, don’t you think?”

“Mm. I’m guessing we’ll be paying him a visit tomorrow morning?”

“Your deductive ability is truly breathtaking, Josten.”

Josten grinned and levered himself to his feet, his hand passing along Andrew’s shoulders to steady himself. He stretched his back out briefly, and Andrew saw slender hips above the low waist of his sweatpants, the pale edge of a scar and two tantalising dimples either side of Josten’s coccyx. He opened up one of the cat videos to distract himself.

“I’m gonna run out for some food. What do you feel like?”

“Chinese.”

“Alright, I’ll be back in ten.”

Josten grabbed his shoes, coat, wallet and keys and headed out with a happy little wave of his hand.

“Well shit,” Andrew muttered and blew out a harsh breath. His shoulders tingled from Josten leaning close like that and his stomach felt all strange.

Just focus on the case, he told himself, and dialled Wymack. “I’m sure you saw the email, but the lab did a rush on the prints on the car, but they all belonged to your wife. The intruder must have been wearing gloves when he ran into it.”

“I know,” Wymack sighed with a rush of static. “And there was no match to the blood in CODIS. You really think I’m not monitoring my emails right now?”

“I thought you might be busy with cat videos,” Andrew replied lightly, and Wymack swore.

“Why are you calling me right now, Doe?”

“Personal question you might not like, figured it would be better to ask somewhere other than the precinct.”

“Alright, shoot.”

“Are you sure the separation isn’t connected to the attempt on your life?”

Wymack swore some more at him, but Andrew waited him out patiently.

“Okay, I guess we’re going there,” Wymack muttered. “It’s a trial separation. It’s – it’s no big deal.
She just got promoted to being head of Emergency Care at the hospital, and it’s a lot of pressure and stress on her, and with my position too… everything feels a bit different when we’re both so busy all the time. Abby wants some alone time, so I’m giving it to her. That’s the whole story. No affairs or jealous lover angle to work, alright?”

“Alright,” Andrew replied mildly. “Thanks for clearing that up. Are you thinking of your questions for me?”

“I got a few,” Wymack replied. “If you’re really sure.”

Andrew ground his teeth for a minute. “I respect you, Captain,” he replied sharply. “And you deserve some personal answers for all the favours you’ve done me. So ask when we’re done with the case.”

“I’ll hold you to it, then.”

“Obviously,” Andrew replied, and hung up. He sat restlessly for a few minutes, then decided that between Josten and Wymack, his tolerance for emotional speeches was officially exhausted for the day, and got up to fetch some whiskey.

***

“Dustin Bishop,” Doe called the next morning as he rapped on the door. “Would you open the door? We’d like to talk to you about your correspondence with David Wymack.”

They waited for about a minute, but heard nothing of anybody moving around inside the apartment. They pressed close to the door and Neil frowned after a few moments. “You hear water running in there or is it just me?”

They shared a look, then stepped back and pulled out their lock picks with identical motions.

“After you,” Doe said after a short pause. Neil grinned and set to work. He had the door open in a couple of seconds and they walked through to the bathroom – where they saw Bishop lying on the floor, bleeding out from his shoulder and hardly breathing while the tap ran on and on.

“Gunshot,” Neil said, snapping into focus and crouching beside the man. He inspected the wound rapidly and pressed his hands to it tightly after briefly dousing them in the sterilising alcohol on the side. “No exit wound I can see, and he’s lost a lot of blood. I’ll keep the pressure on, you get a needle, thread and some bandages, I can dig out the bullet—”

“Neil, I’m calling an ambulance,” Doe interrupted him calmly. “Just keep the pressure on, alright?”

Neil blinked and felt an embarrassed flush work up his chest to his ears. “Oh. Right.”

Doe finished calling the ambulance then knelt beside him on the wet floor, rolled up his sleeves and helped keep pressure on the wound, monitoring the slow pulse of Bishop’s heart, his pale clammy skin and rattling breaths.

“A needle and thread, really?”

Neil cleared his throat. “Yeah, well. Basic but it works, believe me.”

He could feel Doe’s eyes heavy on his face. “Did she give you any anaesthetic?”
Neil smiled humourlessly. “A couple pulls of whiskey or vodka did the trick, especially when I was younger. I kind of built up a tolerance as I got older.”

“And what about the time you got shot?”

Neil felt his mouth twist bitterly. “A bottle or two over a couple of days. It wasn’t safe to go to the hospital.”

Doe muttered something heated and angry under his breath that Neil pretended he hadn’t heard, and they knelt in silence until the paramedics arrived and whisked Bishop away to the ER. They cleaned up their hands and pants as best they could, and looked around the apartment as they waited for Boyd to arrive. The walls were a testament to obsession – absolutely covered in newspaper cuttings, blog pages and press releases of the best and brightest of Wymack’s achievements, going all the way back to his rookie days. There were even a couple of pictures of him and his wife. Neil didn’t want to think how the guy had got a copy of their wedding photo, and shuddered.

“I used to do cracker dust to soften withdrawal from my meds,” Doe offered quietly in the lull to keep them even. “Stopped the shakes and the vomiting, anyway. I never really got high from it, my meds were too strong for it to register.”

Neil watched him considering for a minute, choosing his words carefully. “They sound… kind of scary. To be strong enough to cause addiction like that.”

“I’m not gonna argue with you there,” Doe muttered. “I hated them.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

Doe slanted him a blank look. “I’m sorry you got stitched up with only whiskey to help.”

Wymack and Boyd’s arrival halted that conversation in its tracks. Boyd waved his phone at them as he walked in. “That was the hospital, they pulled a .38-caliber slug out of Bishop’s right shoulder in the operating room. He’s stable, but he won’t be awake for questioning for a while.”

He turned to Wymack. “We should get the preliminary serology results soon, see if he matches the blood found at your house, sir.”

“Don’t waste time waiting, the blood won’t match.” Doe said.

Wymack scowled and gestured at the walls. “This guy’s got my life on display here, and the doctors just pulled my wife’s bullet outta his shoulder.”

“I don’t think that was your wife’s bullet, I think he shot himself,” Doe shook his head. “He has a .38 revolver on the bathroom counter there, but not a Glock revolver that the assailant was carrying into the house with him. It’s not too hard to listen in to police radio transmissions, I do it myself frequently. For an obsessive of this degree, it wouldn’t be difficult for him to find out the details of the gun used, or to overhear the directives to local hospitals to watch out for a man with a bullet graze to the shoulder.”

“You think he wanted to confess to a crime he didn’t commit?” Boyd asked with raised eyebrows.

“It would certainly remove a few degrees of separation between himself and the object of his obsession,” Doe shrugged, his eyes on a sick-looking Wymack. “To possibly meet the captain, maybe be interrogated by him? Happy day. See, Josten? I told you excellence has consequences, and this is just one of them.”
Neil rolled his eyes. “I think we’re unlikely to get stalkers with all our work kept anonymised, but thanks for the heads-up. I feel so much more resigned to our chances for matrimony, happy?”

Wymack and Boyd both looked at him in bewilderment and he shrugged uncomfortably. “You really need context for that. Just – never mind.”

“…Anyway,” Boyd said after a moment. “The lack of the Glock doesn’t mean he didn’t do it, he might have just ditched the gun as he ran.”

“I think the fact he shot himself in the wrong shoulder kind of rules him out,” Doe said with a heavy dose of sarcasm and a bright smile. “The blood on the car was on the driver’s side window where it was pulled up on the drive, left by the attacker as he ran away from the house up the street to the left. Therefore, the wound was in his left shoulder. Bishop shot himself in the right shoulder.”

Boyd’s phone pinged with an update and he sighed. “It’s the lab – the blood doesn’t match, wrong typing. Bishop’s not our guy, though at least now you’ll be able to slap him with a restraining order.”

Wymack swore and paced the apartment, staring at the details of his life collected so carefully.

“Look, Captain,” Boyd said in a soothing voice, reaching out to grip his arm. “I know it’s frustrating, but whoever broke into your house knows we’re looking for him, knows we have a protective detail on you and Abby. He’s not getting violent again.”

***

A call from the morgue two hours later disproved Boyd’s theory nicely.

“His name is Sam Clennon,” Boyd sighed as they looked down at the body on the metal table. “According to the evidence, you have a friend in common, Captain.”

“I’ve never seen this guy before,” Wymack shook his head and folded his arms. “Never heard his name. You’re sure he was killed by the same man that threatened Abby?”

“Sure? No,” Boyd grimaced and pulled up a short video clip on his tablet. “But a security camera outside Clennon’s building caught this around ten thirty last night.” They watched the clip of a man in a black mask vaulting over the chain-link fence into Clennon’s garden. “I already showed this to Abby, and she’s pretty positive it’s the same guy. And Clennon was shot with a Glock .21. I figure if this is our guy, this is what he had planned for you.”

Neil frowned at the body just laying there, seeing Wymack there instead for a sickly moment.

“Obviously last night wasn’t the first time somebody tried to kill Clennon,” Wymack said, gesturing to the many old scars on the man’s torso.

“Ex-military, yeah,” Doe nodded and pointed at a few. “Shrapnel wounds. And sun damage to his hands and face. Afghanistan?”

Boyd consulted his notepad and nodded. “Yep, he was between tours, got back a few weeks ago.”

“That’s a bullet wound,” Neil added quietly, pointing to a very familiar puckered scar on the man’s arm. “And he’s somehow managed to get stabbed, look here.” He pointed at another scar, a raised white line that sent shivers up his arms reflexively. “Looks like a narrow blade, but went deep. He’s lucky it didn’t sever any major arteries or nick any organs. Looks precise, calculated to hurt
or incapacitate by somebody with some kind of anatomical knowledge.” He hugged his arms to his chest and took a quiet few breaths.

Doe eyed him for a second and leaned in closer to the body. “It’s almost quaint. Most injuries in warzones these days are from IEDs or gunshots. Stabbing suggests close-quarters, something personal. You’re sure you’ve never seen this man before, Captain?”

“Never,” Wymack replied.

“Hm.” Doe tapped his shoes on the floor restlessly. “It’s possible there’s a connection between Clennon and you that you don’t remember. His death, while unfortunate for Boyd’s theory, must be seen as progress. We now know the killer has an agenda not limited to you. More data for us, hm Josten?”

Neil nodded, absently tracing the outline of his bullet scar through his shirt. “I’ll meet you back here in a while, I promised I’d look over something today.”

Doe raised his eyebrows a little but didn’t push for details and just flapped his hands. “Off you go, then. Shoo.”

Neil smiled and let his hands drop back into his pockets. As he left, he heard Doe asking Boyd and Wymack about any military connections in more detail. Neil made his way out to the bullpen and swallowed down a sigh; he didn’t really want to bother with the falafel cart case when Wymack was still potentially in danger, but he’d promised, and he told himself it would be good to get some more practice at solo work. Doe hadn’t objected, so he might as well give it a try.

He found Baskin’s desk after asking around, and lightly knocked his knuckles on it when he found it. Baskin was turned around in his chair talking to another detective, but he spun around at the noise and gave Neil a brilliant smile.

“Oh hey there!”

“Hi,” Neil replied, smiling back a little more warmly than usual due to the bright friendliness of Baskin’s grin; he couldn’t help but relax a little. He seemed like a genuinely nice man, and Neil was trying to let go of his more paranoid instincts. “Good time for that coffee?”

“Oh my God, yes of course!” Baskin grinned and grabbed his coat. “I was just wondering if I should ask around for your number to ask just that. Let’s get going then.”

Neil fell into step beside him, ignoring the raised eyebrows and muttered conversations that followed them. He figured people were just surprised to see him anywhere but at Doe’s shoulder. Baskin was chatty, he discovered as they walked out the precinct and down a few blocks to a particular coffee house. He asked Neil all about himself, the things he got up to in his spare time, what he thought of the Exy season so far… Neil gave polite answers that wouldn’t raise any flags about his life before joining Wymack’s team, talked a bit more enthusiastically about Exy, and tried to redirect the conversation back to Baskin as much as he could.

To his surprise, Baskin insisted on paying not just for both their coffees, but also lunch for them both.

“Don’t worry about it, it’s my treat.” Baskin smiled and shook his head when Neil tried giving him money. “Really, I don’t mind, and I know vending machine lunches can get super depressing after a while. If you’re really that bothered, you could always take me out for lunch another time, hey?”

“Um. Alright,” Neil said with a shy smile, not used to such pleasantness. Boyd was all sunshine
with him, but this guy was like a supernova.

Baskin rested his chin in his hand and smiled back as he stirred his drink, watching Neil’s face contentedly. Neil could feel his cheeks warming. “What?”

“I didn’t mean to stare,” Baskin smiled. “You’re just really sweet, that’s all.”

Neil had no idea what to do with that statement, so he smiled quickly in acknowledgement and sipped his coffee – damn, that was miles better than anything from the station. It reminded him of Doe’s fancy grinder and percolator at home, and he cupped the mug to inhale the steam for a minute.

“So, um, about the falafel carts,” He said when Baskin just kept smiling at him. “I wanted to let you know it’s gonna take a bit more time before I can dig into the file, what with everything happening with Captain Wymack, but I’m happy to go over things verbally for now, if that’s not wasting your time too much?”

“Oh – didn’t Doe talk to you?”

“What?”

“He dropped the file off at my desk this morning,” Baskin explained. “Said you’d solved it already. Thank you, by the way. I had no idea you’d crack it so fast, we arrested the guy just a few hours ago.”

“Oh. It – right.” Neil frowned down at his plate, confused. “No, he didn’t tell me he’d solved it already. I wanted to go over it today.”

“Well at least we have more time just to get to know each other without work stuff, right?” Baskin smiled encouragingly.

“Sure,” Neil replied more out of reflex not to cause trouble than because he genuinely agreed; he could feel his temper starting to heat at Doe stealing his case, but he wasn’t going to turn down a literal free lunch in nice company. To cover up his annoyance, he asked Baskin about his own hobbies and half-listened as Baskin waxed lyrical about his painting projects and his community Exy team.

It was a nice lunch, Neil reflected as they lingered over their empty coffee cups. He hadn’t really talked to many people outside of Boyd and Gordon and the other detectives on Wymack’s particular team, hadn’t really talked to anybody for well over a year before he stumbled into Doe’s life. It was nice just to listen to something not related to mobsters or murder or tragedy. And Baskin seemed to understand Neil’s quietness and didn’t push too much, just encouraged him to share with inoffensive questions that seemed genuinely aimed towards knowing him better.

“I think I should be getting back,” Neil said eventually, checking the time.

“Ah, probably,” Baskin nodded and rolled his eyes regretfully. They pulled on their coats and stepped out together; while they’d been eating, the wind had picked up and was gusting about, setting scarves and coats flapping.

Neil scowled and tucked his hair behind his ears over and over again to stop it whipping into his eyes. Baskin laughed genially when he saw the problem and stepped in front of Neil to shield him a bit from the wind.

“Here, let me,” he offered with a mischievous glint in his eyes. He reached out and very gently
stroked a lock behind Neil’s ear, then leaned down and pressed a warm kiss to Neil’s lips.

Neil froze.

Baskin chuckled quietly and stroked his hair again. “Sorry, was that too forward of me?”

“I – what?” Neil said weakly. His heart was jumping in his chest and for a second he thought his sandwich would make a reappearance. “Why did you do that?”

Baskin let go of him and stepped back, looking concerned. “Because you’re really fun and sweet and I had a great time with you today, and I’d really like to do it again sometime? I didn’t mean to startle you, I’m sorry.”

Neil’s gut clenched as the pieces all came together. “This – this was a date. Oh, shit. I didn’t – fuck.”

“Yes?” Baskin looked at him for another moment, then his cheery expression dropped off. “Oh… oh. You just thought it was a work meeting, right?”

Neil nodded and pressed the back of his hand to his mouth for a minute, not liking how the taste of Baskin’s coffee was lingering. His hands were starting to shake and he felt so embarrassed and uncomfortable, like his skin was pulling in multiple directions. He rubbed anxiously through his hair, trying to control his breathing. He didn’t know what was wrong but he felt so bad and itchy and squirmy and mortification was giving him hot and cold flushes and he just felt… ill.

“Still – it was nice, right? You had a good time?” Baskin tried valiantly. “I’m really sorry if I wasn’t clear enough. But would you maybe… would you like to go out properly sometime? As a real date?”

Neil considered it for a second, thinking of how pleasant it had been, how non-pushy Baskin had been, how understanding… but the thought of doing it again as a date, of all the expected touching and kissing and talking had his mind shrieking in alarm. He shook his head rapidly.

“Look, Baskin, I – I had a nice time,” he stammered, his gaze flickering between the street and his own shoes. And oh fuck, his eyes were stinging and his face was on fire and he just wanted to run, run, run… “Y-You’re very, very nice, and kind, a-and fun, but – no. I’m not – I don’t – I’m sorry.”

He fumbled some bills out of his pocket and held them out in a visibly shaking hand. “Th-Thank you for lunch. You’re nice. But no. S-sorry.”

“Oh,” Baskin said in a soft, sad voice. He took the money carefully and tucked it into his pocket. “Okay. I’m sorry to have upset you, I really am. Are you okay, Neil?”

“It was nice, right? You had a good time?” Baskin tried valiantly. “I’m really sorry if I wasn’t clear enough. But would you maybe… would you like to go out properly sometime? As a real date?”

Neil considered it for a second, thinking of how pleasant it had been, how non-pushy Baskin had been, how understanding… but the thought of doing it again as a date, of all the expected touching and kissing and talking had his mind shrieking in alarm. He shook his head rapidly.

“Look, Baskin, I – I had a nice time,” he stammered, his gaze flickering between the street and his own shoes. And oh fuck, his eyes were stinging and his face was on fire and he just wanted to run, run, run… “Y-You’re very, very nice, and kind, a-and fun, but – no. I’m not – I don’t – I’m sorry.”

He fumbled some bills out of his pocket and held them out in a visibly shaking hand. “Th-Thank you for lunch. You’re nice. But no. S-sorry.”

“Oh,” Baskin said in a soft, sad voice. He took the money carefully and tucked it into his pocket. “Okay. I’m sorry to have upset you, I really am. Are you okay, Neil?”

“I’m fine,” Neil said tightly as panic clawed up his throat and before Baskin could say anything else Neil was gone, walking as fast as he could with his head tucked down, weaving between crowds and dodging strollers and jumping over traffic cones.

So stupid, he thought miserably. He just wanted the world to swallow him and his thoughts to quiet down and his stomach to settle, he’d never felt so twisted-up by anything so nice or innocent and didn’t know how to cope, how to feel, how to think… He just wanted somewhere quiet and calm, somebody who would understand – he wanted Doe to draw him out of his head, put a hand on his neck and tell him to calm down, tell him it was okay, it was rude of him to steal a weekend, and to just breathe…

But thinking of Doe made him remember the stupid fucking falafel cart case, and in a heartbeat his shame and anxiety had been eaten up by his temper running hot and wild, raging through his chest.
until his lungs burned. He took all the awful shit in his head and turned it outwards, focussed on how Doe had stolen his case, his case, and never said a goddamn word about it.

He found Doe in one of the conference rooms back at the station and smacked the door closed behind himself. Doe looked up from his files with a mild expression on his face.

“You solved the case Baskin gave me?” Neil demanded.

Doe blinked slowly. “Unless you’re referring to the ice cream company, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Detective Baskin,” Neil snapped, his hands shaking uncontrollably so he clenched them into fists. “He asked me to look into a string of robberies, I brought the file home with me yesterday.”

“Oh, that Baskin,” Doe said, and fucking grinned like everything was so funny. “Honestly I think of most of the detectives here as ‘not Boyd’.”

“You stole my case!”

Doe’s humour morphed into a frown. “I was up late after you went to bed last night. You’d left the file on the table, and I needed a palate cleanser to think more clearly.”

“A palate cleanser?” Neil repeated, coldly furious.

“The solution presented itself pretty quickly, was I supposed to keep it to myself?” Doe returned, irritation creasing his brow and he flipped his files closed with a hard motion of his hand.

“It was my case, Andrew!”

“Point of fact, it was Detective Baskin’s case. You were consulting – so was I.”

“I didn’t ask for your help,” Neil said through gritted teeth. “I wanted to do it.”

Doe sighed shortly. “Well I’m sorry for stepping on your toes, Neil, but it wasn’t exactly a diamond heist. It was busywork, far too mundane for you to bother with. Really nothing more than an excuse for Baskin to flirt with you.”

Neil didn’t want to think about that – didn’t want to think about the look Doe had given him after talking to Baskin, about the comments and raised eyebrows in the bullpen, his own mortification over not understanding, about Baskin’s touch and kiss. So he latched onto his temper for dear life and let his mouth run away with him.

“Is that was this is really about?” Neil demanded, folding his arms tight to control the shaking in his whole body. “You’re so bitter about being alone and lonely you don’t want me talking to anyone, having anyone flirt with me, so you took my case to stop me talking to him?”

“Don’t be a fucking idiot,” Doe said, lurching to his feet with a scowl. Neil noted somewhere in the back of his mind that even with his temper up, Doe refused to yell at him. “I don’t care what you do, who you flirt with, who you sleep with if you do. It’s none of my business and I wouldn’t do that. You fucking – you really think I’d do something like that, out of – what? Pettiness? No. No.” He shook his head and jabbed a finger in Neil’s direction, looking livid. “No, fuck you Neil, fuck you for thinking I’d do something so messed up and controlling after everything we’ve both been through. I took the case because it was boring and easy to solve and I needed a distraction because the Captain’s case is being so difficult. It had fuck-all to do with you or Baskin or whatever you’re trying to figure out with your love life. Get your head out your ass.”
Neil felt like he’d been sucker-punched. All the rage, all the anger that had kept him from feeling so awful had nowhere to go except inwards again, and hot shame poured over him like an oil spill. He rubbed miserably at his mouth and ran his hands through his hair while Doe took some deep breaths to calm down. Neil couldn’t believe he’d picked a fight with Doe like that, had sparked his own temper and hurt him with his accusations. Guilt and shame and unease roiled through him and he was absolutely disgusted with himself.

Boyd sauntered in a minute later, apparently oblivious to all the shouting. “Hey, I just got the contact info for Clennon’s next of kin, thought you guys might want to come along to the interview.” Then he blinked and visibly took stock of the room and all the tension between them both. “Unless you’re in the middle of something?”

“We’re good,” Doe bit out and pulled on his coat as he walked, preceding them both out of the room. Neil couldn’t meet Boyd’s curious gaze and followed him silently, hands shoved deep in his pockets. As they walked, he saw Baskin getting back to his desk and accidentally caught his eyes. Baskin smiled weakly and raised a hand in acknowledgement. Neil turned back to watch the hard line of Doe’s shoulders instead, and pulled his coat a bit tighter around himself.

***

“Sam made it through three tours in Afghanistan,” Clennon’s mother told them in a subdued voice as she hugged a framed photo of her son close to her chest. “He comes back here, where he’s supposed to be safe, and gets killed in his own home.” She shook her head and hugged the photo tighter.

“Mrs Clennon, we think what happened to your son may be connected to a break-in at the home of an NYPD Captain last night,” Boyd said in his particularly gentle grieving-witness voice. “Does the name David Wymack mean anything to you?”

She shook her head miserably.

“Sam never mentioned him before?” Boyd prodded carefully.

“Never.”

“Can you think of anyone who might have wanted to hurt Sam?” Boyd tried again.

“No,” she said, hugging the picture with an empty look in her eyes. “Everybody liked him. My sweet boy.”

“Well, not everyone,” Andrew disagreed. There was an angry buzzing under his skin that refused to go away and got worse whenever he glanced at Josten’s glum, closed-off face. It was making his tongue loose and his manner snappish and he was annoyed with himself about it, but it was hard to put away his anger. “There was his killer, of course, but also the person who stabbed him.”

“You know about that?” Mrs Clennon frowned.

“We noticed the scar this morning. I thought it might not be due to his service – would that be right?”

“Well, yes and no,” Mrs Clennon hedged. “During Sam’s last tour, there was this guy who was having trouble adjusting. Sam knew how hard first deployment could be, wanted to help, but… Jacob, he was too far gone.” She sighed sadly. “He snapped, came at Sam with a knife partway through.”
“Do you remember Jacob’s last name?” Boyd asked.

“Esparza,” she nodded.

“Okay, I’ll reach out to the Army, see if we can get any contact info for Mr Esparza.”

“Oh, you could try Lieutenant Monroe?” She suggested, her hands still tight on the photo.

“James Monroe?” Andrew clarified with a quick burst of understanding.

“Yes,” Mrs Clennon said in surprise. “Like the president. He was Sam’s CO in Afghanistan. He lives here in New York, I believe.”

Andrew looked to Josten out of habit, whose eyes were wide with alarm. “The witness,” he said.

“Did you get a house number?” Andrew asked Boyd as he pulled out his phone. Boyd flipped back through his notebook to find it and Andrew tapped rapidly on his phone with a cold feeling in his chest. Josten came over to lean over his shoulder and Andrew registered his touch to Andrew’s shoulder dimly, their spat momentarily forgotten. Once he had the information he needed, he hit the speed-dial for Wymack.

“What?” Wymack answered irritably on speakerphone.

“Where are you?” Andrew asked.

“I was just visiting with Abby, checking up on her.”

“Oh good, are you still there?”

“I was just about to leave, why?”

“You need to take your wife’s protective detail to a neighbour’s house, James Monroe at number 86,” Andrew ordered. “We found a connection between you and the second victim.”

“What, what is it?” Wymack asked, and Andrew heard him ordering the officers to follow him and the uptick in his breathing as he jogged down the street.

“The killer wasn’t after you, Captain, he was after your neighbour. Sam Clennon served under him on tour, they knew each other. More importantly, if you enter Monroe’s address into Google maps, a picture of your house comes up on the street view.”

“So instead of getting a bad delivery order—”

“You got his would-be murderer,” Andrew finished grimly. “You need to locate Monroe before the killer realises his mistake.”

“Don’t tell me how to do my job, Doe,” Wymack snapped, and Andrew grinned back at Josten for a moment before remembering he was angry. Josten dropped his gaze shamefully at the same time and Andrew pulled his attention back to the phone.

They listened as Wymack banged on his neighbour’s door and asked for him to open it. Then they heard the officers breaking down the front door, and Wymack’s tired cursing.

“Too late,” Wymack sighed down the line. “Boyd, call the crime scene team.”

***
Andrew closed the door behind himself and watched as Josten jogged up the stairs and locked himself in the bathroom. He took a few minutes, then came back downstairs in his workout clothes and left the house without another word. Andrew clenched his jaw as the door slammed. *Guess we’re not talking about it then.*

He didn’t know what had set Josten off earlier to get him so mad, unless he really was just *super* pissed about the falafel carts, but he knew Josten well enough that he could guess there was something deeper bothering him. Case in point, the extra run when he usually restricted himself to morning exercise due to the weird hours of their work. And maybe the way he’d been jittery and withdrawn since lunch.

*Andrew Joseph Doe formerly Minyard formerly Spear formerly Doe, consulting detective extraordinaire,* he thought mockingly and frowned at the contents of the fridge and freezer. While he was deciding whether fries and chicken nuggets were more appealing than portions of the lasagne he’d batched the previous night, his phone started ringing.

“Boyd.”

“Hey, Doe. Primary report from the ME just came in.”

Andrew raised his eyebrows at the milk; he would have been able to read the email report in a couple minutes, so Boyd must want to *talk.* He grunted anyway to encourage him; he could do with a bit of a distraction with Josten being so dramatic.

“Time of death is estimated at last night, just a few hours after Sam Clennon. No prints or DNA at the scene, but the cause of death was bullet wounds to the chest, and a slug was recovered. Glock .21.”

Andrew hummed in satisfaction and pulled out the bag of fries; he felt the need for something fatty and greasy after the argument earlier. It had always been his reaction in college whenever Kevin had his panties in a twist, to wind him up even further with unhealthy food. It would make Josten pull a face after his obsessive running as well. He scowled and shoved thoughts of Kevin away, and Josten too.

“I did some digging on Jacob Esparza,” Boyd continued pleasantly while Andrew got the oven heating. “Confirmed he served in Monroe’s unit with Clennon, and his height and weight match Abby’s description. The report that Monroe wrote up on the stabbing was pretty damning stuff, almost had Esparza put in for a psych eval. Certainly ruined his chances of promotion. According to some of the other soldiers in the unit, Esparza always claimed the incident was trumped up, that Monroe and Clennon had it out for him. Sounds like motive to me.”

“Sweet, sweet motive,” Andrew agreed, and shovelled a pile of fries and nuggets onto a tray.

“We’re still running down Esparza’s current address, I’ll let you know when we pick him up,” Boyd said, then hesitated. “So, um…”

“Out with it,” Andrew ordered.

“Okay, what was going on with you and Josten earlier?” Boyd asked in a rush. “I haven’t seen you guys fight, like, ever. What the hell, man? Things okay? And did he really go out on a date with Baskin? The rumours are getting pretty wild in here.”

Andrew frowned at the oven and watched the fries slowly start to cook. A date?

“Ask him about it, it’s his life,” he said eventually. “He’s in a mood about something, don’t worry.
about it.”

“Well, okay,” Boyd said doubtfully.

“I think we’ve been spending too much time together recently, that’s all,” Andrew muttered and perched on the table. “Getting in each other’s space, I dunno. It was a stupid fight.”

“Yeah, sometimes me and Dan are like that,” Boyd said sagely. “Especially with wedding stress. Like, I love her to bits and I can’t wait to marry her, but sometimes we both just need to relax with other people away from all the flower arrangement magazines. Where’s Josten at now?”

“Gone running.”

“Oh, that’s great,” Boyd enthused. “I bet he’ll have calmed down when he’s back and things will be fine again, you’ll see.”

Andrew squinted suspiciously at his phone then put it back to his ear. “Yeah, whatever. Is that all you wanted to talk about? I’m trying to cook something.”

“Right, right,” Boyd replied in a tone that said he knew exactly what kind of food Andrew was ‘cooking’. “I’ll let you know when we’ve got Esparza for questioning.”

Andrew hung up on him and waited impatiently for his food to cook. It was taking a while, so Andrew took to wandering around the house. He paused outside Josten’s bedroom, thinking hard. After a few moments’ deliberation, he fetched the copies he’d made of the falafel cart reports and left them in a neat stack by his door. Then he went back downstairs to check on his dinner.

Josten came back soon after Andrew had finished eating and vanished upstairs to shower without saying a word. He didn’t slam the door though.

Andrew fiddled with his lighter, debating whether he wanted a smoke or if he wanted to wait for Josten. He turned it over and over in his hands and toyed with the lever as he listened to the shower running, then the vague footsteps moving around in the bathroom once the water cut off. He listened to the door unlocking, and some more footsteps, before he heard Josten on the stairs and put his lighter away.

Josten stepped into the kitchen, all pink-cheeked and damp curly hair wisping around his face. He looked considerably less pissed and withdrawn, though he was holding the packet of photocopied police reports and frowning.

“Why?”

“You seemed annoyed that I’d done it,” Andrew replied with as much sarcastic understatement as he could fit into the words. “So there you go, have at it.”

“I don’t want to solve it now, I wanted to solve it when it was relevant,” Josten said flatly and leaned against the doorframe, arms folded. “I wanted to figure it out on my own, see if I’ve gotten any better or more confident with my solo work.”

Oh.

“You’ve been doing this for years,” Josten continued with an admirable attempt at keeping his voice level. “Even before that, you were a criminal justice major and I bet you studied bits of law in juvie too so you could understand your sentence and hearings better. I’ve only been at this a few months, and we both know I have problems being on my own, working on my own. The case itself
was never going to be the most interesting thing in the world, but it was a chance for me to try and catch up to you and stand on my own feet a bit better in the precinct. Now it’s not. It’s just busywork. I don’t want to be placated, I want to be useful on a real investigation.”

Andrew nodded slowly. “Alright. I understand. Won’t happen again.”

“Thank you.” Josten nodded and softened a little, coming into the room properly and sitting in his usual chair at the table.

Andrew watched him fiddle with his hands for a few minutes before biting the metaphorical bullet. “So what’s the other reason you were so mad?”

Josten frowned down at the table and shifted uncomfortably. “You don’t have to say, but I’d appreciate knowing if it’s going to result in more histrionics,” Andrew said coolly. “I don’t enjoy being yelled at for no reason.”

Josten chewed at his lip and flicked a guilty glance up to Andrew’s face. “Sorry about that. I lose control of my temper sometimes. I shouldn’t have taken it out on you.”

Andrew nodded again stiffly, accepting his apology. It would take him a little longer to really let go of his own annoyance, but it would be easier with the apologies out of the way. Thanks for that tip, Bee.

Josten took to rubbing at his mouth while he thought. His eyes were far away when he spoke again and Andrew didn’t like the vague feeling of recognition in his own chest – the distancing, the obsessive touching and jitters.

“I kind of accidentally went on a date with Detective Baskin.”

“Was he not a perfect gentleman?” Andrew asked lightly, trying to draw Josten out a bit with something silly. “Should I get my shotgun?”

Sure enough, Josten smiled just a little. “He was very nice, actually. Too nice. I didn’t realise it was a date until he, er, kissed me.”

Andrew raised his eyebrows. “Wow, first base with Baskin. Alert the cheerleaders.”

Josten’s smile grew slightly. “He was very sweet about the whole misunderstanding, apologised for not being clear enough, very considerate. He even asked me out explicitly once we were on the same page.”

Andrew carefully smothered the tight, anxious feeling in his chest. “And?”

“I wasn’t interested,” Josten shrugged with a great show of casualness, though he was rubbing at his lips again. “I told him no. He was nice about it.”

Andrew smothered the relieved loosening in his chest even more carefully. “So what’s the issue? Just that he’s a man?”

Josten took a few minutes to collect his thoughts, talking to his hands and the table top with a flush across his cheeks. “I freaked the fuck out. I don’t even know why. I don’t think – I don’t think it’s because I’m not gay. It was just… the thought of being touched like that, of all that kind of… stuff. I wasn’t even thinking about Lola, it had nothing to do with her for once. It was just all from me. And it made me feel… really, really upset. Alarmed, and stressed, and shaky.”
Andrew watched him for a moment, seeing how he’d curled up on himself in his chair with a distressed frown on his face.

“Like your body was wrong and your head was screaming and you wanted to be covered up?”

Josten glanced up at him again and nodded hesitantly.

Andrew fetched a carton of ice cream from the freezer and two spoons. Josten accepted his slowly.

“Is that what it’s like for you?”

“With a side order of ugly memories, yeah,” Andrew muttered and dug a large spoonful out of the carton.

Josten took smaller bites as he was less fond of sugar, but he seemed to appreciate the gesture.

“I was thinking while I was running,” He said quietly as they ate. “If I have that reaction with somebody as nice as Baskin, as understanding and respectful and sweet… maybe it’s not so possible, for me. Maybe that’s not something I can have. Maybe you were right.”

“I don’t want to be right,” Andrew muttered around his spoon. “So if you figure it out, let me know the trick.”

Josten smiled shyly at the ice cream and took another tiny spoonful; he nudged their knees together under the table. “Okay.”

***

“Something funny, Jacob?” Boyd asked frostily in the interrogation room the next morning.

“Just thinking,” Jacob Esparza chuckled, “Even dead, these guys are still managing to mess with me.” He gestured at the crime scene photos of Clennon and Monroe’s bodies and shook his head.

“So you admit you weren’t a fan?”

“Not really, no,” Esparza shrugged with a bland smile. He sat back in his chair, utterly relaxed and unconcerned with being questioned about his connection to two murder victims.

Boyd smiled back. “You, Jacob, are what we call a cool customer. Not exactly what I expected given your military record.”

“Probably ‘cause you believe that crap about me going whacko stab-stab, right?”

“Was there some other reason you stabbed Sam Clennon?”

Esparza shrugged again. “I proposed to my girl right before I left for my tour. We promised we’d wait for each other, and have the ceremony when I got back safe and sound. Three months into my deployment, I find out she’s hooked up with my best friend back home. We weren’t married yet, but it still felt like adultery to me. So, when I found out Clennon was sleeping with some woman who I knew had a husband back home, I took it kinda personal.”

“Are you saying you stabbed Clennon over the morality of him having an affair?” Boyd asked with raised eyebrows.

“I called him out for having an affair,” Esparza corrected with the first bit of agitation he’d displayed all evening. “He got physical. I was defending myself.”
“That’s not how this murdered man described the incident in his report.”

Esparza snorted. “Course not, ’cause Clennon was the lieutenant’s boy. They were tight. He wasn’t gonna make his buddy look like an asshole, was he? Just me, seeing as I didn’t like either of them and wasn’t shy about saying it neither.”

“Can you account for your whereabouts for the past two nights between eight and ten PM?” Boyd asked.

“I was home.”

“Can anyone corroborate that?”

“Nah.”

“If we were to ask you to take off your shirt, would we find any bullet wounds? The individual we’re looking for got winged the other night.”

Esparza smiled incredulously. “Do I look shot to you?”

“Hey, if you don’t have a wound, you don’t have anything to worry about, right?” Boyd smiled back.

Esparza snorted and stood. With fast, relaxed motions, he pulled his shirt over his head to display a fit frame. He faced the two-way mirror with a confident tilt of his chin and turned on the spot, arms out for inspection. A few scars, no fresh wounds.

“Guess I got nothing to worry about,” he smirked.

“Alright, you can put your shirt back on,” Boyd replied. “What can you tell me about the woman Clennon was having an affair with? Do you remember the name of her husband?”

“Beth Roney,” Boyd said to Andrew and Josten when he joined them outside the interrogation room a few minutes later. “Archaeologist who was working a dig in Afghanistan, Monroe’s unit was assigned to the team as protection. Obviously her and Clennon got close. Reckon her husband might not have liked that if he found out recently.”

“Sweet, sweet motive,” Andrew said brightly. “Let’s hope it’s more plausible than the last one.”

Boyd pulled a face at him and smiled at Josten. “So, you two alright now?”

“Yeah, of course,” Josten replied. “No more yelling, I promise.”

Boyd’s eyebrows rose at that and he looked between them both. “Huh,” he said contemplatively. “Interesting. Anyway, do you want to take Beth Roney or shall I? I’ve got more military leads to run down as well.”

“We’ll go,” Andrew shrugged. “I’ll catch you up later.”

“Alright, later man.”

Andrew idly watched him go as Josten chattered about possible theories; Andrew was half-listening until he noticed Baskin eyeing them both from his desk. Josten didn’t seem to notice, but Andrew purposefully met his eye and raised an eyebrow. Baskin glanced meaningfully to an empty office nearby.
“Can you get the address off Boyd?” He asked calmly. “I’ll meet you out front in a minute.”

Josten shrugged and followed Boyd, no doubt assuming Andrew was just going to the bathroom. Andrew slipped casually into the free office a minute after Baskin sauntered in there, and closed the door firmly behind himself.

“What?” He said in polite, professional greeting.

Baskin wasn’t fazed. “Um, so, I don’t know what you’ve heard or if Neil’s said anything—”

Andrew waved a hand lazily. “I know about your not-date. Skip to the point where we need to talk about it.”

“Oh, he told you?” Baskin asked in surprise, then nodded. “I thought you guys must be close, shouldn’t be surprised. Anyway, um, I just wanted to ask – is he, er… okay?”

“What are you asking?” Andrew replied with just a hint of a threat. Josten had a bursting binder full of issues – and whole hemispheres of mental scar tissue – but Andrew wasn’t going to let Baskin tiptoe around questions about his stability like an asshole.

Baskin raised his hands calmly, seeming to get the gist. “I only meant is he feeling okay? I think I scared him yesterday and I really, really didn’t want to do that. I’d ask him myself but I think that might make things worse.”

“You’d be right,” Andrew said flatly. He watched Baskin for a long minute, then decided he wasn’t a danger to Josten. “He’s alright now.”

“Oh, good,” Baskin sighed in relief, then smiled bashfully. “I… look, this is really embarrassing to be going around like third-graders, but I don’t want to upset him. Do you think, maybe, he’d ever be interested? Seeing as you know him so well.”

Andrew’s fingers twitched with the need for a cigarette. His chest felt tight again but he bullied through it, ignored it, thought of Bee’s calming voice instead.

“I don’t know,” he managed shortly. “He said you were nice. He’s also figuring some stuff out, so if you really want to go there, do some research and be prepared to be patient. Ask him yourself if you want to know – it’s his life, his body, his decision. Completely his decision, do you understand?”

“I understand,” Baskin nodded rapidly. “God, I wouldn’t want to pressure him. Of course not.”

Andrew narrowed his eyes and levelled an accusing finger. “You’d better. If you hurt him, you’ll have me to answer to.”

“Whoa,” Baskin laughed nervously. “You’re crazy protective, huh? But that’s good. It’s good he has someone looking out for him, poor kid.”

Andrew clenched his jaw hard and shoved his hands back in his pockets. “He’s my friend,” he snarled, the words still dangerous and foreign in his mouth, but his tongue couldn’t lie about something so important. So it must be true. “We’re done here. Don’t make a habit of this.”

“Loud and clear,” Baskin smiled as Andrew walked off. He had a cigarette in his mouth and lit well before he left the building, earning more than a few annoyed glares and gestures to the No Smoking signs. He ignored them all and focussed on the draw of nicotine and smoke to balance out the elastic-band tightness in his chest and crawling over his skin.
Look, Bee, I did a mature thing, he thought to his mental image of her. I didn’t tell him to fuck off, be proud? She applauded him, though the sarcasm in the gesture was all his own making. So what if I wanted to punch the guy? So what if I don’t want Josten looking at anyone else? So what if maybe this is more of a problem than I thought? I didn’t give into it, at least. He can make his own decisions, and I should have fuck-all to do with it. I kept my nose out of it.

Mental-Bee nodded and told him to have some hot chocolate to toast the moment. He was thinking up a sour comeback for her when Josten reappeared at his side in the smoking area next to the station, inhaling his own in that weird way he did.

“Ready to go?” He smiled cheerily.

“Mmhmm.”

Andrew decided it was shaping up to be a tiring day when they proved unable to get close to Beth Roney’s door, thanks to the very large and very threatening Doberman on the other side of the metal gate.

“Do your many talents include dog-whispering?” Andrew asked over the ear-splitting barks.

“Nope,” Josten said, edging back from the fence. “Definitely not.”

Luckily for them, a woman came running out of the house. “Hey!” She said firmly to her dog. “Gotham, enough!”

The dog abruptly shut its jaw and looked to her.

“Go on, inside,” she pointed, and the dog obediently trotted back into the house. She smiled apologetically at them both, hands on her hips. “Sorry about that, she’s sort of a man-hater. Goes crazy every time a guy walks past.”

“We weren’t walking past, actually,” Andrew replied. “Elizabeth Roney?”

“Yes, that’s me.”

“I’m Andrew Doe and this is Neil Josten, we’re consulting detectives for the NYPD. We’d like to ask you a few questions about your relationship to Sam Clennon.”

“Oh, alright, come in. Is Sam in some kind of trouble?” She asked as she unlocked the fence and gestured them in.

“He was killed a few nights ago,” Andrew said without a speck of sugar to coat it. Beth Roney’s face drained of all colour and she stared at him in shock. “We’re investigating his death.”

“I’m sorry,” she said a little while later, after sitting with them in silence for a few minutes. “It’s just a lot to take in. Sam and I weren’t together for very long, but still… it’s hard to believe he’s gone.”

“You didn’t see anything on the news?” Josten asked, lingering by her display cabinets of old pottery and artefacts, presumably souvenirs from her work.

“I’ve been overseeing a dig in Kabul the past few days,” she replied and gestured to the display screens set up around the living room, showing streamed images of an archaeology dig. Presumably Kabul. “Ordinarily I’d be on-site, but some teaching opportunities here in New York came up. God bless technology, right? The dig is about eight hours ahead, timezone-wise, so I’ve
been doing a lot of weird hours. Haven’t been keeping up with the news.”

“Is your hus—” Andrew started asking, but the dog interrupted him with a series of loud barks.

“Gotham!” Beth commanded, and the dog fell silent again, sitting back in her bed contentedly. “Sorry. Problems with men, like I said. She was a rescue, so… you know. I figured she had a rough time of things.”

Andrew narrowed his eyes at the creature, steadfastly ignored any comparisons to himself that sprang to mind, and refocussed on his question. “Is your husband around? We’d like to speak to him, as well.”

“Why would you want to speak to Cameron?” She frowned in confusion.

“Sam Clennon, the man you had an affair with in Afghanistan, was murdered in his home two nights ago,” Andrew replied with raised eyebrows. “If you were us, wouldn’t you want to speak to your husband?”

Beth looked between them both, still frowning, then cleared her throat and sat forward a bit. “Okay, I think there’s been some confusion. Yes, Sam and I were involved, but it wasn’t an affair. Not in the least.”

“How do you mean?” Josten asked.

“When we met, I was excavating a site called Mes Aynak. Sam’s unit was assigned as security, and we… well. But before I left the States, Cameron and I were already halfway through divorce proceedings. Yeah, technically we were still married, but we weren’t a couple. Cameron moved to Arizona to be with his new girlfriend, and I left for the dig. Now I’m back, I’m even mailing him his stuff.” She nodded to the corner of the room, and they turned to see the boxes and stacks of belongings waiting.

“Were you ever involved with Lieutenant James Monroe?” Andrew asked next.

“No,” Beth replied. “Why would you ask me that? Look, I wish I could tell you Cameron was some kind of jealous nut or bad person to help you out, but he wasn’t. Even if he knew about Sam – which he didn’t – he wouldn’t have hurt him. I can give you his new cell number if you really want, but I think you’d be wasting your time.”

***

Neil frowned around the doorway of the living room, seeing Doe sitting cross-legged opposite the evidence-covered wall, eyes closed and hands folded in his lap while very, very loud chanting echoed through the room from the speaker system. He looked almost serene, his face relaxed and shoulders loose. His hair was fluffly from the shower he’d taken after the visit to Beth Roney, the reasons for which still eluded Neil, and it flopped and curled over his forehead into his eyes.

“Are you – are you meditating?” Neil asked at a slight pause in the recording.

Doe’s eyes snapped open and he blew a short huff of breath upwards to move his hair out of his vision. “Not really. Great white noise machine, though.”

“Do you have to play it so loud?” Neil said. “I could hear it in my room.”

“That was kind of the point.”
“Could you not, maybe? It’s giving me a headache.” Neil said.

Doe blinked up at him for a minute, then reached to the side for the stereo remote and cut the volume down about halfway. Neil sighed and smiled in relief. “Thank you. So, what are you doing exactly?”

“I’m immersing myself in Mes Aynak,” Doe replied and rolled his neck a little, though he stayed sitting down in his lotus pose. Neil had given up months ago on wondering why exactly Doe seemed to think best on the floor. He didn’t even question it as he slid down the wall beside him, listening attentively. “The site seems to be something of a crossroads for this case – all the victims and potential suspects met there or worked there, if we’re dismissing Cameron Roney. It’s an interesting place, from what I’ve been able to research. The remains of several ancient Buddhist settlements sitting on top of the world’s second largest copper deposit. Six years ago, a Chinese company was granted a lease to mine the copper, but they can only do so once the site is razed.”

“They’re just going to destroy it?” Neil asked in dismay, looking at the tacked-up photos of beautiful shrines, hauntingly half-collapsed houses, mostly-intact objects lovingly preserved, and scenic shots of the landscape.

“They would if they had their way,” Doe said. “But the plans incurred a bit of negative press, as you might imagine. So, the Afghan government set up a rapid excavation, headed by Beth Roney. The mining is currently on hold until next summer. Anything not carefully removed before then will be lost forever.” Doe flicked his fingers as if casting off dust, then folded his hands back in his lap.

“It looks beautiful,” Neil said softly, picking up some reports on the artefacts recovered and looking over the photos of large bowls and simply-designed pins and the remains of clothes.

Doe didn’t reply for a minute, and Neil knew to take his silence as agreement. “Not beautiful enough, apparently, to delay access to that copper deposit. Monroe, Clennon and Esparza were part of the unit put together for security, in charge of making sure the archaeologists were safe, and the artefacts were not interfered with. It was a very hastily-assembled team, though, of near-priceless artefacts. My cold, cynical heart is wondering if corners were cut.”

“You’re not all that cynical,” Neil disagreed with a smile. “But you think they stole from the site?”

“I’m not finding any more viable motives, so I’m clutching at straws a bit,” Doe admitted with a grimace. “Nothing was reported stolen or tampered with, not even slightly missing, though.”

“That could just mean the robbery was a phenomenal success,” Neil pointed out.

Doe lifted an eyebrow at him in amusement. “Or that it never happened. Now who’s being cynical?”

Neil scoffed softly and tilted his head back against the wall, listening to the Buddhist chanting. It was quite soothing at a lower volume. He saw Doe stretch his neck again in his periphery and resettle himself, seeming to ‘meditate’ some more for a bit as he thought. Neil was happy to keep him quiet company, similarly turning the case over in his head, looking for new angles and different views. He let the chanting ebb and flow through his mind, and heard Doe’s breathing sync with his. He let himself drift, and thoughts to present themselves without urgency or confusion.

“So what did Baskin want?” He asked sleepily some time later, his thoughts slowed and gentled.

“Hm?” Doe said, then Neil heard him shift a little. Neil kept his eyes closed but tilted his head in
“At the station, he motioned you into an empty office,” Neil said, feeling weightless and soft all over. “I figured he wanted a private word with you. Mind sharing?”

“He wanted to ask if you were okay,” Doe replied. “Wanted to know if I thought you might be interested in him.”

“And what did you say?”

“That you were fine, and to ask you about it. I may have threatened him not to push too hard,” Doe admitted, then tacked on a little hastily, “I’m not your messenger. Be an adult and have that discussion among yourselves, and leave me out of it. The ‘he said she said’ shit is infantile.”

Neil smiled. “There’s no discussion to have, but thanks anyway. I’m not interested in him.”

“Like I said, leave me out of it.”

“Alright.”

They subsided back into quiet thoughtfulness. Neil was thinking about Baskin, how apparently everyone at the precinct had known he was gay, aside from Neil, and the comments and looks they’d got walking out to lunch together. Not exactly hostile, but they’d definitely been watched and judged, as if they were doing something… vulgar, something that shouldn’t be done in public or openly. Baskin had been all smiles and affability, but Neil had to wonder how much of that was adopted as armour if the members of his team reacted like that, if Baskin had to endure responses like that whenever he talked about his personal life. Neil didn’t pretend to understand all of Doe’s thoughts about his sexuality or his decision to stay closeted at work, but he thought maybe he understood a little more than before.

He was startled a little from his thoughts by the peeping of the washing machine in the back room and felt Doe twitch beside him.

“I’ll get the washing out,” Neil offered in thanks for the music being quietened. “Do you want anything put on the radiator, or is air-drying okay?”

“A couple shirts on the radiator,” Doe requested and rubbed at his eyes, flicking away grit. “Running low.”

“Okay,” Neil smiled and got to his feet. He couldn’t help himself and reached out to touch Doe’s hair lightly. Doe blinked up at him but didn’t bat his hand away. “Sorry, it just looks really fluffy without your usual styling.”

Doe rolled his eyes and blew another breath up at his bangs. Neil combed it out the way for him and made his way to the back room.

***

Neil came downstairs the next morning to the smell of fried food and fresh coffee. He found Doe at the stove, dressed and ready for the day, in one of the shirts Neil had laid out for him the previous night. He smiled, thinking of Doe pulling it off the radiator and putting it on still-warm. He plucked at it and joined Doe by the stove.

Doe glanced over to him and his mouth quirked a bit. “Morning. Coffee, Tibetan fried bread, and the answer we’re looking for,” he announced, pointing his spatula at the coffee machine, skillet and
the papers beside him in turn. Neil wiped a bit of oil off the top sheet and skimmed it with a yawn.

“What is this?”

“A list of every artefact catalogued at Mes Aynak so far. The site contains nine different temples, and seven have been excavated. In each of those temples, they’ve found a carved votive bowl common to Buddhist temples. Unique to Mes Aynak, these bowls are decorated with copper ornamentation, increasing their value even further.”

“Interesting, and pretty,” Neil allowed as he looked at the attached pictures. “But I’m not seeing the answer.”

“They’ve found a bowl in each of the temples they’ve excavated so far, except for the last one,” Doe explained with a hint of smugness as he flipped the bread, and a small portion of scrambled eggs, onto a plate each for them. Neil watched his hands sleepily, thinking that he smelled like laundry detergent and coffee beans. “The one overseen by Monroe, Clennon and Beth Roney. In that dig, no bowl. It’s been written up as likely lost due to time or plunder or shelling, but I believe it was stolen.” Doe took their plates to the table and gestured at one of the photos with his spatula again.

Neil frowned and dabbed at the oil spots, then looked closer. “Beth Roney had a bowl like this in her cabinet yesterday.”

“I thought you might remember that,” Doe smiled as he sat down and started eating. “She was working with Monroe and Clennon. She prevented it from being catalogued, then she got it into their hands so they could remove it from site.”

Neil nibbled at his bread and eggs. “Why would she steal something and leave it in the open?”

“No one even knows it’s missing,” Doe said. “She must have felt confident, hiding it among her other souvenirs. Can’t see the trees for the forest, something like that. Even you didn’t spot it at first.”

Neil hummed in agreement and yawned again; he’d had uneasy dreams about forceful hands and judgemental stares that had left him feeling less than rested.

“She isn’t working alone,” Doe continued happily, buoyed up by the new lead. “We know that a man committed the murder, so she and her partner must be just cleaning up and eliminating the other parties who could take a share of the profits, when they find a buyer. Eat up, Josten. Boyd is getting a search warrant as we speak. Once we have the bowl, it should be easy enough to compel Roney to roll on her accomplice, and then we’ll have to find something to do for the afternoon. Renee was telling me there’s an exhibition on meteorites at the Museum of Natural History, what do you think?”

Neil smiled down at his plate. “I’d really like that. Sounds like fun.”

***

“This is absurd,” Beth Roney protested as Boyd and the rest of his team went over her house in detail, while her dog barked incessantly in a closed-off room, loud enough to be heard by the cars outside. “I’m a scientist, I don’t steal from my digs!”

“It was sitting right here,” Neil asserted, squinting into the cabinet and the faint line of dust around a circular outline.
“We’ve got a warrant, we’ll turn this place upside down,” Boyd replied, half to Josten and half to Roney.

“I doubt you’ll find anything,” Doe commented. “She hid it somewhere after our visit yesterday.”

“I hope not,” Boyd said in an undertone. “’Cause if that’s so, we got nothing.”

An hour or so later had Boyd sighing and Neil chewing at the inside of his cheek while Beth Roney threatened to set her dog on all of them if they didn’t leave her house immediately.

“No go?” Wymack asked from the squad cars in the drive as they filed out.

“We searched her place top to bottom,” Boyd said. “No trace of the bowl we think was stolen.”

“It was there yesterday,” Neil insisted. “Doe and I both saw it. And a bowl the same size has clearly been removed from her cabinet.”

Doe nodded agreement and folded his arms.

Boyd sighed again. “Well, she says they’re mistaken, and she had nothing to do with the murders of Clennon or Monroe. Said she’d file a harassment lawsuit if she saw any of us on her property again, actually.”

Wymack rubbed the bridge of his nose with a grimace. “Are you absolutely sure this bowl is the real motive?”

“It’s the only one that’s still holding water after investigation,” Boyd said. “Abby should be safe, Cap. It really doesn’t seem to be about you two at all. But we’ll keep the protective detail on her until this is all wrapped up, just in case.”

“I appreciate that, Boyd.”

Doe rolled his eyes impatiently. “Obviously, our visit spooked her. She must have passed the artefact off to her co-conspirator. We could check her cell activity, see which towers carried her signal to have a rough idea of where she went, or where her conspirator received the call.”

“She spent all night on two videoconference calls,” Boyd disagreed after consulting his notebook. “I took her statement while you two were poking around. Fifteen archaeologists on two different continents confirm she wasn’t away from her desk for longer than five minutes.” He flipped his notebook closed with a sharp snap.

“Then her accomplice must have come to her, removed the bowl and all other incriminating evidence to maintain her alibi,” Neil said. He danced about a little on his feet, as restless and annoyed as Doe.

“Yeah, well, without proof…” Boyd said and shook his head.

***

Neil looked up from the kitchen table as Doe abruptly muted the chanting coming from the stereo, and chucked the remote onto the sofa. He scowled up at his wall and got out of his lotus position.

“I’m giving up on immersion,” he announced.

“Because we haven’t figured out who Roney’s partner is yet? We’ve only been at it a couple hours,” Neil pointed out. He rubbed through his hair and pushed it out of his face, but it was really
getting in need of a cut now. He swore quietly and fished an elastic band out of the piles of paper and crumpled-up post-its and tied his hair back out of his face. Doe watched him for a minute, then his mouth turned down for some reason and he got up to start walking around the living room and kitchen.

“There aren’t even any suspects to evaluate,” Doe said irritably. “She seems to have no boyfriend, girlfriend, no close friends, no close colleagues currently on this continent. To put a finer point on it, no friends of any sort. Her every waking hour is consumed by work.”

“Wonder what that’s like,” Neil muttered, looking around at the crime scene photos on every available surface.

Doe shot him a sour look, then leaned his hip against a suitcase that had appeared at some point in the afternoon. Neil frowned at it, momentarily thrown.

“Where’d that come from?”

“The storage closet,” Doe replied, and most of his annoyance seemed to bleed away. He rested a hand on the suitcase and held Neil’s eyes. “It’s for you. And it’s no doubt my most loathed possession.”

“I’m touched?”

“I was thinking about what you said the other day about wanting to ‘catch up,’” Doe elaborated slightly.

Neil wondered if drawing blood from stones would be easier than getting a straight answer from Doe sometimes. “And the suitcase is going to help how?”

“It contains cold cases. My cold cases,” Doe said, the heaviness in his gaze and quiet tone of his voice telling Neil to pay attention. He put down his pen and focussed properly on Doe. “These are the handful of puzzles in my career which have eluded me. So the next time you want to hone your skills on a real case, solo, I’d encourage you to use these. I’ve already given them everything I can. So, there’s little risk I’ll arrive at a conclusion before you. You might even succeed where I failed.”

“Oh,” Neil said softly, heat curling through him. It put an odd pang in his chest and a clench in his gut that he didn’t know how to interpret, but his face felt warm and it all felt… nice. “Thank you, Andrew.”

Doe held his gaze for another moment, then cleared his throat and came forward to pick up one of the files on the table. “Boyd’s canvass reports?”

“Useless,” Neil frowned. “None of Roney’s neighbours heard or saw anyone approaching the house between our visits.”

Doe tilted his head to the side a bit, then glanced at the stereo. “No one heard anything. But her partner was there. Who we know is a man.”

***

“You wanna get your dog under control?” Boyd asked later that day as they stood outside Roney’s house again, facing off with her dog.

“Not really, no,” Roney called back from her front door, scowling at them. “You’re not welcome here. None of you.”
“Well either you call her off, or I can call the canine unit to take her away,” Boyd pointed out. “Your choice.”

Roney scowled, then patted her leg. “Gotham! Heel.” She waved the suddenly-biddable dog into the house and came forward to stand on the other side of the fence, arms crossed. “So, let me guess. You have another warrant to ransack my home and disrupt my work and very few sleeping hours.”

“We do, only this one is of the ‘arrest’ variety.”

She raised her eyebrows coolly.

“We’ve identified the man who shot Sam Clennon and James Monroe,” Andrew announced with a smile. “Your ex-husband, Cameron. We had the right man before, just the wrong motive. He didn’t kill your old partners-in-crime because of some affair, he killed them because he was your new partner.”

“That’s insane,” Roney said flatly, clutching her arms a little tighter. “I told you, we started the divorce process nearly a year ago.”

“And then you reconciled,” Josten said. “According to him, at least.”

Her cold expression flickered for a moment. “You talked to Cameron?”

“At great length,” Andrew said cheerfully. “You told us he was in Arizona, but a quick check of his recent credit history told us he was, in fact, here in New York.”

She blanched and pressed her lips together.

“Yeah, he had much the same expression when we knocked on his door an hour ago,” Boyd commented dryly.

“As soon as we made it clear how simple it would be to compare his blood to the droplets left at Captain Wymack’s house, he gave you up. He told us all about the bowl you stole, and a few other things as well, how you thought you could get several million for the lot on the black market.” Josten said.

“Why would you even look into Cameron? There was no motive,” Roney half-protested.

_Ah, scientists,_ Andrew thought. _Always so curious._

“You have your dog there to thank,” Andrew replied with a grin. “Your neighbours didn’t report hearing anything from your house between our visits, _including_ the very loud barking of your dog. Odd, that, seeing as we knew your partner was a man, and that he’d managed to come into your house while you were conferencing to take the artefacts, all without alarming her. So was it someone she’d become used to since the divorce – or someone she’d just never forgotten?”

Roney had nothing to say to that. Boyd unlatched the fence and gently turned her around, cuffs in hand. “Elizabeth Roney, you have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law…”

“So. Meteorites?” Josten asked with shining eyes as they watched Boyd escort her into the back of a police car.

Andrew smiled back, just a little touched by his enthusiasm. “Sure, I just have a small errand to run
at the station first.”

Josten smiled wider and tucked his hair out of his face. “Alright, I’ll wait for you back home.”

***

Andrew knocked vaguely on Wymack’s door before letting himself in and sitting down on the other side of his desk.

“…Come in,” Wymack replied sarcastically. “What is it?”

“The case is closed, your wife is officially safe and we no longer need to nose into your personal affairs,” Andrew said. “Ask your questions.”

Wymack closed the file he had been reading and leaned back in his chair, hands folded on his stomach. They watched each other for a minute before Wymack opened his mouth.

“What’s really motivating you and Josten with the M and W families?”

Andrew smiled without humour. He could appreciate directness. “When I was in college, I was… friends, I suppose, with somebody they had previously owned. He was important to me; he promised me something to hold onto when I was in a dark place. I promised to protect him from them in return, and they didn’t like that very much. They orchestrated something quite nasty to get blackmail material on me and convince him to return to the fold.”

He paused and tapped his fingers together. Honesty always suited him, but these particular truths were too painful to be said casually. “It was quite a personal attack on me. I didn’t like that very much. It’s taken a long time to start to… let it go, a bit. And it convinced my ‘friend’, he left in a heartbeat. Coward. So I’ve got my reasons. As for Josten – I think you already suspect a thing or two. Do you really need me to spell it out for you? I had so much faith in your deductive abilities.”

Wymack’s sigh and tired shake of his head said he understood more than he wanted to know. “Is he really safe here? They won’t find him?”

Andrew shook his head. “He’s practised at changing identities, which I know doesn’t surprise you. He doesn’t look like he used to. He assured me his trail was as cold as he could make it, and they wouldn’t think to look for him here, or to even be in this city so close to their territories. Besides, our names are never advertised or connected to cases, we always give full credit to the department. He’s safer hiding in plain sight, with people who know and look out for him, than being alone on the street. And I’m just bitter and petty enough to be invested in keeping them away from him.”

“That’s the only reason?”

“I think you’ve used up your allowance of questions,” Andrew said breezily, though he felt uncomfortable and jittery from sharing so much of what he’d kept private for so long, even as vague and nonspecific as those details had been. “So sad.”

Wymack rolled his eyes with a tight smile. “Alright, be that way. Good work on the case. I appreciate your focus.”

Andrew nodded back. “You’re both safe. That’s good enough for me. How is Abby?”

“She’s alright, better now the case is done,” Wymack replied after just a little hesitation, no doubt surprised Andrew was asking at all. “I took Roney’s dog to her earlier, now she doesn’t have an owner. Gotham should help keep her safe if she forgets the alarm system some nights. Keep her
company if she’s lonely.” Wymack shrugged and frowned.

“Did she accept?”

“Yeah.”

“Hm.” Andrew said. He fought against the instinct to stay out of it, not to care, not to bother… but he respected Wymack, and didn’t like to see the usually solid and dependable man so rattled and upset. He sighed and gave into the urge to meddle. “Despite the separation, she still has pictures of you around the house. Hasn’t rerouted your mail to your new place, just stacked it on the counter for you to pick up when you drop in, which she clearly wants you to do regularly. She sat at one end of the kitchen table, facing the empty spot I would assume you usually occupy rather than sitting square in the middle.”

“What’s your point?” Wymack asked tiredly.

“I don’t have a very positive view of marriage,” Andrew said, apparently tangentially. He studied his hands rather than meet Wymack’s eyes. “Josten thinks I’m biased, and I am. I would normally cheer the end of any marriage. But recently, I’ve come to appreciate the concept, at least, of partnership. It’s more intricate than I imagined. The smallest gesture can speak volumes, and mean a great deal more to the other person. For arguments, and more friendly things too.”

“Are you telling me not to give up?” Wymack asked incredulously.

“I’m telling you that you should never have got married in the first place,” Andrew shot back. “But it seems you had a partner. Perhaps you still do. And separation isn’t always a permanent thing.”

Wymack watched him for a few minutes, a small smile on his face. “You’re different to when you first started here,” he said slowly. “Josten’s good for you.”

Andrew rolled his eyes and checked his watch, then frowned. The museum would be closed now by the time they got there. They’d have to go tomorrow instead.

“I’d better make sure he’s not wrecking the house on his own,” Andrew said lightly and crossed to the door. “Call me when the next case comes up.”

“Obviously. And thank you, Doe.”

Andrew tapped his temple in salute and walked away. He looked up public observatory opening times on his phone on the way back, thinking that perhaps they could go to an exhibition there instead of the meteorite exhibit; Josten had seemed oddly eager to go, even though it was one of Andrew’s interests and not his own. He closed the door behind himself and was about to call out as much, when he saw Josten sitting on the living room floor, hands deep in the suitcase and a determined, excited look on his face.

Andrew watched him pull out a file and flip it open with an expression of undisguised relish, eyes shining, oblivious to Andrew’s presence in the hallway. Andrew’s words died on his lips as he watched Josten dig into the file, and he quietly left him to it. They could go another day. There was no hurry, after all.
“What do you think?” Boyd asked, holding up three magazines in his hands.

“Well, I think they all look good. They just...different. You know what I mean?”

“Um,” Neil said. “They all look nice?”

“Neil,” Boyd sighed with a fond smile, “I know that, I’m asking for your opinion on which one would suit me best. Ha, suit me.”

Neil smiled at the joke and leaned forward to take a proper look at the magazine spreads of fashionable suits for grooms. They all looked very smart, and Boyd was tall and fit and muscular and attractive enough to look good in any of them, objectively. Neil wasn’t exactly sure what Boyd wanted to know in particular, seeing as everyone was always making comments about Neil’s wardrobe if Doe hadn’t supplied the clothes.

“I think you’d look good in all of them,” Neil said eventually, fiddling nervously with his cuffs. He frowned at them – they were getting ragged and pulled out of shape from his fidgeting, he’d have to stop doing that if he didn’t want to damage all his clothes. “Sorry. I don’t know anything about fashion.”

“Hey, that’s okay, I appreciate it anyway buddy,” Boyd replied with an easy wave of his hand and a wide smile.

“Maybe Seth or Allison would be better to ask. Or Andrew. He’s good with clothes. Or Dan, seeing as she’s the one marrying you.”

“It’s bad luck for a bride to see her groom before the wedding,” Boyd protested.

Neil frowned. “But you live together. She sees you every day.”

Boyd opened his mouth to make a smart comeback, then frowned and slowly nodded. “Huh. I guess you’ve got a point there. But anyway, it’s a stupid tradition and we like it, so we’ve agreed not to know what we’ll be wearing until we’re at the altar. Dan’s being just as secretive about her dress.”

“Well, okay,” Neil shrugged. “I like that one best, though I don’t really know why. It looks snazzy.” He pointed to one of them and Boyd beamed.

“Nice!” He wrote down the details listed next to the photo carefully in one of his ‘wedding things’ notebooks. “I’ll ask the tailor for something like that to try on when we go for the fitting next week.”

Neil blinked and stalled by having a sip of his coffee, setting it back on the table carefully. “You – you want me there?”

“Oh course! If you wanna be there, I mean, no pressure, but I’d love for you to come. Seth’s
already got the spot as best man, but I’d really like you to be part of the whole process too. I’d ask Doe as well, but he shot me down when I asked him to be best man the first time round, and to the rest of this stuff. At least you’ll both be at the reception, right?”

“Yeah,” Neil replied shyly, feeling warm in odd ways. “Yeah, I’ll be at the fitting. And the reception. Yeah. Thanks, Boyd.”

Boyd looked at him blankly for a second, then sighed and carefully reached out to fold Neil in his arms. “Oh Neil,” he said and rested his cheek on Neil’s hair. “You sweet soul.”

Neil tried talking but his face was firmly squashed into Boyd’s chest and his arms were trapped against his ribs. He managed to turn his face to breathe.

“I want you around, okay?” Boyd asked with a gentle squeeze. “We all do. You’re our friend, and we all like you a lot. We all want you to be part of things. Okay?”


Boyd laughed and rubbed his knuckles affectionately over Neil’s scalp.

“Are we done hugging now?” Neil asked.

“Do you want me to let go?”

Neil was about to say ‘yes’ but his throat wouldn’t work. It felt… it felt very nice, to be held like this. He didn’t think he’d been held since he was a very small child. Even after the past couple of months with the NYPD, and the small touches from Andrew of increasing frequency that spoke of home and security and steadiness, he wasn’t used to being touched at all.

Boyd was warm and strong and gentle, and being held like this felt like… like the world had stopped for a moment, just a moment, and he could allow himself to feel… small, vulnerable, and comforted. Nobody had ever treated Neil like he was anything more than meat that could bleed or an inconvenience to tug along and protect. Not until he came to the NYPD and found friends. And family, he realised. Family that had nothing to do with blood. Family like Andrew, Boyd, Dan, Wymack, Renee and the others too, slowly creeping in under the walls he’d built as a boy and setting up camp. As if his blood family had never mattered at all. As if his mother had never mattered.

Well, a little voice reminded him, how much could she have loved me, really, if she never held me like this?

A sudden aching stab in his chest, something like loneliness and a lot like grief, had him shaking his head. “No,” he mumbled into Boyd’s chest.

“I’m your friend,” Boyd said gently. ‘Friends give hugs. Any time. Free of charge.”

Neil bit his lip hard enough to break the skin and let himself shake silently while his eyes spilled, and Boyd just rocked him gently and kissed the top of his head. “No,” he mumbled into Boyd’s chest.

Neil couldn’t hold back a sniff or two, but Boyd didn’t comment on it, just hugged him tighter. A little while later, they heard Dan’s key in the door. “Honey, you home?”
“Yep, Neil’s here too,” Boyd called back.

“Cheating on me already?” Dan called breezily.

“Three times already today,” Boyd said outrageously, and they heard Dan laugh as she closed the door. Even Neil managed a smile, and Boyd let him go with a gentle pat to his back. Neil busied himself wiping his face and getting his emotions back under control while Boyd flipped all the magazines closed.

“I’ve got a surprise for you,” Dan sang cheerily from the hallway.

“And Neil is still here, babe.”

They heard her scoff loudly. “You fucking wish it was that kind of surprise, doll. Open the door, would you? My arms are full.”

Boyd obliged curiously, then made an absurd cooing noise as his fiancée walked in, arms full of mewing balls of fluff.

“They’re gorgeous, aren’t they?” Dan grinned as she settled on the couch beside Neil. “Hey Neil. You like cats?”

Neil leaned closer cautiously, watching the little animals tumble around in the blanket-basket of Dan’s arms and lap. They looked young, to his inexperienced eyes, stumbling around with their tails sticking straight up, tiny and stubby and fluffy. One closest to him seemed to be staring at him with huge, pale blue eyes like his own and he held his hand towards the little thing. The kitten sniffed at his fingers and licked them with a raspy, tiny pink tongue.

Carefully, Neil stroked his fingertip along the top of the kitten’s head, marvelling at the fragility of its bones and the incredible, downy softness of its fur. The kitten mewedled again, high-pitched and pathetic, and closed its eyes in apparent enjoyment. He kept stroking that spot as carefully as he could.

“Yes,” he answered Dan.

“They’re so cute,” Boyd whispered, crouching down and watching with awe as the kittens played clumsily with each other and tried to climb out of Dan’s arms. “Oh my God. Babe. Please always come home bearing kittens.”

Dan smiled fondly at him and squeezed his hand. “I wish I could. Marie’s cats all had kittens, obviously, and she can’t keep them all. I volunteered to find homes for these ones, now they’re old enough and weaned and had all their shots and neutered and whatnot. I think we could only keep one or two, though.”

“Oh my God,” Boyd kept whispering with wide eyes. “Oh my God.”

“Yeah, babe,” Dan said softly, and kissed his cheek with shining eyes. “Neil, you want to hold that one? It seems to like you.”

Neil nodded and together they carefully scooped the precious fluffball into his lap and the bowl he made of his hoodie. The kitten seemed to approve and settled in his lap, allowing Neil’s cautious strokes along its head and batting playfully at his hoodie with tiny, tiny paws.

“What will happen to them if you can’t home them?” He asked thickly. “Will they go on the street?”
“Oh honey, Neil, no,” Dan replied, shocked. “Of course not. I’ll take them to a shelter and they’ll get adopted, hopefully. Even if not, they’ll be well looked-after at the shelter. I promise. Do you like that one?”

“Yeah.”

Dan smiled and scooped another into his lap. “Take another for Doe, too. I’m sure they’ll be happy with you two as dads.”

Neil blinked down at the kittens; his first one had been a ginger tabby, and the new arrival was a tortoiseshell with dark brown and light caramel fur, and yellow eyes. It pawed at his hand curiously and kept sniffing, its tail flicking stiffly.

“I don’t know if Andrew will want any more strays,” he mumbled distractedly as he petted the kittens, a hand for each one.

“How many cats do you have already then?” Dan asked.

“Hm? What, none. I meant me, I’m the stray.”

“What do you mean by that?” Dan asked with a smile. “How’d you two meet, anyway?”

Neil shrugged and felt his chest squeeze when the tortoiseshell fell over trying to chase his finger and flopped on its back with a warm, gentle thud. He hesitantly stroked the little thing’s tummy but stopped when it started swatting his hand and went back to the fuzzy spot between its ears instead.

“I broke into his house, and he let me stay. So I’m pretty much a stray cat. It’s his house, I don’t know if he wants cats. I don’t think he likes them.”

Neil heard vague clicking noises and glanced up – Boyd was taking photos of him on his phone with a huge grin.

“I think he’ll like them if you bring them home,” Boyd commented, earning a curious look from the other humans in the room. “Never mind. Just bring them home – they’re so cute I bet he’ll love them instantly. Just see what he says. If he says no, bring them back and we’ll take them to the shelter. And you can always come over to play with whichever ones we adopt, anyway.”

“Okay,” Neil mumbled as the ginger one started mouthing and licking at his thumb, clearly expecting milk instead of a fingertip. “Can you drive me back? I don’t think I can take these on the subway.”

“Sure thing, buddy,” Boyd smiled and rubbed through his hair. Neil was about to object – he wasn’t a cat – but the kittens had started mewing and meowing in sweet, perfect voices and it made his breath catch in his chest.

Boyd helped get them all back to the house and helped Neil through the door with a smile and a command to let him know what their names would be, when Doe inevitably agreed to keep them. Neil promised he would text, but he wasn’t so sure of Doe’s reaction.

Doe was out with Renee somewhere so Neil resolved to make the most of his time with the little kittens and laid down on the couch with them on his chest and stomach. He stroked down their backs and stopped them from falling off the couch or climbing over the back, scooping them back onto his chest when they wandered too far. They mewed sweetly and rubbed up against his hands and he felt like he was melting happily with each little lick of their tiny tongues. His cheeks hurt from smiling but he couldn’t stop, not when the ginger one kept walking up his chest to nudge their noses together and lick his face. The tortoiseshell eventually stopped trying to conquer the couch
and curled up on his stomach to sleep. Its tiny, warm body was so soft and fitted perfectly under
Neil’s hand, rising and falling with his breaths. He could feel tiny purrs and its rapid heartbeat echo
through his guts and his throat felt all scratchy from some kind of emotion he couldn’t name.

Doe came home about an hour later and Neil watched as he walked slowly into the room, his eyes
on Neil and the kittens on his chest and stomach.

“What exactly is happening here? Where did they come from?”

“Dan’s friend, someone on her team I think,” Neil replied quietly; the ginger one was nuzzling at
his cheek and he didn’t want to scare the tiny animal. “Can we keep them, Andrew? I know you
don’t like cats, but… look at them. Dan said they’ve had shots and been, um, spayed, so…”

Doe was looking at them alright, with a vaguely stunned expression and a peculiar flush to his
face. Neil guessed he’d tired himself out with Renee and kept stroking the sleeping tortoiseshell
and tilted his head up to the ginger one’s curious nosing, smiling wider when it licked his nose
again.

“I don’t dislike cats,” Doe muttered, and came slowly closer. Neil slowly drew up his legs so Doe
could sit and settled them over his lap again, half aware of the quiet shushing noises he was
making to keep the cats settled and happy with the movement. Doe didn’t react to Neil’s legs being
draped over his lap, he seemed to only have eyes for the cats, and Neil’s face possibly. He held out
his hand to the tortoiseshell, which had stirred and was yawning and kneading at Neil’s hoodie. It
sniffed and licked his finger, then plodded clumsily over to Doe.

Neil watched as Doe helped the little thing into his lap and held it carefully, cradling and
supporting. It meowed softly up at Doe, and Neil watched something equally soft flash briefly
across his face.

“As pets go, cats are pretty low maintenance once they’re mature,” Doe said eventually, oozing
nonchalance as if he didn’t care at all. “I guess they can stay. What’s another stray, at this point.”

Neil smiled. “Thank you, Andrew.”

Doe glanced at him briefly, then back to the kitten trying to playfully fight his hands. “Do they
have names already?” His tone was bored, casual. Neil was not fooled at all.

“Not yet.”

“Alright. Cat One, Cat Two.”

“Andrew, come on. No.”

“Eins, Zwei. Or Une, Deux for you.”

“Better, but still no.”

Doe thought for a minute, then his mouth twitched up just a bit. “Bonnie and Clyde.”

Neil grinned and laughed quietly, trying not to jostle the cat walking all over his chest and trying to
play with his hair. “A bit dark, but I like it. Which one’s which?”

Doe hummed, then pointed at the tortoiseshell first. “Clyde. The ginger one’s Bonnie.”

“Oh, wait – I don’t know what sex they are.”
Doe shrugged. “Bonnie and Clyde are pretty gender-neutral. I see no problem.”

Neil grinned and scrunched up his face as the ginger one, Bonnie, planted careful paws on his cheeks to tumble into his hair. He gently retrieved the cat and set it – her? Him? Them? – on his chest instead.

“You’re pretty attached to those names for someone who doesn’t care.”

Doe gave him a sour look before sighing. “I always wanted pets called Bonnie and Clyde, alright? Criminal history is interesting, so sue me.”

Neil’s cheeks were positively aching now but it was a good feeling, a very good feeling.

“Hello, Bonnie,” he whispered to the little fluffball trying to get into his hair again. “Nice to meet you.”

If over the course of the evening he heard Doe humming to Clyde and making quiet clucking and kissing noises, he didn’t mention it at all, and the cats would never tell.
CASE - The Ripple Effect

A couple points before we get started!

- With this update, this fic has officially exceeded 100k and is therefore my longest work. Ever. Including my original works. So thank you so much to everyone reading for all your support, I wouldn't have dreamed of getting a fic to this length without all your love and support and enthusiasm <3
- Comments - thank you so, so, SO much to everyone who has commented or left kudos the past 2-ish months, I read and reread and adored every single one. Especially as there's a lot of personal drama going on in my life rn, all your comments really helped me when everything was feeling just Too Much. I'm sorry I haven't really replied, and I'll be making a renewed effort to reply from now on <3
- Update schedule - the personal drama is still ongoing but things have settled a little for now, so updates might be more frequent, though probably not to a strict schedule still.
- CHECK OUT THIS AMAZING, BEAUTIFUL ART of Andrew and Neil having a 'date night' with the cats, by the fantastic broship-addict !!! You're a staaaarr
- CHECK OUT THIS AMAZING, BEAUTIFUL ART of Andrew and Neil sitting in the club in Let Loose, by the fantastic requiemofkings !!! Holy shit :O

Trigger Warnings: this case is based off season 2 episode 10, which deals with both casual and hostile ableism towards mentally ill people, reference to police brutality (though none actually happens), murder, gun-related violence and gunshot injuries. Additional warnings for unhealthy intrusive thoughts, depressive symptoms, and reference to addiction and triggered impulses relating to substance abuse. As always, any concerns or issues, please feel free to contact me at my tumblr.

Andrew scratched behind his ear and half-listened to Wymack’s announcements. He was putting together a grocery list in his head, knowing that the cats needed more special kitten food and probably some new toys seeing as Clyde kept shredding everything with their claws, and he’d been planning to make a big batch of chilli to last them the next week or so but they didn’t have enough mince or rice. Some more cereal and coffee would probably be good, too, seeing as Josten was having twitchy dreams recently and kept having snacks at weird times of night when he couldn’t get back to sleep.

“—mayor’s gonna hinge his re-election campaign on renewed vigilance when it comes to quality of life crimes,” Wymack was saying in a flat voice. “So keep it in mind when you’re out there doing, y’know, real work. Dismissed.”

Andrew snorted quietly to himself and watched the bullpen start to disperse. He was about to turn to Boyd to ask about the wedding progress when a uniformed officer walked forward with a shaky young man beside him.

“Captain?” The officer said, and Wymack raised his eyebrows expectantly. “This guy walked in, said he needs to see the man in charge.”

“Are you the lord here?” The shaky young man asked in a tremulous voice. Andrew looked him over rapidly, seeing the loosely-hanging clothes, the knotted fabric around his wrist, the shake of his hands where he clutched a duffel bag to his side.

“He keeps saying ‘lord’,,” the officer said in an undertone, looking to Wymack for guidance. “I took it to mean ‘Captain’.”
Wymack nodded and looked to the young man with nothing but respect and calm patience. “I’m David Wymack. Can I help you, sir?”

“I am the knight,” the young man announced with a flicker of pride. “I was dubbed. Now I am the knight.”

“Okay,” Wymack said, still waiting.

“That’s why I had to kill the queen.”

Andrew could practically feel the ripple of alarm that ran through the room of officers and detectives, though they were all careful not to move. Wymack only blinked and kept watching the young man.

“You killed the queen?”

“It was my duty,” the young man explained, his eyes wide and starting to fill. “I had to kill her. I had to…” He turned to his duffel, unzipped it, and slowly pulled out a shotgun.

“Gun!” Someone yelled, and abruptly all twenty-odd officers in the room were holding guns and yelling for him to drop the weapon, now!

“It was my duty,” the young man said again, sounding more confused and definitely not aware of all the guns pointed at him, or possibly even the one in his hand. Andrew swallowed hard. This could get extremely ugly. His eyes flickered unwillingly to where Josten was standing, mercifully out of the potential crossfire against an office on the other side of the room. He met Andrew’s eyes with a panicked look of his own and Andrew swallowed again.

“Look, sir, if you use that gun, this is gonna end very fast and very bloody,” Wymack said as calmly as he could while trying to edge forward to the young man. “Can you understand me, sir?”

“I’m the knight,” the man mumbled, looking down at his hands. They were shaking in earnest now and Andrew couldn’t help but think of how his whole body would shiver and spasm when he was deep in withdrawal, of the fugue in his mind at Easthaven when he was drying out, how nothing had felt real or certain for a long time after. The man held tighter to the gun, his hands finding the stock and trigger apparently by instinct.

Shouts of down, down, drop the weapon! echoed ever louder through the tense precinct. It was just a matter of time before somebody lost their cool and everyone got shot.

“I’m the knight…”

Andrew stepped forward between Wymack and the young man, hands out and body blocking, perfectly in the way of at least five bullet trajectories.

“Doe!” Wymack hissed. “Stay back!”

“I was dubbed…”

“Can I try something?” Andrew asked quickly.

Wymack looked around the room bristling with firearms and gritted his teeth. “Try it fast.”

Andrew looked to the young man. “The scarf on your wrist. It—” bouts of coughing interrupted him, he couldn’t clear his throat—
--he kept coughing, and reached forward for the glass of water on the top of the witness stand. Andrew took a slow swallow and cleared his throat again.

“As I was saying,” he continued calmly to the room at large. “I noticed the scarf straightaway.”

“This is a compelling story, Mr Doe,” the prosecution said with very little patience, “but I asked about the James Dylan case. The incident you are describing is linked to the murder of Rada Hollingsworth.”

“Which is, in turn, inextricably linked to the case of James Dylan,” Andrew replied calmly.

“If you would just answer the question I asked—”

“I *am* answering the question,” Andrew interrupted her. “Just more precisely than you intended. You cannot understand one incident without understanding the other. So. As I was saying…”

“The scarf on your wrist,” Andrew said, stepping carefully closer to the young man. “Was it a favour from your lady?”

“Yes,” the knight replied with a brief, pleased smile. “It belonged to my queen.”

“Then it must be returned to her now you’ve done your duty,” Andrew nodded with a quick smile of his own, slowly closing the steps between them and watching as the man’s hold on the gun loosened. “The knight’s code commands it, yes? Hand it to me, I’ll have a squire bring it to her.”

“You’ll return it to my lady?” The man asked brightly, smiling happily.

“Yes, my word on it. One knight to another.”

The man beamed and set down the gun, reaching for the scarf instead.

“Here, allow me sir,” Andrew offered with his hands extended. The man stepped forward towards him, away from the gun, hands out in front of him. Quick as a flash, Boyd jumped in and had the man carefully restrained and kneeling on the floor, neutralised as a threat.

A quiet sigh of relief went through the room, and the cops started to put away their weapons. Andrew tried not to feel the guilt squirming in his stomach at having deceived the man like that, especially when he had started to cry and whimper in confusion and fright while being patted down for any other weapons.

Josten eased through the crowd and clutched for a second at Andrew’s arm. Andrew could hear him swallowing down frightened breaths.

“You just had to stand in the middle of a potential firefight, didn’t you?” Josten muttered and rubbed over his face with a trembling hand.

“If I hadn’t, that man could be dead right now.”
Josten sighed and made an obvious effort to put that aside for now. “The knight’s code? What’s that?”

“Oral tradition,” Andrew replied, distracted by the confused slew of questions coming from the knight as he was led away to be processed, struggling weakly against Boyd and the other cops escorting him. “The man’s clearly suffering delusions and possible hallucinations, but they are based on actual history.” The man started yelling out for his lady, saying she was in danger and they had to help her… Andrew took a quick breath and forced himself to keep talking. Josten gently squeezed his arm. “In the Middle Ages, a knight would often wear a token of affection from a noblewoman in tournaments, competitions, during errands, that kind of thing. Usually a piece of clothing, a… handkerchief, or scarf, something like that.”

They heard the man yelling even through the few dividing rooms, distressed and frightened and vulnerable. Andrew felt his whole body tense up and even Josten’s hands on his arm couldn’t ease away the responsibility he felt.

“Captain,” he said, though it hurt to say, “That man was not in control of himself, he’s clearly unwell and not responsible for his actions. He needs medical attention, not rough treatment. There’s no need for force.”

Wymack looked at him for a long moment, then nodded. “I’ll make sure he’s being handled appropriately, alright? Just… go sit down with Josten for a while, okay? Calm down a bit. Everyone’s on edge.”

Josten tugged gently on his arm and Andrew let himself be led away to an unoccupied interview room. Josten closed the door with a soft click and perched beside him on the table.

“Wymack won’t let him be mistreated,” Josten said quietly. “He’s a good man.”

“Police as a whole have a pretty shit record with mentally ill people,” Andrew replied, frowning down at his hands. “Regardless of individual officers.”

“I know,” Josten said, and was quiet for a few minutes. “But you stopped him from getting shot. That was a good thing. Now he’s in custody he can recover safely and receive treatment, right? He won’t be a danger to himself or anyone else in here.”

“That’s certainly the thinking behind forced committals,” Andrew muttered. “Doesn’t always work out that way.”

Josten didn’t seem to have any words for that, and Andrew knew they were both thinking of Andrew’s time at Easthaven, and the mistreatment he’d suffered while under Proust’s ‘care’. Instead Josten just held his wrist and sat in grim silence.

“Mr Doe, could you please get to the point and spare us the social commentary and tender feelings?” The prosecution asked sarcastically. “This is a real hearing presided over by a real judge. Not an opportunity to air grievances with the justice system.”

Andrew felt his face twitch. “Of course. Although, point of fact, it is an administrative hearing. This court represents neither state nor federal law, but rather the dictates of the NYPD. So, ‘real judge’, while not technically inaccurate, seems like an overstatement.”
In the seating at the back of the court, Wymack sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

The judge, an older Black man with quite an air of gravitas about him, leaned forward. He looked distinctly unamused. “Then by all means, let’s be a hundred percent accurate. I do only represent the police department of New York. And we are here today because you made a grievous mistake. And the NYPD has empowered me, as a technically real judge, to determine the magnitude of said mistake, and to make a recommendation as to whether you and your partner should be allowed to continue working with the NYPD. Now, is that accurate enough for you, Mr Doe?”

Silence seemed to echo in the room, and Andrew felt Wymack’s eyes burning a hole in the side of his face with a silent warning to mind his tongue.

“Crystal, Your Honour,” Andrew replied tightly.

The judge watched him with narrowed eyes for a moment, then nodded and sat back. He gestured to the prosecution, who tucked her hair behind her ears and folded her hands in front of her.

“We’re here today because of one particular breach of protocol.”

“Alleged breach of protocol,” Andrew corrected blandly, and she scowled at him for a second.

“Alleged breach, yes. I’m curious though, would you say the incident is part of a larger pattern?”

Andrew was about to reply when the doors at the back of the courtroom opened to admit one older, portly man. He walked calmly through the benches to sit near Wymack, a forbidding frown on his face.

“David,” the man said quietly.

“Commissioner,” Wymack replied respectfully.

The prosecution cleared her throat and Andrew forced his attention back to her. “So how about it, Mr Doe? Is this all part of a larger pattern?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t follow.”

She raised her eyebrows and asked in a piercing, clear voice, “Do you routinely break the law during your investigations?”

Andrew blinked and looked back calmly, the very essence of being cool and collected. “Not that I recall, no.”

“So you’ve never broken the law?”

*Whoops.*

“Everyone breaks the law, Ms Wright.” He said instead of answering that. “Case in point, you have been precisely seven minutes early for every meeting we’ve ever had. You arrange your notebooks in the same way each day. You position a small photo of an eleventh-century stone bust on top of your day planner so you can look at it before you begin your work. Are you suggesting that someone as bound by routine such as yourself has never, oh, say, crossed against the traffic lights, jaywalked, sped through a yellow light, used an expired subway pass or ticket in order to keep to a schedule?”

The prosecution’s lips thinned momentarily. “I’m not talking about that kind of law-breaking.”
Andrew raised his eyebrows innocently. “So, some degree of criminality is acceptable then, the rest is just negotiating triviality and consequences?”

The judge cleared his throat again. “Answer the question directly, Mr Doe. If you won’t do it out of respect for the institution that employs you and your friends, do it for the detective who is unconscious in the hospital because of your actions.”

Andrew felt all vague amusement from the verbal sparring drain away to be replaced by a heavy feeling, weighing down his bones and making his stomach churn. He turned back to the prosecution and answered in a cold, professional tone.

“I have never broken the law in the manner Ms Wright suggests.”

“We have statements from several officers saying they have no idea how you and your partner get inside of so many private homes and businesses when nobody’s there. They all think you break in.”

Andrew didn’t reply as she hadn’t asked a question, simply waited.

“So, you didn’t pick the locks of the homes of Charles Milverton, Stuart Bloom and Dustin Bishop to name just three? Never mind the occasional morgue, hotel room or place of business out-of-hours? A couple of officers even think you’ve taught your partner to do it, considering he was caught breaking into the car of Drew Gardner, though no charges were filed.”

“I have no comment for the Drew Gardner incident, and as you say there were no charges,” Andrew replied placidly. “As for the rest, the officers who told you those things are confused.”

“You’re saying you didn’t enter those dwellings? Because you’ve used evidence from inside those places. Evidence used in convictions. Convictions which would need to be overturned if it came to light that the evidence was obtained illegally.”

“Mr Josten and I entered those locations, just not illegally.”

“Explain yourself,” the prosecution suggested, none too gently.

Andrew looked up to the ceiling as if wracking his memory and was careful not to fold his arms, as it would look defensive. “It was quite some time ago, but if I remember correctly, on most of those occasions the doors were already open.”

“In New York City?” Ms Wright scoffed. “The front doors were open? Not just unlocked, but actually ajar?”

“I was surprised as well. Although, it should be mentioned that few criminals in the midst of a crime would be clear-headed enough to remember to close doors behind them, so it makes more sense than it sounds. In several other instances, we thought we heard cries for help or believed somebody to be in danger, such as with Dustin Bishop. If I remember correctly, our fast entry to his home helped save his life, as he was bleeding out on his bathroom floor.” Andrew looked calmly between the prosecution and the judge. “I believe the ER incident report says as much, if you care to consult it. As for the cries for help, they turned out to be televisions with the volume turned up. Unfortunate, but rather reassuring that nobody was in danger, wouldn’t you agree?”

Andrew watched her grind her teeth. “So there’s an epidemic of unlocked doors and people leaving their TVs on, that’s your story?”

“Once we mistook the cries of a small puppy to be a baby in distress.”
The prosecution gave the judge a hard look. “Your Honour, allow me to register my scepticism.”

“Registered,” the judge acknowledged with a frown. “But unless you’ve got a witness who can contradict Mr Doe’s statement…”

“How could she?” Andrew butted in with a brief smile. “Mr Josten and I were the only ones present.”

“Oh, I’ll be asking him what happened too,” Ms Wright promised sourly.

“Excellent,” Andrew replied brightly. “That should clear things up.”

The prosecution blew out a short breath and looked back to the photo on her planner for a second to collect her thoughts. “So. Someone walked into the precinct with a shotgun. You insist this has something to do with the James Dylan incident—”

“No, it has everything to do with it,” Andrew shook his head, uncaring that Wymack was glowering at him for his continued rudeness. “Having disarmed the knight, we turned our attention to establishing his identity and that of his queen.”

“Does anyone ever call you anything besides ‘the knight’?” Wymack asked carefully, sitting opposite the young man in the interview room, Boyd at his side.

“It was my duty to kill the queen,” the knight insisted. He was a little calmer now, and had accepted some water and a sandwich, but his eyes were still hazy and unfocussed. “I was summoned to her castle and told that only in death would her soul be freed from her demons.”

“This castle,” Boyd said gently as the young man’s eyes started welling up again, clearly grieved. “Do you have any idea where it is? Any – directions so we might find her for you, uh, to ensure her soul is truly free?”

“It was my sworn duty,” the knight replied, looking down at his hands as tears dripped off his chin onto the table.

“This is going nowhere,” Andrew said quietly in the viewing room on the other side of the mirror. “He seems to be schizophrenic and in the middle of a psychotic episode. It’s going to be days and a lot of medication before he starts regaining lucidity.”

Josten sighed. “Not a time frame that bodes well for the queen, if she’s still alive. Well, there’s blood in the treads of his boots, probably hers. Boyd found two receipts in his pockets, both for early morning coffees, from the same bodega on West 20th and 5th Avenue. Maybe he lives out there.”

“Along with hundreds of thousands of other people,” Andrew said. They watched Boyd and Wymack try to draw usable information out of the young knight for a few minutes until Andrew’s phone chimed. He read the message and hummed thoughtfully. “But only one of them is named Silas Cole. I texted his picture to a contact who works the psych ER at Sandbridge, she recognised him from frequent appointments.”
“I set her free,” Silas was weeping. “I set her free, I set her free…”

Andrew buzzed open the comms between rooms. “Captain, his name is Silas Cole. He lives in the Flatiron District. We’ll have an address for you soon.”

“Alright, let’s get a warrant,” Wymack said to Boyd, who nodded and started getting his things together.

It took a few hours, but eventually they found themselves inside Silas’ apartment, looking at his collections of beautiful, archaically-styled paintings.

Boyd sighed at the one front and centre in the bedroom, depicting a grieving knight with Silas’ face standing with a bloody sword over a beheaded woman wearing a purple dress. There were shadowy, frightening figures made of smoke pouring out of her severed neck.

“This does not fill me with optimism,” Boyd remarked.

“Well, the knight is obviously Silas, which suggests the woman is real, too,” Josten said sadly.

“How do we know for sure that’s the queen?” Boyd asked. “No crown, no jewels…”

“Purple was a colour reserved for royalty in the Middle Ages,” Andrew said from the other side of the room, where he was examining a photo collage. “It was an offense for anyone not of royal blood to wear the colour, much like the laws prohibiting any but royals from hunting and eating particular breeds of swan, in England. That is most certainly his queen. He seems to have done an excellent job with the likeness.”

Boyd and Josten came over to him and looked at the photos with him – depicting Silas and a young, redheaded woman hugging and holding hands in various places, with lots of just her face. Smiling serenely. She seemed fond of shades of blue and purple.

“Oh, she was his girlfriend,” Josten said.

“Seriously?” Boyd shook his head. “That guy is in no shape to be dating anyone, he’s clearly all bent out of shape in the head.”

Andrew clenched his jaw for a second and took a slow breath. He hadn’t expected a statement like that from Boyd. It hurt, he found. Rather a lot.

“You don’t know what he’s like when lucid and receiving proper treatment and care,” Andrew said shortly.

Boyd hummed doubtfully and Josten lightly touched Andrew’s wrist, just for a second. Then he leaned forward and pointed at the photos. “From the weather and clothing in these photos, it looks like they were together until about six months ago. None more recent than last spring. Maybe she broke up with him?”

They peered at the photos again and Josten spotted a locket necklace on a nearby table. He pointed to several of the photos where the woman was seen wearing it, proudly on display. “Maybe he gave this to her, and she gave it back when they broke up. It’s engraved with an R.”

“Good theory,” Andrew said, and Josten smiled faintly at him.
Boyd, meanwhile, was going through a pile of old mail. “There’s a whole stack of fashion magazines here, all from last year. The subscription label is addressed to… Rada Hollingsworth, of 23rd.”

“So, Detective Boyd was actually the one who identified Rada Hollingsworth as ‘the queen’?” Ms Wright asked. “A substantial contribution to the case, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yes,” Andrew replied calmly after another sip of his water. “One of the many he’s made during our work together.”

“Sounds like you regard him as a real asset to the department.”

“Detective Boyd is several standard deviations above the norm, and an exemplary detective.” Andrew said coolly, honestly. “I’ve always regarded him as such.”

“Yes, your affection for the man really shines through,” the prosecution commented snidely. Andrew felt his face twitch again. Wymack would know that compliments from him were rare and honest, and Boyd and Josten would know how to read his inexpert attempts at vocalising their friendship. But only Wymack was in the room, and he wasn’t allowed to speak. “According to your deposition, when you got to Rada Hollingsworth’s apartment, the door was wide. Open.”

“That’s correct.”

She raised her eyebrows incredulously and threw up her hands.

“It was.”

“Miss Hollingsworth?” Boyd called as he nudged the already-ajar door further open. He shone his flashlight inside, gun ready. He proceeded slowly until he was sure the area was clear, then sighed and put away his gun. “In here.”

Andrew darted forwards from the doorway, Josten at his heels until they joined Boyd by the sad, bloody corpse of Rada Hollingsworth.

“Looks like she’s been dead a few hours,” Andrew observed.

“Those must be Silas’ boot prints,” Josten said and pointed at the bloody treads marking an anxious circle through and around the pool of blood surrounding the body, and tracking unsteadily out the door.

Boyd sighed again. “Alright, I’ll call the station, tell them to book Cole.”

“Don’t,” Andrew said sharply. “He didn’t kill this woman.”

“Uh, sorry,” Wright interrupted with a frown and contemptuous look. “Silas Cole walked into the station with a shotgun and confessed to murder. You were standing there looking at his boot prints and the body, and your first thought was that he couldn’t possibly have done it?”
“Not my first thought,” Andrew admitted. “I tend to have thoughts in rapid succession.” He ignored Wymack’s sigh, the prosecution’s irritated expression, the judge’s frown, and continued. “She’d been shot in the chest, the rib cage, with a shotgun, at point-blank range. Her heart had been pretty much obliterated. The knight wouldn’t do that.”

“And why not?” Wright sighed.

Andrew sat forward, knowing he was getting agitated and jittery but unable to stop himself. “Silas Cole said he killed her in order to save her soul. In the Middle Ages, in the world of his delusions, the heart was not just a symbol of romance. It was literally seen as the vessel of a person’s soul. So for him to shoot her in the heart?” He grimaced and shook his head. “He would have been sentencing her to an eternity of purgatory, not setting her free at all. He loved her, there was no way he would have done such a thing.”

“And the confession? The footprints?”

“Silas Cole was acting in diminished capacity,” Andrew said firmly. “He may have believed he was responsible, even if he wasn’t. As for the footprints, I’m not saying he wasn’t there, I’m saying I didn’t believe he was the one who pulled the trigger. Which means, of course, someone else did.”

The prosecution was about to make another comment when the doors opened again and Josten, of all people, walked in. He looked pale in his too-new suit, his hair messy despite the short ponytail he’d pulled it into, and he headed quickly down towards Wymack.

“Your Honour, Mr Josten is scheduled to testify at this hearing, he cannot be here,” Wright protested.

Josten held up his hands, eyes wide. “Y-Your Honour, I have an important message for Captain Wymack and his phone is off, I wouldn’t interrupt otherwise.”

The judge nodded permission and Josten bent down to whisper behind his hand in Wymack’s ear, who immediately got up with an alarmed expression.

“What’s going on? Neil?” Andrew called, leaning forward.

Josten flashed him a stressed, worried look and bit his lip, but said nothing and followed Wymack rapidly out of the courtroom.

“Mr Doe, while you’re on the stand in my court, you will limit yourself to testimony relevant to this case. Do you understand?” The judge said sternly.

Andrew took a slow breath and tried not to read too much into Josten’s appearance, at all the haptic signals his body language had been practically screaming across the room.

“Yes, Your Honour,” he said through gritted teeth.

***

Neil followed Wymack into the ER as he headed for the tall, blonde woman waiting by the doors.

“Abby,” Wymack sighed as she hugged him gently. He kissed her cheek and Neil studied his shoes for a minute. “Thanks for getting a message through. What happened?”

“This way,” Abby said with a brief smile for Neil. “I’ll take you through. Well, while the surgeon
was repairing the abdominal wall, a blood clot formed in the left ventricle.”

“I thought it was supposed to be just routine?”

“We thought he was out of the woods a few days ago too,” Abby grimaced. “But there’s no such thing as ‘routine’ when you’re recovering from a gunshot to the abdomen.”

“What happened to the clot?” Wymack asked. Neil guessed that years married to a medical professional had given him some familiarity with her work, just as she’d been able to identify her attacker and recognise the calibre of gun used.

Abby sighed and squeezed Wymack’s arm as they came to a stop outside a recovery ward. “It got wedged in the right subclavian artery and obstructed blood-flow to the arm for about 30 minutes.”

Wymack swallowed hard and Neil tried not to fiddle with his suit cuffs. “What does that mean? I don’t understand.”

Abby looked to him with sad, droopy eyes. “He might be fine. Or he may never regain full use of his right arm or hand. He’ll need his friends around him regardless.”

She gestured to the viewing window in front of them and Neil looked through with a sinking feeling in his chest, seeing his friend unconscious and hooked up to a lot of machines.

“Oh, fuck,” Neil said quietly and hugged himself. “Does Dan know?”

“Yes, she’s on her way. Are you okay, Neil?”

“I’m fine,” Neil choked out. “When will he wake up?”

“A couple hours,” Abby said gently. “I’ll text David when he’s awake, if you like.”

Neil nodded tightly and watched Boyd’s heart monitor, the trace bleeping steadily in slow waves. Don’t die, he begged silently even though he knew Boyd was safe, it was just his arm in trouble, but the fear wouldn’t let go. Please don’t die, Matt.

***

Doe blinked slowly at the cement between his feet as Wymack recapped Boyd’s condition for him. Neil couldn’t stop moving, pacing and shifting his weight and trying not to scuff his new shoes. Part of him was angry, so angry with Doe; part of him couldn’t understand how he could sit so silent and still and hear the news that had panic roaring through Neil’s chest.

“Tell me again why they waited five days before operating,” Doe said eventually.

“Abby said they always leave abdo wounds open for a while, it’s to do with infection, it’s completely standard procedure. The timeline had nothing to do with the clot, she said,” Wymack replied.

“I’m going back to the hospital,” Neil announced. “You should come when this is done for the day. You haven’t visited him at all, Andrew. What the fuck?”

“There’s no point in me being there,” Doe replied biting. “There is nothing I can do for him, and I highly doubt he wants me there anyway.”

Neil sighed and shook his head.
An officer walked over to them with a bored expression. “Hey, they’re heading back in, recess is over.”

“Thanks,” Wymack said absently, and held an arm out when Doe made to go right past him. “Hey. Wide open doors? Puppies?”

“I’m just saying what I need to say to get us back to work,” Doe snapped.

“Well it’s not just what you say. It’s how you say it, Doe.” Wymack said. “You can hate what’s going on in there, you can think it’s a waste of time and beneath you. But if the judge knows that you think that, how is that good for you, huh? Be nice. It’s the smart thing to do. Now scrounge up some manners or so help me I’ll fire you out of spite, you hear me?”

Doe pushed his arm away. “Loud and clear, Captain. Loud and fucking clear.”

Neil felt his stomach twist uncomfortably as they watched Doe stalk back inside. “You wouldn’t actually fire him, would you?”

“No,” Wymack said quietly. “You and him and Boyd and Gordon and Dan are all basically my kids at this point. And he knows that. But he doesn’t respond well to gentle suggestions. Sometimes he needs a push.”

Neil tried not to startle too badly and told himself not to think about it. “It’s the guilt, I think,” he offered. “He’s not used to feeling guilt like this. And – I think, from what he’s said – Boyd was the first real friend he’s made since he was very young. I…” Neil sighed and rubbed through his hair, wishing the words would come easier. “I’m stressed and worried and angry too, but I don’t know how to help Andrew when he’s like this. He’s all prickles and blades.”

“Just… keep an eye on him, I reckon,” Wymack said. “Let him know he still has a friend, even if Boyd doesn’t want to see him for a while. He’s worst when he’s alone.”

“Just… keep an eye on him, I reckon,” Wymack said. “Let him know he still has a friend, even if Boyd doesn’t want to see him for a while. He’s worst when he’s alone.”

***

Andrew settled back into the witness stand and adjusted his sleeves to hide how he was stealthily doing some breathing and grounding exercises Bee had taught him for managing anger. He watched as Ms Wright walked over to her desk and picked up the post-it note he’d left on top of her planner. She read it quickly, then came over to him with a wary look on her face.

“Did you put this on my desk?”

“’At the head of all understanding is realising what is and what cannot be, and the consoling of what is not in our power to change’,” Andrew recited quietly from memory. “A lovely sentiment. First expressed by the 11th century poet Solom ben Judah. But you know that, because you have a photo of ben Judah’s bust on your planner.”

“What’s your point, Doe?”

“The saying is thought to be an early derivation of the Serenity Prayer,” he continued quietly, careful that no one else could overhear them. “Which is commonly recited by recovering alcoholics and addicts. Is that why you keep the photo – to remind yourself of the prayer?”

Wright’s eyes turned hard and flinty. “Is this some kind of threat?”

Andrew blinked, then shook his head rapidly. “No. No. You misunderstand me. I would not reveal a secret of that nature. It’s simply a… a nod. From someone who has close friends and family
members who’ve been through addiction, and someone who’s struggled with it himself, to another. An acknowledgement that the world we live in is often too complicated for the rules we make for it.”

He held her gaze as she searched his face and hoped that she wouldn’t immediately try to use those tacit admissions against him once the hearing was in session again. He was betting she wouldn’t, from the way her eyes went wide and thoughtful.

The judge took his seat and got settled, then looked to them both. “Ms Wright, ready when you are.”

“Yes, Your Honour,” she replied and walked back to her desk for a few moments, pretending to flip through her notes. She took a quick drink of water and when she looked back to Andrew, she was back to business. “Mr Doe, during the recess I take it you heard about Matthew Boyd’s complications?”

“Yes, I did.”

“I’m told they may have long-term implications for his career. In that light, I was wondering if you feel any regret over your methods in this case.”

“This is a courtroom, not a confessional,” the judge interrupted before Andrew could reply.

“Fair enough,” she nodded briskly. “Let’s turn back to the Rada Hollingsworth investigation.”

“Yes, well. Captain Wymack did not agree with my assessment of Silas Cole’s innocence, so Mr Josten and I explored other avenues on our own,” Andrew said. “Ex-lovers, colleagues, a neighbour with designs on her apartment… all dead ends. But in the course of exploring Rada’s life, we learned she was seeing an oncologist called Dr Hobbs.”

Wright frowned and flicked through her notebook quickly. “When had she been diagnosed with cancer?”

“Seven months prior to her murder,” Andrew said. “Dr Hobbs was administering a stage one drug trial which Rada was enrolled in.”

“I’m sorry,” Hobbs sighed, “Rada didn’t say anything to me about where she planned to go after she left my office. We tended to talk mostly about her diagnosis, I’m sure you understand.”

Andrew nodded vaguely and Josten copied him, looking around the doctor’s office at all the accolades on the walls.

“She was really responding to the medication,” Hobbs continued sadly. “It was beautiful to watch. I thought she might even go into remission. But I guess her ex-boyfriend had other ideas.”

“Rada told you about her relationship with Silas?” Andrew asked as neutrally as possible.

“Yes, she mentioned her former boyfriend was schizophrenic. She said he’d switched
medications and therapists since they broke up and he didn’t seem to be coping well, that she was still worried about him, that kind of thing. She’d ask me for advice about it sometimes, but I’m an oncologist, not a psychiatrist. There wasn’t too much I could offer other than my own basic training from years ago. I was glad she was out of a relationship with someone who sounded so unstable, with everything she was dealing with health-wise.”

Andrew nodded again politely and balled his fists under the desk where Hobbs couldn’t see them.

“I really had no idea just how sick the man was until he showed up here about a week before she died,” Hobbs said with a shake of his head. Andrew clenched his jaw and forced himself not to interrupt. “He was ranting, delusional, wanting to find her and talk to her, to apologise for something or other. I thought about pursuing a committal. I should have, obviously. But hindsight is 20/20, and all that.”

“Forgive my ignorance,” Josten smiled blandly, leaning forward to draw Hobbs’ attention, “But drug trials like yours are expensive, aren’t they? They wouldn’t be covered by insurance? According to our research, Rada Hollingsworth was a student teacher. Do you know how she was paying for treatment?”

“I know exactly how she was paying for it,” Hobbs replied, grim. “She cashed in her life insurance for a viatical settlement.”

“A viatical settlement,” Andrew explained to the court, “Is a predatory arrangement where a terminally ill patient signs away their future life insurance payout in exchange for a monthly cash sum. The individual or company supplying the settlement is more-or-less betting that their client will die before these payments surpass the value of the policy. Or, more plainly, that their client will die as soon as possible so the company can retain as much profit from their life insurance value as possible. For patients with exhaustive medical needs and bills, however, this can seem like their best option to keep up with treatments.”

He paused to drink some more water, then raised his eyebrows at Wright and turned over his palms as if in offering. “In Miss Hollingsworth’s case, the vulture circling overhead was an employee at Helping Hands Viaticals. An employee called… James Dylan. So, as you see, the incidents are intricately linked.”

“And we finally get to the point,” Wright acknowledged with a slanted smile. “So you confronted Mr Dylan at his place of work.”

“Yes.”

“The equation seems simple enough,” Andrew said, leaning on the top of the plywood cubicle wall and looking down at James Dylan in his ratty suit and thinning hair. “The longer she lived – for example, if her cancer were successfully put into remission – the less profit for this company. In fact, according to the contracts of this place, if she outlived the value of her policy then the difference would come out of the agent’s pocket. Yours. So it seems like you would stand to benefit from her death, don’t you
“Yeah but that doesn’t mean I killed her,” Dylan said sourly, his eyes flicking around at the other cubicles.

“So where were you the night she died?” Josten asked.

Dylan licked his lips nervously and lowered his voice. “Look, if you wanna talk about this we can go somewhere else. And if you’re gonna grill me, I want a lawyer present. Right now, we got leads from a nursing home and I gotta hit the phones if I wanna stay employed.”

“This place is a miserable pit of despair,” Andrew said, lip curled as he looked around. “You’d think they’d have a hard time hanging onto their employees. And yet, the cubicles are full. Some people are even hot-desking and sharing space. Some of your colleagues even have diplomas and certificates on display. Seems like in this economy, your employers have no problems attracting the overqualified.”

“Yeah, so?”

Andrew shrugged and studied his nails. “I was wondering if they know that you’re a convicted felon who spent time in prison, that’s all.”

Dylan sat forwards, eyes wide, and hissed, “Who told you that?”

“Seems like a fair question,” Wright interjected. “How did you learn about Mr Dylan’s criminal record?”

“When I leaned that James Dylan had sold Rada Hollingsworth her viatical, I did some basic research into his background. Research his employers had apparently neglected to perform. The internet’s just marvellous, isn’t it?”

“Mr Dylan stated in a deposition given from his hospital bed that you discovered that information from his personal cell phone. Which you accessed without a warrant.”

“Would it surprise you to learn that James Dylan is lying?” Andrew asked coolly.

“Not necessarily,” Wright conceded, then turned a sharp gaze on him. “But you do tend to attract people who lie about your illegal behaviour, it seems.”

“I’m not sure what you’re trying to imply, Ms Wright.”

“I’ll ask plainly, then. Did you access James Dylan’s phone without permission and without a legal warrant, therefore obtaining personal information about his criminal history illegally?”

“I did not,” Andrew replied calmly. “I simply confronted him with the fruits of my earlier internet research.”

“Who told you that?”
Andrew held up the old flip phone he’d spotted earlier, left out on the desk while Dylan was in the bathroom. “Oh, you did. Or rather, your phone did. According to your call history, you regularly contact the same local 477 number several times a week. That area code is the same as our precinct. Your desk calendar there has a commitment every Tuesday with the address 202 Broadway, which, oddly enough, is the address for the New York State Division of Parole.”

Dylan’s eyes seemed to bulge and he looked around rapidly, pale and clammy. “Okay, okay, let’s take this outside, okay? Not here.”

They followed him out of the building into a side street, with Andrew slipping the man’s phone back into his pocket as they walked.

“On the night Rada Hollingsworth was murdered, I was having a drink with a friend in a bar called Sharkey’s, okay?”

“Your presence in a bar is a violation of your parole.”

“Yeah,” Dylan admitted. “I got sent upstate after a barfight, got outta control and broke a guy’s legs.”

Josten exchanged a look with him and tucked his hands in his pockets, leaning a little closer to Andrew.

“So on the night you’re asking about, okay…” Dylan sighed. “I had a lousy day at work. Well, honestly, they all suck, but whatever. I just felt like having a couple of drinks with a friend. There’s at least a dozen people who can vouch. I was nowhere near Rada Hollingsworth when she died.”

“We’ll need names and numbers,” Josten said, digging in his pockets for a notebook. He’d started copying Boyd that way, Andrew had noticed recently.

“Fine, fine,” Dylan nodded as he started scribbling. “Just please, please don’t tell my parole officer.”

“You are aware, I presume, that it’s a crime to steal private property?” Wright tried again, obviously not buying his assertion that there had been no phone involved in the conversation whatsoever.

“I stole no property,” Andrew replied easily, keeping his body language unaffected and honest-seeming. It helped that in his mind, he’d only briefly borrowed the phone. It had been in a public space when he’d seen it, after all. He hadn’t taken it off Dylan’s person or from his home. From his desk, yes, but what kind of idiot left his phone lying around these days anyway? “Nor did I call his parole officer. So our investigation was back to square one. Usually, this means a distraction of some kind is called for.”

Andrew gently placed Clyde in a bowl on top of a set of old-fashioned weighing scales, measuring them against a collection of his burner phones.
Clyde apparently grew bored of this and tried to clamber out, meowing pitifully until Andrew picked them up and deposited them back in the front pocket of his hoodie. The little cat purred happily, their tail poking out one end. Andrew reached for an old phrenology bust and weighed it against the phones instead, adding more from his box until the scales were level.

Andrew propped his elbow on his knee and his chin on his hand. “Hm.”

Josten wandered in a little while later, holding a bowl of pasta in one hand and with the other cat in the crook of his arm. “Hey,” he smiled gently. “What are you doing?”

Andrew accepted the food and watched as Josten laid down on the couch and let Bonnie walk all over him, literally. He kept grinning when Bonnie nudged their noses together.

“Science,” Andrew eventually replied. “Clyde’s weight is equal to thirteen phones. Angus’ weight is equal to thirty. Therefore Angus is equal to two and four thirteenth of a Clyde at their current age and weight.”

Neil grinned and pursed his lips up towards Bonnie in a tiny kiss. Andrew shoved pasta in his mouth to distract himself from the sight.

“You could just say two point three, you know. Fractions are stupid. Do we have another cat called Angus now?”

“No, Angus is this one,” Andrew said, and pointed to the phrenology bust.

“Oh, I see.” Josten smiled and ran a hand down Bonnie’s tiny back towards their fluffy tail. The kitten purred and arched up into his touch. Andrew wolfed more pasta and tucked a hand into his pocket to hold onto Clyde, who nuzzled his fingers happily.

“Why are you doing such important science in the middle of a case?”

“A distraction,” Andrew admitted and rubbed gently between Clyde’s ears with his fingertip. “Silas Cole said he was ‘summoned’ to Rada’s apartment, which made me think that the actual killer called him. And indeed, Silas received a phone call from a disposable cell phone at 8.40.” He waved vaguely at the paper piles around him on the floor.

“That doesn’t fit,” Josten said thoughtfully as he petted Bonnie. “Rada’s neighbour said she heard a truck backfiring at 7.35, obviously the shotgun blast. Why would the killer wait over an hour before calling Silas there to frame him?”

“Why indeed,” Andrew replied and scooped Clyde out of his pocket to hold them properly in both hands. They were so tiny and warm and soft, it was hard not to feel attached already. Especially when Clyde seemed to enjoy falling asleep in his lap, like a miniature, purring water bottle. He’d taken the cats to the vet soon after Josten brought them home to make sure they were healthy and to get them sexed, but he and Josten had decided not to care too much about the results. They liked their gender-neutral cats and their names just as they were.

“Hm.”

“Precisely. Hence, the science. I sent Aaron the autopsy report to see if he had any
“Rude of him,” Josten muttered, then was promptly distracted by Bonnie doing that odd kneading push-pull thing with his shirt, as if plumping up a pillow or tenderising meat. Josten found it endearing, and Andrew was thoroughly irritated with himself that he couldn’t look away from Josten’s delighted expression.

It took about another half hour of quietly fussing with the cats until Aaron called back.

“‘There’s nothing especially suspicious in there other than the gunshot wound, I don’t know why you wanted me to look at it,’” he said grumpily, without preamble. They could hear vague noises of traffic in the background, as if Aaron had stepped into the street to make the call.

“It might have been a reach,” Andrew admitted. “We’re a bit stuck on one detail – we’ve theorised that the killer waited over an hour before calling in the man potentially being framed. Would there be any medical reason for that?”

Aaron started denying it, then stopped himself. Over speakerphone, Andrew and Josten heard him muttering calculations. “What were the potassium levels at time of autopsy?” He asked instead. “I can’t look up the digital version on a call.”

“22.4,” Josten answered.

“Oh, hi – Neil, yes?”

“Yes, it’s Neil,” Josten said calmly and tweaked Bonnie’s tail, prompting a high-pitched mewl. “…And cat.”

“You have a cat now? Whatever.” Aaron sighed. “22.4…”

“Is that especially high?” Andrew asked.

“Not for a body a few hours into decomposition,” Aaron said slowly. “After you die, your cells start leaking potassium into the bloodstream. It’s often used as a measure of time of death, the concentration of potassium present, seeing as it’s basically linear at a known rate. Waiting an hour after death… could be because the killer wanted the potassium levels to build up, potentially confuse the timeline? Or… I don’t know, conceal her potassium levels? The file said she was undergoing cancer treatment, right. I don’t know anything about that drug, but it might have an effect on her electrolyte levels.”

“Potassium chloride is a very effective murder weapon, it’s used in lethal injections,” Andrew pointed out. “Waiting an hour after death might allow the lethal concentration in her bloodstream to go unnoticed.”

“Huh,” Aaron said thoughtfully. “That’s… grim.”

“It’s a murder investigation, what were you expecting?”

“I don’t know. Maybe a ‘hello’ or a ‘how are you’.”

Andrew glared at the phone and took a minute to stroke Clyde’s fuzzy head. “How are you, Aaron.”
“I’m very well Andrew, thank you for asking,” Aaron sighed. “Katelyn keeps getting those pregnancy cravings and asking for weird shit all at the same time. Like pickles and ice cream and chicken nuggets.”

“I don’t see an issue.”

“Of course you wouldn’t. How are you doing?”

Andrew looked down to the tiny kitten sprawled happily in his lap, batting at his hands playfully and mock-biting his fingertips. He looked to Josten, laying so peacefully and happily nearby and positively glowing in the sunset streaming through the windows. He thought about the new suit in his closet, ready for Boyd’s wedding.

“Fine,” he said eventually. “I’m enjoying having cats.”

Josten smiled softly at him from the couch and Andrew pulled his eyes away after a moment.

“Oh,” Aaron said awkwardly. “Good. Nice. Well, about those potassium levels. You could ask your ME to test the vitreous fluid in her eyes, it’s not affected by post-mortem potassium leakage so it would give you a good idea of her bloodwork before death.”

“I’ll do that,” Andrew replied. “Good work.”

“Yeah. Well. I should get back inside before Katelyn starts wondering where I am. I’ll call in a week or so.”

“Right. Thanks for your input.”

“Bye, Andrew.”

“Bye.”

Josten raised his eyebrows when Andrew disconnected the call. “What a beautiful sibling conversation. You’re getting really close, I can tell.”

“Shut up,” Andrew muttered, and turned back to giving Clyde attention. At least Clyde wouldn’t sass him over trying to bond with his brother.

“The test suggested by my medical contact confirmed the theory of potassium elevation,” Andrew explained to the court after neatly excising all the personal details of the evening. A small smile was tugging at the corners of his mouth and he didn’t try to stop it. “Rada Hollingsworth was killed with an overdose of potassium chloride, and shot to conceal the fact. The murder was clearly a result of highly technical, medical planning, and exonerated Silas Cole. It was clear he was being set up to take the fall. We confirmed he was legitimately delusional and had likely reinterpreted the murder scene in the only way he could, according to the world as he was seeing it at the time. He was dropped as a person of interest in the case and released into medical care. I’m told he’s receiving more appropriate treatment now.”

“You’re smiling,” Wright pointed out with some surprise. “This is the first time you’ve been anything other than irritated or superior this whole time.”
“An innocent man was freed,” Andrew pointed out, feeling the brief warmth of satisfaction bleeding away. “I’m told that’s a good thing.”

“And what does that have to do with what happened to Matthew Boyd?”

No, he was all ice again.

Andrew rubbed under his eye briefly and fidgeted in his chair. “Look. Whether you believe that I have acted in error in the past or not, you cannot evaluate the work myself and Mr Josten do without considering the good that comes of it. Whatever happened later, it matters that a mentally ill citizen was not unjustly imprisoned or mistreated in this case.” His voice was getting louder, more agitated, and he couldn’t sit still. “It has to matter. It has to. To all of us. Or we might as well dissolve this whole justice system and start over.”

“Mr Doe—”

“This is just one instance,” he went on, staring her down. “There are many, many others. All of which, by the way, my partner and I donate to the NYPD without a charge or request for acknowledgement. We do the full workload of paid detectives, plus a hell of a lot of free time and running around and working all hours of the day and night, because the work matters to us, and the good we do matters. We close cases and help victims find justice. Giving full credit to the detectives. For free.”

“Are you looking for a ‘thank you’?” Wright asked incredulously.

“Might be nice for once,” Andrew shot back before he could stop himself. “Seeing as the whole precinct and NYPD in general reap the substantial benefits of our expertise and hard work.”

The courtroom went deadly silent. Wymack slowly closed his eyes and looked like he was praying. The Commissioner wore a deep scowl to match that of the judge and prosecution.

“Well,” Wright said after a tense minute. “I’ll make sure Matthew Boyd gets that message. When, you know, he wakes up.”

Shit.

***

Andrew leaned into the hot spray of the shower and took slow breaths. He’d called Bee after getting home from the courthouse and she’d helped talk him through the past week or so, and she gave him some more exercises to try for managing his emotions. They were working, more-or-less.

He just felt drained and irritable, honestly. It felt like ever since Boyd had got shot, the air around him had turned to sandpaper, rubbing him raw with everyone’s accusations loaded in their eyes and words like bullets in the chamber. And he was trying, he was honestly trying to put forward a good case. But it was so hard when his temper got away from him, when everyone seemed hell-bent on misunderstanding and provoking him, and he couldn’t help but hear the whispers of monster behind his back, echoes of those foster homes and Palmetto.

He groaned and pressed his hands to his temples, trying to block out the awful thoughts spiralling around and around in there. He sat down on the floor of the shower and let the water pour over him, trying to wash it all away.

I’m sorry, he mouthed to his hands, thinking of Boyd’s wide grin, his excellent mind, his easy friendship from day one, the way he’d asked Andrew to be his best man as his first goddamn
choice and the sad but understanding smile he’d given when Andrew refused. *I’m sorry, Boyd.*

There was a quiet knock on the door. “Andrew? Are you okay in there?”

Andrew rested his cheek on his pulled-up knees and watched the water spiral down the drain, imagining it was siphoning away all the ugly thoughts too. “Fine.”

“I’m making dinner,” Josten said. “Sausages and mash sound good?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. Come down soon, alright?”

Andrew grunted and listened as Josten’s steps went back downstairs. He spent about ten minutes watching the water drain away before he started feeling cold, and hauled himself out of the shower. He dressed in his loosest, comfiest clothes and didn’t bother combing his hair or styling it, just left it ruffled up from the towel.

Josten glanced his way as he turned the sausages over on the grill. “Boyd’s stable. He was awake for a bit, but they decided to keep him sedated overnight, to put less stress on his system. Wymack told me about the rest of your testimony.”

Andrew shrugged and sat down at the table. “I might have got angry. But it’s not done yet, there’s still tomorrow.”

Josten sighed and started mashing the potatoes with greater force than strictly necessary.

“Oh, you’re upset with me,” Andrew said blandly. “I had no idea.”

Josten set the pot down with a heavy *clang* and folded his arms around himself, eyes pale and dangerous. “For such a smart guy you can be a real asshole, you know that? Remember I have to testify tomorrow, and lie under oath about – about puppies, and wide-open doors, and how we got that information about Dylan…”

“As long as we stick to the same story, they can’t prove anything.”

“Well if you’d bothered to come up with a better story, it wouldn’t be so obvious that we’re lying,” Josten shot back and ran a hand through his hair. It was kinked from the ponytail and frizzed out around his hand. “You’re practically daring them to fire us.”

“I am not.”

“Andrew,” Josten snapped, then held up his hands and took a few slow breaths to calm down. He sat slowly at the other end of the table and gentled his tone. “Andrew. You know I don’t care much about the petty rules either. We’ve both been living in the greys of law and morality for a long time. We colour outside the lines a lot and honestly it doesn’t bother me much. But this time Boyd got shot. Because of us.”

“Boyd got shot because of James Dylan.”

“Who wouldn’t have been angry if we hadn’t provoked him in the first place,” Josten said calmly, precisely. “We’re not wholly responsible, but we’re not blameless either. Doesn’t this make you think about how we work?”

“No,” Andrew said softly, refusing to meet his eyes. “Our methods work. Our methods close cases
faster, more accurately, more conclusively. The ends justify the means. I hate that Boyd got hurt because of us – because of me. Alright? I already called Bee and had this whole conversation. I hate it. He was my friend first. I hate that his career might be over because of me. But I’m not sorry we exonerated Silas Cole and found the real murderer, whatever the fallout.”

He could feel Josten’s gaze on his face and listened to the fat quietly popping in the pan as the sausages sizzled.

“I don’t completely agree,” Josten said eventually. “But I can understand why you’d feel that way. And I’m not really mad with you, I’m just worried about Boyd. I’m not used to caring about people, and seeing him hurt really scares me. Are we okay?”

Andrew ran a hand through his damp hair and nodded. “We’re okay.”

Josten finished making their dinner and they ate in silence, but it didn’t feel heavy and tense like it had ever since Boyd’s hospitalisation. When he’d cleared his plate, Andrew rested his cheek on his palm and stared down at the grain of the table. He spaced out for a while until two warm, miniscule bodies were airlifted into his lap.

Bonnie and Clyde meowed up at him and he absently curled his other arm around them to stop them falling to the floor.

Josten gently rested a hand on his shoulder. “You’re not alone, okay? I’ve got your back.”

Andrew didn’t have any words, but he could reach back with the hand that had been supporting his cheek to touch Josten’s hand, and squeeze. So he did.

***

“Mr Josten,” Wright began the next morning once he’d been sworn in. “You and your partner have often found yourselves at crime scenes and other places of interest ahead of the police, often, in fact, ahead of any kind of warrant. Would you say that’s a fair assessment?”

Oh, Neil could smell a verbal trap a mile away. He mustered up his most pleasant, polite smile. “I’d say it’s happened on occasion.”

“How, exactly?”

“We’ve encountered an unusual amount of open doors,” he replied with a slight shrug.

“Open. Doors.” Wright said flatly. “I see. Did you ever break into a place to help out a little puppy?”

“Once,” Neil nodded, refusing to be baited. He’d heard all about how she’d provoked Doe yesterday. “Although we didn’t realise it was a puppy until after we were inside.”

“And how did you and your partner learn about Mr Dylan’s criminal history?”

“We looked into his background before meeting with him at his place of work.”

“Neither of you stole Mr Dylan’s cell phone?”

“No,” Neil said calmly.

“So, then,” Wright said and clapped her hands together. “You are committed to the same version of events as your partner?”
“I can corroborate his account, if that’s what you mean.”

Wright sighed and sat down. “No further questions, Your Honour.”

“Actually, the defence would like to ask some questions,” Doe said smoothly from his place at the defence bench.

The judge raised an eyebrow at him. “You want to cross-examine your own partner?”

Doe stood up and buttoned his suit jacket. “I’m within my rights, Your Honour. I am acting as my own counsel.”

The judge waved him forward and Neil told himself not to smile at Doe as he stepped closer. They had to be completely professional.

“After you and your partner—” Doe frowned and looked to the judge. “How should I refer to myself, Your Honour? First person or third?”

The judge at least looked vaguely amused by that. “Doesn’t matter.”

“Excellent,” Doe said, and turned back to Neil. “After you and your partner freed Silas Cole, how did you go about finding the real killer?”

“Well, Rada Hollingsworth died of a potassium overdose,” Neil said, half to Doe and half to the courtroom. It was easier not to feel nervous if he just kept his eyes on Doe. “Potassium chloride can be obtained online, but to use it in such a way as to obscure the post-mortem potassium levels would have required a thorough understanding of the biochemistry of dying tissue. We were assured of this by our medical contact. All of that suggested we were looking for someone with a medical history.”

“Well, Rada Hollingsworth was a cancer patient,” Doe pointed out, walking slowly back and forth in front of the prosecution and defence benches. “She was attended by a veritable platoon of doctors and health professionals. Are you saying they were all suspects?”

“I’m saying that initially none of them were. We didn’t have a clear motive, so we went to the morgue.”

“You examined her body in an effort to unearth more investigative routes?”

“Yes,” Neil nodded. “Well, her organs. The ME helped us re-examine them.” He hesitated, glancing the judge. “Do you want me to go through all of it?”

Doe’s mouth twitched briefly. “How about we just skip to the good bit?”

Neil smiled back for just a second, then cleared his throat. “Yes, well. We found that the heart had basically been obliterated by the buckshot. It seemed like literal overkill, as she’d already been dead from the potassium injection. That suggested that, much like the potassium levels, something was being camouflaged in all the very obvious damage.”

“And what did you find?”

“The ME took a section of her heart’s muscle fibre and examined it under the microscope. He found signs of di…dilated cardimye…”

“Dilated cardiomyopathy,” Doe supplied easily without tripping up on a single syllable. Asshole
with a perfect memory and a doctor for a brother.

Neil tucked his hair behind his ears and nodded. “Yes. He explained that meant her heart was enlarged, and she would have started showing symptoms of congestive heart failure, which would have been eventually fatal before her murder.”

“Could her enlarged heart have been a result of her cancer?”

“We consulted our medical contact to ask that,” Neil said, remembering briefly that other phone call with Aaron, who’d been obviously pleased to have been contacted so quickly after their last call, but annoyed again when it was obvious Doe had just wanted medical insight. “Our contact said it shouldn’t have been a direct result of her cancer. Her records had all looked normal from the preceding months, too.”

“So what could have caused the damage?” Doe asked, hands in his pockets.

“Our contact said it wasn’t unusual for it to happen as a result of some forms of chemotherapy, especially aggressive treatments.”

“Such as Rada’s experimental drug trial, you mean?”

Neil nodded. “Yes, the one being overseen by Dr Hobbs. Our consult informed us that stage one trials typically determine the safety in humans for sometimes the first time, after safety-based animal testing. They said this is sometimes called a ‘first in human’ study and usually only involves a very small group of volunteers. If there are any dangerous side effects judged unmanageable or unacceptable, the drug goes back into redevelopment. This would further extend the timeline of drug testing before approval, which would be costing the developers huge amounts of money for every delay. If any life-threatening side effects were seen, the drug could potentially be pulled completely from development with huge financial and professional ramifications. With Hobbs as the responsible physician in charge of Rada’s care, he stood the most to gain from her successful response to the drug, and the most to lose from her enlarged heart, especially if it came to light that he might have concealed her condition for his own gain.”

“Dr Hobbs then became a suspect?” Doe asked.

“Yes. We asked him to the station to answer some more questions.”

“I’m sorry,” Hobbs said hotly, “You said you had a few follow-up questions. Now it sounds like I’m a suspect!”

“Oh yes, you very much are;” Doe informed him brightly.

“Well then, I’m getting a lawyer;” Hobbs announced and began to stand. Before he could leave the room, Doe stepped forward and pushed firmly on his right shoulder.

Hobbs staggered back into his chair with a pained shout. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Hurts, does it?” Doe asked. “I bet you’ve got a nasty bruise under there. That’s the thing with shotguns, if you don’t know how to brace them properly the kickback will get you for sure.”
“I strained my shoulder playing squash,” Hobbs said.

Doe rolled his eyes. “Once you’d dispatched Rada and shredded all evidence of your misdeeds, it was time to put your patsy on stage. Well aware of Silas’ poor mental health and the nature of his delusions, you called him to come to Rada’s apartment.”

“You convinced him he’d killed his queen,” Neil said. “Then you gave him the not-so-metaphorical smoking gun, shoved some shell casings in his pocket, and sent him to the police. I’m sure you thought he’d get gunned down. Either way, you were covered, right? He couldn’t possibly recover lucidity in time to defend himself before being incarcerated.”

“Or at least you thought so,” Boyd added. “But the shotgun didn’t just kickback into your shoulder, did it? The trigger caught the webbing of your finger. Opened up a nasty cut.”

They all looked to Hobbs’ right hand, which was sporting an awkward dressing between his index and middle fingers.

“No something you’d notice in the heat of your first murder,” Boyd continued, “But it drew enough blood to settle in the casings of those shells you put in Silas’ pockets. See, you were smart about wiping down the gun and shells, but those little grooves in the casings are hard to get to. We know the blood didn’t come from Silas or Rada.” He turned over a piece of paper and slid it across the table towards the doctor. “This is a warrant to compel a DNA test from you. We can run the tests, wait for the results, or you could just start talking.”

“Dr Hobbs confessed,” Neil said with a brief smile. “As a result of our investigation, he’s losing his medical licence, going to jail for a very long time, and the drug has been pulled for further safety investigations.”

“Thank you, Mr Josten,” Doe nodded to him, looking satisfied. “A pleasure, as always.”

Doe sat down at the defence bench and Neil caught Wymack’s slightly approving smile. Then the prosecution stood. “Redirect?”

The judge nodded.

“Then what happened?” She asked.

Neil frowned in confusion. “With Dr Hobbs?”

“No, I’ve seen enough of the mutual admiration society here,” Wright said, waving her hand between himself and Doe. Neil felt his face start to heat, but all embarrassment was wiped away with her next words. “I’m talking about the actual reason we’re all here today. What happened after Hobbs’ confession, after you left the precinct?”

“Oh. Yes.” Neil looked down at his hands for a moment, subdued. “We were just heading out of the station.”
“I’m not going to learn dirty brawling from you unless you learn proper boxing from me,” Boyd was laughing as they stepped into the street. “Give it up, Doe. Or would you rather we all hit the Exy court?”

Doe was vehemently objecting to that when a very angry man came up to them.

“You just couldn’t keep your voice down, huh?”

“Mr Dylan,” Doe said, dodging back so Dylan wasn’t towering over him, right up in his face. “It’s business hours, shouldn’t you be out trolling a cancer ward for the scared and destitute?”

“No, ’cause I don’t have that job anymore. ‘Cause somebody overheard you at work! They heard you say I’d been to jail, they went to my boss, and he fucking fired me!”

They all blinked at him for a moment.

“Well,” Doe said, “Perhaps it’s an opportunity for you to find something a bit less soul-destroying to do.”

“Hey, give him a break,” Boyd said in an undertone. “He just lost his job, Doe. Cool it.”

“Nah,” Dylan said, baring his teeth and shaking his head like a rabid dog, “I won’t be doing anything because my boss called my parole officer. I’m going back to prison, you fuck!”

“That’s… regrettable,” Doe said slowly.

“Regrettable?” Dylan spat. “Regrettable? You ruined my life! You don’t get to just walk away from that!”

He surged forward, a gun pulled from his pocket, lifting up to fire, point-blank at Doe’s chest—

“Gun!” Boyd yelled, yanked Doe’s shoulder, sent him stumbling backwards as Boyd jumped forward—

BANG

Boyd fell to the ground, a hand to his gut. Dylan staggered back, pale, and Neil and Doe rushed to Boyd’s side as he gasped in pain, blood already streaming from between his fingers.

“Get an ambulance!” Doe yelled to the police officers pouring out of the station, and Neil helped apply pressure to the gushing wound. Someone was arresting Dylan but Boyd was groaning and panting and Neil had never seen anyone recover from a gut shot like that…

“Hold on, Matt,” Doe was saying. “Hold on.” His hands were slick with blood where he was pressing down with Neil, and their eyes met with a look of stark horror over Boyd’s torso.
Neil finished his account numbly, fighting down a shudder at how narrowly Boyd and Doe had both escaped death.

“No further questions,” Wright said simply with a long look to the judge. He dismissed the courtroom, but Neil, Doe and Wymack stayed seated for long moments. Neil found Doe’s eyes and saw all his own guilt reflected tenfold.

***

“Hey,” Neil said quietly as he stepped into Boyd’s room.

Boyd looked over and smiled tiredly from where he was propped up in bed, holding something that looked like a hybrid between play-doh and slime. “Hey, Neil, my sunshine child. Pull up a seat, Dan’s just gone to get coffee.”

“You’re only a few years older than me, Boyd,” Neil objected, but perched on the bed anyway. “How are you feeling?”

Boyd’s mouth twisted. “Like I woke up from surgery.”

Neil bit his lip and looked over at Boyd’s right hand, which was holding the slime thing. “I bumped into Abby on my way here. She said you have some movement back in your arm?”

“Yeah, check this action out,” Boyd said and slowly lifted his right arm. It all seemed to be going smoothly until he tried to manipulate and squeeze the slime ball – his hand started to shake uncontrollably, and he couldn’t grip the object at all. It slipped back onto the bed with an odd squishing noise and Boyd let his arm rest with a sigh.

They sat in silence for a long minute.

“They said I uh, might get better,” Boyd said quietly. “Physical therapy and all that. Said it’s too soon after the surgery to know of any definite long-term effects.”

“That’s good,” Neil whispered. He knew they were both thinking that the NYPD required detectives to carry a gun, and if Boyd could barely hold a pen, there was no way he’d be allowed to continue at his current rank. Not out in the field, anyway.

“Hey, has Doe been by?” Boyd asked with forced casualness. “When I was unconscious, or anything?”

Neil shook his head and fiddled with Boyd’s blankets. “He’ll visit soon, I promise. He’s just… not dealing well with it.”

“I’m the one who got shot,” Boyd muttered darkly, then sighed and rubbed over his face with his uninjured hand. “Anyway. How are those little fuzzballs settling in? I can’t believe what you called them.”

Neil managed a shaky smile and got out his phone to show the latest pictures.

***

The next morning, the judge sat down with a grave air and began his address in a slow, serious voice. Andrew listened from his seat at the defense bench, feeling Wymack and Josten’s eyes on the back of his head.
“This hearing has left me in no doubt that Andrew Doe and his partner Neil Josten have provided work to the NYPD that has been a real asset to the department and the community. That an officer was wounded over the course of that work was a highly regrettable outcome. But, one that occurs every day in law enforcement.”

The judge paused and turned his solemn gaze squarely on Andrew for a second, then looked directly to the Commissioner sitting next to Wymack.

“Another regrettable outcome in law enforcement is when officers decide that they are above the rules, and above the accountability that provides such vital checks and balances in our justice system. So in spite of Mr Doe’s good intentions, he has demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that he does not care to control his actions or work within the laws he claims to defend so vigorously. As such, my recommendation to the police commissioner will be that Mr Doe and Mr Josten be terminated as consultants for the NYPD.”

Andrew turned in his seat to find Wymack and Josten, who looked similarly ill and tired. Josten was looking around the room with wide eyes, frightened and lost. Wymack held Andrew’s gaze grimly, then looked away towards the Commissioner helplessly.

The judge banged his gavel.

“Dismissed.”

Andrew watched as Wymack gently steered Josten out of the room. He could feel loss clawing at his insides and trying to climb up his throat – starting work with Wymack had been the lifeline to pull him from the bleak waters of his apathy and trauma, a reason to care, a reason to live, a reason to feel, a reason to keep moving and getting better. It had brought him a house and a profession and an income and a place in the world he’d carved out for himself away from Exy. It had brought him friends, maybe even family, brought him Josten and companionship and the tantalising possibility of something more, of something soft and cautious and caring filled with quiet smoke breaks and meals cooked side by side and lingering touches and sweet smiles.

And now – and now...

Fuck, he could use a whole goddamn bottle of whiskey just to stop these awful thoughts.

Ms Wright stopped by his seat with the premise of adjusting her armload of notebooks and binders.

“You don’t need to gloat,” Andrew said dully.

“I’m not going to,” she replied quietly. “I’m going to head to an AA meeting. Maybe – maybe you should come with me.”

He stared at his hands for a minute, feeling the burn at the back of his throat begging for some harsh alcohol or the fizz of dust or something to distract and pull him away from this dangerous fall of everything going away, of everything retreating, of everyone leaving him alone, alone, alone. He could almost see Bee’s concerned frown, hear her voice telling him to recognise a trigger and take steps to counteract it.

He nodded and got to his feet.

***

He found Boyd a few hours later, still sober, slightly less panicky. Boyd was sitting in one of the
meeting rooms, looking out at the night lights and trying to lift and squeeze an amorphous blob of therapy goo. The tremors were unmistakeable, but Andrew caught the look of determination on his face. He’d seen it before, when Boyd had to work drug cases that brought up shadows of his own ghosts. He’d pulled through those ones, and Andrew knew he could pull through this too.

If only muscle and nerve damage were so easily fixed, his brain reminded him cruelly as he took a seat near Boyd.

“I heard your hearing didn’t go too well,” Boyd said in a cool tone, not looking his way at all.

“Not well at all,” Andrew admitted. “But. The Commissioner said he’d consulted with all the concerned parties, and decided not to accept the judge’s recommendation to terminate us. We’re staying on after all, with greater oversight and accountability and all that jazz.”

“Congratulations.”

“Any idea what changed his mind?”

Boyd turned to look at him, his expression distant and unfriendly in a way Andrew had never seen before.

“I may have saved your job, and Neil’s,” Boyd said. “But that doesn’t mean I’m happy to see you.”

Andrew nodded, trying to ignore the sinking feeling in his stomach. “I understand. There’s a lot I should say to you. Thank you,” he said quietly. “For intervening with James Dylan. You saved my life.”

Boyd sat silently, waiting.

“And I apologise,” Andrew continued. “I had Dylan’s name before we went to see him. I should have done proper research and not helped myself to his phone. I should have been more discreet in our conversation. I should have behaved in a more pleasant manner outside the police station and not provoked him. My behaviour, however indirectly, has resulted in this. And I am deeply sorry, Matt.”

Boyd nodded slowly in acknowledgement, but offered no forgiveness. That… hurt, but Andrew hadn’t had high hopes for this discussion anyway. He took a deep breath and held out a card.

“The clinic with the highest rate of recovery for nerve palsy is in Gstaad, Switzerland. I’ve reached out to the director, and they would be happy to take you on as a patient immediately. If you’d rather stay in New York, their top physician and his team of physical therapists travel here very frequently. At no cost to you, obviously. I have savings, I would pay for it. Call it a wedding present.”

Boyd took the card and looked at it briefly, then shook his head. “My dad’s already arranged something with one of his friends, and Mom’s said she’ll help out with the money. I don’t need a favour from you, Doe. And honestly, I’d rather not see you right now.”

“I see.” Andrew got to his feet. “I won’t bother you any further, then.”

Boyd said nothing as Andrew walked away, his heart in his shoes. I’m sorry, Matt.
Call your mother, she misses you.

Andrew checked the view behind himself as he adjusted the webcam angle, making sure that there were no geographical give-aways in view or any personal effects that would compromise his job or connections or location or history. The wall was bland, decorated with a vague, faded fleur-de-lis wallpaper that he had never paid any attention to anyway. There were a couple art prints tacked over it, mostly Hubble photographs blown up, and one of those fake space tourism posters. It seemed safe enough.

He checked his hair in the webcam preview and fluffed up the top a little. He could admit he was a little self-conscious; he couldn’t look back on his fashion sense during college without a cringe or two. He didn’t know what he and Aaron had been thinking with the long floppy surfer trims, especially with how short they were and how round their faces had been. Now with the benefit of ageing out of the more painfully shapeless stages of puberty, a more rigorous workout routine to trim the last bits of teenage softness from all over, and a renewed interest in life and his appearance in general, he had a look that suited him much better. He idly ran his fingers over the fuzzy-smooth sections from his temples sweeping around to the back of his neck, all buzzed down in a severe undercut that left only the very top part long and loose; he usually kept it styled up out of his face or swept to the side, but when it was getting longer he sometimes let it curl down instead over his forehead.

He hoped Bee liked it.

He certainly didn’t look much like the hollow, ever-smiling husk of a teenager he’d been during high school and the first year of college. He definitely looked different to the gutted-out poster boy for depression and abandonment he’d been after rehab. She’d last seen him on graduation day, clapping away proudly as he walked across the stage after Aaron to shake the obligatory hand and nod to the faculty members who looked bored out of their minds by the time they’d got to the M’s. She’d been in the audience instead of on the stage, the only person there for them, and she’d sought him and Aaron out once the ceremony finished. The Exy coach had been there, but he’d seemed more than a little relieved to see the back of the twins he’d had so much hope for, and who had only made his line and his job more miserable and difficult, especially after losing Kevin Day mid-season barely a year after signing. Of course Kevin hadn’t shown up (he’d berated himself for ever entertaining the thought), if he hadn’t texted or emailed in four years he wasn’t going to show up for a stupid ceremony.

Andrew perfectly remembered Bee’s teary congratulations to them both, Aaron’s eyeroll as he walked off to hang out with the cheer squad, and her hand on his arm as they sat by the park in their fancy get-ups and watched the other families celebrate. She hadn’t said much, but she’d sat with him for over an hour, just keeping him company so he wouldn’t feel alone. He had allowed himself the opportunity to soak in the last morsel of time and comfort with her.

He remembered reluctantly standing up when she said she had to go see her other graduating patients, and closing his eyes as she asked permission before gently cupping his cheeks and kissing
his forehead. He remembered holding her arms, as close to a hug as he could get, and fighting with
the overlapping sour memories of Cass as they said goodbye before he was taken to juvie. Bee had
smiled at him, tears spilling, and fondly smoothed a rumpled bit of his robes that he’d refused to
iron properly. He’d watched her walk away wiping her eyes and stayed still on the park bench for
hours, complete in his isolation once more. Then, he’d got up and walked to Fox Tower for the last
time. His former teammates ignored him, as had become the norm after getting out of rehab, and he
and Aaron worked around each other in silence as they packed up their belongings in a few
suitcases and backpacks each. Aaron had nodded to him once, looking him in the eyes properly for
the first time since Drake, then loaded himself into the Katelyn’s rented van. Andrew hadn’t
watched them drive away, and had instead driven himself to the car dealership to trade in his GS
for the resources to burn all his bridges, erase himself, and start fresh in New York.

He shook himself out of the heavy grip of his memories and watched the clock until it was almost
the time they’d agreed on in their last call. When it was ready, he gave his hot chocolate a quick
stir then clicked ‘call’ on his screen. He waited nervously for the minute or so it took the secure,
hidden ghost connection to wind its way through the many layers of onion-skinning, bouncing
around the world to make it untraceable before finding Bee’s home computer. It was a stupid risk
even so, he knew that, but…

He wanted to see her again like an ache in his chest, and she’d said she wanted the same. Bee.

She picked up quickly, her eyes wide and her smile even wider as the picture cleared for them both.
For a minute they didn’t say anything, simply staring at each other and cataloguing the differences
the years had made. She was getting greyer than he remembered but she seemed to be embracing it,
and she’d restyled her hair. He was glad she’d stopped using the relaxers; it looked much more
beautiful in its natural form of tight curls making a kind of soft cloud around her face. There were
more lines on her forehead and around her kind brown eyes, but also more around her nose and
cheeks – laughter scars. He was glad. Her glasses were the same.

He raised his mug in a slight salute and took a sip. She beamed and did the same.

“Hello again, Bee,” he said quietly once his mug was back on the desk.

“Oh, Andrew,” she said softly, “Look at you!”

“What?” he said and self-consciously rubbed at his jaw.

Bee covered her mouth for a second, eyes shining. “You’re so grown up.”

“Well I’m sure not any taller,” he replied, his mouth twisting a bit. “You’re looking good too, Bee.
Very silver.”

She laughed, like tinkling bells, and tugged at a twisty curl that was getting in her eyes. “I’m glad
you think so. I just couldn’t be bothered with all the dyes and shit.”

“Bee,” Andrew said, mildly shocked and rather delighted, “You swore.”

“It isn’t office hours, I can swear all I like,” she grinned. Then, just to rub it in, she leaned forward.
“Fuck.”

Andrew felt his eyebrows shoot up. “Well, look at that.”

She laughed again and he took another sip to collect himself; the ache was being quickly being
replaced by warmth, as if the hot chocolate were filling up all the tense and uneasy parts of him,
smooth and comforting like Bee’s voice. She leaned her cheek on her palm and kept on smiling as
she watched him in silence for a minute or so. He was watching back too, his heart going a bit fast as foolishness raced around in his head. He felt like his face might be heating up the longer she looked at him like she’d missed him just as much as he’d missed her. He fidgeted with the mug, swiping his fingers through trickles of spilled hot chocolate and rubbing the stickiness between his fingers.

“How’s work?” He asked to distract himself. “Any interesting patients?”

“Oh, it’s exciting as always,” she sighed. “I wish sometimes there was no need for my position, but I’m just glad I can be of help to all these students, however I can. They changed the pond, you know? Made it bigger and put in some lilies and fish. It’s very pretty.”

“Sounds nice. Good place for a lunch.”

“It is,” she smiled. “And how about yourself, Andrew? I know you can’t say much about your work, but how are you?”

He nodded slowly and took another sip. “I’m okay. My friend is out of the hospital now, but he’s still angry. I know why, I can understand it. My recklessness might have cost him his career. I didn’t force him to jump in front of that bullet, but he shouldn’t have had to in the first place.”

Andrew shrugged. “It’ll be fine. He hasn’t uninvited me to his wedding, at least. He’s alive, that’s what matters.”

Bee’s smile turned a little sad and she reached out to touch the screen, where his face would be. He closed his eyes for just a second, imagining that she was there and holding his cheek, maybe brushing his hair out of his eyes. He sighed slowly through his nose.

“And the cats?” She prodded gently, drawing him out of his thoughts. “How are they settling in?”

“I don’t think we’ll ever get rid of the fuckers,” he replied, his mouth twitching. “Bonnie is always in Neil’s pockets or hood or climbing all over him, and Clyde keeps sitting on me whenever I’m around. And I keep finding them in my wardrobe or sneaked up under my duvet. Neil says Bonnie likes sleeping on top of the warm laundry, so we’ll both be covered in cat hair for all time now.”

“Very stealthy,” Bee chuckled. “And how is Neil doing?”

Andrew shrugged and picked at his fingernails, ignoring the jump in his pulse. “He’s fine. Nothing to report. He’s stopped burning the food now, at least. You wouldn’t believe just how much toast that guy can burn.”

Bee grinned, eyes twinkling behind her glasses as she waggled her eyebrows a bit. He never should have talked to her about Neil, she’d picked up on his interest almost immediately and relentlessly teased him about it.

“Shut up,” he muttered. “It’s stupid, it’s nothing. Nothing’s gonna happen.”

“You can still enjoy being housemates, though,” she pointed out. “And being his friend.”

“Mm. That is nice,” he admitted, very quietly. Bee touched her screen again and he cleared his throat. “How are the baking adventures? Got the lemon meringue down yet?”

“Almost!” She chirped, and he settled happily in his chair to listen to her chatter about the various pies and cakes she’d been trying to make, usually ending up in delicious but very sloppy messes that never stayed in their moulds or had a tendency to fall apart during decoration. He very much wanted to eat one of them. At one point Clyde wiggled their way through a crack in the door and
jumped up onto his lap. He folded his arms around the soft little cat as they chatted, rubbing absently under Clyde’s chin and feeling their quiet purrs vibrating through his stomach.

“Oh,” Bee said at one point, cutting off her own story about the disastrous batch of half-burnt, half-raw cupcakes she’d tried to make. Her eyes filled and she covered her mouth again. He raised his eyebrows at her. “Oh, it’s just – I’ve never seen you smile like that, Andrew. You look so happy.”

He was smiling, he realised belatedly. He didn’t try to wipe it away and met her eyes for a moment. “I missed you,” he said simply, his heart clenching in his chest.

“Oh,” she said again, soft and choked. “Oh, Andrew.”

Andrew distracted himself by petting Clyde, trying to discreetly swallow down the tightness in his throat as Bee wiped her eyes unashamedly. When they had both recovered their composure a bit, he lifted a mewling Clyde up to the webcam so Bee could coo over them. She agreed Clyde was very cute, even if they seemed rather tortoise-like with how little they moved and how much they slept.

“Don’t be mean to my cat,” Andrew protested at her teasing. “You won’t be allowed to pet them when you visit.”

Her mouth opened for a second in a comical little O. “Would you like me to visit you?”

He blinked, replaying his words; they’d just slipped out. He nodded after a moment. “I would. I would like that. But it’s probably not safe for either of us. Just – never mind.”

She smiled fondly at him. “I’d very much like that too, Andrew. Don’t brush it off – I’m sure there’s some way we can work things out. We’ll just have to plan very carefully. I’ll go away and have a think, and you do the same. We’ll make it happen.”

“It’s a long way for you to travel,” he hedged uneasily, not wanting to be sensible, wanting to book her flight right then and there, but he hadn’t survived this long by being incautious.

“Nonsense, I’m due some holiday leave soon and I’ve always wanted to see New York,” she waved her hand and smiled. She hesitated, then carried on. “I can always say I’m visiting family, that needn’t raise any flags.”

His eyes snapped to hers, everything in him gone tense and hopeful. She smiled gently at him, her mouth quavering a bit. He nodded silently and swallowed hard.

He was trying to think of something else to say when he heard the front door opening and closing, the dim thuds of Neil’s shoes being kicked off, the rattle of his keys as he spun them around his finger.

“Andrew?” Neil called from the hallway. “You home?”

“Yeah,” Andrew called back without a second thought. “In the study. I’ll be down in a minute.”


“Well, I won’t keep you,” Bee said lightly, smiling away at him from the screen. For a moment, Andrew had a vivid dream of picking her up from the airport, kissing her cheek, carrying her bags home and introducing her to Neil and the cats, baking in the kitchen together, showing her all the tacky tourist traps before collapsing tiredly on the sofa, talking the evening away while the cats
rolled around in their laps and Neil played with his hair…

“We’ll organise your visit,” he said, rough to his own ears and far too vulnerable. “We’ll figure it out.”

She beamed. “I’d love that. We’ll talk again soon, alright Andrew? Just let me know when you want to talk and I’ll be here.”

“Okay. Take care, Bee. Be safe.”

“You too, Andrew.” She kissed her fingertips then touched them to the screen. After a brief moment of dizzy panic, Andrew did the same. His fingers trembled but she kindly didn’t mention it. *Bye Mom*, he thought as they disconnected the call. *See you soon.*
Time to throw some appreciation out to some lovely fanart! Check out this cute kitten overload by the wonderful parrisshadam!!! You're amazing!!

Trigger warnings: this case is based off season 2 episode 11, which briefly deals with mentions of torture and murder. Additional warnings for non-graphic references to suicide, gunshot trauma recovery, abuse, drug addiction, depression, physical and sexual abuse of a minor, parental abuse, kidnapping, agoraphobia, panic attacks, self harm and self-destructive urges in line with the backstories for Neil, Andrew and Robin Cross. As per usual, any concerns or questions, contact me at my tumblr.

Neil walked quietly into the bullpen on an unassuming Thursday night, taking off his hat and unwinding his scarf as he watched Boyd slowly filling out forms with an unsteady left hand. His right rested curled and limp on the desk, small trembles shaking his arm every so often.

Boyd glanced up and spotted Neil lingering about. Immediately, he grinned and waved him over. “Neil! Hey there, stranger.”

Neil smiled back hesitantly and sat down at his desk, settling the bag he was carrying on the floor. “Look at you, southpaw.”

Boyd snorted and flexed his left hand with a rueful smile. “Yeah, well. Life’s changed, right? Gotta adapt. Still can’t really hold a pen with my right, figured I might as well start learning with my left. At least nowadays most of the paperwork is digital.”

Neil smiled and fidgeted with his scarf. “How was your first shift back? I’m sorry me and Doe weren’t here for the welcome presentation, we weren’t sure you’d want to see us.”

Boyd shrugged and flicked his pen for a moment. “Yeah, well. I’m glad you’re here now. And it was okay. A bit shaky at first, but I’m good. Dan popped over for lunch, that was nice.”

“How is she?”

“Oh, she’s wonderful,” Boyd beamed. “Wants you to come to dinner again sometime.”

Neil smiled shyly and set the bag on the desk instead. “Um. Doe made you some ready-to-nuke dinners. I helped a bit, but it was mostly all him. I can do bulk and basic stuff, but that tends to get boring after a while. You should try the chilli, it’s really good.”

Boyd’s smile twisted on his face and he flexed his right hand. “Right. Well. That’s nice of him, I guess.”

Neil bit his lip, wanting to intervene and plead Doe’s case – but he knew the situation was delicate, and he didn’t want to make things worse. Doe and Boyd would have to figure out their friendship themselves, in the wake of everything. He really hoped they could make it work.

“What did the doctors say?” He asked instead.

“They don’t really know,” Boyd sighed and massaged over his shaking hand with a grimace. “It’s
only been a few weeks. Physical therapy’s helping, but no one can tell me if the damage is permanent.”


“If you call pushing papers around working,” Boyd muttered.

Neil felt his smile slip; he was so used to Boyd being upbeat and happy and grinning, or at least serious and thoughtful on cases. He’d never heard him sound bitter like this. He knew it was more than just the injury playing on his mind — there was his career, the upcoming wedding and all its expenses, and the likelihood of him taking a pay cut back to a desk job if he couldn’t use his gun in the field any longer, questions about Doe’s responsibility in all of it, Neil’s own close bond with Doe and the uncomfortable tug-of-war on Neil’s loyalties (and when had those developed, he asked himself) between Doe and Boyd’s other friends.

“Um, Matt,” Neil said gingerly, “Do you maybe need to — to talk? Or a hug? Or — something? I’m not great with all this stuff, but, if you need me, I’m here?”

Boyd sighed and rubbed over his face. When he took his hands away, there was a much more familiar smile on his face. “Honestly, I’m kind of sick of talking about it right now. But thanks, Neil. That’s really sweet of you. It actually helps just to hear you offer.”

“It’s okay,” Neil mumbled. “You’re my friend.” It was a promise and a surprise all in one, and he clutched it tight. “I gotta head back to feed the cats, but I’ll see you around, right?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Boyd smiled as Neil got to his feet again. “Thanks for the food.”

Neil waved as he walked away, neatly avoided running into Baskin or Wymack, and headed home.

***

Andrew grimaced as Renee kicked his stomach hard enough to wind him, and stepped back with a hand raised to signal a pause.

Renee raised her eyebrows at him as he took a minute to breathe. She looked barely out of breath, hardly sweaty at all, while he was bruised and tired already. He supposed he was performing too badly to make her work for her victories, and they both knew it.

“You aren’t trying,” she said flatly the next time she scored a hit and knocked him back a couple steps. She put her hands down and shook her head. “If you want to be punished, I won’t be a part of that. I refuse, and you should know better than trying it on.”

Andrew scowled and stretched his bruised knuckles. After a moment, he gathered himself enough to apologise. She nodded serenely in acceptance and gestured him over to their water bottles. They sat together leaning up against the wall.

“You have a lot on your mind,” she opened with after a few quiet minutes.

Andrew drained the last of his water. “It is irrelevant to our matches.”

Renee cast a slow eye over the uncharacteristic amount of bruises on his forearms, defensive marks that he usually never picked up, because he was usually too aggressive to need to defend much. “Obviously.”

Andrew tilted his head back to stare up at the ceiling and huffed in annoyance. “In terms of my
actions on the case resulting in Boyd’s injury, I was completely in the right. I’ve reviewed every
decision I made, every turning point and branch of the investigation. And it is indisputable that
from any rational, cost-benefit analysis that I did everything correctly. So – why can’t I move on?”
He asked her, half-mocking. “It’s always buzzing in the back of my brain, weighing me down,
following me around. I’m obsessing over that case and trying too hard with Boyd when he’s made
it very clear he doesn’t want me around. But I can’t stop fixating on it.”

She watched his profile for a few minutes. “The case is acting like a trauma trigger for you,” she
replied quietly. “And obsessing over your decisions, and the consequences for your friend – and
your own near-death, may I say – will be worsening the emotional associations you have with the
memories. I’m hosting a meeting in an hour. Maybe you should come, Andrew.”

Andrew scowled and shook his head. “No. I don’t need to tell it all to other survivors or bare my
soul or ask for forgiveness from people wholly unconnected with it. That’s not what I need right
now.”

Renee sighed quietly and tied her hair back out of her face. “Alright. Maybe not now – but
tomorrow, Andrew.”

Andrew huffed again, but reluctantly agreed.

When he got back home an hour or so later, he found Josten in the living room acting as a cat bed
while he watched the news.

“All allegations continue to mount that Donald Hauser, trusted money manager to New York’s richest
elite, may have been running a decades-long pyramid scheme,” the news anchor was saying
sombrely. “Sources confirm the SEC is scrutinising Hauser’s hedge fund, which seemed to yield
annual returns of 12% or more. Thanks to the work of independent journalist Rosalie Nuñez, who
first sounded the alarm, we may discover those figures were all lies. If so, Hauser will be looking
at criminal charges that could put him behind bars for life, while hundreds of his investors will
have to adjust to the news that their whole life savings – may have completely vanished. Onto
stocks…”

Josten made a sound of disgust even as he petted the cats. Andrew dropped wordlessly onto the
couch beside him and ignored the cats pawing at his sleeve for attention.

“Hey,” Josten said softly. “Good visit?”

Andrew grimaced. Josten nodded in understanding and they watched the stocks and then sports
coverage in silence.

“How is Boyd?” Andrew asked bluntly once the news began to cycle again.

“He’s better,” Josten sighed. “Riding a desk for now, but at least he’s back to work. He said thanks
for the meals.”

Andrew grunted. “He’ll probably just chuck them when he gets home.”

“I don’t think so.”

Andrew shrugged as if he didn’t care, as if he hadn’t spent hours on hours buying the groceries,
cooking and batching a good six or so meals. “Renee wants me to go to one of her meetings
tomorrow.”

Josten nodded slowly, watching his face. “Maybe that would be good for you. Break the routine a
When Andrew said nothing, Josten reached out and curled his fingers into Andrew’s sleeve. His thumb skated gently over the back of Andrew’s wrist, more comforting than Andrew wanted to admit.

“I’m going to bed,” Josten said. “You should try and get some sleep too.”

He squeezed just a little before getting up and handing the sleepy kittens off. Andrew watched him walk up the stairs and viciously squashed the urge to follow him right into his room and do something stupid like kiss his pretty mouth. He scrubbed over his eyes and told himself to get a goddamn grip. He had no energy for this clusterfuck of guilt and desire – sooner or later, it would screw him over on another case, he just knew it.

***

They got the call early the next morning. Dead bodies were calling. Specifically, the dead body of one Donald Hauser, tied up in an armchair with a good few bullet wounds in painful places, as well as the forbidding epithet of THIEF written on the wall in his own blood. Charming.

“Someone had some anger issues,” Josten muttered as they examined his body.

“Well, steal a few hundred million dollars of other people’s money, somebody’s bound to get ticked off,” Wymack replied.

“Who found him?” Andrew asked as he walked slowly around the room, looking at his furniture and the expensive drinks cabinet, missing only the bottle sitting by the body.

“Personal chef,” Wymack replied. “She came in this morning, said the alarm system was off and the TV was on. She’s in the kitchen now. Uh, Miss Butler?”

The uniformed officer taking her statement waved her through to the living room. As soon as she laid her eyes on Josten, she twitched and clutched at her arms. Andrew observed the careful stillness Josten adopted for a minute. Curious.

Butler opened her mouth like a startled fish a few times, fidgeting away most suspiciously.

“Sorry to meet under these circumstances,” Josten said before she could get any words together.

“This is Mr Josten, and his partner there, Mr Doe, consult for the department.” Wymack introduced them, barely blinking at their behaviour.

“So, you’re a personal chef?” Josten pushed. Very curious. He still hated talking to witnesses without a lot of prompting.

Miss Butler seemed to appreciate it though. She nodded quickly as if relieved to be talking about her dead boss. “Yes, Mr Hauser was a client for a long time. I prepare meals at my house and bring them here for him a few times a week.”

Andrew narrowed his eyes at her briefly before turning back to the body. Gloves on, he gently tilted the corpse’s head back until he could peer into the mouth. Carefully, he poked his finger inside and along the roof of Hauser’s mouth.

“You have any idea who might want to hurt Mr Hauser?” Wymack asked.
“Well, with what’s been going on with the press, plenty of people, I guess. Wh-What’s he doing?” Butler asked, watching him with wide eyes and clutching at her sleeves.

Wymack gave him an unimpressed stare, before making a pained kind of smile. “He, uh. Has a process.”

“Captain,” Andrew called, frowning down at his fingertips as he rubbed them slowly together.

Wymack muttered an ‘excuse me’ to the chef and joined Andrew by the body. “Yeah?”

“I take it the victim’s gun was found here?” Andrew asked, gesturing at the case visible in the partially open drawer beside the chair, and one of the crime scene markers showing where evidence had been bagged up.

“Yeah, by the uniforms first on the scene, it was registered to Hauser.” Wymack nodded and consulted his notes for a moment. “Different calibre than the casings we found on the floor, though. Pretty sure ballistics will say a different gun inflicted his wounds. I figure Hauser tried to defend himself before he was restrained, got disarmed before he could fire.”

Andrew shook his head tightly and bounced on his feet a little, letting the excitement of an interesting case fizz in his blood once more, sherbet-sharp. “Nope. He was actually about to commit suicide when he was very rudely interrupted for some quick torture. The handgun was stored in the drawer; whoever removed it actually bothered to close it after taking out the gun. Unlikely for someone in the middle of a heated home invasion. No, his gun was out before the killer entered.”

Andrew grinned quickly and picked up the bottle of whiskey sitting by the armchair. “This whiskey. Glen Lochaber, 1926, a single cask aged for 55 years. Only a hundred bottles ever commercially sold. Mmm, damn. Worth about $10,000 if I remember correctly. This is literally ‘The Good Stuff’, gentlemen. Judging by the ring of dust where it usually sits on his bar, Hauser only got it out for the very best occasions. Miss Butler said the TV was on when she entered, yes? Well, we all know what news story was breaking. Hauser himself was sitting here, watching it unfold, and filled his glass to the very brim. Not much point saving it any longer, right? And, lastly, there’s gun oil on the roof of his mouth, and a slight nick as if he’d quickly removed the gun from his mouth, causing the front sight to scrape across his hard palate.”

“So our killer arrived just in time to stop Hauser from shooting himself. Ironic,” Wymack sighed and shook his head. “So, what? The killer just wanted to squeeze in some torture first?”

Andrew shrugged and stripped off his gloves. “Probably not as satisfying as getting their money back, but I guess beggars can’t be choosers. Though I highly doubt anyone loaded enough to need their money privately managed will exactly be beggared by all this.”

“There could be over a thousand people affected by the pyramid scheme, I’d say our work is cut out for us finding suspects,” Josten said, walking over and finally joining the conversation instead of trying hard not to look at Miss Butler too much. Andrew tried not to wonder if he found her pretty; she had long hair that swept around her round face and framed big, sad eyes. Andrew couldn’t feel attracted to her, but he knew her curves and husky voice and long legs would be appealing to many people.

Andrew raised his eyebrows at Josten and switched to German. “The personal chef is screaming anxiety right now, did you notice?”

“Well, she just found the mutilated corpse of her boss,” Josten shrugged, eyes flitting away
tellingly as he fiddled with his sleeves. Hmm.

Andrew gave him a minute to admit that he was hiding something, and clenched his jaw when Josten stayed silent. Fine then.

"Why don't you establish her alibi," he suggested blandly. "Find out what's going on with her. I'll see you back home."

"Okay, sure," Josten agreed quickly, glancing rapidly back towards Miss Butler.

Andrew watched him for a moment, then shoved his hands in his pockets and walked on his own back towards the elevator. As it descended, he checked the time. Maybe he should go to Renee’s meeting later after all. He shouldn’t be depending so much on Josten’s presence; he knew that, had always known that, but he still felt childishly irritated at the thought Josten would likely find other friends and other people to spend time with besides himself.

***

Neil casually followed Miss Butler out of the building and caught her panicked gaze as soon as the detectives and officers left her alone. He smiled slightly at her and tilted his head in the vague direction of the subway. She shook her head and led him towards a parked car, sliding into the driver’s seat and waiting for him to close the passenger door.

"Oh my God, Alex? Is it really you?" She burst out.


"Oh fuck, I thought I was going mad," she laughed with just a slight edge of hysteria, staring at her shaking hands. "I thought it couldn’t possibly be you, with the different hair and eyes and everything, but you still looked so familiar…"

"It’s okay, I wasn’t expecting to see you either," Neil shrugged. "How are you?"

She breathed in deeply then blew it all out at once. "I think I need some coffee before we get into all that, Al—Neil. Come on, my apartment’s not far from here."

To Neil’s amazement, Marissa made a brief detour to a daycare centre to pick up a small child. "You have a baby now?" He asked stupidly as he watched her settle the young boy into a carseat.

"Yeah," she smiled shyly and dropped a kiss on the boy’s head. "The dad was a piece of shit, but Shane is the best thing in my life."

"Is the dad still around?" Neil asked cautiously, watching the baby gurgle and coo as they drove.

"No, no. Can’t say I got any better at picking men just because I got older." Her mouth twisted wryly and she gripped the wheel tighter. "As far as bad decisions go, Shane’s dad was right up there with heroin."

"Did he hurt you?"

Marissa sighed and pulled into an apartment building parking garage. "It doesn’t matter, I’m okay now."

Neil felt a sour frown tugging at his face. "I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you."

She gave him a shaky smile. "It’s okay. You obviously had your own shit to deal with. Come on,
help me in with the bags, would you?”

Once they were all inside and Shane was burbling away in a play pen while Marissa made them both coffee, she poked one of several elephants in the room. “What happened to your mom?”

Neil tapped his nails on the rim of the mug, waiting for it to cool down. “She died. About a year and a half ago, now.”

“Oh, Alex—sorry, Neil. I’m sorry. Though I have to say I’m kind of glad.”

He shrugged and took a sip, choosing the scald over having to reply immediately. “I’m doing much better now. I’m not running, either.”

“I noticed,” Marissa smiled gently. “Are you – are you safe now?”

“Not entirely,” Neil replied, “But I’m much safer than I was. I’ve got people protecting me now.”

“That other detective, the short one?”

Neil had to smile at that. “Mmhmm. Andrew. He’s kind of taken me under his wing. I’m living with him now.”

Her smile widened and Neil figured it was his turn to ask a difficult question. “Are you still using, Marissa?”

Her expression darkened and she took to fiddling with her hands. “No. My friends helped me get away from Ross—” Neil nodded, remembering the awful boyfriend she’d had when they met—“And to move to New York. They helped me get into rehab. I’ve been clean for about four years now.”


She nodded and took a few deep breaths. He watched her straighten her back with shaky pride. “I didn’t know what to do, earlier. With you being part of the police, are you – are you obligated to tell them about our history? I didn’t know if I should say I knew you, or what was going on with your different name, or what would be safe…”

Neil shook his head. “It’s okay, you don’t need to apologise. I didn’t know what to do either. I’m not obligated to tell anyone, and I won’t. Andrew knows everything about me, and my past, and all that, but the others don’t know. They know I won’t talk about things beyond coming to the department, and they stopped asking a while ago. But I don’t want them tracking down my aliases either.”

“Okay, okay,” Marissa nodded slowly. “Good. I just – I try not to tell anyone about that part of my life, ever, if I can help it.”

“I understand.” Neil smiled briefly, then rubbed under his eye tiredly. “Though that’s something we need to talk about regarding the case. With your permission, I’d like to explain our history to my partner.”

“We?” She asked in alarm.

“Part of what he’s training me to do is pick up on body language and emotional signals,” Neil explained. “He’s very good at it. He knew you were hiding something significant from everyone, and at the moment he thinks you might be involved with Hauser’s death.”
Marissa clapped her hands to her cheeks, shaking. “He thinks I’m a suspect? I would never, I wouldn’t – I was with my AA sponsor all last night, I couldn’t…”

“It’s okay, it’s okay,” Neil said quickly. “With this case, the suspect list is going to be huge with thousands of people with plenty of motive to want Hauser dead. And you immediately presented as someone with potential motive, access and opportunity. That, as well as your behaviour at the scene, just caught Andrew’s eye. If you’re not comfortable with him knowing, I understand, but he’ll be wanting to consider you a suspect without evidence otherwise.”

“How do I know I can trust him with that information?”

“Because I trust him,” Neil said, leaning forwards intently. “Marissa, I’m trusting him literally with my life, and he hasn’t let me down or broken his promises. If I ask him not to make it known to the other detectives, he’ll protect you too. I promise.”

Marissa took a few more deep breaths, and finally rested her eyes on her boy. There was steel in her gaze when she slowly nodded.

***

When Neil got home, he found Doe in the middle of tacking up crime scene photos on their walls. He had to stand on a chair to get to the highest ones and Neil carefully didn’t smile, though he was admittedly a little distracted by the solid muscles he could see under Doe’s shirt where it rode up over his stomach while he reached up with the photos. He had the briefest, stupidest urge to reach out and find out what those ripples of smooth muscle and the fair hair under his navel would feel like under his fingertips, but he quickly shoved that aside once Doe looked down at him.

“How does it feel being tall?” Neil asked.

“Shut the fuck up,” Doe muttered without any heat, and jumped lightly down from his perch.

Neil smiled quickly, then crouched down to pet Bonnie and Clyde who had streaked out of their bed in the kitchen at the sound of his voice. They arched up into his hands, meowing happily, and Bonnie twined around his ankles.

“Hello,” he murmured to them, and playfully stroked up the length of Bonnie’s tail, making them purr louder.

Doe cleared his throat after a minute, his beefy arms folded impressively across his chest. He looked distinctly unamused. Neil rolled his eyes and straightened up, though Bonnie complained loudly about it.

“Marissa Butler. Spill.”

“I need to sit for this conversation,” Neil said, and made himself comfortable on the couch. Bonnie immediately pounced into his lap, looking smug about reclaiming his attention. They started cleaning their paws and head while Doe shifted about restlessly, walking vague circuits around the room.

“I knew Marissa when I was on the run with Mom,” Neil began, focussing on the warmth of Bonnie’s soft body in his lap and the steady orbit of Doe, his gravity keeping Neil solid and anchored. “We were holed up in some run-down apartment block in New Jersey for a while, I must have been seventeen or something. Marissa was living next door with a real asshole of a boyfriend, her parents had kicked her out years earlier. Mom had a cover job at a local store, but I never managed to find anything while we were there. Marissa’s boyfriend didn’t like her leaving the
apartment and seeing people without him there, so we were usually around at the same times.”

“You became friends,” Doe said flatly.

“I suppose so,” Neil nodded. “We’d hang out. It had been a long time since I really talked to anyone my own age, at that point. Mom stopped trying to enrol me in schools after a year or so, it always took too many resources and too much time. Marissa was just as desperate for company. She was in a bad way – getting beat on all the time, and her boyfriend got her onto heroin. When she didn’t want to use, when she needed a distraction and a getaway, she’d come over to see me. And when – when Mom got too much for me, I’d do the same.”

“What happened?” Doe asked, slowing a little to watch him more closely. “You obviously broke contact at some point.”

“Mm. Mom didn’t like me getting close to other people. Especially girls. She thought I’d get a crush and do something stupid like spill all our secrets, or something. It still doesn’t really make sense to me, but that was how she felt. We weren’t supposed to tie ourselves down or leave memories with strangers. Maybe she was right; Marissa managed to guess that we were running from my abusive father, even if I never told her anything about it, or the family business or anything. Mom caught Marissa in our apartment one time and thought there was something going on.”

The words got stuck in his throat and he had to stop. He lifted shaking hands to stroke Bonnie’s silky soft fur and blinked the sting from his eyes. Grief and anger and old fear were rising up, strong enough to choke and smother him. Doe slowly sat on the other end of the couch.

“She went ballistic,” Neil managed in a whisper. “I’d never seen her like that before, screaming and hitting and slapping and… it was like being back with my father. She even forgot Marissa was there, until Marissa tried to intervene. Mom nearly killed her. I managed to stop her and got Marissa out of the apartment. We left the state as soon as we had our bags packed.”

Neil only realised he was hunching over, making himself small and nonthreatening, when he felt Doe’s warm, strong hand on the back of his bowed neck. He forced himself to take slow, shaky breaths and let the warmth of Doe’s hand spread through his body, easing his tense shoulders. Bonnie meowed quietly and nuzzled at his hands with inquisitive little chirps. He felt Doe shift closer on the couch and tilted sideways to lean into his side. Doe said nothing, simply let him lean and kept him close. He was warm and strong and solid, more dependable than anyone Neil had ever known. His arm rested down along the line of Neil’s spine and his fingers lightly curled in the back of his hair, keeping him grounded and calm.

“Anyway,” Neil said roughly once the harshest edge of the memories had faded. He didn’t move away from Doe, and Doe made no move either. “So. Everything you saw about her haptics and keeping secrets was about her past with me, and being surprised at seeing me again. And she has an alibi for the time of the murder, she was with her AA sponsor. She gave me his details if you want to double check. I promised her you wouldn’t tell anyone about her past – she has a kid, she’s trying to move on from that part of her life.”

“Of course,” Doe promised easily. “Do you want to come to Renee’s meeting later, Neil?”

“No,” Neil replied quickly. “Thank you, but no. I’m not – not ready to talk about this stuff with other people. This is good, for now. This is enough.”

Doe’s fingers ran slowly through the locks of Neil’s hair and Neil let himself sag just a little, soothed and comforted beyond words. It didn’t feel strange to accept the touch from Doe; it just
felt like the only good and right thing. A quiet sigh eased from his chest and he felt Doe gently squeeze his shoulder.

“Do you want to focus on the case, or do you need a minute?”

“I just want to work right now,” Neil replied, and managed to turn his head to give Doe a wobbly smile. “Thank you, Andrew.”

“Hmm,” Doe said softly. Almost reluctantly, it seemed, he let go of Neil and turned back to the photos. “In that case, we should focus on culling our list of suspects in Donald Hauser’s murder. I left a voicemail with the journalist who broke the story, Rosalie Nuñez. With any luck, she’ll get back to me with information on the most likely of Hauser’s clients to want him dead.”

Neil cleared his throat and leaned back against the couch, feeling the ghost of Andrew’s warm body missing all along his side and back. “Yeah. Actually, Marissa may have already helped with that. She didn’t think of it until we were talking, but she had an idea who might have been the last person to see Hauser alive. The director of a non-profit called Jacob Weiss.”

Doe raised his eyebrows in question.

“Part of Marissa’s job as Hauser’s personal chef was to know the tastes of all his usual guests, so she could tailor meals for them. She said Hauser asked her to prepare an extra meal for last night, and she remembered it was Weiss’ usual dish. Could be a lead.”

“Could be indeed,” Doe agreed as he got up to finish putting up the photos. His hand brushed lightly along Neil’s shoulder as he passed behind the couch, and Neil looked down at Bonnie to hide his smile.

***

They found Jacob Weiss to be an older, white-haired rather portly gentleman, as he stood in the lobby of his organisation. He stood next to a sculpture in the shape of the Star of David, its dark marble etched with hundreds of gold names.

They made their introductions, and Doe lead with their reason for being there.

“I was shocked when I heard the news,” Weiss replied. “I still don’t really believe it. It couldn’t have happened all that many hours after I left his apartment.”

“Our thinking exactly,” Andrew said as they fell in behind Weiss on his way to his office. “We’re curious if you can account for your whereabouts for the rest of the evening. The ME put Hauser’s death somewhere between 10pm and midnight. Thoughts?”

Weiss shook his head. “After I left dinner at Donald’s place, I hate a late meeting at the Palladian Hotel with a Swiss banker names Jonas Bitz. We were there quite late, I’m sure any of the bar staff could confirm that. But anyway, I’m the last person with reason to kill Donald.”

“It’s our understanding that he handled your charity’s finances,” Josten frowned. “Considering everything that’s happened, that would give you reasonable motive.”

“Actually, it wouldn’t,” Weiss smiled. “Do you know what we do here?”

“You seek reparations for Holocaust survivors,” Andrew answered, glancing around calmly.

Weiss nodded grimly. “To this day, bank accounts are still being identified that belonged to Nazi
war profiteers. Our investigators uncover that money and process claims on behalf of survivors and their families. I can’t deny what I’m hearing in the press about Donald’s hedge funds, but he was my friend. And he donated his services free of charge, as our CPA. As for our investments, we never lost a dime. Every cent has already been accounted for.”

“Can you think of any reason he might have left this place alone from his swindles?” Andrew asked as they slowed to a stop outside Weiss’ office; he had people already waiting in there.

Weiss lifted his hands. “I would like to think that even as he was stealing from others, he saw his work for us as some kind of… karmic counterbalance, to make up for his other crimes. Whatever the reason, I’m glad. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have some families to talk to.”

Andrew nodded and passed him his contact card before they left.

“So, a swindler with a heart of gold,” Josten muttered as they walked.

Andrew shrugged. “It would seem even Hauser had a moral line he refused to cross.”

Josten hummed sceptically, but stopped when Andrew’s phone started ringing.

“Ah, excellent,” Andrew said after checking the caller ID. “Rosalie Nuñez, the reporter. Ms Nuñez, thank you for calling me back.”

“Is this Andrew Doe?” A man replied on the other end of the line.

“Yes,” Andrew frowned. “Who is this?”

“Detective Luntz of the NYPD. You left a message for Ms Nuñez saying you were a consultant with David Wymack’s group?”

“That’s correct,” Andrew replied. “Why do you have her phone?”

“I think maybe you should join me at her residence. I may even have some consulting questions for you.”

Josten sighed as Andrew hung up. “I really hope she’s not dead when we get there.”

***

His hopes proved to be unfounded. They found Rosalie Nuñez bound hand and foot in a chair with several bloody bullet wounds in her knees and arms, never mind the kill shot to her chest. Wymack had got to the scene before them and had crouched down to examine the ropes around her wrists.

“Well, it looks like she was killed by the same person who did in Hauser. The technique used to bind her, the size and placement of the bullets. I’m quite confident ballistics will confirm.”

“Our shooter had a busy night last night,” Andrew mused, walking slowly around the body while Josten poked around her desk.

“ME put the estimated time of death only a few hours after Hauser’s, he’ll narrow it down after the autopsy.” Wymack agreed.

“This doesn’t make any sense,” Josten shook his head as he carefully rifled through Nuñez’ mail. “Why would someone want to kill both Hauser and Nuñez? Seems like if you hated him, you’d be a fan of her. There was even talk on the news about her getting an award for breaking the story.”
“Rare to come across such a literal case of someone shooting the messenger,” Andrew observed with a quick grin. Wymack gave him a sour look but had long since giving up on curbing his irreverence at crime scenes, unless there were family members present.

“Looks like she plugged in her laptop here,” Josten said, gesturing at the ergonomic stand on the desk. “We should find out if it’s missing – the shooter might have taken it.”

“Hmm,” Andrew agreed. He glanced over to look at the desk and was promptly distracted by the banged-open door, and the oddly tacky-looking boot print. He approached it from an angle, seeing the traces of something like juice where he’d initially missed it. He sat down cross-legged on the floor and slowly dragged his gloved finger through the stickiness. He sniffed it, then thoughtfully licked his fingertip.

“Andrew, why?” Josten asked in exasperation, having clearly seen him. Andrew grinned up at him and offered up his hand. “What is it with you poking things on this case.”

“Sap of the Osage orange, I believe. Not really a true orange, more of a mulberry, but it has a distinct citrusy scent and taste. See?”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Josten replied, nudging Doe’s hand away with a slight smirk. “So the killer must have walked through somewhere with those trees before kicking in the door and transferring the sap.”

***

“Monkey balls,” Josten said delightedly as he bent to scoop up the remains of an Osage orange fruit.

Andrew blinked. “Excuse me?”

“Monkey balls,” Josten grinned and picked at the pulp. “That’s what we called them where I was growing up. I didn’t know it was the same tree. Squirrels rip the fallen fruit apart, spreading the seeds and sap everywhere. It makes the husks look like a monkey’s taken it apart and thrown it around, like they do at the zoo.”

“I see,” Andrew said dryly, trying to imagine a happy little boy with auburn hair playing in the street with other kids, throwing fruit pulp at each other and getting covered in sticky sap. He couldn’t quite see it, but it was a sweet thought. “Well, this park is the only one near Nuñez’ apartment. Maybe our shooter walked through here on their way, and back after they were done with her.”

“Look at the teenagers,” Josten nodded to the crowds of skaters and bikers using the steps and railings of the park to practice tricks with varying degrees of success, all faithfully filmed by their friends. “How late do you reckon they’d stay out at the park before they’d have to be chased away by the police?”

Andrew was about to reply when his phone started to blast out the opening part of Boss Ass Bitch by Nicki Minaj.

“Hi Renee,” Andrew said as he picked up, much to Josten’s amusement. He tossed the fruit in his hands while Andrew listened to her.

“Everything okay?” Josten asked once he hung up.

“Mm. She wants me to come over to her place to talk about the meeting later,” Andrew frowned.
“Then go,” Josten shrugged. “I’ll see if any of the skaters were here last night, see if they saw or filmed anyone suspicious. I’ve got this.”

Andrew raised his eyebrows. “You want to talk to a crowd of witnesses all on your own?”

“Mmhmm.”

Andrew had to hand it to him, he was determined to improve his solo skills. He shrugged and turned away; if he got to the nearest subway station, he could make it to Renee’s place fairly quickly.

“Hey Andrew,” Neil called as he walked away, “What’s my ringtone?”

Andrew pretended he hadn’t heard the question; he didn’t think Neil would appreciate the sarcasm meant for them both at his choice of Runaway Train.

When he got to Renee’s place, he rang the doorbell three times without a single answer. He checked his phone and found a text that said she’d popped out for some groceries but to let himself in if he got there before her.

He rolled his eyes and for a minute considered picking the lock just to be petty, but decided to use the key she’d given him instead. No sense in asking for a kick to the groin next time they sparred. He let himself in and headed to the kitchen, determined to steal a can of soda before she got back, and stopped in his tracks.

There was a young woman huddled up in the corner of Renee’s kitchen, watching him with fearful eyes and clutching a child’s Exy racquet in both hands. He wasn’t sure if she meant to use it as a comfort or a weapon against him.

“Hello,” he said slowly, when she showed no sign of moving or speaking or even breathing. “What are you doing in Renee’s kitchen?”

She swallowed a few times, looked down at her feet, and eventually replied in a tiny voice. “You know Renee?”

“She’s my friend.” Andrew stepped back a bit and put his hands in his pockets. “My name’s Andrew. Who’re you?”

“You’re Andrew? The detective?” She whispered, looking up at him again.

He nodded and leaned back against the kitchen counter, watching as she slowly relaxed her death-grip on the racquet. “I’m Robin,” she blurted after a minute.

He nodded again and watched her watching him, staying silent while she very obviously tried to figure out if he was a threat to her or not. He stayed still and quiet, and checked his phone absently. He sent off a text to Josten asking for progress, but got no reply. Thankfully, the awkward silence was broken after a few minutes when Renee came back, bags in hand.

“Oh,” she smiled, so innocent, “I see you’ve been getting to know each other.”

“Ahh. I thought for a while there you might have a very unusual burglar.”

“No, Andrew,” Renee smiled and crossed to the skittish young woman. He watched as Renee put a gentle arm around her shoulders, and how Robin relaxed and slumped into her in relief. “Robin is from one of my groups, I’ve mentioned her to you before.”
He didn’t miss the alarmed look Robin gave her before Renee squeezed her reassuringly.

“That’s nice,” he said blankly, checking his phone again. He remembered that conversation – so this was the young woman who’d been kidnapped and held hostage.

“Robin and I have been talking recently about her progress; we think she may have got all she can from my sessions. We think she might benefit from some sustained, one-on-one mentoring from another survivor. I was going to introduce you two at the meeting last night, if you’d come along.”

Andrew looked up at her properly with a sharp look, assessing her protective arm around the young woman who was unashamedly staring at him.

“Smart decision,” he replied. “Renee’s been extremely helpful to me over the past few years, she’ll look after you. Renee, I assume this means we won’t be sparring much anymore?”

“Andrew,” Renee sighed fondly, “Stop being obtuse. I was thinking you might be the man for the job.”

“Renee says I could learn a lot from you,” Robin put in shyly, with a trembling smile.

“Does she now. Renee, can I speak to you for a moment?”

Renee followed him into the hallway with a serene smile and a hard glint in her eye.

“You’re joking, right?” Andrew muttered.

“Do you think the idea of you becoming a mentor is funny? Because I don’t. I’ve been thinking about it for a long time, Andrew. The things you said last night rather sealed it.” Renee replied calmly.

“What things?”

“Do you want to know why you’ve been so agitated the past few weeks, why you’ve been so distracted?” She asked in return. “It’s because you feel bad about what happened to your friend.”

“I told you, I was completely in the right,” Andrew said hotly.

“Maybe for the old you, that would have been enough,” Renee murmured, and gently held his shoulders. “But not now. When I first met you, you were so closed off I could barely get you to tell me your name and how you take your coffee. And you’ve worked so hard and healed so beautifully even in just the time I’ve known you – look at you, with a whole network of colleagues and friends, and a housemate and partner and pets, a steady routine and hobbies and interests to give you joy. You’ve even been trying with dating, though I know it hasn’t worked out yet. You’ve made stability for yourself, Andrew, and I am so very proud of you.”

Andrew scoffed and folded his arms, though he knew it was true. He’d come a very long way since his teen years, had fought for it tooth and nail.

“You want to help Matt,” Renee continued. “And that’s a wonderful instinct and impulse to have. Seeing as he won’t let you in right now, why not try to apply it somewhere else?”

He scowled and shrugged off her hands, not wanting to hear the truth in her words or the possibility she was giving him. “Being a mentor means being available,” he deflected crossly.

“You know me, you know my work. It is all-consuming.”
“You find time for me, don’t you?” Renee smiled. “And Neil. And Matt. And for cello recitals. And the cats. Oh, and your pen-pal in Germany.”

His phone chimed with an update from Josten and he waved it in her face with a hard stare. “Oh look, duty calls. As it always will.”

He turned away before she could say anything and spotted Robin lurking in the kitchen, clutching her racquet again and having clearly eavesdropped on them. She had the grace to look guilty, but he didn’t care too much about that. He tapped out a vague salute for having managed to sneak up on him, and left without another word. He could almost hear Renee’s sigh through the door.

***

“Study,” Josten called when he walked in the house and hung up his coat. Andrew found him curled up on a beanbag and watching skating footage on the six screens Andrew had set up in there, his eyes flickering between all the monitors.

“How’s Renee?”

“She’s a dirty schemer,” Andrew muttered and plucked at some loose threads in his jeans.

“What are you talking about?”

“She ambushced me. She wants me to mentor one of her little ducklings and make her all better.”

“Oh.” He could feel Josten’s eyes on him, considering. “And what did you say?”

“I said my life is not conducive to making myself available every time some kid needs her hand holding.”

Josten didn’t reply and turned back to the screens. They watched in companionable quiet for about ten minutes until Josten lunged forward to hit pause on the master remote. “Oh my God.”

“What?”

“The man with the bag,” Josten said, pointing at one of the screens where a tall man in a dark coat with a satchel had been caught behind the skaters. “I know him.”

“Small world?”

“Not that small,” Josten frowned. “I don’t remember his name, but he came over to Marissa’s place a couple times while we were neighbours. I’m pretty sure he was her dealer.”

“Are you saying there’s a connection between Marissa Butler, who discovered Hauser’s body, and a man seen in the vicinity of Rosalie Núñez’ apartment only…” he checked the timestamp on the video, “Half an hour or so after her murder?”

Josten nodded.

“You’re right, the world is not that small.”

***
“Oh my God, that’s Nelson,” Marissa said later that evening, when Neil showed her the picture. “Nelson Maddox. You said this was taken outside the apartment where that reporter died?”

“A few blocks away, yeah. You know how I recognised him, right?”

Marissa nodded sadly and went to pick up her son, holding him close and stroking his wispy hair. “Yeah. He was my dealer. I didn’t realise he worked here as well as Jersey.”

“Maybe his operation’s grown,” Neil shrugged. “Do you think he had any connection to Hauser?”

“Donald?” Marissa bit her lip. “I wouldn’t think so? Donald wasn’t really the type to use, but his clients… I wouldn’t be able to say for sure, but Donald often had big parties for his clients. One time I found cocaine out when I came over the next morning to drop off meals. I never confronted Donald about it; I really lucked out getting him as a client, I didn’t want to get fired.”

“Hmm,” Neil said thoughtfully. “Maybe if Nelson Maddox was also dealing for Hauser, and Hauser swindled him out of payment, he’d have motive. But why hurt Rosalie?”

“Neil,” Marissa said in a nervous voice, clutching at her son, “You know you can’t tell anyone about this, right? The only reason you recognised Maddox was because of our past, and knowing about my drug history. If – if you tell the police how you know him, you’re gonna have to tell them about me, about my past…”

“Marissa,” Neil said as gently as he could, “I know you don’t like to talk about it, I don’t like thinking about that time either, but…”

“No, you don’t understand,” she said miserably. “I’m – I’m in a custody battle for Shane. His father doesn’t know anything about my life from before.”

“What do you mean?” Neil asked as his stomach began to sink.

“The lawyers don’t know,” she sobbed, tears spilling onto her baby’s head, “The court doesn’t know. If it comes out now that I’m an addict, and it looks like I hid it, they’ll take Shane away from me.”

“Two people are dead and this man could have done it,” Neil said uneasily.

“And that kills me, Neil, it really does,” Marissa said. “But Shane is the most important thing to me in my whole life. If I’m not there to look after him, he’ll go to his father or into the foster system. I have to protect my son. I’m sorry, but… if you want to connect Nelson to Hauser, you’ll have to find a way that leaves my family out of it. And that’s my final decision.”

***

“Let me check I’m hearing this right,” Doe said coldly when Neil explained her refusal. “We now have a name to the face of the man we believe may have brutally tortured and murdered Donald Hauser and Rosalie Nuñez, but we can’t share this with Wymack?”

“Not unless we can make a connection without involving Marissa,” Neil sighed and dropped into a seat at the table, where Doe had left some scrambled eggs and potato cakes for him.

“Which in this case is the same thing, because Marissa is the connection.” Doe tossed the sponge he was using back into the soapy sink full of dishes. “This is ridiculous. She would let her shame prevent us from doing our jobs and getting a potential murderous sadist – and drug dealer too, to boot – off the streets. Unbelievable.”
“Hey,” Neil said sharply. “This isn’t about her being ashamed. It’s bigger than that, she could lose her child.”

“Unlikely,” Doe dismissed him with a wave of his hand. “Even if the courts thought she was still at risk, it’s far from certain she’d permanently lose custody. They might make her do an evaluation and meet with a sobriety counsellor regularly or do more AA meetings, but she probably wouldn’t lose him. Donald Hauser was a shitty human being, but Rosalie Nuñez was not. She had a family who loved her; many people consider her a hero.”

“This is not up for discussion,” Neil said severely around a mouthful of eggs. “We have to find another way to connect them. End of story.”

“And while we look for this mysterious other connection, Maddox remains at large, free to cover his tracks or make a break for the state border,” Doe huffed and began to pace, dripping suds over the floor from his hands. “We should at least tell Wymack what we’ve uncovered. Explain the situation, but make sure it’s clear that Marissa’s identity is to remain a secret. She could be put under protective detail, even.”

“I suggested that, okay?” Neil sighed. “She still said no.”

“We could do it anyway,” Doe said darkly.

“So your solution is to make a liar out me after I told her she could trust us?” Neil snapped. “I promised her, Andrew. And so did you.”

“I don’t like it either Neil, but this man is a danger and we need to do all we can to make sure—”

“Did you learn nothing from what happened to Matt?” Neil cut him off and watched him go stiff and pale. “He got hurt because of choices we made, choices just like this one.”

“There was no way to predict that he would be placed in danger,” Doe shot back.

“Just like there’s no way to predict what will happen to Marissa and Shane if we drag them into this investigation,” Neil retorted, then raised his hands in a calming gesture. “Andrew, look. I know you’re frustrated and upset and you want to do this fast, but I can’t let you compromise my friend and your own principles over a heat-of-the-moment decision like this.”

Doe glared at him for a moment, bit out an angry “Fine,” and stalked out the door with a loud bang.

“I know,” Neil murmured to a very distressed pair of cats, startled out of sleep. “It’s okay, guys. He’ll be okay, I’ll make sure of it.”

***

Renee found him helping himself to her ice cream stock somewhere close to midnight. She flicked on the light and put away the butterfly knife she’d been holding ready to confront the possible intruder.

“I know I said you could use that key anytime you needed me,” she said in a tone as close to annoyed as she allowed herself to get these days, “But there is a limit, Andrew.”

He raised his hands in acknowledgement and hitched himself up on top of her table. She sighed, pulled her dressing gown more securely around herself, and joined him.

“Is Robin still here?”
“No,” Renee replied. “She’s with her parents, though the mentoring could involve overnight stays if she wanted that. She was very upset with how you left earlier, by the way. She was really hoping you could help her.”

“Do I look like I care?”

“Yes,” Renee said bluntly, and took the ice cream from his hands. “And thank you for solidifying her view that men only want to hurt her or abandon her.”

Andrew allowed himself to wince at that. “Do you want to yell at me?”

“Yes,” Renee admitted in a controlled voice. “But I’m not going to.”

“Why not? I definitely deserve it.”

Renee gave him a long, serious look, then took his hand. “Stop seeking out conflict and punishment to assuage your guilt over Matt,” she told him firmly. “I refuse to let you spiral down that path to self-destruction.”

He abruptly couldn’t meet her eye, his forearms seeming to sting with old wounds at her words, scars set alight. She was right, of course. Bee would say the same thing. Goddammit.

“You’re obviously here because you want to talk,” she said softly when he made no indication to reply. “So talk.”

Andrew took a deep breath and sighed it out, looking at her chipped nail polish instead of her face. “I’ve always had a degree of compassion for the victims of the crimes I investigate,” he said quietly. “Regardless of what others think of me, I’m more than capable of caring enough to not want somebody to be hurting. I have a vivid imagination, and my capacity to place myself in other people’s shoes, to imagine and anticipate their actions, reactions, thoughts and feelings, is a necessary skill in determining motive and catching criminals. This has never been a detriment to my work. Until lately. Now it feels like I can’t switch it off – I keep second-guessing myself, overcompensating, acting and reacting emotionally and irrationally.”

“Matt’s predicament and reaction have been on your mind,” Renee agreed.

“And you want to risk exacerbating this problem my assigning me a mentee to worry over and fail to guide?”

“No one is assigning you anything,” Renee said. “That’s not how it works. I just think you’re ready, and you would both benefit. You need to be allowed to care for somebody else as you so clearly need to do, and she needs help and guidance and support from someone who understands her.”

“You think it will focus me and provide a relief valve for all this?”

“Even if that was my primary motivation, there’s one thing you need to remember. It’s not about you.”

Andrew frowned and kicked his feet a little, feeling like he’d failed a test of some kind.

Renee squeezed his hand. “Andrew. My dear friend. I know you didn’t get the help you needed for a long time, and you know how it feels to be overlooked in that way, to struggle on your own without any apparent end. But when you did receive the help you needed, you were able to grow so much. You’re still growing. You’ve benefitted incredibly from all the help given to you, and you
have so much to give in return. Don’t you think you might be able to help someone else, like you were helped?”

Andrew said nothing for a long time, the clock ticking away more than half an hour while they sat in thoughtful silence. Eventually, he squeezed back.

“I promise I’ll think about it.”

***

He made it back to the house somewhere on the bullshit side of six AM.

“Early start?” He asked a sleepy-looking Josten, who was surrounded by evidence boxes and napping cats.

“Late night,” Josten corrected him as he sank tiredly into his squishy armchair. “I couldn’t sleep, so I stayed up. Marissa said Maddox might have been a kind of business partner to Hauser, dealing to his clients and no doubt giving Hauser some kind of deal or kickback for it. His name isn’t in any of Hauser’s records, as you might expect, but I had to give it a shot. If I could find monetary motive alone, we could implicate him without involving Marissa.” He sighed and rubbed under his eyes. “In the meantime, I sent Wymack the video of Maddox in the park and convinced him to release it to the press as a potential witness to the murders. If they can bring him in for questioning, it’ll at least buy us some time to investigate him and find another possible motive.”

Andrew nodded slowly. “How did you convince Wymack without mentioning Marissa?”

“You remember the missing laptop? I looked into it, and it still hasn’t surfaced as evidence. Then I told Wymack about the sap on Rosalie’s door and how that led us to the park. Then I sent him the video of Maddox walking through that park with a laptop satchel close to the time of her murder. I couldn’t give Wymack his name, but at least his face is out there. Not ideal, I know.”

Andrew found himself starting to smile. Maybe it was the exhaustion, but there was something very sweet about Josten’s pillow-ruffled hair, baggy pajamas and his earnest attempts to work with the circumstances they had been landed in and wrangle a solution from impossibility. And it was a very neat solution, without needing to break any promises. Andrew hadn’t even considered the laptop as a possible avenue of investigation.

“Not ideal,” he agreed, “But given everything, it was quite literally all you could do. Nice work.”

Josten glanced up at him, and a shy smile eased some of the fatigue and desperation in his expression. He seemed to glow just a bit in the early morning light.

Josten’s phone dinged quietly and he grinned in satisfaction at the message. “It’s Wymack, someone saw Maddox’s face on the news and called in his name.”

***

A bit of to-ing and fro-ing later, they were proud and slightly confused owners of the information that Nelson Maddox had been invited to a fundraiser for Jacob Weiss’ reparations charity as one of Hauser’s guests, and had donated several pieces of art to the auction from the gallery he apparently owned. The tip had been called in by one of Weiss’ employees, who remembered talking to Maddox during the event. They tried finding Maddox’s name associated with any of the other contributors to the fundraiser, but turned up nothing. It took some digging, but Neil found vague reference to a gallery in Chelsea in one of Hauser’s client books.
That had led them to stand in the middle of very white, brightly-lit room surrounded by several truly bizarre pieces of artwork.

“You think Maddox might have been a silent partner to this place?” Doe asked him doubtfully.

Neil shrugged and tilted his head, trying to figure out if one sculpture was intentionally supposed to look *that* much like somebody’s genitalia. “It would explain where he got all the art he donated.”

Doe joined him to see what he was looking at, and tilted his head in the opposite direction. “Now that is what I call a weird looking cock.”

Neil couldn’t help it – he laughed. He clapped a hand over his mouth to muffle it in the empty and echoing gallery, but little gasps kept escaping. Doe glanced at him, a smirk on his lips as he bent down to read the plaque.

“Oh dear, it’s just titled *Self Portrait*. Josten, I believe we have a civic duty to track down the sculptor and march him to a doctor. Immediately.”

Neil managed to get control of himself just long enough to grin and make a reply. “Well, I’ve always heard that art is like pornography – you just know it when you see it.”

Doe snorted, a harsh sound in the back of his throat as he struggled not to laugh along as well. They shook quietly, avoiding each other’s eyes like schoolkids misbehaving. Neil bit his knuckle to try and get a grip, but every time he looked at Doe he just heard the perfect tone of dry surprise as he said *weird looking cock* and had to try not to lose it all over again.

“How can I help you?” A cold, female voice suddenly asked, making them both jump. The woman they’d seen at the front desk on their way in was eyeing them both scathingly, utterly unimpressed with their lack of artistic appreciation.

Doe recovered his composure immediately, his expression wiping clean to a professional front even though his mouth kept twitching as he pulled out the picture of Maddox.

“Yes, actually. Do you recognise this man, or the name Nelson Maddox?”

“No, sorry.”

Neil noted her sudden lack of eye contact and the uncomfortable shift in her posture.

“Uh huh,” Doe said. “Do you mind if we look around? Huge fans of this whole… concept.”

Neil had to pinch his wrist to stop himself from grinning or laughing again. The woman gave them both a hard look, but couldn’t kick them out just for giggling, especially as they were attached to the police. She stalked away but didn’t leave them alone in the room. Neil made the mistake of catching Doe’s eye again; he waggled his eyebrows once and Neil lightly pushed his shoulder as he struggled not to laugh. Neil joined him on a slow circuit of the room, glancing around for anything unusual.

“Well, she was obviously lying,” he said in an undertone once he had mastered himself.

“Mmhmm.”

They made it most of the way around the room until Doe spotted something – two faint trails on the floor, leading towards a back room from the looks of things. Doe met his eyes and they pursed their lips in unison.
“Excuse me, miss?” Doe called towards the woman. “Did you open up this morning?”

“Yes,” she huffed.

“And you didn’t see anything out of the ordinary?”

“No.”

“Mmhmm.” Doe lightly touched Neil’s back and led him along the trail of scuff marks, as if a body had been dragged with the heels of shoes making marks on the floor. They followed the marks through the backroom and out to some dumpsters, the gallery worker following them suspiciously. Neil looked at the dumpsters once they lost the trail, and thoughtfully stepped towards one that looked less full. He pulled on some forensic gloves from the stash in his coat pocket, and slowly started shifting the refuse sacks around until he found his buried treasure – the bloody corpse of one Nelson Maddox.

The woman gave a shrill squeak and covered her mouth, looking ill.

Doe turned to her dispassionately. “Would you care to revise your answer? Seeing as it very much looks like Nelson Maddox does have something to do with this gallery?”

By the time Wymack and the forensic team had joined them, they had a bit of a better idea of things.

“So, she admitted to knowing that Maddox was a part of the gallery, nice one Josten,” Wymack said with a quick, paternal smile. “She said he was acting as liaison between the gallery and one of their silent partners, Donald Hauser. Apparently his main line of work was in distributing hard-to-supply pharmaceuticals to a select clientele, and did some business with their other investors and clients too.”

“A rich person dealer, you mean.”

“Yeah no shit, Doe,” Wymack sighed. “Presumably, her employers were not fond of admitting they had a drug dealer as a contact, and had instructed her to keep quiet about it. Our crew just found Maddox’s car parked up the block. Inside the trunk, they found a gun matching the calibre of Hauser and Nuñez’s wounds, and the same kind of rope used to bind them both.”

“So, Hauser and Maddox both had money tied up in the gallery?” Neil clarified. “If Hauser screwed over the gallery with his scheme, that might explain why Maddox killed him. But why go after Nuñez and steal her laptop?”

“She must have found something on Maddox’s activities when she was researching Hauser’s pyramid scheme,” Doe suggested.

“But if his only apparent connection to Hauser was this gallery, what’s so incriminating about that?” Neil asked with a frown. “I’m pretty sure Hauser wouldn’t have been stupid enough to save files under the name ‘Nelson Maddox, my drug dealer friend and associate’.”

Doe frowned with him and looked around the room again. Neil watched the sharp upturn to his mouth when he hit on an idea. “Ah. Josten, marvellous as always. I think you’re right, and Rosalie Nuñez found out there was more to this gallery than meets the eye. You see those red dots by some pieces?”

“Yeah?” Wymack said. “They indicate whether a piece has been sold or not.”
“Indeed they do, Captain,” Doe smiled. “In this gallery, it appears that every third piece has been sold. Almost as if someone with a pad of sticky dots walked around the room at a fairly steady pace, sticking dots apparently at random.” He demonstrated for them, gesturing unerringly at each piece marked with a red dot. “Reality would never be so tidy, especially as some of these pieces are meant to be displayed in pairs. Who would buy one half and not the other?”

“It’s a front,” Neil nodded. “They’ve tried to make it look like business is happening here, in case anyone comes poking around looking to buy things.”

Doe clapped his hands and pointed at Neil with a wide smile. “Precisely.”

“I think I’ll go ask for the books to this place,” Neil grinned. “Might be interesting to see who’s buying all this art.”

***

A couple hours later, Wymack accompanied them into the lobby of Jacob Weiss’ company.

“How do you do?” Weiss smiled as he shook hands with the police chief. “And hello again, Mr Doe, Mr Josten. How can I help your investigation?”

“Magnificent work you do here,” Doe observed casually. “Setting right, in some small way, such a horrific wrong. I wonder how some Holocaust survivors would feel, knowing that money had been claimed in their names without them knowing, or even seeing a dime?”

“Excuse me?” Weiss frowned.

“You’ve been embezzling millions from your own charity by filing false claims in the names of survivors who are either dead, or who were simply never informed.”

Weiss began to bluster, so Wymack stepped forward with a list of names. “This is a list of people who supposedly bought art from the gallery which both Nelson Maddox and Donald Hauser had ties to. Recognise them? I can see several just from here, on that sculpture.” He nodded to the large Star of David remembrance monument.

Doe grinned, razor-sharp. “Funny, isn’t it, how so many of these war veterans and families of veterans apparently wanted to buy expensive artwork with their newly awarded money – some of them buying the same pieces over and over again. Tsk tsk, Mr Weiss. Sloppy.”

Weiss just gaped at them.

“You were laundering the embezzled money through the gallery with Maddox’s assistance,” Neil said when Doe gestured for him to join in. “That was the incriminating evidence in Hauser’s files. We strongly suspect that as the charity’s CPA, he uncovered evidence of what you and Maddox were doing through him, and even he couldn’t stomach what was going on. When his own house of cards was coming crumbling down, and he decided to take his own life, he chose to take you down with him and emailed the proof to Rosalie Nuñez. Karmic counterbalance, maybe.”

“We think his mistake was giving you a heads-up,” Doe added. “Probably when you two had dinner together the other night. That gave you enough time to contact Maddox, who arranged to retrieve the information and stop it from being released after Hauser’s downfall. He killed them both, staged the scenes to look like revenge, and stole the files on Nuñez’s laptop.”

Weiss was just shaking his head and looking around, where his employees and clients were starting to gather to listen in.
“And when you saw that we had identified Maddox as a person of interest, you killed him to bury the connection further.” Wymack said. “We’re already working our way down this list of art buyers. So far, not a single one of them had any idea they’d been awarded six-figure settlements. Any idea why that might be?”

Weiss’ only response was to choke out, white-faced, that he wanted to call his lawyer.

***

Matt looked up from his desk as the procession made its way down the length of the station; some portly man being led to an interview room in handcuffs while uniformed officers tried to beat back the mob of reporters clamouring for a photo or a statement. He carefully looked away when he saw Doe and Josten following the crowd into the interview room, but not quite fast enough to avoid catching Doe’s eye as he made to close the door. He nodded shortly, Matt nodded back, and they both turned away.

He firmly settled his eyes on the pile of paperwork he was helping the other detectives manage, seeing as they were all out in the field investigating with little time to write up their reports. He sighed, took a long gulp of coffee, flexed the tremor from his hand and got back to work. After about an hour, Baskin tapped him lightly on the shoulder.

“Hey Boyd,” he smiled. “Captain wants to see you in his office, he said.”

“Thanks, Baskin,” Matt smiled back. “Oh hey, how’d your date go the other night?”

Baskin grinned and winked. “Real nice.”

“Score,” Matt grinned, and bumped fists. “Did you get his number?”

“Mmhmm, gonna call him later and see if he wants to go out again this weekend.”

“Good for you, man. Catch you later, yeah?”

“Sure thing, Matty,” Baskin beamed and went back to his own desk looking way happier than normal.

Matt smiled to himself; he was glad Baskin had stopped moping after Josten or whatever had been going on there, and that he was having a good time. He’d seen how Baskin’s own team got all shifty and uncomfortable whenever he dared allude to his sexuality, had heard the comments muttered behind his back. He figured it was the very least he could do to give Baskin a real colleague to talk to about his personal life. And seeing as he’d likely be hanging around the bullpen mostly in the immediate future, he was already planning how to take those assholes aside and educate them on not being bigoted douchebags. He was almost looking forward to it.

He entered Wymack’s office without knocking and stalled, one hand on the door.

“Uh, sorry,” he smiled politely at the older man sitting by Wymack’s desk without the man himself. “I was looking for Captain Wymack?”

“Detective Boyd,” the man smiled, “That’s alright, come in. Frank da Silva.”

Matt felt his eyebrows shoot up. “As in Deputy Commissioner da Silva?”

The man laughed and waved at the chair next to him. “That’s me. Please, have a seat. David was kind enough to lend me his office so we could chat, I hope you don’t mind.”
Matt cautiously took the chair beside him, wondering whether this was an upper-brass way of gently telling him to consider another career. Let him down softly with praise or a commendation or something from a higher position.

“What do you know about my division, Detective?” He asked instead.

Matt blinked and considered his words carefully. “I got a pretty good idea,” he said slowly. “You’re in charge of an intelligence unit, right? Surveillance?”

“It’s called the Demographics Unit.”

Matt tried very hard not to show what he thought of that name. It must have shown anyway, because da Silva smiled and waved his hand.

“I didn’t name it,” he assured Matt. “To me, being so euphemistic… it makes it sound like we got something to hide, doing something wrong. And we’re not. We’re just… keeping an eye out on certain groups. Listening for concerning chatter. I think, if you took a close look at what we do, you’d agree that we’re working to keep the city safe much as you do every day. From a bit of a remove, but with the same goal.”

“You don’t have to convince me, Sir,” Matt started to protest.

“No, but I want to.”

Matt frowned. “Sir?”

Da Silva folded his hands for a moment and fixed him with a beady eye. “I wanted to talk to you because your situation has been brought to my attention. I’m told that you’re an exceptional detective – smart, adaptive, quick on your wits, good at finding unusual solutions and thinking outside the box. And with an unimpeachable record, very distinguished work on all cases, well above board.”

“Well, thank you Sir…”

“I’m also told,” da Silva continued gravely, “That through no fault of your own, you may be staring down a desk job for a very long time. Or… you could come and work for me. How does that interest you, Detective? Would you care to help protect your city from the next attack?”

Matt knew his eyes were wide and he couldn’t summon any words at all.

Da Silva smiled and passed him a contact card as he got to his feet. “Think about it, Detective. Talk it over with your fiancée if you want. We’d be more than happy to put your talents to good use.”

***

Andrew waited in the living room, watching the clock and half-wishing he hadn't told Josten to take the cats upstairs for this, just so he could distract himself with them. He took to rifling through the books on his shelves instead, flicking the pages with a swipe of his thumb so the sound and scent of the pages could calm his jitters.

Eventually, there was a rapid series of knocks on the door. He cleared his throat and opened it up. Robin stood on his stoop, clinging to her child-sized Exy racquet with a watery look to her eyes. He glanced behind her and saw Renee sitting on the wall outside his house, writing something in a journal. She smiled and waved at him, then turned back to her writing.
“Come in,” he said quietly, and Robin followed him in so quickly she nearly stepped on his toes. He raised his eyebrows at her and put some careful distance between them.

“Sorry,” she mumbled tearfully, reaching out to touch his walls. “I’m – I’m a bit agoraphobic. Travelling is difficult for me. Sorry. I don’t mean to – to get like this.” She started gasping for breath and hugging the racquet close to her chest, shaking and chewing on her lip.

“That’s okay,” Andrew replied calmly. This wasn’t how he wanted to start this conversation, but there was no point in starting if she were rushing towards a panic attack. “You’re safe here. I’m not going to hurt you, and Renee is right outside. Come sit down, get your breath back. Tea or coffee?”

“Tea, please,” she whispered. He twitched at the word but said nothing about it just yet; if nothing else, existing as an adult in a world where ‘please’ was used around him hundreds of times a day, he’d had his own version of exposure therapy to it. Though it was still unpleasant.

When he had made them both a drink and taken his own seat across the room, he watched her look around. “Any better?”

She nodded, and he noticed the kept the racquet tucked into her side. “I’m sorry I got so – panicky. It helped having Renee escort me, but it’s still so difficult, and I don’t know this place…”

“You don’t need to apologise, or explain yourself to me,” he said quietly. “You feel how you feel, and I ought to have no opinion on it unless you ask me for it.”

Robin blinked at him in surprise for a minute. “You’re – odd.”

“Thank you.”

She flushed and rubbed her palms on her knees. “I just mean, Renee told me you have a bit of a different way of looking at things. She said a different perspective could be good for me. I didn’t really know what she meant by that.”

“I’m not so strange,” Andrew shrugged. “I just got tired of pretending the way other people think was sensible long ago. How much did Renee tell you about me?”

“Not much,” Robin replied, tapping her nails on the mug. “She said you’re her friend, that you’ve been recovering for a long time and doing very well, and she thought your particular kind of coping might be good for me. That I could trust you completely. She didn’t say anything more than that.”

“Hm. Well, we can swap sob stories another time. I asked Renee to bring you here so we could talk about this mentorship thing.”

“Oh, okay.” She straightened up in her seat a bit, trying not to appear too hopeful. “If – if you don’t want to be my mentor, I understand. I won’t mind.”

“I do want to be your mentor,” Andrew replied quietly. “I was resistant at first because the idea that I am recovered enough to offer valuable advice to another was… shocking to me. I still find it strange that I have reached this place in my life. And in full honesty, I still find it difficult to open up to people emotionally. Mentorship would require a great deal of… communication. Which I’m still working on. If we agree to this, it won’t be an easy ride for either of us.”

Robin nodded her understanding, twining her fingers together.

“But, from the few details Renee has given me, I do think I would be able to assist you.” He said. “If that’s still something you want. I understand you have issues with physically strong, adult men,
and I do unfortunately fit that category for you.”

Robin licked her lips nervously and reached out to touch her racquet as if to ground herself. “Mm. That’s true. But, I trust Renee. And she said I could trust you. And I am nervous sitting here with you, I won’t lie. But I want to be able to trust you like Renee does.”

Andrew nodded seriously. “You can trust me, Robin. I promise you I will never touch you without your consent, will never encroach on your personal space or push boundaries in any way. If you tell me to walk out of this room right now I will do it. I will always respect your wishes and your space. And I’m not saying that because of your history. Ask Renee – I do that with everyone.”

She nodded silently, looking a bit teary again.

“Besides, even if I didn’t work like that, you’d never be in any danger from me.” He allowed himself a small smirk. “I’m gay. Renee thinks she’s so sneaky sometimes.”

Robin grinned uncertainly, like she didn’t know if it was okay to laugh or not. Poor thing, barely eighteen. She most definitely hadn’t had any queer education from her kidnapper, that was for sure.

“As to how our relationship would work – I am not here to be your brother, father, uncle, cousin, whatever.” Andrew said firmly, holding her eyes. “I’m not here to be your best friend. If you need a therapist, I can recommend you to several excellent practitioners. I am here to be your mentor. I will share with you my methods, my experiences, my tricks for getting better and coping. If you ever feel unsafe or unsure, I will come get you. I will protect you if you need it. I will listen to anything you need to discuss without judgement and offer whatever I can to help. If you need a place to stay, for a few hours or overnight or longer, you can stay here. I will pick up the phone at 3 AM if you call. If you want me to investigate your abuser from my position as a consulting detective, I will do so. And the hope is that together, we can work on helping you live your life in the aftermath of your trauma. Is this acceptable?”

She blinked down at her lap and cleared her throat. It took her a couple minutes to look up again, but Andrew had only patience for her.

“Yes,” she replied at last, in a clear, certain voice. “Of course that’s acceptable. Thank you.”

He nodded seriously, then got to his feet. “Good. Welcome aboard, or some such. I’m about to start making dinner, do you want to stay for it?”

“Oh.” She blinked rapidly. “Um – yes. Thank you. That would be nice.”

“Excellent. I’ll go collect Renee.”

When he told her he had taken Robin on, he thought she might cry. As it was, she settled for gripping his shoulders in a tight, distant hug, and promising to buy him cake for a month. They made it back inside just as he heard Josten starting to come downstairs.

“Andrew?” He called as he jogged down, a cat in each arm. “Are you all done? The cats want to go outside…”

He saw Robin freeze in the living room at the sound of a strange man’s voice. He cleared his throat. “Yes. Come into the living room once the cats are outside.”

He went to stand near Robin, who was on her feet and clutching the racquet as a shield across her body. “Steady,” he said quietly to her, and together they watched as a bemused Neil poked his head into the room. His eyes widened a bit at the sight of a strange girl in their space. Andrew beckoned
to him, and rested a hand on his back, keeping him close.

“Robin, this is Neil. He’s my work partner and he lives here with me. He’s safe. He’ll respect you the same way I will, and he might understand you better than I can in some ways too. Are you okay with him being around?”

She chewed her lip and slowly nodded, her eyes on Andrew’s face. He nodded back to her reassuringly.

“Neil, this is Robin. My mentee.”

“Oh,” Neil smiled, lighting up all over. “Andrew, that’s great. I’m sure you’ll both do just fine. Um, hi Robin.” He gave her an awkward little wave and didn’t move to shake her hand. “Nice to meet you. I’m normally wherever Andrew goes, so you might be seeing a lot of me.”

“Hi,” she whispered back.

“Do you like Exy?” Neil asked, nodding at her racquet. “I used to play little leagues when I was tiny.”

“You’ve always been tiny,” Andrew muttered.

Neil grinned at him. “Like you can talk, Five-Oh.”

Andrew rolled his eyes. “Ugh. Anyway, I’m sure you two can bond over stickball another time. How does curry sound?”

He received affirmatives from all round, and gently tugged Neil into the kitchen so Robin could adjust to things for a minute. Later, when he was serving up, Robin caught his eye across the table and shared with him a very tiny, shy little smile. He reflected it back to her, and raised his glass just a little in salute.

*Here’s to this, kiddo.*
Neil stood in front of the bathroom mirror trying not to cry. Since starting his new life in New York with Doe, he’d changed a lot. He’d put on some healthy weight, got rid of so many bony angles, regained his muscle tone. His skin was healthy and his hair was less brittle, and the bags under his eyes were finally starting to smooth out. He was eating great food three times a day, usually had a regular eight hours of sleep every night (unless a particularly tricky case changed that), and could wash himself whenever he wanted. His nightmares were getting less frequent and severe. He had friends, pets, a home.

He had a home for himself.

That thought needed repeating a few times.

He was doing so much better than he had since even before his mother took him from the Baltimore house and the clutches of Lola and his father. So much better than he had been while on the run for all those years. He was happy, content, occupied by interesting and meaningful work. His enemies had no idea where he was or who he was, and his friends were always there for him when he needed.

But no matter how much he improved, he would always have his scars to remind him.

He traced his eyes over them in the mirror, his hands shaking at his sides. The iron scar on his shoulder, bobbed and mockingly-regular where the steam holes were, perfect raised red circles surrounded by a white-scarred wedge from the hot metal, a sharp and clean line against the rest of his skin. The rough, scabby-looking pink wash all down one side of his torso from jumping out of a moving car and landing on his chest. The bullet wound under his collarbone puckered up like some kind of sick flowerbud. The raised white line making a thread from his throat, over the other side of his collarbone and down over his chest. The many, many slashes and ugly lines over his stomach and gut.

Marks from Lola that made him shudder. Faint tooth marks and nail scratches, a few deep enough to bleed and scar. More from her knives whenever she’d told him to take off his clothes and stand still under her wandering hands, but he’d squirmed or wept or fought back. Ones that hadn’t scarred anywhere other than his memories.

More faint scars from altercations with his father’s men over the years. A jagged mess of red and white lines on his side where he’d gotten caught on barbed wire while escaping over a fence. The slight irregularity in his left fingers where his mother had broken them for disobeying her, when things were getting bad after so many years. The faint line hidden under his hair where she had
pulled out a chunk in her rage, where his scalp had been too scarred for hair to grow there again; he brushed his hair to disguise it, so no one but him would ever notice it, but he always knew it was there. More knife cuts and scars on his legs. A bite mark on his ankle from an overly aggressive dog in a rough neighbourhood. The long rope of the cut from Romero’s knife, extending from his bicep down to his wrist in a horrific twist that had nearly bled him dry when he stepped in to his mother’s defence, though she had already received the killing blow. And on the backs of his hands were faint white dots, the least noticeable of them all, burns from sparks of the fire he’d lit to destroy her body just a week later.

He couldn’t bring himself to touch them, to remember in visceral detail the pain of each one. It was bad enough having to see them, to always have this reminder of just how fucked his life had been. And there was no getting away from it, not ever.

As he rubbed his eyes dry and yanked on a long-sleeved shirt, he heard the distinctive sound of Doe’s rowing machine start up in the room downstairs. As it did so often these days, thinking of Doe helped ease some of his distress, as if the man’s very presence in his mind could act as a barrier between himself and all the awful memories, as effective as a hand on his neck.

But at the same time, there was something else whenever he thought of Doe, now. There was still security and friendship and closeness and a sense of being home just by standing by his side or thinking of his voice. None of that had changed. But he kept catching himself looking at Doe, and he didn’t know why. He’d be thinking about something to do with a case, or something on the news or the cats, and would realise he’d been watching how Doe ran a hand through his pale curly hair when he was distracted by something. Or he’d zone out when tired and stare at Doe’s hands, thinking about their shape and strength and how delicately he held his cigarette between them or cradled the cats. He’d watch Doe walking around the house and get preoccupied by the smooth, curving lines of his shoulders and back as he moved. He’d see how light caught on Doe’s jaw and browbones when they sat waiting on the subway, fluorescent lights and fleeting shadows speeding over them both.

He’d never wanted to look so much at a person before. He had no idea why, but even after months of knowing the man, there was always something new and interesting about him to catch Neil’s eye. He could just be cooking or drinking coffee or reading a book and Neil would feel his eyes drawn as if to a lodestone. Neil couldn’t even describe what exactly he was looking at so much, or why it seemed to calm him.

And when he was upset, when he was stressed or trapped in his memories, or when he did well, the warmth of Doe’s hands and the weight of his regard was sometimes all he wanted, like a craving. His fleeting touches to alert Neil when he came into the room, wordless greetings, how he would pull Neil closer by the sleeve whenever they were in crowds or dangerous situations. How he would let Neil lean on him when he was distressed, the comforting motions of his hand on Neil’s back and gently moving up into his hair…

Neil sighed shakily and hugged his arms around himself. When he was around Doe, it felt like nothing could ever hurt him, nothing would ever go wrong ever again. He wondered if maybe this… ache in his bones, this anxiousness that was soothed just by the touch of Doe’s eyes on his own, had formed because he associated safety so strongly with Doe. And he was self-aware enough to realise that he hadn’t known any comforting physical contact since he was a baby, most likely, and Doe had developed a very effective and hands-on way of comforting Neil when needed. Maybe he shouldn’t be surprised he was longing so badly to be touched.

He felt like maybe, if he showed Doe his scars, if he could give Doe that part of his past to keep safe in his mind, they would lessen their power over him. He knew very well that Doe bore his
own scars, though he kept them covered most of the time. They hadn’t spoken about it since Neil had first seen them, when he’d taken off Doe’s armbands to hide his knives when he was breaking down during the Whitman case. They hadn’t really needed to; Doe knew that Neil had seen them, and Neil could guess how they had happened. It had been obvious they were old scars, a habit long since kicked, and Doe wasn’t in danger of relapsing that way.

But maybe they should talk about it, Neil thought as he tugged his sleeves down over his hands. While Doe kept his arms covered around strangers and at work, he didn’t bother so much when it was just the two of them in the house. He didn’t go out of his way to display them, but he didn’t seem preoccupied by them either, if it was only Neil around. He didn’t hide them or seem worried that they might be in view. He seemed at ease with his body in a way Neil could only marvel at, knowing all the things he knew about Doe’s past. He wondered if there was some kind of trick to it. He wondered if some day he could feel the same way about his own scars.

He chewed his lip for a few minutes, undecided. Then he made the only logical choice, and headed for his safe place.

He made to knock on the door of the workout room, but paused with his hand hovering over the wood as his eyes widened.

He watched dry-mouthed as Doe worked out on the rowing machine, shirtless and flushed with exertion. He had earbuds in and was facing away from the door, but Neil caught flashes of his determined, focussed expression as he moved back and forth along the sliding track. His eyes were sharp and his brow drawn down as he huffed out controlled breaths. His arms and shoulders were… just… and his back…

He knew he was staring, that there shouldn’t be something so captivating about watching Doe work out and strengthen himself, about seeing his muscles all work together like that and bunch up tightly and release with each pull on the bar while the seat moved back and forth with the flexing of his legs. There shouldn’t be anything fascinating about it, or how his tattoos seemed to flow over his skin, geometric designs turned fluid. He shouldn’t be watching that bead of sweat trickle down his spine, or want to reach out and feel the warmth of him and how solid he would feel under Neil’s hand, the solid weight and breadth of him. He shouldn’t want to feel that strength reaching out to him too, holding him close and warm, touching his hair and stroking his back…

It was all well and good to admire how strong the man was and how capably he could protect and shelter Neil, but this was…

He rubbed over his face and looked away. His face was warm and his pulse felt unsteady and he hated this, he didn’t understand, he didn’t want this. He just wanted to feel safe again like he always did around Doe, wanted to feel secure and calm and sheltered. He didn’t want that to change into whatever was going on in his stupid brain, didn’t want to lose feeling at home with Doe. He didn’t want to… want.

He knocked quickly on the door and waited until he heard the machine stop before looking back to Doe. He was twisted around in the seat to look at Neil, earbuds in hand. He was panting a little for breath, and his hair flopped over his forehead, damp with sweat.

“Everything alright?” He asked when Neil stayed silent, and Neil did his best to ignore the warm curl in his stomach at the rough, breathless edge to Doe’s voice.

He hugged his arms tighter around himself and rubbed absently at the scar along his arm. He could see Doe’s scars now, pale lines standing out more vividly against his flushed skin, but Doe wasn’t paying them any attention. He was laser-focused on Neil’s face, starting to frown in concern.
“Neil? What’s wrong?”

“Sorry,” Neil managed to say. “I didn’t mean to interrupt. I’ll go.”

“Stay,” Doe disagreed, and stood up to snag Neil’s sleeve as he was about to turn tail. “What’s going on?”

Neil let himself be gently pulled into the room and sat on the bench where Doe did his weights. Doe sat back on the rowing machine and drank some water while Neil gathered his thoughts and traced over his scars through the shirt. When he realised what he was doing, he shoved his hands in his pockets.

“I wanted to talk about scars,” he mumbled to his lap.

“I see.” Doe replied quietly, seriously. “Let’s talk, then.”

Neil fidgeted with his cuffs for a few minutes, shoving all his confusion way to the back of his mind. Then he pushed up his sleeve to show the long scar from Romero.

“I know you’ve seen this one before,” Neil said. “There’s more. A lot more. They’re very ugly. I hate them.”

Neil felt Doe’s eyes on him for a while before he responded by extending his arm into the space between them, wrist turned upwards so the scars all along his forearm were visible.

“And you’ve seen mine,” Doe replied easily, unbothered. Neil snuck his eyes up to meet Doe’s and saw nothing but calm watchfulness. “You can look at them if you want, I don’t mind.”

Neil let his eyes wander over them, his gut clenching a little at the sight of them sitting along his skin like tally marks, carving out a time and experiences Neil could hardly bear to think about. When he’d looked his fill, he raised his eyes back to Doe’s face.

“How do you not mind me seeing them?” Neil asked. “I know you keep them covered normally, but you don’t seem… upset by them.”

“They’re old now,” Doe replied, and ran light fingers over his arm thoughtfully. “It’s been a long time since I made these, and I’ve done a lot since then to heal and move on. I made them trying to keep control of my body, to reclaim it after others had hurt me. I have better ways of doing that now.” He glanced around at the equipment in the room, and dragged his fingers away from his scars up to a tattoo on his thick bicep instead. “I’ve had to learn how to like my body again. It’s taken a long time.”

“Do you think I could learn how?” Neil asked his hands.

“I don’t see why not,” Doe said. “No matter what was done to you, it is still your body. It belongs to you. No one else has a right to it, even in memory.”

Neil nodded, wondering how many times Doe had said that mantra over the years.

“Were you thinking of getting a tattoo?”

Neil looked back up at him in surprise. “I hadn’t even considered it, actually.”

Doe gave him a small smile. “If you decide you do, I’ll bring you to the artist who did all mine. She’s very good.”
“I know, I can see. They look really nice.”

“Thank you.”

Neil could feel himself flush before he even asked the question. “Could I touch one of them?”

Doe just looked at him for a second, a peculiar look in his eye. Then he sighed quietly and sat down beside Neil on the bench, turned away a little so Neil could see the one extending from his left shoulder down over his back. It was intriguing—all tessellated geometric shapes, interlocked and intricate. One edge was faded, as if it were appearing ghostly on his skin, and etched in pale whites and greys until it darkened throughout the width of the tattoo, gaining contrast and emphasis until certain blocks seemed to almost leap off Doe’s skin in a wonderful optical illusion, with a border of pure black hexagons that ended starkly at the bottom edge of his shoulderblade.

Neil rubbed his hand nervously on his pants leg before reaching out to touch. He was almost surprised the tattoo wasn’t raised, especially the more 3D parts. He followed the lines of it and traced over the edges of the pattern blocks with light fingertips. He could feel the heat radiating off Doe’s skin, and the firm swathe of muscle shielding the bones underneath. He was still a little sweaty, but Neil didn’t mind. After a few minutes he grew braver and rested his palm flat along one edge of it. He had the oddest urge to squeeze and dig his fingers in, to really feel how strong Doe was, but pushed it away. He didn’t think Doe would appreciate it, either.

“How long did it take to do?” He asked, to stop more foolish thoughts.

Doe shrugged and Neil felt heat pool in his stomach at how the muscle and bone shifted under his palm, controlled and sleek and taut.

“A couple of sessions. It was very sore until it had all healed, too. But I like it.”

“Does it mean anything?”

“Yes.” Doe took a few minutes before elaborating. “They all mean something in particular, but they all mean the same thing too. It’s staking claim on myself.”

“Oh.”

“Mm.” Doe brightened his tone a little. “Plus, they can help me get laid.”

Neil snorted despite himself and allowed one last touch before taking his hand away. “They are very beautiful,” he agreed quietly.

Doe made a ‘go on then’ gesture and Neil shrugged off his shirt before he lost his nerve. He held it in his hands and fixed his gaze on the floor, not wanting to see them again though he could feel his
mouth starting to wobble.

Doe slowly turned around to face him completely, and was silent while he looked and assessed. Neil couldn’t bear to check and see if Doe had pity or disgust on his face and gritted his teeth as shame worked its way up his chest and into his throat, a tight heat like a strangling hand cutting off his air and making him shake.

“May I touch one?” Doe asked quietly after a long time.

Neil nodded and twisted his hands in the fabric of his shirt. To his surprise, Doe went for one of the relatively less-gruesome ones – the bullet scar under his collarbone, rather than any of the gorier slashes or marks. He circled around it carefully, tracing out the edges where it blended back into his skin, before swiping his thumb gently over the puckered centre. He pressed in just a little, and Neil could dimly feel it through the mess of numbed nerves all over his torso from so much deep scarring.

“This is where you were shot.”

Neil nodded again and hurriedly wiped at his eyes as tears threatened. Doe reached out and took his chin in gentle fingers, turning Neil to face him again.

“How about you?” he said softly as he looked Neil right in the eyes. “Do you know what I see when I look at all these?”

Neil blinked, clenching his jaw.

“I see a man who will survive and thrive despite everything thrown at him. I see a man with an amazingly strong will and thirst for life. I see someone who has been hurt, but is healing. And that is very beautiful too.”

A broken sound tore itself out of Neil’s throat and he quickly shoved a hand over his mouth to try and control himself. Doe eased both hands gently to either side of Neil’s neck, his thumbs resting over the pulse either side, and guided him until Neil rested his head on Doe’s shoulder. His fingers lightly brushed against the edge of his hairline and Neil shuddered, going limp as he let himself be protected.

“It’s alright, Neil.”

Neil chewed his lip and tried to control his shaky breathing, leaning a bit more into Doe who held him up and kept him safe, as always, kept him from tumbling over the edge of his mind.

“I’ve got you, you’re alright.”

“I know,” Neil whispered back, and closed his eyes. Doe’s only reply was to shift one hand into his hair and rub gently at Neil’s scalp. Neil sighed and felt his heartbeat calm, his breathing steady out. He was home, and he was safe.
Wow it's been a hot minute since I could update this. While I was gone, the wonderful [broship-addict](https://example.com) did [this fantastic piece of artwork](https)!! Holy shit!

Trigger warnings: this case is based off season 2 episode 13, which briefly deals with gang-related violence, government surveillance, and brief mentions of corpse mutilation. Additional warnings for mentions of rape, self harm and suicidal ideation, child abuse, kidnapping and psychological abuse, trauma recovery and the death of Neil’s mother. As always, any concerns or worries, please contact me at [my tumblr](https://example.com).

“For the last time,” Doe said impatiently as he tugged at the bowtie around his neck, “Give me your leg.”

“No,” The security guard at the interview table replied in a sulky voice. “What is this?”

“This is a court order, Mr Riley,” Detective Nash said in his nasally way and unfolded an official-looking piece of paper. “It means we get to look at your leg. Now.”

“I don’t understand what any of this is,” Riley protested.

“Sure you do,” Neil said, and finally gave into the heat of his suit jacket and took it off, folding it neatly over his arm. The whole suit was very fine, a deep midnight blue and trimmed to fit him perfectly. Doe had bought it for him for Boyd’s upcoming wedding. Doe looked very smart in his own tux, very sharp and neat. Neil put that out of his mind. “During the sixteen months you’ve worked as a guard at the Aster museum, you’ve stolen a Fabergé egg, a Cape of Good Hope stamp and a piece of ancient Egyptian papyrus.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“We became quite certain that a woman named Adrien Harper was selling the items on the Japanese black market,” Doe said with a slight smile. “But the mystery of her inside man remained.”

“We were at the opening of the new exhibit tonight, we saw her signal you.” Neil added, gesturing at the two of them so dolled up. Doe had even consented to styling Neil’s hair for him, tying it back in a little bun at the nape of his neck and leaving his bangs free. Doe had insisted it was a trendy look at the moment, and had given Neil a bit of styling wax to let his bangs stay curly and out of his eyes. It had been nice. And wandering around the gala together had been pretty fun too.

“Mr Riley, your prosthesis, please,” Nash sighed and extended his hand in a ‘give it over’ gesture. Riley gave them all an irritated look, then bent to roll up his pants leg and started detaching his prosthetic leg. When he had it disconnected, he handed it over to Doe reluctantly.

“Thank you,” Doe murmured with a satisfied look, and handled the prosthetic as carefully and respectfully as he could while searching it. “Miss Harper was actually quite discreet in her signalling of which items she wanted you to later smuggle. It was your clumsy nods which gave it away, really. She’s currently in another one of our interview rooms and her testimony will be more than enough to convict you. So I suppose this is all rather superfluous, but then we are all dressed up with nowhere to go.”
Neil looked away from the pleased smile Doe sent his way, and self-consciously smoothed down the little grey waistcoat he had on over his shirt. Doe kept looking at the prosthetic for a few minutes, before carefully pushing on a small hinge. It popped open with a neat little click to reveal a small pocket hidden in the bulk of the prosthetic.

“Most prostheses don’t have a hidden compartment, do they Mr Riley?” Doe grinned. “What possible use could you have for this?”

“Okay, you made your point,” Nash interjected with a slimy smile. Neil tried not to roll his eyes – it had taken days to convince Nash of the potential for the smuggling route to be in the prosthetic limb of one of the security guards rather than something more mundane like a briefcase or handbag. “Time to gimme a minute alone with our friend here.”

“What?” Doe said, his smile slipping. “This is our case. We only included you because—”

“Let’s not fight in front of the perp, ‘kay? I said I can take it from here.” Nash smiled wider and gestured at the door. “Come on. Out, the both of you.”

Doe scowled and marched out with Neil in tow.

“Hey!” Riley cried as they walked off with his leg.

Doe handed it off to a passing forensic scientist. “Here, present for you. Bag that up as evidence, if you don’t mind.”

“Uh, sure,” the woman replied with a confused look between the two of them.

“We’ve been going in circles for a fortnight because Nash missed his military records, and now it’s ‘I’ll take it from here’?” Neil muttered under his breath.

“He’s an ingrate and a fool,” Doe agreed sourly. “We’ll be lucky if he checks that Riley signs his own confession.”

Wymack emerged from his office to use the photocopier nearby, and paused as he took in their fancy clothes. His eyebrows rose and a smirk grew on his face.

“Looks like you two had an interesting night. Any news I should know about?”

Neil frowned in confusion while Doe settled for rolling his eyes. “The museum business is settled. No thanks to Detective Nash.”

“Is there a problem?”

“Too many to list,” Doe said and folded his arms. “The leg would have been a more suitable collaborator. At least that had hidden depths.”

Neil smiled at him, and nodded when Wymack looked to him for confirmation. “He’s not wrong.”

“Well, I don’t know what to tell you guys,” Wymack said with a shrug. “But if you want to be consulting detectives, you have to consult with someone. You’ve burned through half the squad since Boyd transferred to Demographics. Even Gordon won’t work with you anymore.”

“I’m well aware, but I have a solution,” Doe grinned. “You, Chief. We already work very well together. You could take on more casework yourself. I understand the rote administrative elements of your position are very demanding, but you could rely on us to carry the bulk of the case load.”
Neil winced as Wymack gave him a severely unimpressed look, then raised his armful of photocopying. “Right. Well, I gotta take care of this ‘rote administrative element’.” He looked to Neil and smiled a little. “Why don’t you take him for a walk? Crash a prom, or something. The size of you two, you could pass for students.”

“Har de har,” Doe said darkly as Wymack walked away. “C’mon, Neil. We might as well go to Eden’s if we’re already fancy, and I need a drink after making nice with rich assholes all night.”

“Are you going to see your friend again?” Neil asked as they walked. “The bartender you were talking to last time?”

“He’s not my friend,” Doe said, looking away. “And no, I don’t think so. No point.”

“Okay,” Neil said, a little nonplussed. He wanted to ask if something had happened, if they’d argued or something, but decided not to push it. “I’m still not drinking though.”

“That’s alright, you can watch me drink,” Doe grinned. “I’m very good at it.”

***

“Hashemi and Mukerji, I want you listening to the chatter coming out of Bensonhurst,” da Silva instructed his team gathered in the conference room. “Sengputa and Theil, you’re gonna vet this Moti Bagul fella. And last but not least – Boyd.”

The whole room turned to grin at their newest member.

“To the young man who picked against the Terrapins in the pool yesterday, you get the grand prize,” da Silva joked good-naturedly. “You and Wozniak get to visit Nemetz Oil Recycling. A man of advanced years called the tip line ‘cause he thought he saw, and I quote, ‘a man with dark features up to no good’. Have fun, I hear Port Morris is really beautiful this time of year.”

Matt grimaced but accepted the jovial backslaps and sarcastic wishes of good luck as he grabbed up his scarf and hat from his desk.

“What did I do to deserve this,” Wozniak sighed as she did the same.

“I thought the job was research and analysis,” Matt smiled. “And I researched and analysed that the Terrapins would lose against the Catamounts. And they did.”

“Yeah, not when you’re betting with the boss,” Wozniak shook her head. “That’s when blind loyalty is expected.”

“I’ll remember that,” Matt chuckled. “So, what’s the assignment?”

Wozniak flipped quickly through the folder da Silva had given her at the conclusion of the meeting and hummed. “A man was seen wheeling a barrel onto the premises of an oil recycling centre after business hours. Exciting.”

“Hey, if you make a bomb and you got some toxic chemicals left over, that’s a good way to make sure they never get traced back to you,” Matt pointed out as they made their way out to her car, wrapped up tight against the bitter November wind.

“More like someone didn’t want to pay the drop-off fee.”

“It’s field work though,” Matt grinned and buckled himself in. “The first I’ve seen in a while. I’m
“Excited about getting out of the office, aren’t you?”

“Well as long as I’m the one carrying the gun in this partnership, I go where you go,” Wozniak replied, not unkindly. She gave him an understanding smile as he flexed his left hand, which was trembling in his lap as it did these days; febrile little shivers, nothing like the full shakes he’d had in the hospital, but he still had difficulty gripping things properly and there was no way he could reliably shoot with the persistent trembling in his dominant hand. “So don’t sign us up for any more field work until spring, alright?”

“Oh, boss,” he sighed, but managed a smile. “I still reserve the right to my opinion that the Terrapins were obviously going to lose from the start, though.”

“Alright, you can keep that one. How’s your wife doing, by the way? She’s Detective Wilds right? In Vice?”

“Still fiancée for now, though it won’t be long until we’re official,” Matt beamed. “And she’s amazing as always thank you. She’s got a couple of tough cases at the moment, but that’s normal for Vice. Her CI’s are getting pretty close-lipped about something or other big in the wind but they won’t say what. It’s frustrating for her, especially when her unit relies just as heavily on informants and tips and unofficial information as ours does.”

“That’s a tough one,” Wozniak commiserated as she drove. “She’s a hell of a detective, though. I did a brief stint in her squad during my early training days, she was like a force of nature. I remember one time, she had this ring of dealers cornered and none of them would talk, but by the time she was done just… talking to them, they couldn’t wait to spill their guts fast enough. It was amazing, and she didn’t even have to threaten them with jail time or anything. Hell of a woman. If she was ever up for Chief one day, she’d have my recommendation for sure.”

“That’s so sweet of you, you’re definitely invited to the wedding.”

“Really?”

“Completely,” Matt said firmly. “We’ll squeeze you in on the table plan somewhere. Or I might just boot somebody. Can I get away with asking my dad not to bring his fourth wife when she’s even younger than me?”

“It’s your family, man,” Wozniak smiled and shrugged lightly. “If you want to risk the fallout, that’s your business. I’ll just be at the bar sipping whiskey and watching the show.”

“Ha, you’ll fit right in with Doe then,” Matt said, before he remembered he was still angry. His smile faded and he rubbed at his hand uneasily.

Wozniak watched him out of the corner of her eye for a few minutes. “Hey, not that it’s any of my business, but… are you still inviting him to the wedding? I got the impression when you transferred that things were a bit frosty between you.”

Matt didn’t answer until they were at the recycling centre, and Wozniak waited for him with the engine turned off.

“Yes,” he said eventually, watching his hand shiver. “I mean… it’s hard. I’m still so angry with him. And I know that there was no way to predict what would happen, and he’s not directly responsible for my injury, and he’s apologised and tried to make amends. And that’s honestly more than I thought I would get, actually, he’s really come along since I first knew him. And I know he’s trying to do better and not repeat those mistakes. So I know, logically, that there’s no reason
for me to be angry. But I still am. Whenever my tremor starts up, I think of him and get mad for doing this to me.”

“Trauma doesn’t always obey the laws of the rational,” Wozniak replied quietly. “And you were close before, right? I’m sure it must have felt like some kind of betrayal, at the time.”

“Yeah,” Matt sighed and watched as sleet started to drizzle down. “I asked him to be my best man, actually. He turned me down, which I kind of expected, but we were still close. I can’t just walk away from a friendship that took years to build, I’m not that kind of guy. But I can’t let go of my anger all that easily either. I feel like if I uninvited him, I’d regret it in the long run. But I don’t want to see his face right now either. It’s complicated.”

“Sounds like it,” Wozniak said sympathetically. “But hey, in the meantime, we’ve got some barrels to poke around in. Fun, right?”

“So much fun.”

When they found the shift manager, he didn’t have a lot of useful information for them. “I was on duty the night you’re talking about and I didn’t see anything. If I had to guess, this tipster who called you probably just saw Rajiv or Zahid working. We got a few Indian and Asian guys working here, one of them was probably just doing overtime and shuffling inventory towards loading.”

“What’s the difference between the green barrels and these other unpainted ones?” Matt asked as they stopped by a warehouse section full of green barrels.

“Semi-toxic stuff in the greens,” the manager replied with a shrug. “We get them from mechanics, service stations, places like that. Used oil and transmission fluid and the like. You’re welcome to have a look if you want, just come get me if you need to open any of them. You’ll need some protection in case of fumes.”

“Sure thing, and thanks.”

“I’m gonna check the security tapes,” Wozniak said through the thick bundle of her scarf. “Where it’s not nine degrees.”

Matt smiled and waved her off. He took his time walking around the room to inspect the stacks of green barrels waiting there for transportation. He tried to see any major differences between the ones closest to the doors, presumably the ones delivered most recently, and the ones further back, but they seemed to be a uniform shade of green. A couple had old liquid spills over the edges, but they looked long-dried. They all seemed to have the right hazard code labels on the sides... as he wandered, one particular barrel kept catching his eye. There was nothing immediately obvious about it, and it took him a couple of passes before he pinned down why it kept nudging at him.

The other barrels had some damage to them, but where they’d been scraped the paint had come off to show the bare metal underneath. This one particular barrel had plenty of dents and bashes to it, but the paint was intact all round. And while it could have been freshly repainted, it didn’t seem like that was a major priority as long as most of the barrel were recognisably green. So why completely repaint one very old barrel but not others?

He walked over to it and ran his gloved hands carefully over the paint, checking to see if it was wet. It wasn’t, but now he was up close he could see paint globs where it had been done unevenly, maybe by hand. And as far as he could remember, big shipments of industrial barrels got spray-painted on assembly lines, right?
He frowned and knocked on the barrels surrounding it, listening to the sound of the empty ones and the ones half-filled with fluid. Then he knocked on his odd barrel – and heard a much more solid sound.

And when the shift manager got it open for them, they all had a nasty surprise.

“This is Bronx Intel to Central K,” he said into his phone once he’d taken off the respiratory mask. “Please advise Captain Wymack we need detectives and additional units at Nemetz Oil Recycling in Port Morris. It’s a homicide.”

***

Andrew followed Wymack into the oil recycling plant, Josten at his side as they approached the entry, where they could see Boyd turned away talking to another officer from Demographics, Andrew tried to figure out how he felt about seeing Boyd again. Josten had been sending him looks and touching his sleeve ever since they got the call out about a body in a barrel, but Andrew wasn’t about to break down or lose it. He felt a little blank about it, maybe, which could be concerning. Old habits, maybe.

“You never call, and you never write,” Wymack said with a wide smile as he and Boyd shared a quick handshake and back slap in lieu of a hug, “But as soon as somebody jams a corpse in a barrel…”

“Yeah, I wish it was a happier occasion to catch up,” Boyd said with a brief smile. “And that it was warmer, too. But if wishes were fishes, and all that.”

He barely glanced at Andrew and Josten a few paces back, though Andrew felt his eyes pass over them. No hellos were offered. Alright then.

“Lay it out for us then, Boyd,” Wymack said blandly, an eye on his consultants too.

“Alright, we got a tip on the line…” Boyd quickly outlined the events that had led to that particular barrel.

“Did they get the dumper on tape?”

Boyd grimaced at Wymack’s question. His partner stepped forward with a brief introduction. “Detective Wozniak. No, the system must have been set up by chimps, there’s blind spots all over. Nothing useable I’m afraid.”

Wymack sighed. “Naturally not. Nothing in the other barrels?”

“Well, whoever took this guy’s head and hands knew better than to dump them in the same spot as the body, and he’s got no clothes, no ID… this thing is ice-cold, Captain.”

Josten perked up a bit at that. “Head and hands?”

“Yeah,” Boyd said absently, peering over at the open barrel with its grisly occupant paid out on some sheeting by the crime scene techs. As such he didn’t see the grim look Josten sent Andrew, and then Wymack. Andrew followed him over to the barrel, but he kept his ears open to Wymack and Boyd’s conversation.

“So, how’s the new gig?”

“It’s nice people,” Boyd said agreeably. “Big job. But the threat briefings we get – jeez. I used to
sleep better. Lots of responsibility. It’ll be good for me, I’m sure. Dan says it’ll give me an iron stomach at least.”

“She’s a smart lady,” Wymack agreed, and squeezed his shoulder. He lowered his voice a little. “Thank her for the offer, will you? It’s very sweet, but I’m sure she must have someone better to give her away.”

“She wants you, Cap,” Boyd replied quietly. “We both do.”

“Well,” Wymack said thickly after a moment. “I guess if there aren’t any other contenders. Do I have to match her dress or something?”

“I’ll send you a colour swatch for your tie,” Boyd said, and Andrew could hear the smile in his voice.

“I’ve heard about your new unit,” Andrew offered into the conversation. “A municipality, rather than a country, launching its own counter-terrorism unit – a fascinating experiment.”

He’d been hoping for some reaction beyond a cool look from Boyd and awkwardness from everyone else, but that was all he got. He bit down on his frustration – he was just trying to make conversation. Trying to seem interested in Boyd’s new life. Trying to reach out like Bee had always been telling him, like Renee had been helping him with. It had just been a fucking compliment on his new job. No need to glare like he’d been rude, when he actually hadn’t been. For once.

Josten touched his wrist lightly and smiled up at Boyd. “Well, we should get to work on this. Nice seeing you again, Matt.”

“Yeah,” Boyd said tightly, and walked off with Wozniak towards their cars. Andrew scoffed quietly ad shoved his hands in his pockets.

“He won’t hang onto that anger forever,” Josten mumbled as they crouched down to inspect the body and barrel.

“Well if time healed all wounds it would be a tremendous comfort to this man,” Andrew remarked as he pulled away the sheeting covering the maimed corpse. “Without a face, dental records, remarkable tattoos, fingerprints, or even the chance at getting sediment from under his fingernails, identification may be beyond us on this one.”

“We could get lucky,” Josten said. “His DNA might match somebody in the CODIS system.”

“Yes, but that’s a job for a computer. Ours is to inspect the rusty tomb.” He squinted at the barrel and scratched away part of the outer layer of green paint with his keys. “Same cast as the others, but older. Brought in from elsewhere and painted to match. Previously painted sky blue, which could narrow our scope to navy shipyards, and… are you listening?”

“Handsome Bobby,” Josten said slowly, staring at the torso. “This is Handsome Bobby.”

***

Josten pointed to the news article on Wymack’s screen, when they were behind closed doors with the window blinds down. Andrew had started thinking of these particular meetings as war councils. “That’s him, that’s Handsome Bobby Pardillo.”

“I take it ‘Tiny’ Bobby Pardillo was taken,” Andrew said, eyeing the photo of an obese man on
courthouse steps, walking on crutches.

Wymack gave him an unamused look. “This was the last time he was seen – 21 years ago, walking out of court after his father was acquitted of racketeering.”

“The body Boyd found was fresh, less than 72 hours old,” Andrew pointed out.

“Bobby was missing, but he was never presumed dead,” Wymack corrected him, rubbing his mouth as he stared at the photo. “Federal undercovers heard that he was in hiding for a feud with the Ferrara family.” He looked to Josten. “At the risk of stating the obvious, the body in the barrel has got to be at least a hundred pounds lighter than Bobby.”

Josten shook his head and gestured to the crime scene photos laid out on Wymack’s desk. “Look at the scarring on the torso. At the time the Pardillo family was on trial, Handsome Bobby was undergoing major surgeries – a lap band and liposuction, I think. He would have dropped so much weight he needed the excess skin removed here, and here. And look at the knees, they’re covered in medical scars, you couldn’t even guess how many operations this guy has had. Handsome Bobby was on those crutches because Big Teddy Ferrara had him kneecapped over gambling debts. That’s how the whole feud started. And severing heads and hands was standard operation for the Ferraras.”

“I see.”

Josten seemed to realise his slip. “The mob was like a soap opera when I was a kid,” he lied easily. “It was fun to follow it in the news.”

Josten kept a blank face, but his hands were fiddling with his keys in his coat pocket; Andrew could hear the metallic noises from the other side of the room.

Wymack watched him closely and Andrew felt a smile growing. Wymack had already surmised who Josten had been, from precisely who he had picked up such insider gossip, but he wouldn’t confront Josten about it directly without compromising all their plausible deniability, and Josten’s anonymity. Andrew coughed pointedly.

“It’s not enough for a positive ID, but it might do until we hear back from the DNA lab. We should hit up as many Ferrara soldiers as we can still find.”

“You don’t think any of them will talk?” Wymack asked with raised eyebrows.

Andrew shrugged. “Probably not. But it might be advantageous to talk to Handsome Bobby’s father, on the other side of the feud. He might be able to formally identify the body, and if he does he might be able to tip us to which of his rivals decapitated the man. Alleged-rivals, I mean. Slip of the tongue.”

Wymack looked apprehensive, but gave the go-ahead.

“I don’t want to be in the same room as Robert Pardillo,” Josten said in quiet German, still fiddling with his keys. “His outfit wasn’t allied with my father’s, but he might still recognise me. The families all kept tabs on each other.”

“I keep telling you, you look nothing your father,” Andrew frowned. “And we’ll need you there to assess Pardillo’s body language and speech.”

Josten’s lips thinned unhappily and Andrew sighed. “Alright. I have a solution.”
Neil told himself to take slow breaths and act natural, and twitched the sleeves of the labcoat a little. He stood at the head of the examining table, dressed up in medical scrubs, and withdrew the sheet from the top of the body.

Sure enough Robert Pardillo, suspected crime boss to an alleged ring far older than the Wesninski circle, didn’t give ‘the morgue attendant’ a second glance.

“That’s him,” the man said thickly after a few minutes of examining the headless body. He too looked at the scars. He reached out as if to touch the body, then drew his hand back. “That’s Bobby.”

“Our sympathies,” Wymack said neutrally from where he stood with Doe, down by the feet. “Mr Pardillo, I’m sure you can understand there’s a few questions we’d like to ask you.”

Pardillo sighed and nodded.

“When was the last time you saw your son?”

“Couple of months ago,” Pardillo said. He eyed Wymack. “We had to keep things quiet, as you know.”

“He was rumoured to be involved in the murder of a ‘made’ guy in the Ferrara family in 1992, we’re aware,” Wymack said cautiously.

“He was a good boy,” Pardillo sighed again. “Made it big up in Albany. A fresh start. No old ties or rumours.”

“How did you manage to keep in touch?” Doe asked blandly. “It would appear one of your son’s old enemies managed to find him. I’m wondering if your communications could have been used to trace him.”

“We did email,” Pardillo admitted reluctantly. “Made it look like insurance spam, hidden keywords in the text. Bobby was smart, very smart. Got surgery, stayed out of sight. He only came into New York for the doctors because we couldn’t find a good gastro guy upstate. Somebody must’ve seen him on the street.”

“Do you have any idea who in the Ferrara family might have done this?” Doe asked, rather recklessly in Neil’s opinion. Doe seemed unbothered by poking at the mob boss or insinuating he believed the ever-unproven allegations of his criminal activity. Wymack tensed a little beside him, but Pardillo didn’t seem to catch his tone.

“Some bastard,” he said dismissively. “Look, I understand Bobby rubbed people the wrong way. I get that. But to deny a man an open casket?” He shook his head and took deep breaths, and when he spoke it was with a dark voice and clenched fists. “Now I’m a law-abiding businessman, but if I wasn’t, the mutt that done this would be in the ground tomorrow.”

There was a tense moment of silence, and Neil willed himself to stay invisible, unseen, unremarkable…

“Now,” Pardillo said, recovering his composure a little, “If you got any more questions, you call my lawyer.”

He turned away, and Neil covered up the body again as unobtrusively as he could. Wymack
offered to walk Pardillo out of the morgue, and Doe turned to Neil as soon as they were alone. Neil removed his surgical cap with trembling hands.

“Well, he’s obviously set on retaliation,” Doe said lightly.

“No shit,” Neil muttered.

“If we’re going to find the killer before he does, I suggest you dig into the files on the Ferrara family infrastructure, see if anything jumps out at you.”

Neil nodded unhappily. He was better suited for it, of the two of them. “And while I’m doing that, you will…?”

“Pay a visit to the Demographics unit,” Andrew replied, taking the cap from between Neil’s hands where he’d been twisting it. He twirled it on his finger and Neil tried not to get distracted. “If we can identify the man who called in the barrel tip, he might be able to pick the killer out of some mugshots.”

“You know you could just call and ask them,” Neil pointed out, and snatched the cap back before Doe could ping it across the room by its elastic rim.

“I could, if I were content to trust other people’s judgement about how possible it might be.”

Neil sighed. This wasn’t going to end well, he could feel it.

***

“I’m sorry to disappoint you,” Deputy Commissioner da Silva said, “But according to our tech people, the man who saw your perp didn’t give his name.”

“Odd,” Andrew commented.

“Actually, no,” da Silva smiled. “Not for Demographics. People want to call in tips about people from certain backgrounds, but in case they’re wrong, they don’t wanna come off as racist.”

He grimaced, and Andrew mirrored him.

“We don’t pressure because we don’t want the information to dry up,” da Silva continued. “Do we get sent on the occasional wild goose chase? Yeah. But it’s worth it for the intel we get that is good.”

It was a well-worn speech, alright. Andrew had the impression he had to bust that out every time someone like him wanted more exacting information. “And the number used to place the call?”

“Our tech people traced it to a payphone down the street from the recycling plant. Vocal analysis tells us he’s old, probably white, likely local.”

“That narrows it down to about a million people.”

“That’s what you wanted to hear, I know.”

Andrew tried out a tight, polite smile. “I suppose we should be grateful he thought to call in the tip at all. Another day and that barrel would be off goodness-knows-where with any evidence very firmly destroyed.”

Da Silva smiled understandingly. “Reasons like that are why we’re so quick to respond to tips.
You know, try this number. Our tech people should be able to work some kind of other angle for you, maybe clean up the background noise, make it easier for you. Feel free to drop my name. I’m at your service.”

Andrew pocketed the post-it da Silva gave him and widened his smile. “Actually, Deputy Commissioner, my reasons for coming to see you were twofold. I wanted you to know that I’m at your service as well.”

A few minutes later, and they were shaking hands. Andrew let himself out of da Silva’s office and blinked; Boyd was standing in the open-plan desk area outside the office, watching him with folded arms.

“Detective Boyd,” he said calmly.

“Doe. What was that?”

“Hm? As I mentioned before, I think the work done here is very interesting. Very worthy, preventing terror attacks and the like. And since pattern recognition is something of a strength of mine…” he tailed off with a polite smile.

Boyd’s frown deepened. “Wait, you volunteered to work here?”

Andrew adjusted his coat buttons nonchalantly. “Your boss thought you might object at first, considering our history. But I assured him we’re both professionals willing to put our personal problems aside for the greater good. Josten and I will now be splitting our time between here and Captain Wymack’s squad.” He tilted his head, watching Boyd grind his teeth and clench his trembling fist. “Or did I mischaracterise your professionalism?”

“You mischaracterised our relationship.”

Andrew felt his eye twitch. He was just about losing his patience with this sulk. “Maybe what we need is an airing of grievances. You have a problem with me all of a sudden? I apologised. I tried to help. I tried to make it right. I’ve tried to reach out. I’ve tried to be polite and supportive of your new position. And you seem incapable of accepting any of it. A bit petty, don’t you think?”

“Petty?” Boyd shot back, leaning forward just a bit. “And what do you call latching onto my new unit when you know I don’t want to see you?”

“For this unit, a profound stroke of luck,” Andrew said sharply. “I think Josten and I could do great things here. With the help of analysts like yourself, oh of course. Or do you prefer the job title ‘number cruncher’?”

Boyd looked like he wanted to refresh his mother’s boxing lessons, but he shook his head and walked away.

***

Neil folded his legs more comfortably under him in the beanbag and frowned between two handfuls of photo stills and police reports.

“Andrew?” He called loudly.

Doe appeared in the doorway wearing – Neil blinked. He was wearing a rubber apron and rubber gloves, and had a large meat cleaver in hand. He blinked back at Neil. There was some kind of bit of meat in his hair.
“Should I be concerned?” Neil asked curiously.

Doe looked at the cleaver and tossed it between his hands for a moment. “Say you wanted to cut someone’s head off. To avoid posthumous spray from the victim’s jugular, you lay them facedown and hold them like so.” He demonstrated the position, cleaver in his free hand. “I’ve been attacking a gammon joint from this position for the past 15 minutes to replicate the wounds on the body’s neck.”

“Find anything?”

“I’ve come to the conclusion our killer is left-handed and probably quite tall. It’s also pretty good for anger management.”

Neil smiled, then pulled a file out of the stacks around him and pointed at a mugshot. “His name is Dante Scalice, he’s an enforcer in the Ferrara family.”

Doe crouched down and tucked the handle of the cleaver in his back pocket as he looked at the photo. “Another subject of criminal gossip at home?”

“Actually, before tonight I’d never heard of him,” Neil shrugged. “But he’s in all the Ferrara files and he fits something Pardillo said. Didn’t it strike you as odd he said the mutt that done this?”

“I figured it was a generic slur.”

“I don’t think so,” Neil frowned and stretched his arms up above himself, rolling his neck. “Crime families this old get pretty obsessed with lineage and ancestry. It’s part of why my father is so determined to kill me; his only son vanishes and refuses to continue the legacy? He would see it as humiliating, shameful.”

“Hm.”

“Well, Dante Scalice’s father is from Sicily. His mother is from Isreal; he has mixed parentage.”

Doe frowned. “But you’re mixed, aren’t you?”

Neil shrugged and picked at his hems. “My mother was from another crime family, that’s more acceptable. I’m the issue of two legacies; and the UK and US aren’t so different, genetically. Scalice’s mother wasn’t part of any criminal organisation. She was just a normal woman who got caught up in her husband’s crap. She was Jewish, while her husband was a Catholic. I’m seeing plenty of mixed things that might make Pardillo’s people aggravated about Dante’s ancestry.”

“If you say so.”

“And look at this. These photos were taken from a raid last year, at a club owned by Dante Scalice. Check out the kitchen.”

“Sky blue oil barrels,” Doe mused. “Well, I don’t think it’s enough for a solid arrest, but maybe we can scrounge up some more.”

***

“Do you really think he did it here?” Neil asked uneasily the next morning as they rooted through Dante Scalice’s garbage cans. He had to speak through the thick scarf covering his face; he hated the cold, and Doe had insisted they go dumpster-diving for evidence right in the middle of a bitter snowfall. “At his home?”
Doe shrugged, his own body bulky from sweaters and his coat and the big woollen beanie shoved over his head almost down to his eyes, covering his ears and most of his neck too. “All this stuff’s only a week old. I’m starting to think he hasn’t cleaned house since the murder.”

“Well we can’t go inside, his car’s right there. He’s obviously home.” Neil added, feeling jumpy and watching the windows.

“Legally, this is public space,” Doe reminded him. “No warrant needed.”

“He still won’t like it if he finds us,” Neil muttered.

“Relax. He’s probably bundled up inside with a hot drink and lots of blankets.” Doe said, rather wistfully. He didn’t like the cold either, Neil surmised. Though it put pink spots in his cheeks that were quite… sweet.

A dog ran out of the house and lunged up against the fence, barking aggressively.

“That’s our cue,” Doe muttered and they quickly replaced the lids on the garbage cans and sauntered away as if they were just passing by.

Dante Scalice came out after his dog, scowling. “Hey! The hell’d you do to my garbage?”

“Mr Scalice, we’re consultants for the NYPD,” Doe announced confidently. “We’re investigating you for the murder of Robert Pardillo Junior.”

Scalice didn’t even blink. “I don’t know what you want or what you’re doing here, but unless you have a warrant you’d better get the hell away from my house.”

“I just told you that Handsome Bobby is dead. You don’t find that surprising?”

“Where were you Friday night?” Neil chimed in, trusting the thick scarf to hide his features.

“I have an alibi,” Scalice said easily. “I have an alibi for any time you ask. But I got nothing to say to you unless you have a warrant.”

“Well then, we’ll just come back later,” Doe grinned sharply, and turned away. They started walking, and Neil saw in the mirrors of the parked cars they passed that Scalice was heading to his own vehicle, phone out.

“He’s spooked,” Neil said softly.

Doe had his phone out too and started calling Wymack. “We’ll need to send units to the club, he might be on his way to dispose of evidence left there. But after that mess-up, he’ll be lucky to see a day in prison.”

Neil watched in the mirrors as Scalice got into his car, settling himself in the driver’s seat. Before Neil could take another breath, a wall of wind from the fireball exploding out of Scalice’s car knocked him into Doe. His ears were ringing, his heart was going a hundred miles, and he could only stare in horror as flames from the initial blast started to eat through the vague shape of a human in the driver’s seat, smoke billowing high.

The thick stench of burning flesh and metal swamped them.

He blinked. He was on the beach. He was in New York. He was on the beach. It was his mother. It was a mobster. It was his mother.
“Neil. Neil, listen to me.”

Warm, strong arms held him tightly, keeping him upright. There were chilly fingers pressed to his carotid, a strong body at his back. Car alarms were going off shrilly all along the street.


“Mom,” he whispered hoarsely. “Mom.”

“That is not your mother. That is Dante Scalice. You are in New York, with Andrew. Your name is Neil Josten. You are a consulting detective. It is 10 AM.”

Neil felt a shudder work itself through his body, and he raised a gloved hand to block his nose and mouth. He let himself slump against Doe, and somehow managed to tear his eyes away from the gruesome tableau not ten feet away.

“I don’t like this case,” he mumbled.

“I was right though.”

Neil frowned. “What?”

“Not a day in prison.”

Neil sighed and thumped his head against Doe’s shoulder for a moment. “I guess not.”

***

“Bomb squad says the explosive used was Tovex,” Wymack told them about an hour later, once the scene was crowded with police, fire department, reporters and nosy neighbours. They were sitting on the stoop of Scalice’s home, and Doe had stolen all the blankets off the paramedics who’d first responded and tucked them around the two of them. The snow was ashy and gross all around them. Neil kept wondering how much human skin was mixed into the snow now.

“That’s poplar in building demolition,” Doe replied from under his own pile of shock blankets. They were pressed together at the hip and shoulder, and Neil had to refrain from leaning on him even more. His eyes were fixed on the car; the fires had been extinguished now, but the half-burnt body was still on ghastly display. “Half of the Pardillo family revenue comes from construction, the other from the resulting real estate.”

“Yeah, the problem is that pretty much every construction firm in the state uses the same materials. The Pardillos aren’t special for having Tovex on their books,” Wymack sighed. “Tovex is damn-near impossible to trace. If we don’t get the evidence to charge Pardillo quick, this might just be the first shot fired.”

“There hasn’t been a gang war since I was a child,” Neil said dully. The firemen and paramedics were trying to remove the body from the seat. He could imagine the awful riiiiip of the melted flesh and leather all too well.

“Well this is how they start. Car-bombs. God.”

“Captain,” Gordon called from inside Scalice’s house. “You might want to see this.”

Doe pulled him to his feet and they trudged after Wymack, dropping only one or two blankets. Gordon was looking rather sickly as he stared at a large boiling pot in the kitchen. He glanced up at
them, then grabbed a set of metal tongs and reached into the pot.

There wasn’t much left, but what he pulled out was immediately identifiable as a human jawbone. The teeth looked halfway to melting, but with luck they might be able to pull DNA from the pulp.

“If you’re gonna witness someone explode, best it’s someone who dissolves heads in battery acid,” Gordon grimaced and carefully laid the jawbone on the counter.

“Well odds are that’s closure on the Bobby Pardillo case,” Wymack said. “But we gotta hang the car-bombing on Pardillo senior, quick. The last thing we need is for this to escalate.”

Neil watched as he went back outside, rubbing at his temples. “I’ll get back into the files, see which one of Pardillo’s enforcers might have planted the bomb,” he offered quietly.

“You sure?” Doe asked in the same tone. “I could do that.”

“Actually,” Gordon butted in, handing the pot over to a crime scene tech with relish, “The pot isn’t the only thing I found, Doe. I thought this might be more your speed.”

He led them to the living room table and gave them a sheaf of papers. Doe flipped through them rapidly, frowning. “Emails. Between Handsome Bobby and his father. Insurance spam. How did Scalise get his hands on these?”

“No idea,” Gordon shook his head. “Thought that would keep you out of trouble for a while.”

He knocked Doe’s shoulder as he passed, and Neil frowned. Ever since Boyd’s injury, he’d been even more irritable than usual. Gordon hadn’t been super chummy with Boyd, but Doe was definitely on the squad’s shit list over the whole thing.

“There are phone records here too,” Doe said after a moment, as if he hadn’t noticed the aggression. “I think I know how Scalise got them.”

***

“I don’t have a clue what you want me to do with this,” a clean-shaven businessman told them a few hours later, frowning down at the emails they had given him. His suit was well-pressed but not flashy, and his boardroom had suspiciously few promotional posters for his company. It had a nice view of the New York skyline though. Not that Andrew was looking at that.

“An acknowledgement that the NSA is in bed with the mob would be a lovely place to start,” Andrew said with an entirely fake smile. He fidgeted with the man’s business card, for Lantera Solutions or whatever they were calling themselves. “The reasons for wanting Handsome Bobby Pardillo found and murdered would also be nice.”

“Mr McNally – if that is your real name,” Andrew replied in a forcibly polite voice, “Please be advised this is not the first NSA front I’ve identified since starting work with the NYPD. Lantera Solutions does not exist. It is a cheap façade with an expensive view and it would calm my nerves considerably if we could all just be adults and admit it.”

“We found these copies of email correspondence between Robert Pardillo and his son Bobby, disguised as spam but apparently not well enough, at the home of a member of the Ferrara crime family,” Josten said in a muted voice. He had been quiet and removed since the car bomb, but he
hadn’t withdrawn completely into himself. Andrew had kept checking on him every few minutes, monitoring his expression and body language. He was keeping his cuffs in his palms and mostly to himself, but he seemed alright. Mostly tired now. Andrew thought they’d earned a few quiet hours at home with the cats and some blankets after this case was over.

“Bobby is dead, by the way,” Andrew said. “There are also phone records in there, impossible to explain as they’re only a few days old. They were generated by someone or something with access to a cell phone company’s computer system – pretty sensitive information, I’m sure you’d agree.”

McNally continued to look politely baffled.

“You’re holding the means by which a killer triangulated his victim’s whereabouts and tracked him down,” Andrew said. He leaned forward and tapped his finger at the top of the sheets of paper, where long strings of apparent web-page nonsense scrawled across the page. “These garbage-looking sequences are stamped on every printout generated by the PRISM system – a system created for the sole use of the National Security Agency. I’m not a deranged lunatic, Mr McNally, but by all means keep pushing me.”

McNally blinked down at the papers and set them on the table. “Look, I’m not saying anything because I don’t know anything. This is a web development company.”

Andrew watched his face for a long minute. He didn’t think he wanted to ever play poker against this man. “Well, I suppose all we can do is thank you for your time.”

“Yeah, sorry I can’t help you,” McNally said as they all got up. He made to hand the papers back to Andrew, but he ignored them and instead flashed a bright smile.

“Even so, expect a token of our gratitude. I’m told many people have great enthusiasm for made-to-order plushie toys, and it would be my pleasure to treat you to a subscription to lots of them.” He grinned wider and held the door for Josten. “If I’m wrong about what you do here, you won’t have to explain to your Federal overlords why you find cartoon ponies so arousing.”

McNally’s stunned face was almost worth the wasted trip.

It was as they were on their way back to the station to pick up the bomb squad’s report that Andrew’s phone buzzed. He frowned down at the message.

Hi im sorry if this is a bad time, can u b here? –Robin

“What is it?” Josten asked.

“Robin needs me.”

“Oh. I’ll go get the report,” Josten smiled tiredly. “See you at home?”

“Are you sure you’re alright on your own?” Andrew asked.

“I’m okay,” Josten said. “Robin needs you more. Go.”

Andrew replied to Robin that he would be there in ten minutes, squeezed Josten’s wrist, and left for the nearest cab stand at a jog.

He’d been to Robin’s parents’ house once before, to meet them after agreeing to be her mentor, but he hadn’t really stayed long. Renee had been there to mediate and smooth over any awkwardness seeing as Robin’s parents were rather well-to-do, and as a rule Andrew didn’t get on with those
kinds of people. As he waited for someone to answer the doorbell, he wondered what had
happened that Robin needed him at such short notice. They’d met a few times, either at Andrew’s
house or Renee’s, and had a few phone calls. They’d skirted around the mentorship and talked
more about books than anything else. Renee had said that was normal; Robin would reach out once
she was comfortable with him. It seemed the moment had arrived. He just had to hope he didn’t
fuck it up.

She cracked open the door on the latch and peered out. “Oh. Andrew. Hi.”

“I said ten minutes, didn’t you believe me?”

“I guess not.” She smiled weakly at him, took the door off the latch, and let him inside.

Her eyes were puffy from crying, and she was hugging herself. She was wearing her pyjamas still,
and seemed to only be aware of that as he looked at her. She bit her lip and quickly fumbled on a
sweatshirt, folding her arms more tightly around herself. Andrew didn’t comment on it.

“My parents are at work,” she mumbled into the silence, gesturing at the empty coat racks by the
door.

“I see.”

“Did I pull you away from work?” She asked, looking at her feet.

“It can wait,” Andrew said calmly. “Did something happen?”

“I – kind of. It’s stupid. I shouldn’t have called you, I’m sorry, you don’t have to—”

“Robin,” he said quietly. “I don’t mind that you called me. I told you I’d pick up the phone for you
and be there for you. I don’t break my promises.”

She looked up at him, eyes getting watery again. Then she sighed and her tense shoulders slumped.
“Come through.”

She led him through the pristine, well-furnished corridors of the large house until they came to a
partially-open door. It had childish drawings of dragons and stickers of characters from old
cartoons on the outside.

“I, um. Since I got away, I’ve been sleeping in a guest bedroom,” she said hesitantly. “It’s small,
and doesn’t have a lot of furniture. I wanted it that way. It reminded me of – there.”

By there Andrew knew she meant the tiny cupboard bedroom in the underground bunker-turned-
prison her kidnapper had kept her in for years. He also knew she’d been trying to train herself to
say there instead of home.

“I haven’t been back in my old room,” she continued in a wobbly voice. “My parents and therapist
think I should try going in and sorting through my old things. They said it’s time.”

“And do you think it’s time?”

She shrugged unhappily. “I have to do it eventually, right? I just… I felt too scared to do it on my
own. My dad offered, but…” she tailed off with a scowl.

Andrew hummed noncommittally. He could guess at the tension there, but wasn’t going to push
yet unless she wanted to talk about it.
“Well, we could stand in the hallway, or go elsewhere, or go in,” he told her. “Your choice.”

She took a few minutes to psych herself up, then pushed open the door and walked in. Andrew followed quietly and looked around the space. He kept his face blank rather than letting his lip curl.

It was like a pastel tomb for a child who was never coming home. Everything had been preserved in its childish glory – toys left on the floor, crayons on the mini desk, bed partially unmade. There was a glittery pink backpack with kid’s books and a pencil case sitting down by the bed, ready for school. Little shoes sat waiting under the bed. A practice ballet outfit hung on the outside of the closet, waiting for the next lesson. Glow-in-the-dark stars adhered to the ceiling, fairy lights over the bed. Cartoon posters and drawings all over the walls. One of them curled at the corner, blu-tac long gone hard.

Robin stood in the middle of the room, her eyes wide and her hand to her mouth. He watched her breathe and look around at the room that had been preserved since the day of her abduction. He gave her a few minutes before speaking.

“Do you want to leave?”

“They keep thinking their little princess is gonna come home someday,” she replied instead, voice ragged. “Instead they’ve got me.”

“It probably helped them keep faith you were still alive,” he reminded her.

“But I’m not that child anymore.”

“No,” Andrew said quietly. “And you won’t ever be the child you were before your abduction and abuse. That time was taken from you, and it’s not coming back. What’s important moving forward is the teenager you are now, and the adult you’re going to be.”

She looked at him for a moment, and he knew she was looking for traces of what had happened to him; she hadn’t asked yet, and he hadn’t volunteered it.

“When,” she said unsteadily, “When I was there, he got me things I liked. He got me pink clothes and princess outfits because I told him I missed the ones at home. And when I misbehaved, or, or cried when he…” She looked down at her feet and took deep breaths. “He cut them up and burned them as punishment. He said I didn’t deserve nice things if I was going to be so – ungrateful.”

He didn’t really know what she wanted from him; she was too tense to want comforting, and he didn’t know how to help her through the mess in her head the way Bee or Renee might have done. So he did his best, what he knew had helped him. He took her seriously, and reciprocated her honesty.

He put his hands in his pockets and looked up at the tacky stars. “I was seven the first time I was raped. It was my foster-father, Samuel. I didn’t know what he was doing at first, I just knew it hurt. He told me he would stop if I asked nicely. If I said ‘please’. So I did. I begged him. And he laughed, and did it worse the next night.” He swallowed the slimy feeling in his mouth and looked back to her pale face. “It took me over a decade to be able to hear that word without thinking of him, and how powerless and scared he made me feel. That’s what abusers do – they control you and take things from you. It makes them feel powerful to know they’ve done it, that they’ve ruined something for you. But you can take that power back.”

“How?” She whispered. “I can’t – I can’t look at any of this without thinking of what he did to
“You acknowledge it happened. You acknowledge the change. And you choose either to ignore it, or to adapt. You choose every time, after every trigger, day after day. And it gets exhausting. And boring. And then some day you won’t need to keep choosing, because it makes you think of your choice and your strength more than what happened to you.”

She sniffled and wiped at her eyes.

“You’re going to be alright, Robin,” he said. “Do you want my help packing this stuff away?”

She nodded. Andrew was content just taking down all the kiddy stuff and putting it in storage boxes, but Robin was the one who grabbed the garbage bags.

“Are you sure?”

She hesitated for a moment, then nodded again. “I’ll give it to charity collections. But I can’t have this around me anymore. I’m not – I’m not a little kid. I need a room for me, not for who I used to be.”

So they started demolishing the room in earnest. Robin took over the desk and school things, and Andrew handled the bed and cuddly toys for her when she couldn’t go near them. They didn’t talk; Andrew thought they both might be all talked-out for the day. He was just wondering whether it would be rude of him to start stripping the wallpaper, when they heard her parents get home.

They halted in the doorway of Robin’s room.

“Andrew,” her father said in surprise.

“Gabe,” he replied evenly as he folded up a pastel bed set covered with fairies and dropped them into another garbage bag, one of just many already crowding the room.

“Robin, sweetie, what’s going on?” Her mother asked, looking vaguely horrified at how they had made the shrine of a room so unrecognisable.

“You told me to sort through my room,” Robin replied, sticking her chin out a bit. She glanced to Andrew before continuing. “So I’m sorting it. I don’t want any of this stuff in the house. I want to redecorate this room.”

“Well…” Linda said falteringly, clutching at her necklace. “If – if that’s what you need.”

“Here pumpkin, let me help you with that,” Gabe offered, moving to take a plastic tea set out of her hands.

“No,” Robin said hurriedly, backing away from him. Andrew saw the deep pain cross her father’s face, but Gabe held his hands up and retreated to the door again. “And I don’t want to be called those nicknames anymore.”

She bit her lip and looked at the floor, hands shaking by her sides. Andrew guessed she had reached the limits of her assertiveness. No doubt her kidnapper had brutalised her independence from her very rapidly along with all those pretty outfits.

“Robin, do you want to take a break?” He asked her.

She looked to him out of reflex, but seemed too lost in her head to register his words. He waited
patiently and held up a hand to her parents when they made to prompt her.

“I think,” she managed after a while, “I think I’m done for the day. I want to be alone for a while.”

Andrew promptly dropped the garbage bag, shrugged on his jacket and started for the door.

“Andrew?”

He turned.

“Thank you for coming,” she said quietly and gave him a shy smile. “Can you – can you come again on Saturday, to help with the rest?”

“What time?” He said simply.

“Um… two PM?”

“I’ll see you on Saturday at two,” he promised easily. “Call me if you want to talk before then.”

“Okay. Thanks. Say hi to the cats for me?”

He nodded, tapped his temple in salute, and slid past her parents. He closed the front door behind himself and had just lit the end of a sorely-needed cigarette when Gabe called out to him.

He took a long, blessed drag and put away his lighter. “What, Gabe?”

Robin’s father joined him outside the house, rubbing a hand through his hair. He seemed to chew over his words for an eternity. Andrew was content to wait and smoke his cigarette.

“How do you get through to her?” Gabe asked eventually.

“Don’t do that,” Andrew sighed in a mouthful of smoke. “Don’t ask me one thing and mean another.”

Gabe absently waved the smoke away from his face. “Fine. How can I get through to her? I just want my little girl back, but she won’t let me in.”

“Your ‘little girl’ is seventeen, Gabe. The child you’re waiting for is not coming home.”

Gabe glared at him. “How am I supposed to help her when she refuses to let near her?”

Andrew refused to be baited. “She needs you to demonstrate you respect her.”

“So what does she need then, if you’re so wise?”

Andrew refused to be baited. “She needs you to demonstrate you respect her.”

“What?”

Andrew sighed again. He hadn’t quite realised at the time that mentoring Robin would apparently also mean coddling her parents. He wanted to get home to Neil and the cats and back to his case
instead of chatting with Gabe. Robin didn’t need him for the moment, so he should be on his way.

“When you have been violated and abused and mistreated like that,” he explained quietly, watching the smoke of his cigarette, “Trust is not something you give out for free anymore. She looks at you, at any man, and has to wonder if he is going to hurt her too. She has been emotionally betrayed and scarred by it. You need to earn her trust by demonstrating, over and over, that you are worth trusting. That you are not a danger, that you are not going to betray her like she fears.”

“And how am I supposed to do that?” Gabe asked, desperate. “I offer to help and she pushes me away. She ignores me when I’m in the room. She won’t even talk to me.”

“You show her that you are consistent. You obey her when she tells you to leave. You turn up when she expects you to, and you respect her wishes. You pay attention to her ‘no’. You show her that you will let her dictate your relationship, that she has power of her own, and you won’t push her. And when she’s ready, she’ll reach out to you on her own terms.”

Gabe sighed and ran both hands through his hair. “Alright. Okay. You’re the expert.”

Andrew grunted and ran both hands through his hair. “Until Saturday then.”

He was reading a police manual on common bomb construction techniques with Clyde curled up in his lap when Josten eventually got home. He seemed in a snit about something, judging by the way he went straight to the coffee pot without saying hello.

“What was the bomb squad’s verdict?” Andrew asked calmly, rubbing his fingertip under Clyde’s chin until they purred.

“Inconclusive,” Josten said shortly. “It was utterly generic. No way to definitely tie it to any organisation or building site, no DNA traces or signature build.”

“Damn,” Andrew muttered. If they couldn’t prove Pardillo’s people had planted it and get somebody behind bars, the mob war might just gear itself up before they got their evidence.

“I have an idea, though,” Josten said in a rather dangerous voice. He turned to fix his cold eyes on Andrew. “Why don’t we call our new boss, Deputy Commissioner da Silva? I’m sure he can put us in touch with an explosives expert.”

“You talked to Boyd.”

“Yeah, I ran into him at the station. He was going to tell Wymack he thought it was a bad idea. Imagine both our surprise.”

“I was going to tell you,” Andrew said.

“Tell me what, that you’re hell-bent on pushing Boyd’s buttons?”

“That’s not what—”

“If it’s not about forcing Boyd to talk to you again, then what is it about?” Josten asked, unimpressed. “Nash and the museum thief, Peterson and the Somalian chef, Baskin and the orange pips. We’ve had one bad date after another. You’re trying to force a reunion with Boyd because you don’t like working with anyone else.”
“That’s not—” His phone buzzed and cut him off. He checked it, thinking it might be Robin. Instead he got a garbled string of letters and numbers. He had the code cracked in under a minute. He rubbed both hands over his face, much to Clyde’s annoyance at the lack of attention. He lifted the phone. “I have to go sort this.”

“Okay,” Josten said quietly, probably thinking it was Robin too.

“Can you feed the cats? I might be a while.”

“Yeah.”

Andrew got up and got ready to go out again. Just before he left, he turned back and watched Josten crouched down on the floor, smiling and petting their cats as they dived face-first into their food bowls. Josten stood back up and turned to the sink, starting to wash up some of their leftover breakfast dishes. His chest ached.

Andrew walked back in and touched his back lightly. “I’m sorry for putting us forward without consulting you. It was a rash decision anyway.”

Josten sighed. He seemed to want to hang onto his anger, but he melted into Andrew’s touch. He absently reached out and curled a hand in the lapel of Andrew’s coat, rubbing his thumb over the thick wool. “Andrew, look. I know this whole Boyd thing is messing with you. And I’m on your side, I really am. But you have to stop pushing him, or you’ll just push him away for good. Let him have his space.”

Andrew felt his mouth twist at hearing his own advice to Gabe. He spread his fingers out a little, feeling the curve of Josten’s spine. “I know.”

They stood like that for a long minute, quiet and content to be near each other, tethering each other. Andrew told himself not to want anything else, not to notice Josten’s warmth or how easy it was with him or how badly he wanted to pull him closer. But he’d made the choice years ago to allow himself to want, and all the attendant frustration.

“Text me when you’re on your way back?” Josten asked quietly.

Andrew nodded and skimmed his hand over Josten’s hip. “See you later.”

When he eventually reached the building site, he checked his phone. No signal. He wasn’t entirely surprised.

“Mr Minyard,” A clean-shaven man in a smart business suit greeted him.

“It’s Doe,” Andrew said coolly, ignoring the flare of alarm in his gut.

McNally twitched a humourless smile, looking much more dangerous and official in the dark of an abandoned building site, with no witnesses for miles.

“Coded text messages, frequency jammer, meeting in an unfinished power plant?” Andrew continued, just to jab him. “You must be the most security-conscious web developer in the state.”

“My superiors insisted we not be seen together,” McNally said in a clipped tone. “You’re meant to understand that this is, by no means, an invitation for you to visit Lantera Solutions again.”

Andrew grinned tightly and dropped a wink.
“We saw the records you found,” McNally said. “We had to make sure we didn’t have a breach or a backdoor into our systems. We don’t; PRISM is secure.”

“So you’re saying the NSA has a mole?”

“No, I’m not.”

Andrew blinked and stepped a bit closer. “I’m sorry – someone at the agency found Bobby Pardillo via his emails and phone records, so unless you’re telling me Dante Scalise was an undercover government cryptologist, you have a leak.”

“This came through channels,” McNally said sternly. “It was requested by a cop.”

“Are you saying the NSA makes a habit of conducting illegal electronic surveillance for any cop that requests it?” Andrew said. “Let me get that on record, won’t you?”

“No,” McNally scowled. “The NYPD has a unit – Demographics. They work to prevent terrorist attacks.”

Andrew stared at him for a moment. Oh, Boyd was not going to like this.

“What Deputy Commissioner da Silva wants, he gets. He wanted Handsome Bobby found.”

McNally shifted and looked around for a second, then fixed Andrew with a very direct gaze. “That said, the events of the past few days aren’t sitting right with my superiors. We thought you should know.”

Andrew grimaced. “Did da Silva say why exactly he wanted Bobby found?”

“No,” McNally replied repressively. “He protects over eight million lives, Mr Doe. He doesn’t need to say why.”

_Fucking government suits_, Andrew thought sourly.

***

“Wait,” Neil frowned and poked his head out of the shower curtain. “He told you da Silva is dirty, as in Boyd’s new boss?”

Doe hummed and continued brushing his teeth. Neil frowned and turned the shower head towards the wall so he could think without the noise. He made sure the curtain was still covering him up and met Doe’s eyes for a second in the steamed-up mirror.

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

Doe spat out a gob of toothpaste. “The Demographics Unit is in touch with over half the country’s intelligence agencies. If he gave even the flimsiest of excuses for wanting that information, then no good spook is going to say no to that request.”

Neil pushed his wet hair out of his eyes and absently tracked the muscle shifting under Doe’s tank top as he bent down for a handful of water to rinse his mouth. “Why would he do something like that?”

“Historically, money is the most effective corruptor of police,” Doe answered once he was done, watching Neil in the mirror once more. “The Ferrara family could have blackmailed him, too.”

“And in a few key strokes, the man who had eluded the mob for more than twenty years was
found,” Neil replied, and shuddered. So much for his own efforts at covering his trail. He decided it would be best never to poke an NSA agent ever again. “So what now?”

Doe wiped his face with a hand-towel. “Finish your shower. If we’re going to make an allegation against the fourth-most respected police official in New York, we’re going to need to dig up a lot more proof. We need an inside man on da Silva.”

“Oh, no,” Neil muttered quietly, and ducked back behind the curtain.

***

There was a sticky silence as Boyd tapped his hands on the papers and photos that made up their case so far, spread out on the kitchen table.

“You’ve got some nerve,” he said finally.

“I know what it sounds like,” Josten said from the other end of the table, self-appointed mediator for this mess. “I’m sorry.”

“For which part? For lying and telling me you needed me to come here and answer questions about the recycling plant, or plotting against my boss?” Boyd asked, wounded.

“We couldn’t exactly plot against him at your office,” Andrew pointed out from his position leaning against the kitchen cabinets, arms folded. Boyd gave him a dirty look for that.

“Given the electronic surveillance we’ve already seen, we thought it would be prudent to give a credible pretext,” Josten translated calmly. “Just in case.”

“He’s not corrupt,” Boyd shook his head and flipped the file closed. “You haven’t got a shred of proof.”

“These accusations come from the NSA,” Andrew said quietly, calmly. That at least made Boyd stop and think. “But you’re right, we have no solid proof. That’s why you’re here.”

The glare was back. “No. Forget it.”

“He assigned you to investigate an anonymous tip, which led directly to the discovery of Handsome Bobby’s remains in the nick of time to start gang friction,” Andrew pointed out. “If you hadn’t found the body, there would be no thoughts of foul play in Bobby’s disappearance at all. No one but his father and the killer knew where he was living. Seems a bit off, don’t you think?”

Boyd shifted his jaw unhappily. He was a good detective, he had to see the logic of it.

“Now, we can’t currently explain the motive for why he might have wanted Bobby found and killed and found again,” Andrew said with a wave of his hand. “But it’s a bit of a large coincidence that da Silva’s name was the one the NSA decided to drop.”

Boyd leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. “Maybe you’re just not as smart as you like to think. Maybe the biggest spy agency on the planet managed to sell you a line.”

“It’s possible,” Josten chimped in, raising his hands a little. “But we want to make sure. And there might have been perfectly good reasons for your boss wanting Bobby found – he might have had ties to weapons distribution or terror cells or anarchist groups. There’s a whole host of scenarios where all this gets swept under the rug. But we should know the truth before we decide that.”
Boyd looked at him for a long time, then shook his head. He slid Andrew a grim look as he stood and started to walk out. “You know, I expected this crap from him. Not you, Neil.”

Blood roared in Andrew’s ears at the hurt look on Josten’s face and he followed Boyd in a few quick strides.

“Oh no, you said your piece,” Boyd said as he reached the door and saw Andrew behind him. He held out a hand to Andrew’s chest as if to push him away. “I’m not gonna sit there and let you smear a good cop.”

“It’s not about smearing, it’s about the truth—”

“What is it with you?” Boyd snapped, leaning down into Andrew’s space. Andrew bared his teeth and stepped into his palm. “I won’t forgive you, so you want to send me on a witch hunt? Huh? Wreck my career even more?”

“Oh, your career, is that what you’re calling it?” Andrew sneered back. “Sitting behind a desk, poking numbers and chasing racist ‘tips’?”

“I’m sorry, didn’t you tell my boss just a few days ago you wanted in?”

Andrew snarled and threw up his hands. “Alright! I was trying to get a rise out of you! To remind you that you are a detective, not a statistician.”

“I am a detective!”

“Oh you still have the title, yeah,” Andrew allowed. “But really, what the fuck are you doing there Boyd? You transferred from Wymack’s squad either because your stupid pride won’t let you occupy the same building as me, or because you’re feeling sorry for yourself. Which one is it?”

Boyd held up his right hand to show the constant shake. “I have a tremor in my hand. I can’t shoot, can’t get out on the street and work cases because of you!”

“Bullshit, you could have stayed in Homicide until you completed physical therapy.”

Boyd laughed bitterly and jabbed Andrew’s chest with his injured hand. It took all of Andrew’s self-control not to lash out. “You’re assuming my therapy can actually be completed.”

“Because I know you’re strong enough!” Andrew snapped. “Because I know you’re better than what you accept for yourself! Be my friend, don’t be my friend – whatever. Like I give a rat’s ass. But don’t be so stupid as to confuse punishing me and punishing yourself. You know how I feel about liars. Sort your shit, Boyd.”

They stared each other down from barely an inch apart. Then, Boyd gave him a look of cold contempt. “You know what I thought when I first met you? It must come easy for that guy. Everything’s so easy, so black and white. So clear-cut and obvious. Well it isn’t that easy for the rest of us.”

Andrew saw red. “I am a rape victim, Matt!”

Boyd’s face fell in shock.

Andrew took a harsh breath and balled a fist in Boyd’s shirt. “Survivor. I was neglected from the day I was born and raped from the age of seven up to fucking twenty. I can’t stand to be touched, I can’t trust anyone I meet, and I’m constantly afraid it’s going to happen again. And it might not
seem obvious to you because I’ve been working on my shit for a very long time. I got help. I fought back. I made a place for myself, found a calling, found a fucking reason to live when I most wanted to die. I found a home and friends and work colleagues. I’m getting myself better. None of this—” he gestured jerkily between them, back towards Josten hovering in the kitchen, at the house that was his safety and up to his own throat where the words just kept pouring out—“None of this is easy for me. So figure out what you want from your recovery and shut the fuck up.”

Boyd gaped at him, ashen.

Andrew shoved him away. “Get out of my house.”

He went, leaving Andrew shaking with rage and adrenaline, the likes of which he hadn’t felt in a very long time. Not since Tilda. He slammed a hand into the wall, hard enough to make the impact shudder into his shoulder-blade and down his spine.

He turned around and saw Josten standing in the kitchen doorway, cats at his feet and a solemn, understanding look in his eyes. Andrew couldn’t stand it.

“Do you think I pushed too much?” He said acidly.

Josten didn’t reply.

Andrew covered his face with his hands and tried to claw his way down from his anger. “I’m going to call Bee,” he muttered, and locked the bedroom door behind himself.

***

Neil came back from his stress-induced run about an hour later, having run off his tension at being caught in the middle of that awfulness. He found Doe had come downstairs in his absence, and was sitting on the living room floor, swamped in his reading blanket and dangling a piece of string for the cats.

“Hi,” Neil said quietly, and sat facing him. Bonnie mewled at him and abandoned the string to crawl up his shirt, looking for the hood they usually rode around in. “How are you doing?”

Doe shrugged. There was a dull, blank look to his face as he cheerlessly twitched the string just out of Clyde’s reach every time.

Neil tried to unstick Bonnie’s claws from his shirt. “Is there anything you need? Anything you want?”

Doe shook his head. “I’d like to work,” he said in a raspy voice, as if he’d yelled himself hoarse, “But my brain isn’t cooperating.”

“Cat breaks are good,” Neil commented, pausing to kiss Bonnie’s head when they nudged his cheek for attention. Clyde snagged the string triumphantly and Doe let it fall from his fingers. “Do you still feel angry?”

Doe’s lips pressed together. “Hollowed out now. Bee talked me down, don’t worry. You’re safe from the violent rage.”

“I’m not worried for myself.”

Doe’s eyes lifted to his for a moment, then dragged back down as if by weights. “I don’t know what I was thinking, taking Robin on,” he said after a minute. Neil blinked at the abrupt change of
“As if I actually have myself fixed enough to help her.”

“You’re only human, Andrew,” Neil said softly. “Give yourself a break.”

Doe just closed his eyes.

“Do you want me to call Renee?”

“No, it’s alright.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

Doe sighed heavily. A bitter kind of look came over him, to be replaced by something sad and defeated. “Come over here,” Doe muttered.

Neil shuffled over until they were sitting side by side. Slowly, as if giving Neil plenty of time to run away, Doe slumped against his side and rested his head on Neil’s shoulder. Neil felt his throat close up for a second. He knew the awful weight of feeling alone and closed off from everyone around you, to ache for physical touch but to be terrified of receiving it. He knew how loneliness was even harder to bear when you couldn’t let yourself accept comfort. He knew how difficult Doe found physical comfort, and letting himself be taken care of.

“Can I put my arm around you?” He asked.

Doe nodded into his shoulder, so Neil gently rested his arm across Doe’s back and nocked his palm over Doe’s far shoulder. He squeezed very lightly, and felt Doe let go of a shuddering breath. They sat and breathed together, and watched the cats stalk and jump on each other playfully.

“We should get back to work,” Doe mumbled, quite some time later. He sounded almost sleepy and at ease, and bubbly warmth filled Neil’s chest at the sound. He squeezed again and let his fingers trace out the curve of Doe’s shoulder.

“Or how about we just take a minute,” Neil suggested quietly.


It was nearly another hour before they got up.

***

Neil felt distinctly jumpy as they walked down the row of rental stationary homes towards the largest one at the end. Doe had disguised him with some coloured contacts and a big hat, but he still wasn’t entirely comfortable with the idea of confronting the head of the Ferrara crime family without any form of backup – and had said so repeatedly. The chatter about the Ferraras hiding out here under threat of more car bombs had been good, but Neil was extremely uneasy about the whole plan Doe had cooked up.

“Relax,” Doe muttered beside him, looking much more at ease than he had in weeks. “You’ll give yourself away like that.”

Neil muttered some choice curses under his breath and tried to get his internal panic under control as Doe walked brazenly up to the door of one place and identified himself as an NYPD consultant, right to the face of Big Teddy Ferrara.

“Alright, make it quick,” he grumbled, and went back to the pan of sausages spitting on the stove.
Neil followed Doe inside and tried not to think about how they hadn’t told anyone they were coming out here.

“Couple’a police errand boys, or whatever you are,” Ferrara scoffed at them. “New on the job, are ya?”

“Actually Mr Ferrara, we suspect you of having an errand boy of your own, and that’s why we’re here,” Doe smiled. Neil wanted to run.

“That right?” Ferrara smiled back. Shark to shark.

“You fancy yourself a businessman, so which of these sounds better: you tell us how your man Dante Scalice managed to locate Handsome Bobby by his phone records and emails, and in exchange we won’t tell our superiors about your knowledge of it,” Doe replied, “Or, don’t tell us what you know and you can add two new enemies to a long and growing list.”

Neil hated this plan. He hated it so much.

Ferrara seemed more amused than intimidated as he fetched a few hotdog rolls from the cupboard. “You threatening me, kid?” His eyes slid to Neil and narrowed, sweeping slowly over his face as Neil tried desperately to keep his cool.

“We think it’s only a matter of time before the police prove that Scalice was working under your orders when he killed Bobby Pardillo,” Doe said, tugging Ferrara’s attention back on himself. “Give us the name of the officer you have on your pay, and we’ll talk to our captain and see if a deal can be made. Get you and your family back into your home again.”

Ferrara treated Doe to a menacing once-over before spearing his sausages onto the rolls. Neil tried not to wince at the efficient jabs of the meat fork, or the runnels of clear fat that bled out of the holes in the sausages. “We don’t have a cop,” Ferrara said eventually. “Dante didn’t have a cop. And if one of yours sent him that packet, it’s news to me, and it’s your problem.”

“Packet?”

“Yeah. Dante got it in the mail ten days ago, out of nowhere. Tells me there’s all this crap in it about our old friend.” Ferrara scoffed and fetched some mustard from his fridge. “You know what I said? I said, who cares about Bobby Pardillo anymore? That beef’s over twenty years old. You think I’d care enough to want him gone after all this time to risk my family out in the sticks like this, with a gun under my pillow? I’m getting too old for this shit.”

Neil and Doe exchanged a glance.

“See, I didn’t tell him to do a thing to Bobby,” Ferrara shook his head. “And you can take that back to your pigpen.”

He squashed the rolls down and fat and mustard went oozing out.

***

Matt sat at his desk, pretending to read over a report Wozniak had sent him for another case. He couldn’t stop thinking about the confrontation with Doe.

He didn’t know what to do with the pile of messy secrets Doe had dumped in his lap, if he should pretend they weren’t there or run away from them or deal with them. Of course, in his job he’d worked rape cases before, and he was friends with Renee, he knew how traumatising that kind of
violation could be. But honestly, he’d only come across those cases involving women. He knew it happened to little boys and grown men too, he’d taken the courses and paid attention to the statistics about it going unreported. But he didn’t know how to match that to the man he knew, the friend he had. He tried pushing the pieces together and they seemed to just fall apart faster.

Until, really, he thought about how careful Doe was with personal space and touching, how he managed never to work those cases with Matt, how long it had taken to get him to open up and talk about anything other than work – and that was still a struggle – and how secretive he was about his childhood or dating life whenever anyone asked. Then the pieces started making up a grim picture.

It just got grimmer when he remembered Doe saying in that voice of wounded rage, *I was neglected from the day I was born and raped from the age of seven up to fucking twenty.*

What the hell had happened to his friend?

He sighed and rubbed his cheek. He couldn’t figure all this out in ten minutes. And while he was still angry at Doe for the part he’d played in his injury, and his pushing after the fact – he couldn’t deny that Doe had a point about the timing of the body being uncovered. And whatever the mess of their personal relationship, he’d never known Doe to be anything but committed to his job, doing what was right for the victims, getting the right perpetrators charged. He wouldn’t fling made-up suspicions in Matt’s face just to get a rise; he’d be an asshole about trying to muscle into Matt’s new unit, but this was some serious shit. He wouldn’t make something like that up, and Matt knew Josten wouldn’t be complicit in that anyway.

He spotted da Silva in his office, packing up his things before a meeting at City Hall, and told himself to do his job. The personal mess could wait.

“Sir?” Matt smiled and knocked on the doorframe. “Can I grab you for a sec?”

“Of course Boyd,” da Silva smiled at him, gesturing him inside. “It’ll have to be quick though.”

“It is,” Matt assured him. “I just wanted to talk to you about something. When Doe came over here the other day, he asked you about the man who gave the tip? For the barrel?”

“Yeah?”

“He uh – he reached out to me this morning. He thought the tip might have been fake.”

Da Silva frowned at him in consternation and huffed. “Fake?”

“He thinks maybe someone wanted us to find that body.”

“To what end?”

Matt shrugged and spread his hands. “Not a clue. But that’s sort of what I wanted to talk about. You know my history with him, and now you see that some of the theories and investigative work he does can be… pretty out there. I just don’t think his style would be a good fit around here. We have enough trouble with our CIs without someone aggravating things just to get a reaction. He can be a bit – insensitive to get the answers he’s looking for, sometimes.”

Da Silva looked at him in concern, then smiled and gripped his arm. “Consider him gone. I trust your judgement – just not about the Terrapins.”

Matt smiled and watched him leave. Doe had to be wrong… right?
“We officially need a new pizza place, this one is taking forever,” Neil grumbled.

“Really, Neil?” Doe smirked from where he was shuffling around the current wall display. “We visit part of the Italian mob in hiding, and you order pizza? Is a marathon of The Godfather on its way too?”

Neil rolled his eyes with a smile. He tilted his head back against the couch and stared up at the ceiling. “It certainly seemed like Big Teddy was telling the truth, right? But if da Silva wasn’t working for the Ferraras, I don’t get it. I looked through the files again and I can’t see any ties between da Silva and Bobby.”

“Maybe the motive isn’t from the past, but from the present,” Doe suggested. “We have to ask what might compel a decorated officer to risk his career while on the verge of retirement, to facilitate the murder of a washed-up and frankly, unimportant ex-gangster. Even Big Teddy didn’t care about finding him anymore.”

Neil frowned and ran his teeth over his lip thoughtfully. When he looked down again, he found Doe watching him. “This case makes less sense the more we dig.”

“That’s what makes it interesting,” Doe replied with a twitch of his shoulders. He didn’t look away even after they held eye contact for longer than Neil felt strictly necessary. But, Neil couldn’t look away either. He felt gently pressed by the weight of Doe’s attention, as if a light hand on his chest were holding him on the couch, telling him to stay. Thoughts about the case fell away and he felt his pulse pick up a bit as he wondered why exactly Doe was looking at him like that. It put a nervous heat in his stomach and a jitter in his hand as he tucked his hair out of his eyes. It put stupid thoughts in his head about maybe, what if, Doe came a little closer. He wet dry lips with the tip of his tongue and felt his gut clench at the way a muscle jumped in Doe’s cheek.

A knock on the door startled them both and Neil jumped to his feet, anxious heat washing through him. He dug in his pockets for cash as he walked quickly towards the door.

“You know,” he offered shakily over his shoulder, once he was out of Doe’s magnetic sight and had a hand on the doorknob, “Maybe after dinner, we can talk about someth—Matt?” He blinked. This was not their pizza delivery.

“Hi,” Boyd offered awkwardly. He had his work satchel over his shoulder and more than a little uncomfortable.

Neil heard Doe step into the hallway, and glanced back at him. Doe and Boyd regarded each other for a second, cautious, then Doe wordlessly gestured for him to come inside. Doe pulled on a long-sleeve sweatshirt and folded his arms; he wasn’t wearing his armbands, and Neil supposed he felt exposed enough to Boyd already.

Neil perched on the arm of the couch, looking between them as they stood and shifted uneasily on their feet. The cats mewed a welcome from their bed in the kitchen, but Boyd didn’t seem to hear them.

“So, I, um. I had a talk with the Deputy Commissioner,” Boyd started after a long, tense minute.

Neil felt his shoulders loosen a bit and saw the same in Doe. Work. Good. Solid ground.

“You shared our suspicions?” Doe asked calmly.
“I asked him about the tipster, same as you,” Boyd nodded, apparently just as glad to talk about work rather than anything messier. “And he didn’t blink. He was comfortable, open. But there was something in his voice.”

Boyd stopped and ran a hand through his hair for a second, grimacing. “It bothered me.”

“You’re an excellent detective, you have good instincts,” Doe said blandly.

“My point is, I wanted to know. I had to. So I walked him out and doubled back to his office. Found this.” Boyd dug in his satchel for a minute and pulled out an unassuming-looking leather notebook. He rubbed his fingers over it with a look of resignation.

“What is it?”

“Proof you were right,” Boyd admitted heavily. “He’s dirty.”

It was a while before anyone talked again as Doe hovered over Neil’s shoulder at the kitchen table to read through the file together. Boyd paced uneasily between the sink and the fridge, hands in his pockets.

“It’s a career case. It’s three career cases,” Boyd said eventually. “He has enough in there to put Robert Pardillo and his whole outfit behind bars for about a thousand years.”

“Accessory to murder, racketeering, tampering with union elections, kidnapping…” Neil listed off. “I can’t believe how old some of this stuff is. He must have been working on it since the seventies.”

“It makes no sense,” Boyd said. “He had the goods on a mob boss for over thirty years and never told a soul. Then he flips the son to the guy’s enemies now?”

Doe was turning a newer newspaper cutting over in his hands, frowning. It was a small piece, more photo than text, with the results of a union election briefly covered. There was some writing at the top – Our friend, and an arrow pointing to the man in the centre of the photo. Neil took a moment to wonder who even bothered with newspapers these days. Well, he answered himself, Old-timey crime families, maybe.

“This handwriting is Robert Pardillo’s,” Doe said at length. “It matches the sample on file for him.”

“Yeah, I noticed,” Boyd replied. “That article was written 12 days ago. Everything else in that notebook predates the internet.”

“It was written less than two days before Dante Scalice received the packet that helped him locate Handsome Bobby,” Doe frowned.

“I don’t get it,” Boyd sighed. “It’s just a union election. It’s meaningless.”

“Or it could be the Rosetta Stone to unlock da Silva’s real motive,” Doe said and put the article back on the table, tapping his fingers against his covered forearms. “He sacrificed Pardillo Junior to wriggle out from under Senior’s thumb.”

“What?”

Neil had a very bad feeling about this.
“The oldest evidence here dates back to da Silva’s first year as a beat cop,” Doe continued in a slow voice. “He’s been cleaning up the Pardillo family’s messes since his early days, covering their tracks and keeping the evidence to himself.”

“He’s Deputy Commissioner,” Boyd said unwillingly. “You think he’s a mole?”

Neil rested his chin in his hand and stared unseeingly at the file. He wasn’t nearly so reluctant to believe it; he knew the ability families like this had for corrupting people. He’d sat at fancy dinners in Baltimore where his father entertained police chiefs, judges, politicians, with Lola sitting next to him to keep him sweet and smiling. With her hand clenched around his thigh and nails ready to dig in if he even thought of misbehaving…

He told himself not to think about it and focussed back on Doe’s voice.

“At first. But as you say, he rose through the ranks. You can’t achieve that through underhanded means alone, not for such a long time. Maybe he decided it was time to take down his former bosses after all.”

“He’s closing in on a gold watch here,” Boyd protested, though the sick look on his face suggested he believed what Doe was saying. “It’s a bit late in the day to grow a conscience.”

“Maybe something forced his hand – this clipping. The winning candidate for a local construction union, which has provided health benefits and a steady income to the Pardillo family, not to mention being a convenient way to funnel money for laundering.” Doe tapped the article again. “The winner is listed as one Luis Martinez, who was elected for his ‘strong moral compass’ and his reformist Christian values, apparently. If he were unable to be bought out, his election would be a crippling blow to a decaying crime family.”

There was another knock on the door, and Doe nudged Neil’s shoulder and held out his hand. Neil passed over the cash in his pocket and watched idly as Doe fetched their pizza in. He got out three plates and handed one to Boyd without blinking. Neil picked at his slice, his appetite largely gone even though it was chicken pizza, his favourite.

“You’re not suggesting that Pardillo sent that clipping to da Silva as some kind of order?” Boyd said once he’d wolfed a slice or two.

“Probably not to commit the murder,” Doe allowed, licking sauce off his finger. “Most likely his role would be to cover it up, muddle the investigation, maybe drop another anonymous hint about where the body might be recovered.”

Boyd sighed. “Alright, just – back up a minute. Why would da Silva have Handsome Bobby killed in the first place?”

“Having him killed wasn’t the point,” Neil said quietly as he shredded the crusts on his slice. “It was the discovery. All respect to your work in finding the body, but da Silva orchestrated the whole thing. He probably tracked Scalice’s movements and progress with more help from the NSA, found out how Scalice was disposing of the body, and either called the tip himself or paid someone off to do it.”

“But why would he want that?” Boyd asked anxiously. Doe was just watching him as Neil pushed his food around his plate.

“He wants a mob war,” Neil said. “A chain reaction of violent reprisals which would weaken the Pardillo family. Best case scenario, when the smoke settled, the one man who knew of his double-
role would be dead, and da Silva could finally sail off into peaceful retirement without fear of further extortion or blackmail.”

“That notebook is completely unusable to da Silva,” Doe added. “He kept it just to remind Pardillo of their mutually assured destruction, I’d imagine. They had each other on a tight leash that neither could break.”

“Well it won’t be much use in court either,” Boyd admitted sourly. “I took it from da Silva’s office. It would be inadmissible evidence.”

“He might not go to jail, but he certainly won’t keep his job,” Neil said.

“And neither would Boyd,” Doe said quietly.

There was a stiff, strained pause.

“I don’t think that level of self-sacrifice will be necessary,” Doe said, drawing both their gaze with a tight smile. “I have an idea.”

***

“Commissioner?” Matt smiled the next morning as his boss arrived in his office and started unpacking his briefcase. “Thought you’d want to hear this.”

“Oh yeah?” da Silva smiled back.

“The lab was able to link the car bomb that killed Dante Scalice to explosives from one of Robert Pardillo’s construction offices. Apparently they pulled the security tapes.” Matt grinned. “Got the old man giving the nod himself. He’ll be going away for a long time, finally.”

“My God,” da Silva said after a minute.

“Yeah. Captain Wymack said he’s gonna hold off on the warrant until they get Pardillo’s location, but with a little luck it should be wrapped up by the end of the day.”

“Wow,” da Silva said and ran a hand through his thinning hair. “Well that’s a damn fine collar for Wymack and his team. You tell him I said that, alright?”

“I’ll pass that on,” Matt nodded. “It’s a shame Pardillo’s probably gonna use whatever leverage he can get to cut a deal to reduce his time, but at least he’ll be out of the game for good.”

“Ah well, that’s how it goes sometimes,” da Silva grimaced. “Well, let me know when you’ve finished up the report for it.”

“Sure thing boss.”

***

Andrew watched from their hiding spot in the harbour-master’s cabin, crammed in with Josten, Boyd and Wymack as they listened to the mic feed planted in the boat da Silva had rented shortly after his conversation with Boyd.

They’d watched as Robert Pardillo helped himself aboard, though he didn’t look too happy, and listened as he paced around muttering to himself. A phone rang, and they listened as Pardillo picked up.
“You’re late,” Pardillo groused.

Even on the feed, they could hear da Silva’s voice on the other end. “I’m on my way, Rob.”

“The hell is the matter with you Frank?” Pardillo hissed. “I shouldn’t even be showing my face here. The Ferraras are after us and I hear the cops got some tapes or something. The hell have you been doing in that office?”

“I know, I know,” da Silva replied. They spotted him on the far side of the dock, fiddling with something in his pocket as he talked into his phone. Andrew handed the binoculars to Boyd to get a better look. “You got problems. But we gotta get on the same page here how we’re handling Martinez. Gotta be smart about this.”

Wymack grinned. It was always nice to have some hard evidence of collusion.

Pardillo made an unhappy kind of noise.

“Rob, I wouldn’t’ve asked you here if it wasn’t serious,” da Silva assured him. “I’ll be there in a minute. There’s a nice Berolo down in the galley, help yourself. Relax a minute.”

They watched as da Silva walked out onto the dock towards the boat, a silenced gun in his free hand.

Boyd clicked on the bullhorn amplifier. “Commissioner da Silva, put down your weapon! We have you surrounded.”

As he spoke, a tactical unit exploded out of hiding and started yelling orders at a white-faced da Silva, *down on the ground, now!*

Boyd smiled and spoke again. “Robert Pardillo – come out with your hands behind your head. Don’t worry, we won’t let the Deputy Commissioner hurt you.”

Andrew snorted at that, and Boyd smirked at him as they watched Pardillo walk out onto the dock and have his hands cuffed. They watched as he took in the scene – his old ‘friend’ lying on the ground with the gun beside him.

“A silencer?” Pardillo called to him, face contorting in rage. “You were gonna take me on a boat ride? You son of a bitch!” He started struggling against the officers restraining him, fighting to get to da Silva. “Come over here and face me like a man, you rat bastard!”

Andrew followed Boyd and Wymack out onto the dock to watch the circus. “Nice job laying the sting,” he commented casually.

Boyd looked down at him for a minute, his right hand trembling and twitching. Then he put his hands in his pockets. “Yeah. It was a good plan.”

***

“He made a deal, didn’t he?” Andrew asked flatly as Wymack hung up the phone.

Wymack grimaced. “Oh yeah. The deposed Deputy Commissioner is going to a minimum security facility for the remainder of his natural life, at Beacon Correctional.”

“They get TVs in their rooms there,” Andrew observed.

Wymack rubbed under his eye briefly. “You testify against Robert Pardillo and his entire
operation, you get basic cable.”

Josten huffed. “Bread and water would have sufficed.”

Wymack rolled his eyes at them both. “You killjoys are gonna suck the life outta me. This was good work, guys.”

“Well, add it to the pile of corruption evidence,” Andrew said.

“We’re getting closer to them,” Wymack said quietly. “And this case is gonna be huge. Should make it difficult to recruit new moles when the scrutiny is so high after this story breaks. Might even flip a few people back to our side.”

Andrew kept his doubts to himself. Sometimes it felt like they were just treading water, waiting for the Moriyamas to catch up to them while they hoarded tiny crumbs of evidence.

“And while you’re here,” Wymack said, more brightly, “I want to thank you for straightening things out with Matt. It’s good to have him back.”

“What?” Josten asked for them both. Wymack nodded at his office window and they turned to peer through.

Boyd was back in the bullpen, swapping a smile with Nash as they moved desks around so Boyd would have his old one back. Boyd looked around, flexed his hand, and sat back in his old chair with apparent relish.

“Oh,” Andrew said softly. Josten beamed at him and lightly nudged his shoulder.

Boyd glanced up and caught them staring. He looked awkward for a moment, then nodded and smiled. Andrew nodded in return.

His friend was back.

***

Later that day, while Andrew was busy rummaging through Gabe’s garage for his steam-power wallpaper stripper and Neil was showing Matt and Dan how much the cats had grown, another young man was busy staring intently at his laptop screen.

“How interesting,” he murmured.

The image he was looking at showed a still from a security camera, high up in an almost conspicuously-minimalist board room, with a great view over New York city. He tapped his finger on Andrew’s still face, then thoughtfully leaned his cheek on his hand. The harsh black line of a tattooed number one draped itself over his knuckles.
Andrew shifted on his feet in the Arrivals hall and absently smoothed his hair; he’d woken up with an annoying tuft at the back that refused to lie flat, and water and wax had done nothing. He hoped he looked smart. He wanted to make a good impression.

The hall was filled with anxious people waiting for loved ones – or bored waiting for business associates – to step out of baggage claim. He watched a few reunions, full of tears and hugs and shrieking. Everyone was very happy, or extremely tense as news of delays or cancellations scrolled across the information boards above. Not that Andrew had been checking every ten minutes, either. But it looked like despite the bad weather delaying everything else, the flight he was waiting for had arrived safely, and everyone was in baggage.

The first few people to get their bags began filing out into Arrivals, either filtering directly towards cabs and cars and buses or into the arms of waiting people. He got a folded piece of card out of his pocket and unfolded it. He felt a bit embarrassed by it – there was no need, it was stupid – but he’d thought his visitor might like it, and had printed it before he could overthink it. There was no name on it, just a simple cartoon of a bee.

The people around him gave him odd looks for it, but he ignored them as he held it in front of his chest and kept his eyes on the doors.

And between one blink and the next – there she was.

Bee spotted him quickly and grinned at his sign, quickening her step until she was there, right there, just in front of him. She smiled gently at him, looking tired and rumpled from the flight but so, so happy to see him.

He’d had something planned, he’d wanted to say something – but now she was here, all his words dried up and his throat clenched painfully, eyes stinging. His heart seemed to thrash in his chest as he stared back at her, fingers crumpling the paper sign in his tight grip.

Bee reached out and rested her hands on his shoulders, like she had at his graduation. Her gentle touch unlocked his frozen limbs and he stepped forward, dropping the sign to put his arms around her and clutch tightly to the back of her puppy-patterned cardigan.

“Oh,” Bee said softly, and wrapped her arms around him too, tucking his head onto her shoulder and stroking his hair so gently, so lightly. He held her tight into his chest, trying not to clutch too hard at her back, but it was difficult when there was a mess in his head and a hot, sharp kind of pain in his chest spreading into his stomach and down to fingertips at being able to *see* her again and be close again and stand in her presence.

Of all the people he’d left behind in South Carolina, he’d missed her the most.

Their calls and videochats had helped, but now, in the moment, he found himself completely
overwhelmed by how fiercely he had missed and needed her. And how relieved he was to see her again.

“I missed you too,” she laughed quietly, her voice thick as if she were trying not to cry. She pulled back a little from their limpet-like embrace to cup his cheeks, her thumbs sweeping lightly over his cheekbones. She gave a wobbly smile and pressed a kiss to his forehead, just like she had years before.

Andrew heard a quiet, helpless noise sneak out of his own mouth at the kiss, and closed his eyes to try and master himself a little. He shakily smoothed his hands over her back and squeezed her arms. She folded him in close again, swaying just a little, and rested her cheek on the top of his head.

“Hello, Bee,” he choked out, belatedly. He could smell her flowery perfume and laundry detergent as he held him, and felt the nervous tension in his back and shoulders fall away. He let himself lean into her, allowed himself to really feel each agonising wave of relief and need and affection and remembered pain at missing her. For a moment he felt like he was eighteen again, having just bared himself completely and told her about the abuses of his childhood, the only person other than Luther he had ever told – and she had believed him at once, made more cocoa, and assured him that she would help for as long as he needed. Had cast himself vulnerable and aching into her extended hands, and she had not let him fall, had not let him down, had made him a promise wreathed in empathy and understanding and was still, even now, upholding her word.

He gritted his teeth against the pained gasps trying to escape, at the unsteady pounding of his heart and shaking of his hands.

“It’s alright, Andrew,” she whispered. “I’m here, it’s alright.”

It took about five minutes for him to calm down enough to let her go, and even then they didn’t separate completely. She held his cheek in her palm fondly, and he held her wrist. She unashamedly dried her weepy eyes and he cleared his throat, dry-eyed but only just.

“I’ll carry your bags,” he offered, his voice unsteady and rough.

“If you’re sure you don’t mind,” she smiled back, and handed them over. “Shall we head along? I’m anxious to meet your cats, I’ll admit.”

Andrew nodded and started walking, Bee matching his pace when she finally let go of his cheek. “I’m sure they’ll want to meet you too. Neil does, as well.”

“Does he now?” She grinned, and gently nudged his shoulder. He sighed in exasperation at her teasing, though he enjoyed her secretive little chuckle.

Their cab got horribly snarled up in traffic outside the airport; it didn’t help that it was the day before Thanksgiving, so half the country it seemed wanted to go in or out of JFK International. But Andrew hardly noticed the long wait – he was happy to listen to Bee talk about her flight, what she’d been up to, how PSU had changed since he left, the latest gossip on her friends, progress on her baking adventures, and to talk as well, when he had something to offer. He was happy to simply be near her, to soak in her presence and tell himself over and over that she was really here. They both sat in the backseat, and Bee held his hand contentedly the whole journey.

He paid the driver, with a good tip for putting up with the awful traffic, and led her into the house. Neil had left a note saying he was visiting Matt and Dan and would be back in a few hours, so he led Bee around the house, giving her the full tour and introducing her to the cats.
She cooed over them appropriately and when they sat down on the couch together, they both scrambled for the honour of sitting in her lap. Clyde won, but only because they pushed Bonnie off the couch.

“Did they learn that from you, hm?” Bee smiled as she rubbed a fingertip between Clyde’s ears. Andrew picked up Bonnie to console them and pretended he hadn’t heard.

They chatted some more, pleasantly passing the time, until Neil got home in a gust of cold air and a mess of pretty curls and bright eyes. Andrew watched quietly as Neil introduced himself awkwardly to Bee, saw how she smiled, and the sneakily approving wink she dropped him when Neil turned away to greet the cats.

Neil lingered enough to make small talk over a cup of coffee, then glanced at Andrew when the drink was gone and excused himself up to his room for a bit. Andrew was grateful; he had been enjoying seeing two of his closest people getting to know each other, but he needed time with Bee just for himself, just for now. They had plans to go out and show Bee all the tourist attractions the day after Thanksgiving, and that would be enjoyable. For now, he just needed to sit and talk and settle himself.

Eventually Bee admitted that all the travelling had worn her out, so Andrew carried her bags up to his bedroom and steadily refused her offers to sleep on the couch.

“You’re staying here,” he said eventually. “Now go to sleep.”

She laughed at that and raised her hands in surrender. “Alright, Andrew, you’re the boss. If you’re sure you’ll be alright on the couch.”

He already knew he would be; he’d slept there several times. And while Neil had offered to give up his bedroom, that didn’t feel right. He didn’t mind sleeping on the couch if Bee would be comfortable in his room.

She stroked his hair in her fingers for a moment; she kept playing with it as if amazed that he’d had it cut in the intervening years since college, and he didn’t mind at all.

“I’m very happy you’re here,” he said quietly, unable to hold her gaze.

“Me too,” she sighed.

He gathered his nerve and rose up on his toes to kiss her cheek. “Goodnight, Bee.”

“Goodnight, son,” she murmured. “See you in the morning.”

His mind froze again for a disbelieving second, and his heart kick-started itself abruptly into a fierce gallop. He had no words, could not react beyond reaching out to lightly brush off some cat hair stuck to her sleeve. He nodded again, patting her arm a bit to reassure himself she was really there and had really just… had just…

He retreated downstairs to process that and get a handle on himself. He busied himself preparing for the meal tomorrow, making sure everything was in readiness to just go in the oven the next morning.

As he worked, his mind wanted to stray to the memories of other Thanksgiving meals in his past, but he was well able to keep his thoughts on-track. He had a nice house, a job that satisfied him. He had a housemate who was respectful and fun and smart and who desperately needed to be kissed. He had two cats. He had friends, and a mentee to help. He had a text from Aaron suggesting a time
for a call tomorrow. And he had his mother to visit.

Yes, he thought to himself. He had a lot to be thankful for this year.
CASE - Pumpkin

Wooo this is a real beast of a chapter, at 20k it is officially the longest chapter so far! Unfortunately there is a lot of nasty stuff in this one.

Trigger warnings: this case is based off season 3 episode 7, which deals mostly with organised crime and body disposal. Additional warnings for discussion of Andrew and Robin's backstories (involving rape, kidnapping, child abuse, the Spear household and psychological conditioning), sick!fic elements including flu-stuff and also graphic medical care of serious injuries analagous to Neil's Evermore visit. Hint hint. There are also physical and psychological torture sections in this chapter, and mental disorientation and breakdown. If you would like more information before reading on or have any issues with the way I've handled these topics, please please please contact me at my tumblr. Stay safe, and a happy new year :D

EDIT - I've made a post here (spoilers) detailing the levels of violence/gore/torture in a specific section towards the end of the chapter if you would like a non-graphic explanation of what to expect before proceeding. I'm more than happy to answer questions on it xx

Andrew dropped his change in his pocket and picked up the two coffees to-go with a nod to the server. It was that awful period lingering between Thanksgiving and Christmas, and it was damn cold to be sitting outside in Central Park.

He found the right park bench and settled beside Robin with a nod. She gratefully accepted the coffee in her mittened hands, her breath blowing out in a steamed cloud as she sipped from the cup.

“Thanks,” she said quietly. Her eyes never stopped moving over the trees and open space and groups of people around them also braving the frigid air. Her body was one whole knot of anxiety, but Andrew didn’t mention that.

“Tell me again why I’m here,” he said and tugged his woollen hat further over his ears.

“Exposure therapy,” Robin said. “My therapist recommended trying to be in open spaces for short periods, for my agoraphobia. She said having a – a friend, or family member with me might help for the first bit. So I still feel safe.”

Andrew gave her a sideways glance. “And your parents didn’t want to come?”

“They’re over there,” she admitted with a nod towards a small bandstand where several people were trying to take shelter against the bitter wind. “I didn’t want them with me.”

“Why’s that?” Andrew pushed, just a bit.

Her lips twisted in a half-smile. “They don’t make me feel safe anymore. I was taken from the schoolyard, remember? In full view of about twenty parents just like them. My dad was even in the car across the street. So no, I don’t feel like they could stop anything bad happening to me just by being around, anymore.”

Andrew sipped his coffee quietly for a minute. “You sound resentful.”

“I am.”
“You’re allowed to feel what you feel,” Andrew observed blankly. “But I’d suggest that holding onto that kind of anger will poison whatever relationship you can have with your parents, if you want to keep them in your life. Your abuser was skilled at appearing to be friendly, trustworthy with children. Someone parents wouldn’t be alarmed by if they saw him with their child. He cultivated that front very effectively. By all means, feel angry about what happened to you. Feel angry that you were taken so easily by a predator. But I believe they punished themselves for their guilt more effectively over the years you were gone than you can by pushing them away.”

He took another long gulp of his coffee. “But, I’m not your therapist.”

“She said something similar,” Robin admitted begrudgingly, frowning down at her lap. “Can I ask you something?”

He grunted permission.

“Did you never – did you never resent your guardians for their abuse?” She asked hesitantly, peeking at him from over her scarf.

Andrew took a few minutes to watch a couple walking their dog, huddled up against the cold, to collect his thoughts.

“It started so young, I didn’t know how I was supposed to feel,” he said slowly. “I came to expect the neglect – being denied food, arbitrarily punished, housed in crappy conditions, ignored unless I was being yelled at. I don’t remember a time when I thought that was wrong, as a young child. I was so conditioned to think it was normal. And, as many of my foster parents reminded me, I’d been given up at birth. Clearly, I wasn’t supposed to be treated well. It was what I deserved.”

“Oh,” Robin said quietly.

“When the sexual abuse began,” he continued, his words dragging to a reluctant crawl, “It started to feel really wrong. The secrecy of it, I think. I was used to being hit in front of the whole family, and they all treated it as normal. The night visits were different. I wasn’t allowed to talk about it. I knew it would be worse if I breathed a word outside of my bedroom. I didn’t know if it was happening just to me, or to the other kids in the house, or the kids at my school. I didn’t know if it was just something else that was normal, if it was something all parents did and no one spoke about. As I got older, I could recognise what was going on more clearly. But it still seemed… to be my normal. It happened over and over, in home after home. I became numb to it, after a point.”

Robin watched him silently, waiting for him to speak again.

He heaved a sigh in a cloud of frosty breath. “There was one foster mother who I thought was different. She treated me well. She and her husband, they were good people. They treated me as a child instead of an object. They cared for me. But their grown-up son ruined that. I didn’t feel like I could resent her for not noticing – she treated me so well, I wanted to hang onto her so badly. But that meant putting up with her son’s… attention. I realised she had to know something was going on, as he had to walk past her bedroom each night to get to mine. I know she must have heard me crying sometimes. And she would have definitely seen the bedsheets. I felt betrayed, but felt that feeling that was wrong, because otherwise things were so good in that house. I felt guilty about resenting her for not putting a stop to things, or confronting her son. I tied myself in knots trying to justify her goodness to myself. And when I couldn’t reconcile things, I started to spiral rather destructively.”

He stopped again and clutched at his arms. He kept his gaze firmly fixed on a tree opposite them. “I think if I’d been able to hate her, if I’d been able to confront her about it, maybe things wouldn’t
have gone so far. But they did. I could only see two ways out of the situation, and one of them was irreversibly permanent. I started acting out criminally, trying to get myself taken out of that house. It worked, eventually. I did a term in juvie, and I didn’t see her again for about eight years.”

He took another breath and forced it out, keeping to a slow rhythm as his head throbbed with the weight of all those sour memories. “So. Feel your anger. But be careful of what it might do to you.”

“Are you okay?” Robin asked in a tiny voice.

He nodded and glanced at her again. “I’ve had a long time to work on myself, Robin. It’s still unpleasant to talk about, but I’m alright. I don’t mind sharing it with you if it will help you. That’s what this is about. Learn from my experience, et cetera.”

“Oh.” She gave him a trembling smile and took a few deep breaths herself. “Thank you.”

He didn’t acknowledge that. “How are you coping with being here?”

She looked around with her lip firmly clenched between her teeth, fingers digging into the cardboard slip of the coffee cup. “I can tolerate this,” she said bravely. “If I’m not alone.”

“How much longer do you want to stay?”

She looked at her watch for a while. “Ten minutes.”

Andrew rolled his empty cup between his palms and debated having a smoke, but he’d decided early on he didn’t want to smoke around Robin. He didn’t want her picking up his bad habits. “Would it help to talk about why it is an issue for you?”

“Probably.” She fiddled with her scarf for a while, collecting her thoughts too. “Well, as I said, I was taken from the schoolyard. A big open space filled with people who were supposed to see, and stop, that kind of thing. But no one did. Crowds are so big and noisy, and I can’t track who is near me or who might be coming towards me. And he kept me underground. In a tiny little cupboard room. For years. It became my home. My safe space. When he brought me out of that little room, it was only to hurt me. To beat me, or rape me, or force me to do horrible things, or see the other kids being hurt right in front of me. When I was in that little space, I knew I would just be left to myself. I could watch old Exy VHS tapes and pretend things were okay.” She swallowed hard and looked around at the giant spaces around them. “This is very much… not that.”

“You didn’t bring your Exy racquet with you,” Andrew noted.

“No,” she agreed. “I’m trying to get used to leaving it at home.” She allowed herself a little smile. “My therapist will be proud I’m trying two things today.”

“I’m proud too,” Andrew replied.

She sniffed and rubbed at her eyes, and Andrew silently handed her a packet of tissues from his pocket.

When she had calmed herself a little, he bit the bullet. “Do you want to watch the Exy game tonight with me and Neil? Bearcats versus Trojans.”

“Oh,” she blinked at him a few times in surprise, then nodded. “I’d like that.”

Andrew managed a tight smile for her. “Alright. Shall I come get you at six?”
“Yeah, thank you.”

They waited out the rest of the ten minutes in companionable silence, until Robin’s calm started to crumble. As he walked her back to her parents, and the safety of their car, Andrew thought that they were doing okay with this mentorship thing after all.

***

Neil rolled his eyes as Detective Baskin handed him a cup of coffee with a mischievous smile.

“Honestly, I’m fine for coffee. Are you ever going to let that go?”

“I don’t think so,” Baskin smiled back and perched on his desk beside Neil. “I mean, at least we can joke about it now. That’s progress, right?”

Neil took a sip instead of answering immediately, trying to ignore the heat growing in his face. He was pretty sure Baskin was tentatively flirting with him again, now they had been on friendly, chatty terms for a while. And it was… nice, now he knew it was happening. It was flattering that Baskin might still be interested. But while Neil had become a little more comfortable with himself since then, and thinking about what he might want in another person, his answer hadn’t changed. Besides, Baskin didn’t make him feel comfortable, when he was around. He didn’t make it seem like everything would be alright. He didn’t have a dry joke or irreverent comment ready to lighten a dark mood, or serious advice when that wouldn’t work. He didn’t feel like home to be around. He didn’t feel like an anchor.

Neil’s ears were starting to feel hot, so he quickly switched his rambling train of thought. “How was your Thanksgiving?” He asked instead.

Baskin let it go easily, and was happy enough to talk about the dinner he’d enjoyed with his sister and her husband, and the football and Exy matches he’d watched. Good. That was much safer, Neil thought, and nodded along.

Fortunately, as the topic was beginning to run dry, Wymack emerged from his office and crooked a finger in Neil’s direction.

“Catch you later, Baskin,” Neil smiled, and nodded to their captain.

“Ah,” Baskin said with good cheer. “Sure thing, Neil.”

Neil gave him a quick smile, got off his desk and followed Wymack into his office where a smartly dressed woman was waiting. She held a manila file in her hands and a worn look on her face.

“Miss Holder, this is one of our consultants, Neil Josten,” Wymack introduced him, and Neil shook her hand quickly. “Josten, Miss Holder might be in need of your talents.”

Neil raised his eyebrows curiously and sat down next to her at Wymack’s desk. “Alright, well, what seems to be the issue?”

“My sister, Jessica, is missing,” she said calmly.

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It’s been five years since her disappearance,” Holder continued, and rubbed gently under her eye. “The anniversary just passed. Most days I feel like no one’s looking anymore.”
Neil watched her for a moment, wondering what he should say. He glanced to Wymack, who grimaced a little.

“The investigation stalled within a year of Jessica’s disappearance,” he explained. “And without any new leads, we don’t have anything to go on. The FBI have looked into it, but they’re not having much luck either.”

Neil frowned. “Why are the FBI involved?” He wanted nothing to do with them at all. His and Doe’s brush with the NSA had been hair-raising enough.

“There’s an agent in the New York office, Blake Tanner,” Holder said and traced her fingers over the file in her hands before offering it to Neil. He took it curiously and started leafing through it as she spoke. “He thinks Jessica was abducted by a serial criminal. The night she disappeared, her roommate reported there was a strange smell in the apartment after he realised she was gone. He said it smelled like baking, like nutmeg.”

Neil blinked up at her, mystified.

She smiled tightly. “It sounds weird, I know. But the thing is, over the years, five other women have gone missing and never been heard from again, and each time the place they were taken from had the same smell. Agent Tanner thinks the same person took all six women.”

“Pumpkin,” Neil read aloud from the summary in the file written by the agent. “He named the abductor Pumpkin?”

“Apparently. Look, I’m a lawyer,” Holder sighed. “I’ve worked criminal cases. I know… I know the odds aren’t good here. But even if Jessica is – is gone. I just want to know what happened to her. Captain Wymack says he can’t keep investigating. Would you be able to help me?”

Neil looked from the file up to her earnest, drawn face. He could see she had been grieving her sister, possibly for years. But she wouldn’t be able to truly let go until she had real closure. He chewed the inside of his lip as he thought; she was right, the odds were that her sister was long-dead and all evidence thoroughly destroyed in the five years since. But he and Doe had no cases at the minute, and the nutmeg thing seemed weird enough to be interesting. He thought that maybe, with his first-hand family experience of serial killers, he might be able to lend some understanding to the case.

“I’ll do what I can,” he promised, and tucked the file under his arm.

“Thank you,” Holder said in a gust of breath, and Wymack gave him a tight nod of thanks and approval, too.

***

Doe met him at the New York office of the FBI as he’d agreed by text, wrapped up in lots of thick layers against the bitter November weather and his meeting with Robin.

“Behavioural Science Unit,” Doe read off the wall as they sat waiting on Agent Tanner. His lip curled just a little – he’d taken off the scarf wrapped around his face, and his hat and gloves, so Neil could see his face properly. His cheeks were flushed bright pink from the sudden change in temperature between outside the building and inside the reception and his body poured off heat from all his layers. His hair was flattened and messy over his forehead from the hat. “Even the name is pompous.”

Neil couldn’t help his smile and reached out to lightly touch Doe’s hair. Doe allowed him, one
eyebrow raised, and Neil carefully combed the wild-looking curls and stray locks out of his eyes. He felt warm all over at the sight – though it might have also been the aggressive central heating in the building.

He realised he had stopped helpfully clearing Doe’s eyeline and was just kind of petting his hair after a minute, and tucked his hand quickly back into his pocket. His shoes were suddenly very interesting.

“That’s neater,” he said inelegantly.

Doe seemed about to reply when he suddenly sneezed, turning away as the sneezing fit continued. When he was done, he coughed a little, a wet sound.

“Ugh,” he muttered.

“Are you coming down with something?” Neil asked and edged backwards a little; he hated colds.

“No,” Doe said firmly. “I don’t get sick. It’s just from the change in temperature. I’m fine.”

He sneezed again, and Neil offered him some tissues and backed further away.

A tall, sharply dressed man hurried down the hallways towards them with a preoccupied look on his face. “You the PIs?” He asked abruptly.

“Detectives, yes,” Doe said once he’d finished blowing his nose.

“Blake Tanner,” the man said with a gesture to encompass himself. “Come this way, I’ve only got a couple minutes.”

Neil and Doe exchanged a look as they walked, but didn’t comment on his rude manner. Once they were all seated and had introduced themselves, Tanner leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers.

“So, you consult with the NYPD, but your interest in this is a private case?”

“That’s right,” Neil clarified as Doe was sneezing again. “I was hired on by one of the relatives of the potential victims—”

“Victims, full stop,” Tanner interrupted him with a cocksure smile. “Nothing ‘potential’ about it.”

Neil blinked at him for a moment. “Right.”

“Agent Tanner, would you mind if I used your tissues?” Doe added. His voice was starting to sound alarmingly phlegmy and Neil grimaced.

Tanner seemed similarly affected and gestured for him to help himself to the box on his desk. Neil noted out of the corner of his eye that Doe sneaked some paper and a pen, too.

“Well, we’re not looking to second-guess anyone,” Neil continued and shifted in his seat to draw Tanner’s attention firmly onto himself instead of whatever Doe was doing over by the window with the paper. “We just want to take a look at your profile. Fresh eyes, and all that.”

Tanner glanced down to the fat file on his desk and smiled lazily. “No offense, but we’re not hunting squirrels here. Pumpkin is big game. He’s been active for ten years, hasn’t left a shred of evidence behind, except the olfactory signature.”
He sounded so impressed with himself that Neil had to really concentrate on not snorting. Doe didn’t have the same compunctions, though he passed it off as another sneeze.

“The official policy of the Bureau is not to share information with private investigators,” Tanner said, apparently oblivious to their quiet derision. “I’m afraid you’ve wasted your time.”

“Well, good luck with your hunt,” Neil said as politely as he could as they walked out. He noticed Doe was leaving little slips of paper on the desks they passed.

“What an ass,” he muttered once they were outside the building again. Doe was busily re-wrapping himself.

“He was never going to share that file with us,” Doe agreed. “He’s clearly a bully and a petty person, and likely also a credit hog. I wrote short notes to his colleagues explaining the situation, and I’m sure at least one of them will relish the chance to share the profile behind his back.”

His phone pinged and he looked at the notification with a smile through his scarf. “See, one already.”

His phone pinged again. And again. And again. Neil laughed quietly and leaned over Doe’s shoulder as they skim-read through one of the copies of the profile emailed to him.

“Well, that’s a good start,” Doe commented after they were done.

“It didn’t seem very helpful to me,” Neil disagreed.

“Oh it’s full of sophistry and is plagued by the lazy thinking that characterises profilers,” Doe agreed with a sniff. “But even a quick read has convinced me that there is no such person as Pumpkin. He’s a construct of Agent Tanner’s mind, a product of a profession which is trained to look for bogeymen in every dark corner. It’s obvious that each of the abductees was taken by a different kind of predator. The crimes aren’t connected.”

“But what about the nutmeg smell?” Neil asked with a frown.

“Well. I can’t explain that. But I do know that Tanner has taken one single detail to form a link and woven a web of tortured psychology to connect seven separate crimes out of intellectual vanity.” Doe scowled even as he wiped his dripping nose with another tissue. Gross. “And that’s just insulting to our profession. We’re going to find out what happened to Jessica Holder. Then, we’re going to explain the nutmeg connection, just for fun. And we’ll prove to anyone who cares to listen that Tanner has been an idiot for the past five years.”

He sneezed again, and wiped a disgusting gobbet of mucus from his nose.

“…Maybe after I take some medicine.”

***

Andrew shuddered as he downed a dose of cold medicine. The goopy liquid was somehow saccharine and bitter at the same time, and had an unsettling grainy texture that stuck to his teeth. He quickly rinsed his mouth with some water to get rid of the feeling and tugged his hood over his head. At some point between the FBI office and home, the illness had started to take hold, and he hated it. He didn’t get sick very often, but when he did it was a rapid decline and an awful, extended period of illness. He hoped he could head this one off before it got started, but the slight
ache already starting in his bones seemed to disagree.

He flopped down on the couch and watched Josten paw through a cardboard box of Jessica Holder’s belongings, lingering on her keys. He watched as Josten slowly flipped each key over the others on the chain, squinting at the teeth and holding them up to the light.

“What?” Andrew asked and tugged the blanket laying over the back of the couch onto his lap instead.

“Every key on her chain is meticulously labelled,” Josten replied slowly. “But here she has three keys of the exact same make and model.”

“Could be copies,” Andrew suggested.

“Mm. I think these might be apartment building keys.” Josten said, fingering the teeth curiously. “One is labelled FD – front door, probably. Another one is labelled A – apartment. But this one.” He held up the only unlabelled key on the whole thing, peering at Andrew through the circle of the keyring like a seeing-stone. Vaguely Andrew wondered if his true self was shown through the circle. Then, if he’d had too much cold medicine or not enough. “It’s unlabelled and is virtually identical to the A one, barring one or two grooves. I wonder what it opens.”

Andrew sniffed and arranged the blanket around himself carefully. “Sounds like somebody’s going to go to Holder’s building and try a key in every single lock until it opens something. Or he runs out of doors. Do have fun.”

“You’re not coming along?” Josten smiled as he got to his feet.

Andrew shuffled a bit deeper into the couch. “I have a bug to sweat out.”

Josten wandered over and smiled down at him. His eyes were soft, and his cheeks bunched up sweetly. He had a few curls trickling into his eyes. Andrew felt a sigh somewhere in his chest but kept it buried. Josten reached out and lightly touched cool fingertips to Andrew’s forehead as if to check his temperature.

“Drink lots of water,” he advised quietly. “I’ll pick up some stuff on my way back.”

“Mm,” Andrew grunted vaguely and turned his head to rest against a cushion. Josten’s fingers smoothed lightly down the side of his face and lingered for a second near his mouth before he took his hand away. The sigh escaped his control at that, at that sweet, gentle touch that gave him an absurd hoping in his chest that refused to die. He blamed the sickness completely and fixed his gaze on the weave of the couch fabric to stop himself doing something stupid like look up at Josten and distract himself with the gentle radiance of Josten’s gaze.

“Bye,” Josten said quietly, and locked the door behind himself.

Andrew scrunched up his face once he was alone and huffed out another sigh. This was getting really, really stupid. He wanted it done. He wanted it over with. He wanted to hold Josten’s face and bite on his lip and tug on his hair and…

He sighed again.

He wanted this lingering wanting gone where it couldn’t bother him anymore.

He’s not interested, Andrew tried telling himself. Again. It’s not going to happen. Stop being like this. Bee would probably have something to say about setting yourself up for failure on purpose.
Just... stop it. He doesn’t want you. Get over it.

***

After five floors of trying the mysterious key in every single door he could find – apartments, broom closets, service corridors, windows, the works – Neil’s attention was beginning to wander.

He’d found, over the past few months, that his nightmares tended to linger in his thoughts for a while once he was awake, steadily demanding. Even if they weren’t really bad ones, they tended to lurk at the edges of his attention until he faced them full-on and let himself feel them. Then, they tended to fade back into the recesses of his brain once he’d done that.

So he was familiar with the process by now. The problem with the dream currently nagging at his brain, was that it wasn’t a bad dream at all. And he wasn’t sure he really wanted it to fade.

He’d been quietly settled into the dream before he realised he was dreaming, too wrapped up in the sense of warmth and cosy contentment that shimmered through the whole thing. He was laying in a big, comfortable bed surrounded by golden sunlight. At first it seemed he’d been alone, simply enjoying the feeling of floating on sunlight and simple happiness like warm coffee in his belly. But then, in flashes and half-blinks, it felt like Doe had been there too the whole time. Neil remembered turning his head in the dream and seeing Doe laying next to him, and not feeling any surprise. But rather, pleasure at seeing him and not simply sensing him there.

They’d been shirtless – or maybe not, maybe only when they touched, the dream was oddly fluid in his mind – and entirely comfortable with it. Doe lay on his side facing Neil, an amused tilt to his mouth as he let Neil touch his warm, strong chest and trail curious fingers over his arms, and dare to trickle to his stomach.

Neil had the impression of talking, of sharing comments and making each other smile or chuckle as Neil’s hands roamed, but couldn’t clearly remember any words or the sound of speech. It had been there like music from another room, filling up the silence even as Neil filled his palms with warm skin and firm muscle.

At some point they shifted closer, and Neil remembered feeling somehow made whole when Doe ran his large hands down Neil’s chest, as if Doe were holding his scarred edges together to heal without a mark. He’d sighed and shifted and arched under each touch and stroke of capable hands, grinning and laughing quietly.

And then a kiss.

Dreams being fuzzy things and only fuzzier in the repeated remembrance, Neil couldn’t recall exactly what it had been like. He just had an impression of great enjoyment and relief, and feeling giddy and precious as Doe paired his strokes with kisses, working down his chest to his ribs and his laughter-wobbly stomach. He’d held Doe’s soft, lovely hair in both hands and revelled in the bliss of it all.

And he’d woken up, arms curled around himself, feeling helplessly warm and sleepily content, half-convinced it hadn’t been a dream at all. The feeling of wonderful happiness had stayed through to the waking, and he hadn’t been able to stop smiling into his pillow as he lay there, dazed and a little breathless, remembering the dream over and over, losing track of time and the feeling of his waking body as he submerged himself in the memory of the dream.

When he’d come out of his dreamy stupor at last, he recovered enough of his wits to be surprised at himself, and the direction his dreams had taken and the duration of his wallowing in them. He felt
warm and soft all over, as if he’d replaced his blood with hot cocoa and marshmallows somehow.

It wasn’t the first time he’d been hit in the face with how much he depended on Doe, how much he valued their partnership, how much he appreciated and clung to the life they had together. It wasn’t the first time he’d had to acknowledge how distractingly appealing Doe looked, just being himself. It wasn’t even the first time Neil had seen Doe popping up in his dreams or thoughts.

But it was the first time all those things had collided together into a mess of undeniable… want.

As he lay there, absently tracing fingertips over lips made sensitive from a dream of kisses, shivering and shuddering from the tantalising thoughts spinning around behind closed eyelids, he’d had to decide what to do about it all.

He’d never felt anything like this before, so he didn’t have any frame of personal reference to help. Annoyingly, it was something he might have broached with Doe to get his take on it, but that was obviously not an option. Far too embarrassing. He thought of asking Boyd’s advice, but rejected it quickly; this was too personal, too private. He wanted to hug it to his chest and hide it from sight until he could figure out what he was holding.

Then he remembered what his mother had always insisted about attraction being too dangerous, and for the first time he thought he understood. Wallowing in such sappy thoughts was making him slow; he was usually up and off on his run by now. Thinking about the dream over and over wasn’t reducing the feeling, quite the opposite – he realised with a jolt that he was starting to get hard, just a bit.

He’d bit his lip and sat up in bed, determined to leave the comforting swaddle of his blankets and the pretence of a warm body wrapped around him, and the distracting thoughts along with it too. And, as usually happened whenever his body did this, his thoughts bounced back to Lola and the years of grabbing and cutting and touching in ways he never wanted.

He’d scrubbed over his face and taken short, shaky breaths, the beautiful glow of the dream washed out by the tense shame and fear that Lola’s spectre always conjured. He breathed through it as best he could and grounded himself by counting his possessions scattered around the room.

He didn’t know what was going on in his head. He could acknowledge that his feelings surrounding Doe were… changing, a bit. Out of his conscious control, and whether it terrified him as much as thrilled him. He was determined not to let it distract him any further, however. It could all be figured out later, if he didn’t let it smother him just then.

In the corridor of the sixth floor of Jessica Holder’s apartment block, Neil realised he’d been caught up in his head again and had probably been staring gormlessly into space for a while. Luckily it was the middle of a workday and no one was around, but he thought he must look suspicious enough already with all the key-business without looking like an airhead, too.

He hurried to the next door in a burst, his cheeks hot, and tried the key. It took a few moments of staring for his brain to connect the snick of an open lock with the key in his hand.

Seemed he’d found the magic door.

He listened for a moment for any sign of people inside, but all was quiet. He slipped in and started to carefully inspect the place, snooping around with a light touch honed by years of running and squatting in semi-occupied houses, and eyes better trained from detective work.

It seemed to be the apartment of a wealthy couple, middle-aged, with a son in college. Seemed like
the husband was a lawyer or something, the wife could be a businesswoman. It was all very tidy and beige, excessive without being gaudy. The safe hidden under the bed was especially interesting, particularly when it yielded to Neil’s clever fingers and sharp ears.

It only took an hour of snooping and waiting for the husband to come home.

“Liz,” the man called as he locked the door behind himself and dropped his briefcase on the floor. “I’m home.”

Neil cleared his throat from where he sat in the living room, and watched as the husband jumped and startled. “Your wife’s not here, Mr Kramer.”

“Who the hell are you?” Kramer burst out, starting to reach for a phone.

“I’m looking into the disappearance of Jessica Holder.”

That stopped him in his tracks, and he sent a furtive glance to the photo of his family on the side table.

“How did you get in here?”

Neil held up the keyring. “Jessica appears to have had a key to your apartment. I wonder why.”

Kramer licked his lips nervously, glancing again at the photo. “I’m calling the police.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” Neil advised calmly. “You’re a defence lawyer. I know as I had a bit of a look around your lovely home. I found some papers, very interesting ones hidden away, regarding some of your shadier clients over the years. Even something about a criminal negligence case. Is there any reason you withheld their evidence instead of turning them over to the police at the time?”

Kramer’s face drained to a sickly grey colour, and his eyes bulged a bit.

“So why don’t you tell me about your relationship with Jessica Holder.”

Kramer started to fiddle with his wedding ring as he looked nervously between Neil, the room where the safe was, and the obvious ease with which Neil had picked apart his life.

“I didn’t want to have an affair,” he sighed reluctantly. “Not again. But Jessica was right downstairs. She was sweet.”

“Did you kill her?”

“Of course not,” Kramer frowned. “Jessica disappeared in, what, October that year?”

“October 17th,” Neil said.

Kramer waved his hand. “I was out of state the whole fall. I worked a class-action thing in Vermont. I can show you my tax returns and receipts, the whole thing.”

Neil nodded, though he could tell from the man’s haptics that he was telling the truth.

“If you find out what happened to her, will you let me know?” Kramer asked once he’d retrieved enough proof. He looked almost hopeful. “I miss her.”

Neil decided it would be better not to reply, and headed out with his one suspect and lead firmly crossed off his tiny list.
He found Doe sitting on the living room floor in a puddle of cushions, blankets and snotty tissues, swaying a little as he listened to the static futz of his old-school style police scanner. Clyde had made themselves at home among the blankets, from what Neil could see of a tail sticking out of one of the folds.

“What are you doing?” Neil asked in bemusement as he divested himself of his layers and hung up his coat.

“I’m on nutmeg watch,” Doe announced, his voice sounding thick and congested. Neil couldn’t help but feel a little alarmed at how rapidly Doe’s condition had deteriorated since he had left earlier.

“You what?”

“I’m listening for any mentions of nutmeg, or general baking smells, in any new incidents,” Doe explained a little further.

“Do you really expect that to be a priority for first responders at a crime scene?” Neil asked, and reached out gently to rest his hand against Doe’s forehead. He was hotter to the touch than normal, and faintly clammy too somehow.

“I expect nothing, which is why I’m so good at my job,” Doe replied glibly and swayed a little, eyes drooping.

“Hm,” Neil smiled. “I got some more medicine, and tissues and soup and stuff like that.”

Doe made grabbing motions with his hands and Neil handed over the carrier bag for the plundering. He stuck a carton of soup in the microwave and returned to Doe’s side as he finished taking another dose.

“I don’t know why the smell has been present at six separate crime scenes,” Doe said once he was done and grimacing at the taste. “I also don’t know that those six are the only scenes with that smell; they’re just the ones Blake Tanner lumped into his case file. It’s a very annoying detail.”

Neil gently poked at the blanket fold containing a cat until it meowed and a fluffy face poked out. He grinned and rubbed his fingertip between Clyde’s ears.

“I’m going to have a look through old case files to try and find references to the smell once my head’s dried up a bit,” Doe continued. “So we’re all set on the nutmeg front. Any progress on the missing woman?”

Neil snorted quietly at the priorities on show. Quickly, he outlined the gist of his conversation with Kramer.

“I’m not really sure where to go with it now,” Neil admitted. “I can have a shift around Holder’s belongings some more, I guess, see if anything jumps out.”

“As good a plan as any,” Doe agreed, and turned away to sneeze a couple times into some tissues.

“Why don’t you have a rest?” Neil frowned once he was done.

“I will be useful as long as I can be,” Doe insisted stubbornly. “The cold cannot beat me.”
Neil smiled despite himself. “Alright. You stay on the vitally important nutmeg angle.”

“Don’t patronise me.”

Neil got up to get the soup out of the microwave. “Of course not. Now do you want your soup in a mug or a bowl?”

“A mug,” Doe muttered.

***

Andrew was slowly pulled from the slow depths of illness-induced blackout sleep by a soft voice and a softer touch on his arm, gently tugging and patting.

He cracked open his rheumy eyes and winced at the bright, early morning sunshine stabbing at them; he realised he’d fallen asleep on the couch. He tried to ask Josten what he wanted, but his voice emerged in a croak that quickly gave way to a thick, gusty cough. His throat started to burn from the wheezing and he hauled himself upright as the coughs wracked through his chest.

“Whoah,” Josten murmured and helped keep him upright as he struggled to breathe without hacking, with horrible clods of gunk shifting into his throat and making him gag. Andrew gestured rapidly at a wastepaper bin and a box of tissues.

When that had been dealt with and he was left trying to catch his breath, he became aware that Josten had shifted to sit next to him, one hand rubbing firm circles over his back. The pressure of it seemed to help the shaky twitching in his lungs that threatened another coughing fit, and he leaned towards Josten blearily.

“Ugh,” he muttered once he had his wits about him. “Hello.”

“Sorry, I didn’t think you’d explode if I woke you up,” Josten said with a tense smile. Andrew shrugged and tried to find some clarity in his thoughts.

“What’s going on?”

Josten ignored that and put his hand to Andrew’s forehead again. Andrew hissed through his teeth – Josten’s hand was blessedly cool on his feverish skin, though it didn’t do much for his unsteady pulse.

“You’re burning up,” Josten said and moved his other hand to Andrew’s cheek. “When can you take your next dose of ibuprofen?”

Andrew squinted at the clock on the wall. “Ten minutes.”

“Make sure you take it. With water, and something to eat.”

Andrew mumbled incoherent agreement and closed his bruised-feeling eyes. Josten kept one cool hand on his forehead and moved the other to rub over his back some more. Slowly, his breathing steadied and started to clear a little. He slumped in Josten’s direction and told himself it was just the illness making him woozy and sleepy, and not the comfort of his hands. Not at all.

Josten was quiet and sat with him for some minutes. Andrew could feel the pressure of his stare and just knew he was being either judged or worried over, and wasn’t sure which would be preferable. After a while, Josten’s hand heated to the same temperature as Andrew’s forehead, but he didn’t mention that. He let himself be stupid and dazed and enjoy it for a minute before his brain
reminded him Josten had woken him up for some unknown purpose.

“What’s going on?” He asked again croakily.

“I’m heading out to Sing Sing Correctional to interview someone,” Josten replied. “I didn’t want you to wake up and not know where I was. I didn’t think it might kill you, though.”

“Ha,” Andrew said blankly. “Who’s the lucky inmate?”

“Raymond Carpenter. I spent quite a while with Jessica Holder’s laptop after you fell asleep last night. As well as a lot of photos of her sister, she had a weird text file hidden in a folder titled ‘September’s bills’.”

“Fascinating,” Andrew mumbled, though he really was interested. Josten tsked tolerantly and prodded his shoulder.

“It seems like her lover Mr Kramer represented a rather notorious drug trafficker – Raymond Carpenter.” Josten explained patiently. “Apparently, Kramer admitted to Jessica that his client was guilty of several murders, but that no evidence had been submitted for them. She details her plans to go to the police with the information, in the hidden document – legal arguments, contact numbers, that kind of thing. I think Kramer might have known she was planning to expose his client, and passed on a message to Carpenter.”

“Who presumably ‘took care’ of her,” Andrew nodded along, though he had to stop as it made his head throb uncomfortably. “Interesting theory.”

“I thought it was worth chasing up,” Josten shrugged. “Carpenter’s doing time for drug-related crimes, so he’s around to ask.”

“It’s a good idea,” Andrew assured him, though the confidence in his voice was undermined by a hoarse rasp. “…Ugh. I hate being sick.”

“Do you want me to stay? Carpenter isn’t going anywhere for the next ten years.” Josten asked, his eyebrows scrunching up in concern.

Yes, Andrew’s traitor brain replied.

“No, it’s fine,” his more sensible mouth said. “I think I’ll go back to sleep when I’ve had my next dose.”

“Okay,” Josten said, reluctantly. “I’ll be back soon, but ring me if you need anything.”

“Did you miss your calling as a nurse?” Andrew muttered, though he was grateful nonetheless. Josten smiled softly at him. “Who knows. If you don’t die on the couch, I’d appreciate it.”

“I’ll do my best,” Andrew promised with a smile, and grudgingly eased away from him to prop himself up on the couch arm instead. He waved his hand vaguely. “Shoo, Josten.”

Josten snorted and poked his cheek in retaliation as he got up and gathered his coat and keys.

Fuck, Andrew thought groggily once he was alone. Just… fuck.

***

Neil was trying very hard not to look twitchy or nervous as he waited in the visitation area of the
prison, all alone. It was one thing to voluntarily do a solo case when he knew Doe would be around to help if he got really stuck. It was quite another to know Doe was near-insensate with a fever and flu-thing and he was truly on his own. And quite another thing, after a lifetime of running and hiding, to walk into a building that was specifically designed not to let you back out again.

He took slow, discreet breaths as he waited for the guards to come back and escort him to the secure interview room. They came eventually, looking bored and indifferent to the nervous fiddling at his jacket sleeves. A call to Wymack had cleared up the initial disbelief over his credentials, and now they seemed more than happy to ignore him as just another body to move from one place to the next.

Sitting in the interview room was Carpenter, handcuffed to the table and wearing an orange jumpsuit and an unimpressed stare, crisp around the corners. Neil took his seat and fixed his best calm facade over his features.

“What do you want?” Carpenter asked flatly. His voice was hoarse and raspy, and Neil spotted the thin line of a scar snaking across his throat. A souvenir from the life that had landed him in the concrete box, no doubt. He was lucky he could still speak, Neil mused.

“Did I take you away from something important?” Neil asked.

Carpenter rolled his eyes. “Cops.”

“Indeed. I’m here because I’m investigating the disappearance of Jessica Holder on October 17th, five years ago.”

“Five years?” Carpenter said with a cold smile. “You must really be scraping the bottom of the barrel. And what makes you think I know who that person even is?”

“Because she was having an affair with your lawyer of the time,” Neil replied, staying as professional and unruffled as he could. “I’ve found evidence that your lawyer, a Mr Kramer, shared details about your criminal history with her, and she was planning on exposing the parts you had both agreed to squash. Seems like the logical thing to do, for a man in your position, would be to silence that threat.”

Carpenter held his eyes for a long second, then gave a humourless chuckle. “So, you came in here just hoping I’d tell you I killed someone five years ago? You must not be the brightest piglet in the pen.”

“It’s not an entirely outlandish request,” Neil shrugged coolly. “You’re serving ten years in prison with no chance of parole. Ten years is a very long time, and things can’t really get any worse for you in here.”

Carpenter’s expression darkened to a scowl.

“And, if there’s anything you covet here, one call to Captain Wymack of the NYPD could go a very long way.” Neil raised his eyebrows expectantly.

Carpenter kept on scowling, but after a minute his jaw worked from side to side, chewing over the cud of the offer.

“There’s an inmate greens crew here,” he said eventually, eyes hard. “I’ve been trying to get on it for years, but the Dominicans have it wired.”

“You want the chance to plant flowers?” Neil asked disbelievingly.
Carpenter leaned forward, making the chain attaching his feet to the underside of the table clink. The guard at the door cleared his throat meaningfully, but Carpenter ignored him. “They get to go outside,” Carpenter hissed. “A lot.”

Neil held himself still despite all his instincts urging him to back up. “Well,” he said calmly, “One call to my captain, and you’ll be gardening among Dominicans in no time.”

Carpenter eased back into his seat, a cold kind of hunger stretched tight over his face. “Alright,” he admitted with a careless shrug. “Kramer tipped me off. I had the girl taken care of. I don’t know where she is though – I outsourced the job.”

“Where can I find the killer?”

“He’s named Danny Tacelli.” Carpenter grinned suddenly. “Last I heard, parts of him were floating in the East River, the rest of him in the Hudson.”

Neil felt his cheek twitch in annoyance. Even if he took Carpenter at his word, he would have wanted to bring Miss Holder the location of her sister’s body, for a proper funeral maybe. “Did you tell Kramer what you did?”

Carpenter made a so-so gesture with his hand. “Not in so many words, but the guy knew. As soon as he tipped me off, he gave that girl a death sentence.”

Neil nodded shortly. “Thank you for your co-operation,” he said, though he had the distinct feeling he’d been short-changed on that deal. No matter, he thought with a sigh.

Once he was free of the oppressive prison, he made a call to Wymack. Once he’d explained the particulars of the conversation, and Wymack agreed to make the call to let Carpenter onto the greens crew, he sighed.

“So now what?” He asked. “Kramer just – gets away with murder?”

Wymack made a sympathetic noise. “A zealous prosecutor could try to make a case. At the least, we can bring him up on charges of obstruction of justice for hiding the evidence you found in his safe. That could disbar him.”

Neil shook his head and flagged down a cab. “Doesn’t seem like justice.”

“No,” Wymack agreed. “But you solved the problem for Miss Holder. She can have closure now about what happened to her sister.”

“Yeah. Yeah, there’s that,” Neil nodded. “Will you pass on the information for me? I don’t want to leave Doe alone too long. He’s sick.”

“Uh huh,” Wymack said, sounding amused for some reason. Neil found his face heating, though he wasn’t sure why. “Hurry home, then.”

Neil hung up on him and was about to shove the phone back in his pocket when he noticed a message had come through from Doe.

Was lucid enough for nutmeg watch, it read. Custodian of a Harlem band space found his structure riddled with bullet holes this morning. Whole area smelled of nutmeg. Use the nose.

There was an address in the next message and Neil frowned down at the phone. Then he sighed and tapped the cab driver on the shoulder.
“I need to get to Harlem.”

***

“These bullet holes weren’t here yesterday,” the custodian assured him as he walked around the space. It was an open-air performance stage, about fifteen feet in diameter and shaped like a cut-open egg to give shelter to the musicians. The off-white paint was marred by some graffiti, and several bullet holes sprayed across the circular back of the enclosure. And even Neil could smell the incongruous sweet scent lingering about. “This place is pretty much an open-air drug market after hours. Guess a deal went wrong last night. Let me know if you need anything.”


He paced around the band enclosure as he waited for his contact to arrive, thinking. He didn’t mind checking out the nutmeg angle, even though the case was definitely over. It was a weird detail in the case, and he had nothing else to investigate, really. And he knew Doe would sulk if he refused to look into it when Doe was too incapacitated to investigate himself. It was possible the nutmeg thing was a complete irrelevance, but it was strange that such a distinctive smell would be present at multiple crime scenes where there was no suggestion of baking at any scene.

He glanced at the time on his phone and shifted his feet. The Nose was almost late.

He had met several of Doe’s irregulars before – a network of specialists in diverse fields, that Doe used when investigating something far outside his areas of expertise. Since Neil became his partner, they hadn’t used them as much seeing as Neil’s skills and experiences neatly filled the roles of several of the irregulars. They’d used a few, though, and they all tended to be a bit eccentric. He remembered with a sigh their case on a complex mathematical competition involving Belphegor’s Prime, a race to solve the equation games before all the competitors were killed, and an irregular called Harlan Temple. He’d been an amazing theoretical mathematician, but his need to work in just his underwear had been a bit… uncomfortable.

He hadn’t met The Nose before, though when Doe handed over the list of his irregular’s contacts, he’d asked why there was no name attached. Doe had replied that they had met on a case involving wine forgery and fraudulent wineries, and the man had quite the reputation in those circles for his discerning sense of smell – to the point where all his friends nicknamed him *The Nose*. Doe apparently hadn’t felt the need to find out his real name. Neil wasn’t entirely sure how it was possible for adults to conduct business when one of them was called only by such a moniker, but he’d let it go at the time so as not to get into a silly argument.

When he turned on his next circuit of the space, he spotted an elderly man in a velvet smoking jacket heading towards him, holding a bag of something in one hand and a fancy walking cane in the other.

“I suppose I should be grateful,” the man opened with in a reedy, posh sort of voice. “Usually when Doe asks for my help, there’s a decomposing body somewhere.”

“Hi, I’m Neil Josten,” Neil introduced himself with a nod. “We haven’t met, I’m Doe’s partner.”

“Oh?” The man said with a wrinkled smile. “Oh, jolly good, I always thought he must be a kindred spirit. Always good to see the young folk being out and proud, and whatnot. Good for you, lad.”

“Oh, um…” Neil stammered, “I didn’t mean – er. I’m his detective partner. We work together.”

“Ah,” the man chuckled and patted his cheek gently. “No matter, no matter. Though you mustn’t be
embarrassed. Us old folk didn’t fight so hard for your generation to be shy about it.”

Neil cleared his throat and tried to get a handle on the conversation. “Er – what’s with the bag?”

“Oh, excuse the potpourri,” the man smiled and lifted the bag to his nose for a moment. “I need coffee beans when I’m out and about – this city is such an assault on a nose such as mine, you understand.”

“Er – quite.”

“You said something about nutmeg, lad?”

“Yes,” Neil said, relieved to be getting back to work. “I’m hoping you might be able to tell something about the smell, why the nutmeg might be there, if there’s anything else you can… smell.”

The Nose hummed thoughtfully and stepped into the centre of the enclosure, inhaling deeply and making wafting motions with his free hand. He closed his eyes and pursed his lips thoughtfully.

“Mm…. yes… the nutmeg is dominant, yes, but it’s the olfactory equivalent of the burlesque dancer. The pretty lady in the spotlight, meant to distract you from everything else. What else… hmm… chemicals.”

“What kinds?”

“There are hints of commercial bleach,” The Nose frowned and sniffed some more. “Something metallic. One high note that’s stronger than the rest. Sodium hydroxide, yes. Quite a high concentration, if I’m not mistaken – it has a distinctly salty tang to it.”

Neil was trying to remember what little chemistry he’d learned in his many schools, when an old memory reared its ugly head. Lola, talking about her work to his father and their associates, planning something when Neil was supposed to be elsewhere and not locked in a cupboard in the next room as a punishment for moving too much when she was...

“Caustic soda,” he muttered.

“What’s that, m’boy?”

“Caustic soda,” Neil said a little louder. “It’s a powerful base. It can be used to melt down corpses.”

The Nose made a face of vague disgust and raised his coffee beans to his nose again. “How dreadful.”

“Yes,” Neil said tightly. “Thank you for your help, Mr, uh… Nose.”

***

“Josten, the case is over,” Wymack reminded him tiredly as he sat in the captain’s office. “Miss Holder has gone home. What are you talking about?”

“Jessica Holder’s murder is connected to a wider array of crimes,” Neil replied uneasily. “It’s connected to every other crime allegedly committed by Pumpkin. The man who killed Jessica isn’t responsible, as he’s dead. But all these crime scenes are connected.” He tapped the folder on Wymack’s desk.
Wymack rubbed a spot over his eye as if he had a headache coming on.

“There are many different murders committed by different people in this case file,” Neil carried on. “But the one thing connecting them all – is the clean up. After each murder, the same person was brought in to clean the scenes of all evidence. The nutmeg smell is meant to cover the chemical agents responsible, make it seem like there wasn’t a crime at all.”

“So somebody commits a murder, and you think there’s a guy who they call to clean it up?” Wymack asked half-seriously.

“We have professional crime scene cleaners on our side of the law,” Neil said, spreading his hands. “Surely there’d be a demand for an illicit cleaner. And we both know for a fact that organised crime syndicates tend to have staff solely responsible for that kind of thing. Is it really such a stretch?”

Wymack watched him thoughtfully for a few minutes, his gaze shrewd. Neil held his eyes firmly, though his hands were clenched in his lap. He knew that Wymack must at least suspect his real identity, his birth name. But so far, he hadn’t said a word about it, or the suspiciously knowledgeable insights Neil could have about the Wesninski circle and others like them. He knew it was only a matter of time before it all had to come into the open, but he was happy to stay silent as long as the captain was too.

“What has he got, a Yelp page?” Wymack said eventually to break the tense silence. “How would a freelance cleaner even advertise his business?”

“I’d guess most of his work comes from organised crime, and word of mouth through those circles,” Neil shrugged. “The cleaner has invented a solution which not only removes all biological traces of a crime, and can melt bodies into the bargain, but which is almost undetectable aside from the nutmeg smell. Pretty convenient for people with a lot of bodies laying around. An asset like that would be very valuable to these people to keep on retainer.”

“What do you want from me here, Josten? It’s circumstantial at best. We have no hard evidence, and no way to find this theoretical cleaner. It could just be a strong odour. A jury would be more likely to blame it on a strong air freshener, or a particularly pungent Christmas drink at this time of year. This is all a bit fantastical to take to court.”

“I know, I know,” Neil nodded, and leaned forward earnestly in his chair. “But don’t you see this opportunity? The FBI profiler, Tanner, has unwittingly linked the cleaner to six separate murders, but that could just be the tip of the iceberg. He could be connected to dozens, maybe hundreds of crimes. Imagine the information he could provide – the damning testimony against organised crime outfits. There’s no way the larger ones in this city haven’t used him at least once.” He stared hard at Wymack, willing him to hear the W and M names he refused to say out loud.

From Wymack’s slow nod, he had heard.

He leaned back in his desk chair and rubbed at his temples thoughtfully. “It could be the key we need to unlock the whole thing,” he muttered, a desperate edge in his voice. Neil nodded quickly. “We’ve had no luck infiltrating them or flipping known associates to give testimony. But a separate person, someone not strongly tied to anyone, who’s done work for the whole lot of them…” he sighed shakily.

“Yes,” Neil agreed quietly, intently.

Wymack took a few deep breaths and a glug of his coffee. “Alright. Keep me in the loop. And go
careful.”
“Yes, Captain.”

***

Neil had spent most of a day reading through employment records of all the major crime scene personnel organisations and unions in the city, looking for any employees with particular skill sets in disposing of hazardous materials, any sudden resignations, and any kind of erratic records that might suggest suspicious behaviour. He decided if he read one more résumé without coffee his head would explode.

He left the study, and the piles and piles of papers, and headed down to the kitchen. He found a rather odd scene in the living room, however.

Renee was lying on the floor, with a pool of fake blood around her and smeared across her throat, while Doe stood over her with a camera.

“Um. What.”

“Hello, Neil,” Renee smiled up at him. “How are you?”

“Stop moving, you’re jostling the wound,” Doe said irritably, his voice all clogged up with mucus and wearing several jumpers layered over each other. Neil sighed quietly; when he’d explained the developments in the case, and the implications for taking down the Moriyamas, Doe had quite literally hauled himself out of bed to help. Last Neil had seen him, he’d been furiously searching the internet for something and swigging cough syrup. Renee dutifully lay still and adopted a vacant, dead stare once again.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m taking out a wanted ad,” Doe sniffed as he took pictures. “You said that the cleaner mostly works by word of mouth, yes? But what if he has an alternate source of income, for when career criminals are on holiday and not murdering each other at a happy regularity? I think he must have a contact site on the Dark Net.”

“I thought the FBI shut that down?” Neil asked, perplexed; he was familiar with the concept, as his mother had frequently used the untraceable, unpatrolled parts of the ‘hidden’ internet to contact her own allies and secure them new documents ahead of time.

“They shut down a drug-running site, not the whole thing,” Doe corrected him as he crouched to get another shot of the wound. “Drugs aren’t the only things bought and sold there – contracts for assassinations, human trafficking rings, stolen artefacts, all sorts. I’m going to post a photo of dear dead Renee, posing to be a man who’s committed a crime of passion and needs help. Hopefully, the cleaner will make contact.”

“Right,” Neil said thoughtfully. It seemed like a good plan, though he was a bit dubious about the unfocussed look in Doe’s eyes and the high flush on his cheeks. “Are you sure you don’t want to go to a doctor, Doe? You don’t seem to be getting any better.”

“It’ll take more than a cold to kill me, and I’m not going to lay around doing nothing while there’s a chance at getting an angle on our quarry,” Doe insisted.

Neil sighed. “Alright. Let me know how that goes. I’ll get back to the papers. And get some more sleep when you’re done, okay?”
“Yes, yes,” Doe muttered absently, and erupted into awful coughs once more.

***

The next afternoon at the precinct, Neil was staring at a leaflet for the Spaulding Technical Institute and the hideous mural on the front page of it, when Doe walked into the empty office in a gust of scarves and bad temper.

“What are you doing out of bed?” Neil cried in concern.

“I didn’t want to be in the house,” Doe said, and sank shakily into a chair. “Things got a bit hectic, and I was starting to feel closed-in.”

“What do you mean, hectic?” Neil asked suspiciously.

“Well, I had a promising response to my ad,” Doe replied as he fished in his pockets for some tissues to deal with his stuffy nose. “The photos got a reaction, a meeting was arranged, and it was all going pretty well until the man turned out to be an undercover cybercrimes detective and started waving a gun around.”

Neil grinned despite himself. “Did you get arrested?”

“The appearance of a whole and healthy Renee helped my innocence,” Doe snuffled. “A call to Wymack sorted the whole thing. But maybe not one of my brighter ideas. Why did you let me drink so much cough syrup?”

“You’re a grown man,” Neil replied calmly, though he couldn’t stop grinning. “You can make your own stupid mistakes. And it had a good shot of working.”

Doe huffed.

“How are you feeling?” Neil asked quietly, peering at him.

“Like a microwave pudding,” Doe replied in a tired voice. “Frozen in the middle and burnt on the outside.”

Neil smiled and passed over his mug of coffee; Doe slurped it gratefully.

“Look, Andrew, there’s not much you can do when you’re half-lucid and sick like this,” Neil murmured. “I know you want to work the case, but you’ll just make yourself ill for longer. Go home and rest. I’ll take care of this.”

Doe scowled at him, but it was difficult to appear fierce with bloodshot eyes, flushed cheeks and a cherry-red nose. Neil could only smile, and try not to feel stupidly warm all through his body at just the sight of his friend.

“Do you want to stay here for a bit?” Neil offered. “Keep me company? It’s very warm in here, and it’d be different from home.”

“If I’m staying here, I’m going to work,” Doe insisted stubbornly. But within ten minutes of his arrival, the latest dose of medicine had kicked in and he was dozing in his chair, letting out the occasional snuffly snore through his choked-up chest and nose.

Neil smiled to himself and lightly draped his jacket over Doe’s legs. As he watched Doe sleep, his dream came back to him in vivid detail, and his chest ached. He purposefully looked away from
Doe and tried to get back to work.

He was going to have to confront this soon, he though glumly as he waited for his phone to ring. 

*Maybe, he thought, Maybe when Doe is better. Maybe I should say something then.*

Before he could make a more concrete decision, the director of the art program at the Spaulding Institute called him back. Neil nodded through the polite introductions.

“Your message said you were interested in the mural on our pamphlet?” The director asked.

“Yes, I was really quite taken with the piece,” Neil lied. “It says at the bottom of the page that it was done by a Conrad Woodbine?”

“That’s correct,” the director said genially. “It’s called The Magical Myristica Tour - a reference to the myristica tree, you see.”

“Yes, the tree which produces mace and nutmeg,” Neil replied, eyes on the piles of paper around him.

“Indeed. Mr Woodbine did an experimental series on the hallucinogenic effects of ingesting nutmeg, and painting during the exposure. It produced some rather breath-taking pieces, such as the mural. Would you be interested in coming to the Institute to see the piece?”

“That’s quite alright sir, but I think I’d rather get in touch with the artist directly. I’d like to purchase multiple pieces of his work.”

“Oh splendid, splendid,” The director gushed. “Well, have a lovely day.”

“You too, sir.”

Neil hung up on him and tapped his fingers thoughtfully on the personnel file in front of him – Conrad Woodbine, a highly decorated and experienced crime scene cleaner of fifteen years who had abruptly quit his profession a few years back, taken a few art classes at the Spaulding Institute, and proceeded to buy a block of flats to convert to an art gallery in Soho. The sudden and unexplained windfall of money had made Neil initially suspicious, but for the man to have an oddly specific interest in nutmeg? Doubly suspicious.

He was about to say so to Doe, but remembered that he was asleep. He stepped out and asked Boyd if he wouldn’t mind driving Doe home, and set off for the address of Conrad’s art studios.

***

The superintendent of the building, a young, nervous man, led Neil up to Woodbine’s apartment and knocked on the wide-open door.

“Mr Woodbine?”

“I’m not to be disturbed when I’m working,” a rather angry-looking man wearing paint-splattered clothes said from where he was crouched over a canvas smeared in lurid paint. “The building doesn’t need a superintendent who can’t do his job.”

“I know, but – he’s police.”

Woodbine squinted at Neil, who stepped further into the apartment with a bland smile as the superintendent scurried away. He had a quick glance around, and decided on his course of action.
“Mr Woodbine, I’d like to talk to you about your other job. The one where you dissolve corpses for money.”

Woodbine stared at him in disbelief for a moment, then got up. “I’m calling my lawyer.” He strode out of the room and Neil darted to a set of metal lockers against one wall – where only one locker had an actual lock on it.

He had his picks out and the lock undone in a few deft strokes, and yanked open the locker doors. It was filled with litre-containers of a thick brown liquid, top to bottom. He pulled one off the shelf and had a careful sniff through a crack in the lid.

He was no Nose, but he could smell nutmeg and bleach just fine.

“My lawyer says you have to leave,” Woodbine announced as he came back in, phone in hand.

“Actually, you can have your lawyer meet you at the precinct,” Neil replied, and hoisted the concoction in his hand with a small smile.

***

“Look, Conrad, we found the nutmeg solution in your cabinets,” Wymack was saying across the interrogation table. “We’ve already had our analysts look at it, and you were easily holding more than fifty litres of highly dangerous chemicals in unlabelled containers, without any appropriate license for buying or storage of concentrated sodium hydroxide. You might as well start talking.”

“I’m not saying a thing until my lawyer gets here,” Woodbine said pugnaciously. “But I will tell you that cabinet was locked.”

“Our consultant said it was open,” Wymack said blandly. “Now, you were a crime scene cleaner for fifteen years. You took on hundreds of cases for the city in that time. You were liked, in demand. A lot of guys like you would have taken on more employees, maybe made your own private company. What did you do? You retired and took up painting.”

Woodbine rolled his eyes and spoke, despite his insistence on waiting for his lawyer.

“Presumably you’ve been to a few crime scenes in your time, Captain,” he sneered. “You know how difficult it is to see what we see. The blood, the viscera, the damage. Day in, day out. Except you don’t have to get your hands in it after all the evidence has been taken away. You don’t have to scrub blood out of a child’s carpet or plaster over bullet holes in a family kitchen for your part of the job.”

Wymack looked unimpressed with his story.

“We know you didn’t quit the clean-up business, Conrad. You just switched sides.”

“That’s preposterous.”

Wymack opened up the file on the Pumpkin case and put the photos of the women face-up in front of Woodbine.

“You helped disappear all these people – and more. The criminals pay more than we can, I get that,” Wymack shrugged. “That’s why I’m not looking at you for any of the murders – yet. I want the killers much more. If you give me the names of the individuals who did kill these people, and all the other jobs you did for them and other criminals in this city, and I’ll recommend a very generous deal to the DA.”
Woodbine was unmoved, and settled a flinty stare on the captain.

“I’ve broken no laws. You have no proof any wrongdoing other than storing chemicals for use in cleaning my art supplies – just some claims that some potential crime scenes smell like nutmeg. My mother keeps nutmeg in her spice rack, you wanna question her too?”

On the other side of the two-way mirror, Neil sighed. So much for co-operation.

But he had an idea. Woodbine might be experienced in cleaning up all traces of any crime, but he still had to operate a business. And a business always needs customers.

***

“Thank you for coming in, Mr Dedekian,” Wymack said to the older man later that day.

The Armenian ex-gangster blinked at them both. “I understand you have some questions about someone named Conrad Woodbine? I don’t know the name.”

“The name might escape you, but I’m sure the work must have left an impression,” Neil said, opening up an old case file. “Six years ago, he helped turn a few Costa Ricans into soup for you.”

He’d found the file after a lot of digging. Dedekian had been the patriarch of a dangerous Armenian gang looking to establish themselves in Howard Beach – a known territory of a Costa Rican gang. Gang warfare had ensued for a few short, bloody months. And then, only a few weeks after Woodbine officially quit crime scene cleaning, the leaders of the Costa Rican gang mysteriously vanished. Rumours said they’d gone into their favourite restaurant one night to discuss plans, and had never been seen again. The officer responding to the missing persons reports had logged a strange smell in the backroom of the restaurant – something sweet, like pumpkin pie.

Dedekian frowned at Neil. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You’re quite a unique case in the underworld,” Wymack observed as he flipped through the file. “A one-time kingpin who managed to extract himself entirely from his past and lead a quieter existence. Even the Pardillo family couldn’t manage such a thing for long, but here you are.”

Dedekian didn’t visibly respond, though his eyes narrowed.

“You were just one of Woodbine’s clients,” Neil said. “There were others, many others, and we’ve set to work identifying them so we might offer them a deal.”

“Tell us how you found Woodbine,” Wymack explained. “Tell us what he did for you, and I’ll help you work out an immunity deal with the DA for your co-operation. One of Woodbine’s clients is going to be very lucky, Mr Dedekian. They’ll be able to get away with murder, quite literally. Because we want Woodbine and his information more than anything. One of his customers is going to talk sooner or later, Mr Dedekian. And then Woodbine will start talking too, and no doubt your name will come up in his many confessions. You might as well talk first and get that immunity deal before anyone else.”

Dedekian licked his lips nervously and folded his hands to hide their tremor.

“What do you say, Mr Dedekian?” Neil asked softly.

***

“Three, two, one,” the police officer whispered to his team, then motioned to the men holding the
“Police!” They yelled and bashed the door in, running forwards into the room in tight formation and yelling instructions for Woodbine to get down, on the ground, hands up.

“Clear,” they started to sound-off to each other as they searched the apartment, until they finally reported the place was empty.

Wymack and Neil exchanged a look, then stepped into the room.

“No sign of him, sir,” the officer in charge of the raid reported.

“Alright, stand down,” Wymack said absently. “Josten, there’s no way he knew we were coming. We came straight here from interviewing Dedekian. Woodbine had only been out of custody for an hour.”


“What?”

“He kept the concoction sealed and locked away,” Neil frowned as he followed the smell. “There’s no reason its scent should leak into the room like this. And…” He stopped at a sink with lots of paintbrushes stacked at the side of it, where the smell of nutmeg was strongest. He peered down the drain, but couldn’t see anything. Quickly, he went to the cabinets – but they were all empty. Not a drop of nutmeg solution remained, not a single container.

“Shit,” Wymack muttered as he came to the same conclusion as Neil. “Our cleaner’s been cleaned.”

“And all the knowledge he had on his clients, too,” Neil replied bitterly.

Two hours later, after forensics had been over the apartment, Wymack joined Neil outside the building for a quick smoke.

“Whoever took care of Woodbine was just as good at cleaning up crime scenes as he was,” Wymack sighed out. “Not a spot of evidence anywhere. They found traces of chemicals in the pipe of the sink, but nothing organic and nothing incriminating anywhere in the apartment.”

“It doesn’t make sense,” Neil said and took a brief puff of his cigarette to keep it alight. “Woodbine was the cleaner. It was his livelihood. If he broadcast his methods he would have made himself irrelevant. And yet he was killed by his own MO.”

“Maybe he had a partner,” Wymack suggested, though he sounded just as defeated as Neil.

“If so, I hope he knew all the grisly details of Woodbine’s work too,” Neil said, “Because otherwise we’ve lost our key. With no living cleaner to give testimony, there’s no edge on the lot of them. No leverage to make a deal for information or testimony.”

Wymack sighed again and stubbed out his own cigarette. “Time to call it a night, Josten. Go home, get some sleep. Make sure Doe hasn’t coughed himself to death. We’ll get fresh eyes on this mess in the morning.”

“Okay, Captain,” Neil replied, glum.

Wymack patted him awkwardly on the shoulder and left him alone.
When he got home, the house was quiet and overheated and smelled like sickness – that stale, cloying smell of fever-sweat and sickly medicine. The cats rubbed up against his ankles happily, and he bent down to pet them for a minute.

“Hello, sweeties,” he whispered to them as he ran hands over their soft fur. They butted up into his hands and started to purr. “Hello, hello. I missed you too.”

He took off his coat and led them through to the backdoor; he left it open to try and clear out the stale smell of the house, and so the cats could have a sniff of the gravel garden.

He found Doe curled up again on the couch, bundled in blankets and moaning quietly in his sleep. Neil frowned and tested his temperature – far too hot.

Neil took off the many blankets at once and started to waft one to get some cooler air over his friend’s sweaty body. It seemed to help a little, but Doe didn’t wake up. He just kept twitching and squirming in his sleep, eyes rolling under their lids, wrestling with fever.

Neil ran cold water over a washcloth and started to gently bathe Doe’s flushed face – and still he didn’t wake at Neil’s gentle ministrations. Neil did his best, but he didn’t know what else to do. Doe seemed completely insensate, and Neil could feel panic starting to whirl in his chest.

On the run with his mother, they had always toughed out sicknesses. Stocked up on medicines, holed out somewhere safe, stole prescription drugs when needed. That had seemed fine at the time, but Neil was hesitant to give Doe the same treatment. He couldn’t remember having a fever like this when he was younger, his mother either. He tried wiping Doe’s neck and arms and hands, and watched helplessly as Doe mumbled deliriously in his sleep.

He put another wet cloth on Doe’s forehead, and that seemed to help a little. He stopped muttering quite so much, at least. Neil took a quick inventory of the supplies in the house and realised they were out of everything.

_Dammit_, Neil thought, half-anxious and half-angry as he got his wallet and keys. _You were supposed to tell me if you needed anything, Andrew._

He left his phone on the couch; he’d be back from the store in a few minutes. He spared one last gentle touch of Doe’s face before closing the back door and heading out again.

The corner store was quiet and nearly deserted as he rounded up a small mountain of flu remedies and soups and tissues. The cashier gave him a nervous look as she rang him up.

“Sick friend,” he explained vaguely.

“Ah,” she replied. “That’ll be twenty dollars and eighty cents, sir.”

He swiped his card in the machine and headed out, preoccupied with trying to figure out how to help Doe. He hurried through backstreets to get home faster. He wasn’t paying much attention to his surroundings, too busy deciding to call Aaron for advice as soon as he got home, and perhaps that was why it was so easy for a man to slip out of the shadows and slide a knife over his throat.

Neil froze instantly at the touch of the metal.

“Easy,” the man crooned in his ear. “Easy now. Wouldn’t want my hand to slip.”
“What do you want?” Neil asked, mind racing and cursing himself for being too lax, for not bringing any kind of weapon with him, for having his hands full of groceries and being so stupid…

“We’re going to take a little trip together,” the man whispered and pressed the knife a bit tighter against his throat. Neil swallowed in nervous reflex, feeling the blade press against his carotid and the slight sting of the razor-sharp edge. “You can walk back all quiet-like, or you can try and make a scene. It won’t end well.”

“What do you mean?”

The man gave a cold chuckle, his hot breath washing over Neil’s ear. “You and your short friend have been poking around where you don’t belong. My employer’s not too happy with you, oh no. But we only need one of you for this. So, you can come quietly with me, or I can slit your throat and go after your little friend instead.”

Horror filled Neil’s lungs like icy water – but not at the danger he was in. He was thinking of Andrew, helpless and delirious on the couch, no way to defend himself, no way to know what was going on or escape.


“Oh, you sound very sweet when you beg,” the man whispered with another cruel laugh that sent goosebumps all down Neil’s back. “My employer will like that very much. Smart decision, kid. Now walk slowly back here with me, and no one needs to get hurt.” The knife gave a twitch, and Neil felt the skin break just a little, and a warm trickle on his neck.

“Okay, okay,” Neil whispered. He dropped the groceries and was about to start walking, when a sudden pressure over his mouth caught him by surprise. Its pungent reek immediately made everything start to burn and fade, and he had just a moment before blacking out to think one thing.

I’m sorry, Andrew.

On the couch, Andrew mumbled and turned over in his sleep, oblivious as a sleek black car rolled out of a nearby alley, with an unconscious man in the back seat.

***

He woke to another harsh waft of chemicals, and tried jerking away from the stench. That was kind of difficult, he realised, as he was cuffed to a metal chair by the wrists and ankles. And he was wearing only his underwear. In a cold, damp room lit only by a single lightbulb. The hand holding the chemical bottle slipped away behind him, out of sight.

“There we are,” a smooth, cool voice said from the darkness that surrounded everything but the struggling lightbulb in the ceiling, barely enough to illuminate his own body in the room.

Neil swallowed and lifted his head, determined to try and seem collected and calm. This whole setup was obviously meant to intimidate him, and he refused to give in to cheap scare tactics like the dark and being cold.

“Hello, Neil.”

“Hello, dark and mysterious stranger,” Neil replied tartly. “The fuck is all this?”

There was a low laugh. “Oh dear. We’re going to have to teach you proper manners, I see. You and your midgety partner have been making annoyances for me. I’d like to cordially invite you to
“I’d like to cordially invite you to choke,” Neil said. “Why don’t you let me see your face, huh? Afraid we’ll throw you in a cell so fast you’ll get whiplash?”

“So rude,” the man murmured. “I thought we might be civil for at least another two minutes. But I suppose that was inevitable, considering your… history.”

Neil rolled his eyes. “Show your face, asshole.”

The man that stepped forward was only a little taller than Neil and wore a dark suit, black as a raven’s wing. His face was closed-off and superior, and a tattoo of the number one sat high on his cheekbone.

“Riko?” Neil said in genuine surprise. “I was expecting someone from the other side of your family. You know, the important side.”

Riko’s face twisted in an ugly sneer, and he lashed out so fast Neil didn’t register the blow until after his head had snapped around hard enough to make him bite the inside of his cheek. He tasted blood and winced, blinking in shock at the force of the blow.

He probed the inside of his mouth with his tongue and found that nothing else was damaged. Casually, he spat a bit of blood onto the floor at Riko’s feet. “I thought you were supposed to be fading into obscurity on a mid-level Exy team somewhere, along with the rest of your so-called Perfect Court. All of you rejected from high-level teams, as I remember. Never going to be considered for the Olympic team. Poor things. Did it hurt when the world called you all mediocre has-beens who peaked at the age of ten?”

His head snapped to the other side this time and his ear started to ring.

“You punched me in the ear?” Neil said incredulously. “Christ.”

“You have a smart mouth,” Riko observed coldly.

“And you have a weak-ass punch.”

Riko considered him for a moment, then glanced back over his shoulder. “Oh dear. He thinks he has some kind of advantage. Better his manners a little, there’s no sense in talking to him until that insolence is gone.”

Neil rolled his eyes again, but his comeback died on his lips as five huge, muscular men stepped forward out of the shadows.

Well, he thought as his body jerked against his restraints under the force of each blow and blood started to flow from his bruised and battered face, at least he knew the goons were well-trained. It was so hard to find good help these days.

“That’s enough for now,” Riko said lazily, after about ten minutes. The men stepped away and Neil fought to control his ragged breathing and to ignore the deep pains all over his chest and stomach from their ruthless working-over. Nothing seemed broken aside from his nose. This was still fine.

Riko stepped forward, flicking a knife between his fingers with an easy familiarity. “Feeling civil yet, Neil?”
Neil spat blood at him, a blob of it landing on his hand with an accuracy he hadn’t even intended. He was quite proud of that, even as his ribs creaked.

Riko looked down at his hand and grimaced.

“Why am I here, dickbag?” Neil demanded. “Not that this isn’t fun, but I had plans you know.”

“Oh? Plans involving that deranged midget, Andrew Minyard?” Riko said with a fake innocence and a cruel smile. “You know, when my surveillance showed me you were working together, I almost couldn’t believe it. But the universe is funny that way, isn’t it? What are the odds that Andrew Minyard and Nathaniel Wesninski would meet?”

All the breath whooshed out of Neil’s lungs, his old name more frightening and powerful than the abduction and beating combined. His heart started to race.

“My name is Neil Josten,” he replied as calmly as he could. “You’re deluded.”

“I know your whore mother taught you to lie, but it will get quickly tiresome if you insist on this game,” Riko said. He walked forward a bit more, the blade in his hand flickering in the light. “And I might just have to cut your lips off if you keep lying. So come now – I know exactly who you are. I know exactly who is looking for you. I know you’re working with Minyard to try and unseat my family. And I know you were poking into Woodbine’s business far too assiduously.”

Woodbine? Neil thought, then his heart sank.

“Fortunately, I was able to keep Woodbine’s assistant on payroll, so I won’t be too inconvenienced by having him removed,” Riko sighed. “But still – you and Minyard are an annoyance.”

“And you’re a psychopath. Do you think starting your own little gang will make Daddy notice you? Finally give you a pat on the head and a slice of the pie?”

Riko laid the blade along the crease of Neil’s swollen mouth, pressing hard enough to cut the corners. His eyes were dead and flat, like a shark, as he stared down into Neil’s face.

“Now, I could kill you,” he said, as if Neil had never spoken. “I could do it myself, or sell you out to your father. I could have you both killed easy as snapping my fingers. But what would be the fun in that? Seeing as I have you here, Nathaniel, I might as well have my fun, don’t you think?”

Neil glared up at him.

“I thought about getting to Minyard again,” Riko said conversationally, drawing the knife up Neil’s cheek with a bloody snick. “That was rather fun, last time. But even Drake and Proust didn’t break him, not meaningfully. He’s so dead inside I bet it barely registered. I thought to myself, he would just rather die. He would be no fun at all. But happily for me, I don’t need to hurt him to hurt him.”

“You’re deranged,” Neil said again.

Riko smiled coldly at him. “I’ve seen the surveillance, Nathaniel. You two are so sweet together – so soft, so close, so tender. Minyard has never fought for himself, but he’ll take a bullet for someone he cares about. All I have to do to hurt him – is to have you here, bleeding. A scream from you, and I bet he’d do anything to make your pain stop.”

“Fuck you,” Neil spat out.

Riko sneered coldly at him. Then he raised the knife and brought it down on Neil’s chest in a slow
carve that had him hissing and clenching his teeth at the calculated, determined pain of it. He carved a W into the already-scarred skin of his chest, then an M above it like a crown.

“I will be king over this city,” Riko said calmly as he slipped the knife under Neil’s skin again, and again. “And Minyard will cease his little operations to hinder me or my family. I know where you both live, and all your little friends. You will explain this to him, when I let you go. You will both vanish, or I will come for you both and make you wish you’d never been born. I might even let your father know, let him join the hunt. Wouldn’t that be fun?”

He whipped another slash across Neil’s arm, and he cried out despite his determination to stay silent and endure it.

“I don’t know that I have to let you go so soon, though,” Riko mused with an unpleasant smugness. “After all, it’s off-season for Exy, and it’s nearly Christmas. I have at least two weeks before I should let you go. That would drive Minyard up the wall rather nicely. And all that time just to enjoy this.”

He trailed the bloody knife over Neil’s face, lingering around his mouth.

“You’re wrong,” Neil said, even as fear began to crack his façade of bravery with each brush of the knife. “Andrew will never do what you want. We’re going to take you down, if we don’t kill you first you sack of shit.”

“Oh, Nathaniel,” Riko sighed with satisfaction. He carved another harsh line into his face and smiled as blood spattered his own cheek, caressing the tattoo. “I’m going to enjoy hurting you.”

As Riko started to truly get to work, Neil promised himself that he wouldn’t cry out. He wouldn’t scream. He wouldn’t give the son of a bitch the satisfaction. He promised himself.

But some promises could only be broken.

***

Josten had been missing for two weeks.

Two weeks of pacing the living room, two weeks of not sleeping, two weeks of upset cats screaming, two weeks of stress and anxiety and a worry so thick it threatened to choke Andrew.

Two weeks of arguing back and forth with Wymack as to whether to put out an APB or sit, sit, sit. And wait. And hope that he came back in one piece, or at all.

Two weeks wondering whether Josten had walked out on his own volition (with not a word, not a note, not a single message for Andrew, leaving him sick and delirious on his own for two days until the fever broke, I didn’t want you to wake up and not know where I was, no, no, no) or had been taken. Two weeks wondering who might be responsible, and having a distressingly long and dangerous list that refused to shrink no matter how many times Andrew disassembled and reassembled the evidence on his walls.

Two weeks of holding Bonnie and Clyde and listening to their crying and trying to calm himself with the soft brush of their fur.

Two weeks eyeing up the whiskey in his cupboards but stopping himself whenever his hand started reaching for the bottle.

Two weeks of calls with Bee trying to quiet his brain.
Two weeks of sitting on his own, staring up at the papers on his walls, trying to figure out where his friend had gone. And wondering obsessively what he could have done to prevent it, or get him back.

Two weeks of running hands through his hair, wishing Josten would come back and that he could see him and hold him and keep him close and kiss him like he should have done ages ago, but too late now, too late…

Two weeks of Renee babysitting him, making sure he was forcing something down his throat and sleeping and showering occasionally, and sparring with him when it all got too much and he needed to get out of his head. Two weeks of Renee handling Robin in his stead and watching the concerned messages from her trickle into his phone inbox. Two weeks of avoiding calls from Boyd and enduring awkward visits from Wymack as they tried to figure out where Josten was and how to get him back.

Because they couldn’t officially investigate, oh no, not without tipping off whatever ears the Moriyamas and Wesinskis had in the department that the missing son had been found, hidden, and then taken again – not without setting them all on his trail too. Not without making it doubly impossible to recover Josten alive and well if they alerted his father to his approximate whereabouts.

No. It was just Andrew and Wymack, working secretly out of the living room and study, poring over the same dead-end information over and over, hoping it would reveal something new each time.

Andrew had solved the Woodbine’s apprentice thing in a fit of caffeine-fuelled frustration, not that it had got them anywhere on finding Josten. They’d managed to trace Josten’s steps between leaving Woodbine’s apartment, back home to Andrew, and paying for groceries at a nearby store. Andrew’s chest had clensed painfully when they found the receipt for more cold medicine and soups for him, and bit down on the useless guilt it conjured until his jaw creaked and his teeth felt ready to shatter. They had found the bag of groceries spilled on the floor of an alley a few streets away, though some of the items had been nicked by the local homeless population.

They had confirmed on CCTV that Neil had entered the alley, and not left. There was no surveillance covering that alley. They had found a sleek black car driving away from the general area on the footage, but running the plates had got them nowhere; it was registered to a man ten-years dead, with no surviving family or friends, obviously a falsified record. They couldn’t catch a glimpse of any people in the car, not even the driver, as the tinted windows were just over the line of illegally-dark for camera recognition. They had tried tracking the car on its circuitous routes in and out of the city, but had lost it eventually. Andrew assumed that if it contained the people who had taken Josten, they had switched cars in a blind-spot somewhere and disposed of the car.

And Josten had left his phone at home, so there was no way of reverse-tracking the GPS on it. There were no messages, no calls, other than some from the day before his disappearance. Nothing.

But still, Andrew had taken to carrying it in his pocket, just in case. Just in case Josten called it, or his captors, or… he didn’t really know. But it made him feel a little calmer, knowing it was there, easily held. Unlike its owner.

Andrew turned away from the evidence-walls that were covered in a mixture of stuff from Josten’s Pumpkin case and his own disappearance, yet again. He traipsed upstairs and found himself lingering outside Josten’s room, staring blankly at his unmade bed and neat stacks of belongings. Not for the first time, Andrew thought that they should really decorate his room better. He wasn’t just a temporary assistant anymore, he shouldn’t have a camp bed and portable wardrobe. He
should have something permanent in his room. Some drawers, bookshelves maybe, a better bed. Or maybe they could move him out of the little spare room and convert the study into a bedroom; he could squash all his screens and filing cabinets in here with a bit of creative thinking. Yeah. Or maybe he should just bite the bullet and ask Josten to move into his bedroom and cut out the middle stage. If Josten wanted that too. But maybe that would be too much at once, for both of them, even if Josten said yes…

But it wouldn’t matter at all if Josten didn’t come back.

A movement on the bed distracted him and for a startled second he thought maybe it was Josten, maybe he’d crept back in and gone to bed like everything was normal – but the wriggling resolved itself into two small, fluffy bodies.

He sighed and perched on the bed, reaching out to the cats making a home on Josten’s sheets. They hadn’t reacted well to Josten’s disappearance, frequently disappearing up here as if to search for him, refusing to eat unless Andrew sat with them and petted them like Josten would, making a bed in his sheets and sniffing at his folded clothes. Bonnie in particular was rather anxious, and kept crawling into his lap and pockets and wanting to be carried around like they did with Josten. He was concerned that they might start grieving him if he didn’t come back soon.

He tried not to think too hard about his own behaviour in mirror to theirs, and scooped them into his lap along with Josten’s pillow; it must still smell like him, if they wanted to be up here so much. He held their warm, squirming, mewling bodies in the circle of his arms and rested his head against the wall, looking up at the ceiling.

He wasn’t sure how much longer he could take this fruitless waiting and thinking and planning. He needed to know where Josten was. He knew the odds of him being alive and well after so much time were laughable. He knew it was unlikely that if the Wesinski had got him, that Andrew would see him anywhere but a morgue – and that was if they didn’t destroy his body. But he still wanted to hope – and God, wasn’t that a cruel testament to how far he’d come in his life – that Josten would come home again. Would come back to him.

He closed his eyes and tried to focus on just the feeling of the cats gently nuzzling and licking at his fingers, rubbing their heads over his palms and arching into his slow strokes. He wasn’t sure who was comforting who, but that was alright. The three of them would sit sentinel for another night, it seemed.

***

Darkness, blood, pain.

Time had lost all meaning in the small, dank room. The light flashed on and off at odd intervals, and Neil came to hate the off times the most. In the on times, there was Riko and his knives and cruel hands and crueler words. There was the endless loop of those hateful tapes projected onto the wall from an unknown source, with Neil tied in place so he was forced to watch over, and over, and over until he took to screaming just to block out the awful sounds that would surely be burned into his brain forever.

But in the off times, there was nothing but the crushing darkness. The feeling of heavy darkness pressing on him, tight against his clammy skin, pressing and jabbing at his ever-increasing injuries and lapping at his blood. It became an animal twining around him, crushing the breath from his lungs with panic. In the darkness, there was nothing to distract him from his pain, and his thoughts. From hopelessly dwelling on whatever lies – and they had to be lies, surely – Riko had told him most recently, curling like smoke around his thoughts and driving him distracted trying to figure
out what was real and what was not.

He didn’t know how long he’d been trapped in the tiny, awful room. He remembered Riko saying two weeks, but his whole sense of time had been screwed over very quickly. He knew they must be staggering the on and off periods to purposefully mess with his internal clock, and it had worked shockingly well. Neil had no real understanding of how long he had been here, or even how long each on or off period lasted. He didn’t know when he slept or when he woke – it was all the same nightmarish existence. They brought him meagre food and water at strange intervals too, so he couldn’t even measure days by how hungry or thirsty he felt. He just felt hungry all the time, and the dryness in his mouth was only exacerbated by his own screaming.

Sometimes, he thought they were playing the audio of the tapes into the room when it was dark, but other times he wasn’t sure if it was his memory playing tricks on him.

He tried keeping himself calm – because surely Riko would let him out, right, he would let him go home, he’d said so, but what if that had been another lie… – by thinking about his home. His friends. His cats. And Doe. Doe most of all.

He drifted into what he thought was sleep to the thought of Doe holding the back of his neck, touching his hair, letting Neil lean on his shoulder. He half-dreamed soothing words in his ear and warm hands on his bare skin. He thought of that dream over and over again, trying to bury himself in the sense of sweet contentment it brought, the imagined, tantalising brush of lips against his, and trailing down his chest. He lost himself in imagining curling up on the couch together, entwined, and feeling completely and utterly safe and secure.

And when the awful recordings on loop got to be too much, made tears streak salty and caustic down his damaged cheeks to see what horrors Doe had endured, he imagined putting his arms around Doe and shielding him, protecting him, supporting him, keeping him safe away from such hurt, telling him how in awe Neil was of how much he had survived and grown from.

He tilted his head back and sighed, not that the darkness behind his bruised and swollen eyes was any better than the darkness squeezing him in its vice. More than anything, he wanted to be home. He wanted to tell Doe everything, end the secrets completely. But he didn’t know if he would ever see him again.

***

The buzzing of Andrew’s phone jerked him out of uneasy sleep late that night, startling him so badly he nearly fell off Josten’s narrow little bed. The cats hissed and jumped to the floor as he wrapped shaking fingers around his phone and hit the call button.

“Yes?” The gravel in his voice shocked him – he hadn’t talked to anyone, not even Renee, for days. She’d been by earlier, he remembered, making sure he ate something. But he hadn’t said a word and she had moved around him quietly.


“Is he alive?” Andrew gritted out, his heart seeming to stop and then jack-rabbit away, his breath coming short.

“Yes,” Wymack said quickly. “Yes, but he’s in bad shape. At my house.”

“I’m on my way,” Andrew said as he lunged dizzily to his feet and hung up the call. Between
blinks and frantic breaths he threw on some clothes and shoes and a jacket and ran into the street to find a cab.

The drive passed without him noticing, and he told the driver to wait as they pulled up to Wymack’s nice little house. There was a light on in the kitchen, and Andrew ran to the door as fast as his stumbling feet could take him. It was unlocked, and he rushed inside towards the kitchen.

He stopped so abruptly he almost fell, at seeing Josten…

Fuck, he wailed silently, and knelt down carefully on the hard kitchen tiles.

Josten was a bloodied, broken mess in Wymack’s arms, struggling weakly with his bloodshot gaze on a knife skittered just out of reach.

“Calm,” Wymack was saying over and over, holding him securely. “Neil, calm down. Calm down. Andrew’s here.”

“Andrew?” Josten whispered, his head shooting up so hard Andrew heard something pop. “Is he safe?”

“Neil,” Andrew said quietly, gently, and waved his hand into Josten’s line of sight. “I’m here.”

Josten’s eyes fixed on him with desperation, and he let out a shuddering, eerie cry and reached for him. Andrew stopped him hitting the floor and pulled him close, wanting to hold as tight as he could but too conscious of the bloody state of his clothes and the probable injuries underneath.

“Are you safe?” Josten sobbed into his neck, his bloody hands patting weakly at Andrew’s chest. “He said – he said – you were – are you safe? Did he hurt you? Andrew?”

“I’m fine,” Andrew replied, “I’m fine, no one hurt me. No one came near me. I’m safe. You’re safe. Neil, you’re safe now, alright? You’re safe, I’ve got you.”

Neil gave another wrenching cry and started to bawl in earnest; heart-breaking, pitiful sobs and gasps for breath like a frightened child.

“I’ve got you,” Andrew whispered, and cradled him gently into his chest, arms locked around him. He eased a shaking hand gently over the top of Josten’s head, feeling scabs and mats and he didn’t entirely know what else. After a few minutes, Josten passed out, slumping heavily into his body.

“What happened?” Andrew asked over Josten’s shoulder, watching Wymack who looked so much older than he was.

“I don’t know,” Wymack replied in a low voice. “There was a knock on the door, and Neil was slumped up against it like this. I heard tyres screeching away, but couldn’t see anything. He didn’t seem very… aware. It took about three tries before he recognised me. I tried getting a look at his injuries, but he panicked and went for the knife. That’s when I called you. He kept asking for you, asking if you were safe.”

Andrew absorbed that silently, dropping his gaze back to Josten’s head.

“Abby’s at work,” Wymack continued wearily. “We can wait for her to get back to patch Neil up. She’ll only be an hour, hopefully.”

Andrew nodded and stroked as lightly as he could over Josten’s bruised and mottled cheekbone. He could feel rage starting to coil somewhere deep in his gut, slow and furious, but he didn’t want...
to lose control. If he focussed too much on thinking about who had done this to Josten, to his
Josten, he would lose touch with himself and do something rash and murderous. And right now,
Josten needed him too much for that.

Josten twitched in his arms and began to stir, then woke again with a shudder. He looked around
himself, then saw where he was. His eyes widened at Andrew’s look.

“Andrew?” He gasped. “Are you alright? Are you safe? Did he hurt you?”

“I’m safe, I’m fine, nobody hurt me.” Andrew assured him. “More importantly, you’re safe. We’re
at Wymack’s house. Do you remember coming here?”

“No,” Josten mumbled, and slumped into him again, resting his cheek against Andrew’s
collarbone. “Everything is… fuzzy.”

“Shock,” Wymack suggested quietly.

Andrew grunted agreement. “Neil, you’re safe now, okay? You’re safe, I’ve got you. Where are
you hurt?”

“Everywhere?” Josten said tentatively, shifting a bit and wincing. “I don’t know.”

“Okay,” Andrew said calmly and settled his arms a bit more gently around Josten’s shoulders.
“Abby should be here in a little while to patch you up. Do you remember taking any drugs or
medicines?”

“No,” Josten said drowsily, then jerked. “I don’t want Abby.”

“Why not? She won’t say anything if you don’t want her to.”

Josten’s eyebrows pinched together and he chewed his lip. A hand with bruised and swollen
fingers clutched in Andrew’s shirt as he shook his head. “No. No. No.”

Andrew sighed quietly. Josten wasn’t very clearheaded, but he was definitely certain about that,
and Andrew wasn’t about to force him into anything. “You need medical help, Neil.”

“No.”

Andrew rubbed gently over his back to try and soothe him. He guessed that Josten was concerned
about Abby seeing his scars, or maybe he just didn’t feel safe. He thought for a few minutes,
though it was hard to get a handle on a train of thought when Josten was curled up in his arms,
breathing, alive, clutching at his shirt.

“I could call Aaron,” he suggested slowly. “Ask his advice and patch you up myself. How does
that sound?”

Josten thought it over, then said reluctantly, “Okay.”

“Do you want to go home now? The cats have missed you,” Andrew said, ignoring the waver of
his own voice.

“Yes,” Josten breathed, “More than anything.”

“Okay,” Andrew replied softly. “Let’s get you up.”

Between the three of them, they got Josten onto his feet, though he was too unsteady to stand on
his own. Andrew slotted himself into Josten’s side and carefully tucked Josten’s arm over his shoulders, and held him around the waist. Josten seemed a bit too woozy to carry much of his own weight, but Andrew was strong enough to bear his weight.

“Get him settled,” Wymack said as they started to leave. “I’ll be over tomorrow to discuss – all this. Hopefully he’ll be able to remember a bit more after a good sleep.”

Andrew nodded. “Thank you, Wymack. For… thank you.”

Wymack smiled tiredly at him, and gently pushed them both out the door. “See you tomorrow.”

Andrew hauled them both into the waiting cab, and firmly refused the cabbie’s alarmed suggestions they go to a hospital. Josten slumped in his seat, his glazed eyes watching the lights as they passed, his hands shaking a bit. When they passed into a tunnel, he cried out and flinched until Andrew could bring him out of his head and into the present with a hand on his neck and cheek.

“It’s okay, you’re safe, I’m safe, we’re both okay,” he assured Josten over and over.

He paid the cab driver generously and pulled Josten into their home. He could hear the cats yowling for attention, but gently pushed Josten up the stairs before they could all get waylaid. He didn’t want to chance Josten getting septicaemia or something because they paused to play with the cats.

“Sit down,” Andrew said quietly, and helped lower him onto the closed toilet seat. He rummaged in his cupboard until he found all his medical supplies and arranged them neatly on the side of the bath. Josten blinked slowly up at him, exhaustion clear. “It’s alright, Neil,” he said softly. “It’s alright.”

Josten nodded vaguely, but didn’t look away. Andrew gently cupped his cheek for a moment, then turned away a little to call Aaron.

“I was wondering if you’d call tonight,” Aaron greeted him with. “Are you going to see some fireworks later? Me and Katelyn are going to watch them on TV, she’s a bit too uncomfortable to be out in the cold for a few hours, she says.”


Aaron was briefly quiet, then Andrew heard the sounds of doors closing and background noise fading out. “What’s going on?”

“It’s Neil,” Andrew said. “He’s very hurt. I need your help fixing him up. He won’t go to the hospital.”

“Jesus Christ,” Aaron muttered. “Alright, well I won’t be much help if I can’t see him. Put me on video and set up your phone somewhere with a good view.”

Andrew chewed the inside of his lip for a moment, watching Josten sway a little. He lowered his voice, though he didn’t think Josten was really listening.

“He has a lot of scars,” he murmured. “Don’t say anything about them. It’ll freak him out more.”

“Alright,” Aaron said dubiously. “Wash your hands and put on some gloves, just in case.”

Andrew switched him into a videocall and propped up his phone on the toilet roll holder. “Neil,”
he said as he washed his hands, “Aaron’s going to help me sort you out, remember?”

“Oh okay,” Neil mumbled drowsily.

“He’s very dazed and disoriented,” Andrew told his brother as he snapped on some disposable latex gloves. “He keeps falling asleep and his short-term memory is a bit wonky. He doesn’t think he was given any drugs.”

“Check his head first for contusions and signs of concussion,” Aaron instructed, his clinical doctor expression covering up whatever he might think of Josten’s tattered state. “And be careful of his neck.”

Andrew stood between Josten’s knees. “I’m going to touch your head,” he said quietly, and when Josten didn’t do anything other than blink up him, he started to gently comb his fingers over Josten’s scalp. He clenched his jaw – this wasn’t how he’d wanted to do this. He trailed his fingers very gently over Josten’s damaged hair. He didn’t find any bumps, but several locks of hair had been yanked out, leaving oozing scabs. He had a fair amount of dried blood matted elsewhere, but it seemed like transference and not from any major wounds. What was left of his hair had been brutally hacked off, his lovely long curls destroyed. It had been cut at around the line of his last dye job, Andrew noted absently, as if whoever had done it had wanted to expose his roots and real coppery colour. Andrew gently dabbed antiseptic cream over the scabs.

“Oh,” Josten whispered.

“I’m sorry,” Andrew said immediately and took his fingers away from a particularly bad scab. He checked over the back of his neck and around his ears instead and found some old bruising, but nothing too serious. No swelling. He gently lifted Josten’s head and, at Aaron’s instruction, shone a penlight into his eyes to check for pupil responses, though Josten tensed up and cringed away from the light for no clear reason. The blackened bruising from his clearly broken nose gave his eyes a raccoonish appearance, so Andrew wouldn’t be surprised if it was from a headache. Luckily his nose didn’t seem to have set off-centre so Andrew didn’t have to re-set it, though there would probably be a bump left across the bridge once the swelling went down. There were a few cuts on his cheeks and mouth, but they weren’t deep and would likely heal without a mark, though they must be painful.

Aaron judged him to be alright, but gave Andrew a list of symptoms to watch out for and told him in no uncertain terms to drag Josten to hospital for an MRI of his head if he showed any of the symptoms. While he was talking, Josten bumped his head forward to rest against Andrew’s chest, as if he couldn’t bear to hold it upright any longer.

Andrew put down the penlight and gently stroked the least-damaged part of his scalp, making him sigh.

“Oh okay?” Andrew asked quietly.

“I’m tired,” Josten mumbled. “And everything hurts.”

“I have some painkillers you can take when we’re done,” Andrew told him. “And you can sleep soon. I need to take off your shirt now, alright?”

Josten shuddered, but nodded and sat up straight again. After a quick inspection and careful tug or two, Andrew decided to cut his shirt off as Josten didn’t seem able to lift his arms up. Aaron didn’t say anything about the scarring, true to his promise, but Andrew heard a short intake of breath at the new injuries.
Andrew wanted to punch something.

He was covered in slashes and cuts, some half-healed, others fresher. Some were bleeding a little, probably opened from his struggles at Wymack’s and from moving around. Some were superficial and others were much deeper and Andrew could already tell he would need to stitch some. His ribs were mottled purple with bruises, and his stomach too.

Worst of all were the initials carved into his chest, onto a previously-unmarred patch of skin, as if to brand or claim him. Andrew stared at the M sitting like a pompous crown, and knew exactly who was responsible for all this.

He was snapped out of a homicidal cycle of thought by a quiet sniffle. Josten was looking down at himself, at the injuries layered on top of his extensively scarred torso, and tears were slowly dripping off his chin.

It wasn’t the desperate crying from earlier, uncontrolled and hysterical. This was quiet, hopeless, resigned. It twisted Andrew’s heart up in his chest and squeezed mercilessly. I don’t want this, he thought desperately. I don’t want him to hurt like this.


Josten gave a choked-off little noise and leaned forward, grabbing at Andrew’s waist in clumsy hands. Andrew gently folded his arms around Josten’s shaking shoulders and held him as carefully as he could, Josten’s head tucked into Andrew’s chest.

“You’re okay,” he said over and over. “You’re okay.”

Aaron was quiet on the other end of the call, and Andrew didn’t want to see what might be on his face. He supposed there would be no luck convincing Aaron there wasn’t something between them, after this. But that wasn’t really a priority in Andrew’s mind for the moment.

After a little while, Josten stopped crying, though he seemed reluctant to let go.

“I need to look after your wounds,” Andrew reminded him quietly, running a hand down the back of his neck.

Josten sighed and slowly sat up again, and turned his head away so he wouldn’t have to watch. Andrew followed Aaron’s quiet instructions on which parts of his sealed and sterile kit to use, and started sterilising and cleaning up the array of lacerations, putting adhesive bandages over the more minor ones. Josten didn’t even flinch when Andrew started stitching up the worst ones, and Andrew hoped that was due to the small shot of local anaesthetic rather than anything else.

“Nearly done now, Neil,” Andrew told him once he’d finished inspecting his bruised, but thankfully not broken, ribs.

Josten hummed vaguely in reply. He seemed to be calmer now, a little more lucid than he had been at Wymack’s, but clearly exhausted. Andrew inspected his bruised hands and quietly bandaged the wide swaths of damaged skin around his wrists, clear indicators of handcuffs.

Andrew rested his hands gently on Josten’s shoulders. “Neil. I need you to concentrate now. I need you to answer just one more question.”

Josten gazed up at him warily.
Andrew fought through the lava in his chest and gently rubbed his thumb over Josten’s collarbone. “Neil. Do I need to get the rape kit?”

Josten was quiet for an awful minute. “No,” he said quietly, keeping his gaze on Andrew’s face. “No. They didn’t take off my underwear or anything like that. Just knives and fists. I don’t need the kit.”

“Okay,” Andrew sighed in relief, and closed his eyes for a moment. “Are you hurting anywhere else?”

“My back hurts,” Josten replied. “But I think that was from the chair.”

Andrew frowned a question.

“They kept me handcuffed in a chair.”

Andrew looked down to his wrapped wrists with another sigh. “Okay. I just need to talk to Aaron for a moment.”

They consulted for a few minutes on how to look after Josten and how to check the stitches and watch for signs of concussion or infection. Andrew held up various bottles of painkillers and Aaron read their labels through the screen and recommended a dosage plan.

“And make sure he sleeps upright until his ribs are better,” Aaron finished. “Make sure he gently moves his arms and chest and back periodically to stop them stiffening. Get him to walk around. Encourage deep breaths and allow him to cough, but hold a cushion to his chest when he does.”

Andrew nodded and stripped off the gloves with a grimace.

“Call me if anything changes or you’re not sure of what to do,” Aaron said. “And when the stitches need coming out. I’d rather supervise you doing that, if you don’t mind.”

Andrew nodded again.

“You’re going to have to tell me what’s going on eventually, you know.”

“I know. Thank you, Aaron.” Andrew said quietly.

Aaron nodded tightly back at him through the screen. “Okay. Goodnight, Andrew.”

Andrew ended the call and turned back to his dazed patient. Now the worst of the work was done, he felt exhausted down to his bones. Josten looked like he was barely holding onto consciousness.

They fumbled him downstairs and managed to get him to swallow some soup and water and painkillers, which stopped the trembling in his limbs. Andrew wrapped him up in a few blankets and settled down beside him on the couch as the cats pounced joyfully into Josten’s lap, screaming for attention.

“Hello,” Josten whispered to them. He did his best to pet them despite the bandages on his fingers. “Oh, hello.”

“I told you they missed you,” Andrew said. “They kept sleeping in your room.”

Josten gave him a sleepy smile, the painkillers already doing their work. “Did you miss me?”

“Yes,” Andrew said in a voice so small he barely recognised it as his own. “Of course I did.”
“Can I lean on you?” Josten asked drowsily.

Wordlessly, Andrew lifted his arm. Josten slowly settled himself to lay against his chest, one arm draped over Andrew’s stomach. Andrew wrapped both arms around him again, feeling more relieved than he knew how to process to be able to hold him and know for sure he was back home. Josten rubbed his cheek against Andrew’s chest and gave a small sigh, kitten-like.

“I solved the nutmeg thing,” Andrew muttered to distract himself from the molten ache in his stomach.

Josten hummed in sleepy interest.

“Woodbine had an apprentice, the one who cleaned him,” Andrew explained quietly. “The superintendent. Turns out he was Raymond Carpenter’s son, they had an arrangement. We went after him, but he’s vanished. There’s an outstanding warrant for his arrest, but there’s been no sign of him. His employer must be concealing him, possibly getting him a new identity.”

“Riko,” Josten mumbled with a nod.

Andrew closed his eyes for a moment. He’d tried so hard to get his life away from that sicko, and the damage he’d wrought. It seemed all for nothing, now.

“We can talk about that tomorrow,” Andrew told the top of his head. “Rest, Neil. We’ll deal with everything tomorrow.”

Josten mumbled incoherently, apparently drifting closer to sleep. Andrew turned on the TV at a near-silent volume to get his bearings on the time and date after Aaron’s odd comment from earlier; he’d lost track of those things during the frantic search to find Josten again.

He blinked at the news coverage – Times Square. The announcer was counting down the minutes to the ball drop.

New Year’s Eve.

Andrew held Josten securely in his arms and watched the crowd amp themselves up and chant along to the countdown.

“Happy New Year, Neil,” he whispered, and gently stroked his cheek. Josten slept on, content and safe in his arms.

As it reached zero, and the new year started with a rash of fireworks and shots of people celebrating, Andrew found his resolution already fixed in mind.

Enough dancing about. He was going to take the Moriyamas and Wesninskis down for good. And he was going to make Riko pay dearly for all he had dared to do to Andrew, and to Neil. Time to go on the offensive.
Slight warnings for recovery in the aftermath of the 'Evermore' visit, medical clean-up, and vague description of a panic attack.

Neil woke to the understanding of two facts which should have been completely contradictory and impossible, but somehow didn’t cancel each other out at all.

One – he was in an incredible amount of pain.

Two – he felt overwhelmingly protected and safe.

It took a few minutes of bleary thought to understand, but he slowly came to the realisation that he was free of Riko’s tortures, and that he was being held, safe and snug and secure, in Doe’s arms. Home. He wondered if this were an elaborate daydream brought on by Riko’s methods – to convince himself he was in a nice dream again, where everything was good and light and perfect, to disconnect from whatever was really happening. He’d daydreamed often enough about that dream with Doe kissing him, after all, it stood to reason his brain might have taken it to the next level to escape the pain thundering through his nerve endings.

But he didn’t think he had enough imagination to paint in such accurate brushstrokes the steady rise and fall of Doe’s chest against his cheek, the faint smell of blood and sweat and unwashed body odour unfortunately coming from himself in stronger waves, the little snuffles and huffs of two small cats curled up asleep nearby, and the low rumble of their purrs. Or to imagine the far-off sound of strangers arguing in the street and vague police sirens, or the occasional twitch of Doe’s fingers where they held onto him.

Doe was warm to lie against, so warm. And his strong arms cradled Neil protectively, holding him close and making him feel more safe than any array of locks or keys or safety measures had ever done. He was back home, and as long as Doe had him, he was safe. Everything would be okay.

He would have laid there, luxuriating in the cozy security of Doe’s arms, for most of the day if his whole body weren’t screaming at him for some food and painkillers. Eventually, he had to move. He craned his head up to see if Doe were awake, and blinked in surprise to see Doe already watching him, alert and aware.

“Hello,” Neil croaked out.

“Good morning,” Doe replied quietly, and started to unwrap his arms.

“No,” Neil mumbled before he could stop himself and clung tighter to Doe’s shirt in aching fingers. “Not just yet? Please?”

Doe paused, then gently curled around him again.

“It made me feel safe, last night,” Neil admitted to Doe’s chest, vaguely embarrassed by his own neediness but also not giving a fuck because it felt too nice to be held like this.

“Do you remember anything of last night?” Doe asked, his fingers lightly rubbing back and forth over Neil’s shoulder.
“It’s coming back in flashes. I think Wymack was there, and Aaron? And you patched me up?”

Doe hummed agreement. It rumbled through his chest like a lion’s purr and Neil just about stopped himself from pressing closer. “You were very disoriented and afraid. You kept forgetting where you were and what was happening.”

Neil went cold for a second, thinking of the gaps in his unreliable memory. “What time is it? And what day?”

Doe shifted to get a look at a clock on the wall, twisting his upper body and in the process pulling Neil tighter into his chest. Neil did not object at all.

“New Year’s Day, nearly nine in the morning. How did you sleep?”

“Really well,” Neil answered absently, trying to wrap his head around losing track of two full weeks at Riko’s whim. Without his permission, his body started to shake and his breath to catch.

“You’re safe,” Doe told him firmly, and ran a hand gently down the length of his spine. “You’re safe. You’re home.”

Doe held him until the panic had passed, then held him some more. Neil’s eyes closed at the soporific heat of his body and the soothing passes of Doe’s hands over his back and shoulders, assuring him louder than words that everything would be okay. He thought he might just drop off again, his exhausted body working at a serious energy deficiency, if it weren’t for the pain increasing every minute.

He tried shifting to lie a little more comfortably, to ease the pressure on his sore ribs, but even that slight movement sent a rip of agony tearing through him. He stiffened, his mind crashing back to Riko’s hands and knives and taunts at the pain, thinking he was back there, he was not safe, it would only get worse—

“Neil,” Doe was saying over and over, and gently moving them both to sit upright. “You’re here with me, you’re home, you’re safe. Can you hear me?”

Neil shuddered and clung to the sound of his voice like a lifeline. Slowly, slowly, they reeled him back onto shore. He nodded and let his head sag wearily. He’d only been awake for ten minutes, and he was ready to black out for ten hours.

“You’re due for some more painkillers,” Doe told him, lightly smoothing a hand over his cheek. “And I should check your wounds.”

Neil mumbled assent and allowed himself to be carefully tugged to his feet and walked up to the bathroom. Doe was about to sit him on the toilet seat again when Neil lightly pulled away.

“I’m sorry I smell so bad.”

Doe looked at him with the corner of his mouth twitching, just a little. “Don’t worry about it.”

“I haven’t washed in two weeks, I’m disgusting. I want to wash.”

“You shouldn’t get water in your wounds, or on the bandages. And I’m a bit fragrant myself, it really doesn’t matter.”

For a blinding moment, Neil thought he’d misheard and had a vivid image of Doe washing them both in the shower together. He thought if he had enough blood in his body he would have blushed
bright red at the thought.

“I’ll just – sponge, or something. I’ll be careful. But I really want to wash as much as I can.”

Doe’s mouth twisted to one side in thought, considering his request. Finally he grunted and fetched the step-stool from the hall and plonked it in the bath. He found a bath sponge from an unopened packet under the sink, a change of clothes, and gestured at it all. He helped Neil sit on the stool in the bath and left the room.

Neil felt a little apprehensive about being on his own – what if Riko got him again, what if, what if – but grit his teeth and washed himself as thoroughly and carefully as possible around all the injuries and bandages. He would have liked a long, hot shower, but it didn’t seem to be in the cards for a while. He winced and hissed through washing his hair, and carefully rinsing around the scabs left behind.

Once he was done, he felt much better for it and managed to get himself dried off and sat on the toilet seat in his sweatpants.

“I’m done,” he called out to Doe.

Doe took a look at him and the small smile on his face and something around his eyes softened. He lifted a hand and lightly touched the raggedy mess that remained of most of Neil’s hair, his lips thinning.

“How bad does it look?” Neil asked. He was planning on avoiding mirrors for several weeks.

“Pretty messy,” Doe replied quietly. “Once the scabby bits heal up it won’t be so bad, but your hair will look very odd with bald patches and short bits. I could – I could clean it up for you, if you want.”

“You do your own hair, right?”

Doe nodded, and Neil looked over his snazzy, attractive cut with a smile.

“Alright. I trust you.”

Doe wrapped a towel around his shoulders and fetched out some scissors and a small buzz-razor. He cleaned them off obsessively and hesitated before touching Neil’s hair, with a faintly regretful sigh. Neil didn’t pay much attention, preferring to watch the quiet, thoughtful expression on Doe’s face and feel the gentleness in his hands, and listen to the slow snip of the scissors. He was especially slow and careful around the scabs, making sure any cut-off bits didn’t fall in the wounds.

“That’s about the best I can do,” Doe said eventually. “It’ll look better once it grows in. And you won’t be able to dye it until your scalp has healed.”

Neil ran a hand carefully over his head; it felt like Doe had trimmed it all down to a fine fuzz that felt surprisingly soft under his fingertips as he ran them against the grain a few times. He wasn’t overly bothered; he’d rather have a uniform buzzcut than hair that had obviously been yanked out. Having his natural hair colour back was a bit more troublesome, but it couldn’t be helped. Hopefully the colour would look darker against his scalp.

“Thanks,” he said quietly, and ran his hand over his head again.

Doe sighed again and got out the antiseptic cream to see to his various injuries. “Wymack’s coming
over later to – debrief, I guess. Can you remember what happened?”

“I’d rather not,” Neil winced. “But I think I can. I’d like to see Boyd, too, and everyone. I have some things to say.”

Doe looked at him sharply, understanding him immediately. “Are you sure, Neil? Once you tell them…”

“I know,” Neil said quietly. “But I’ve had about enough of running away and letting them control me. Time to face them head-on, I think.”

Doe gave him a quick, triumphant smile before turning away to get a handle on himself. “I was thinking about the same thing.”

“Good,” Neil smiled down at his knees. “Can I have some food now? And painkillers?”

When Wymack arrived later that day, it was to see a Neil who was looking remarkably more stable and conscious than he had the previous night.

“Hey, kiddo,” Wymack said, surprisingly gently. “How you doing?”

“Better,” Neil answered with a light shrug. “More myself. It’ll take me a while to be fit for work, though.”

Wymack rolled his eyes. “Don’t you even think of coming into the precinct until you can touch your toes without bleeding out of somewhere. Interesting haircut.”

Doe snorted as he got them all coffee. “Where are the others?”

“Waiting outside. I told them to wait a minute until I could figure out what was going on, and how Neil looked,” Wymack replied. “I told them you look like you went through a couple rounds with a yeti, by the way. Just so they’re not shocked by all… this.” He gestured vaguely at Neil’s battered, bruised and frail-looking body. “So. What is going on, Neil?”

Neil looked down to his lap for a moment, and felt Doe settle protectively beside him on the couch. He wrapped his hands around a mug of soup and smiled at Bonnie as they tried climbing up his leg.

“I have some stories to tell.”

Wymack gave him a long, tired look. Then he nodded and sent a text. A few seconds later and Boyd, Renee, Dan, Allison and Gordon were piling into the house, exclaiming in each of their own ways about Neil’s disappearance and new look.

“Can you all sit down?” Neil said a bit plaintively as his head began to throb from the noise. “This might take a little while. And please don’t interrupt me – I might not finish, if I stop.”

They settled down accordingly, Boyd in particular looking extremely worried but staying quiet. Neil took a few deep breaths to settle his nerves and glanced at Doe.

“I’m here,” Doe murmured.

Neil nodded, and raised his eyes to look at his friends and co-workers. He looked them all in the eye before turning his attention to Wymack.

“My name is Nathaniel Wesninski, and my father is the Butcher of Baltimore.”
Andrew turned around from his position at the stove where he was carefully making up some oatmeal and toast to see his bedraggled and rumpled friend and housemate peering around the doorframe. There was a tremble about him, as there had been since his release back home nearly three weeks ago. The shadows under his eyes were deep, and his face and hands were almost as thin as they had been when Josten had first stumbled into Andrew’s life. His eyes were still a little glassy and uncertain, and the hard-won confidence in his bearing had vanished. He moved skittishly, placing each foot with care. His physical injuries were mostly healed, though the emotional damage seemed to be lingering.

Andrew had felt Josten’s regression like a smack to the face each morning, at the reminder of his uselessness in allowing Josten to be taken and abused like that. True, he had been delirious and sick at the time, and could not have done anything to prevent it, but that hardly eased his mind. He twitched a smile and gestured for Josten to come into the kitchen.

“How did you sleep?” He asked quietly, and heard Josten step up to stand near him, leaning against the sink.


Andrew hummed his understanding. “Did the light help?”

Josten nodded with a faint smile, and Andrew smiled back. After his first day back, and telling his long and sorry tale to their friends, Josten had needed to sleep. But they had found very rapidly that his comfortable, familiar little room was no longer safe for his traumatised mind – the small space made him claustrophobic and afraid, and the darkness from the lack of a large window had only compounded his panic. He had vanished into his memories and begun screaming.

To try and help, Andrew had moved Josten’s bed into the larger and more open study, and jury-rigged a nightlight out of a fancy candle holder and a small touch-light, the kind made to stick into cupboards that could be illuminated by a press to its face. Putting the light into the strategically-carved candle holder had softened the LED light and cast pleasant, Christmassy shapes onto the walls. Josten had managed to sleep in fitful bursts with the new arrangement, and by staring at the light and the shapes on the walls when he was afraid.

He stirred the oatmeal and checked on the pot of coffee; he was determined that Josten regain the weight he had lost over his fortnight of awfulness, and had been giving him larger and more substantial portions with each meal, now that he was a bit more settled.

It didn’t help, Andrew mused, that Josten had chosen to reveal himself completely to their friends
and co-workers, to rip away the mask of anonymity that he had cultivated for the past ten or so years – all that had kept him safe from his murderous father. Anyone would be a little jumpy after tossing that away so quickly. Or to start immediately giving legal testimony on everything he could remember of his father’s enterprise and associates. For a couple hours each day, Wymack and a lawyer had been over to get all the details official and sealed away ready for prosecution.

While they had been busy with that, Andrew had cooked. And cleaned. And worried.

Almost as if hearing the direction of Andrew’s thoughts, Josten reached out a hand and curled his fingers in Andrew’s shirt. Andrew glanced his way and gently skimmed a hand down Josten’s arm in thanks. The touchiness wasn’t new, but the frequency had markedly increased since Josten’s return, he had noticed. He’d known that Josten found his touch comforting and grounding, and it was obvious that he needed it more than ever right now. Andrew didn’t mind supplying it – and would be lying if he said it didn’t comfort him too, to feel Josten close to him again and relatively safe once more.

“What time is it?” Josten asked.

Andrew checked his watch. This was becoming something of a ritual now – Josten seemed disinclined to believe the clocks on the walls or on the TV, more trusting of Andrew’s declaration than whatever he could see himself. “Eight forty-five.” He supposed he should be flattered that Josten trusted him so much, but mostly he was just concerned about his friend’s mental health.

“Thanks. Wymack said he’d be over about ten today, with Waterhouse.”

Andrew nodded and served up their breakfast; as he did so, he cast an uneasy look at the back door. He’d let the cats out a little bit earlier, and was itching to lock the house up again once they were inside. It was all very well for Wymack to have some undercover officers outside his house on protective detail, and to assure them both that they didn’t need to go to a proper safe house. But he still couldn’t shake the creeping sense of dread that Riko must know where he lived by now, had done so for quite a while and had been surveilling them, and that Riko could at any moment order thugs or assassins to take them both out.

If Riko were still watching them – Josten had admitted, in fragments, some of the things Riko had told him during his capture – he must know by now that Josten had not reacted favourably to his threats. They had not disappeared. They had not stopped associating with the NYPD. On the contrary, even more police were coming in and out of the house than usual, as well as the lawyer who would be easily researched as a specialist in criminal organisations. Riko had to know they were planning something.

Andrew wasn’t normally a paranoid or anxious person, but the wait for Riko to react in some way was getting him all twisted up inside.

Josten gently nudged at his arm, and Andrew realised he’d just been staring down at their plates without moving for a while. He contained his sigh behind his teeth and transferred the plates to the table along with their coffee. Josten didn’t mention it, but after they had finished eating his hand strayed again to hold onto Andrew’s shirt, as if tethering them both.

“Wymack was saying getting back into a normal routine would probably help,” Josten offered vaguely. “With the time thing, and feeling normal.”

Andrew grunted noncommittally. He knew that was true, Bee had said much the same thing, but he also didn’t want to let Josten out of his sight in case he got snatched again or killed.
“Did he ring you back yesterday after I went to bed?” Josten asked.

Andrew clenched his jaw and shook his head. He’d gotten the number of a certain dickhead out of Agent McNally of the NSA as a favour for helping them out before, but so far the asshole hadn’t returned any of Andrew’s calls. Not that it was a new phenomenon, but it still stung.

Josten hummed. “Maybe today.”

“I don’t think he’ll be much use anyway,” Andrew muttered. “He was always a coward. I doubt that’s changed for the better since college.”

Josten said nothing, and Andrew knew Josten understood the messy tangle of hopes and bitterness that snarled in Andrew’s chest regarding that asshole. His hand tightened a little in Andrew’s shirt, twisting the fabric around his fingers. He was sure to pull it out of shape if he kept doing it, but Andrew didn’t stop him. He was trying to resist the urge to pull Josten closer himself, and find out what his mouth felt like.

He was going to have to say something soon, he knew. He had kept waiting for the right moment – and then Josten had been kidnapped and tortured. Not exactly the nicest time to announce something like this. And now he was waiting for Josten to be recovered, but his time with Riko Dickmunch had clearly affected him more deeply than Andrew had first thought. He had no idea when Josten might be ‘ready’ to hear that Andrew wanted to kiss him top to toe.

And there was the little voice in his head that sounded suspiciously like a hybrid of Bee and Renee that said there might never be the right time. That it would just have to be the right time when it happened. Because at the rate that Josten got himself into trouble, he’d be waiting a long time for things to calm down, especially with their collective decision to take the fight to the Moriyamas and Wesinskis. Life would be very hectic for a long time, and either of them might not survive the final confrontation.

So maybe he should just say fuck it. Seize the moment. Get it over with, whether it was the right time or not. See what the consequences would be. If Josten wasn’t into it… whatever. They’d work through it, and maybe Andrew would get closure and start to move on. But if he kept it to himself, they’d just be stuck like this with no end in sight.

“Hey,” Josten said quietly, his fingers creeping under Andrew’s shirt to gently poke his side. He smiled softly at Andrew. “You went all quiet again.”

Tell him, Andrew thought. Jesus Christ, just tell him.

His heart started to race in anticipation, and his palms began to sweat. He cleared his throat.

“Neil…”

“Yes, Andrew?”

Josten’s eyes were bright, and his expression was expectant, almost hopeful. Andrew took a deep breath.

“What would you say if—”

A smart knock on the door startled them both out of their seats, fists raised and feet ready to run. For a heart-stopping moment, they both stared in the direction of the front door, waiting for violence.
After a long, sticky moment, Josten rasped out, “I don’t think Riko’s goons would knock. Or my father’s people.”

“Go upstairs,” Andrew said. “I’ll call you down if it’s safe.”

Josten hesitated a moment, then left with shaking hands. His courage was no match for his fear, just now. Andrew didn’t begrudge him his flight – he wanted to do the same, if he was being completely honest with himself.

Andrew picked up a baseball bat that he kept in the umbrella stand and held it out of sight as he cracked open the front door, keeping it on the chain.

“Yes?”

“Hi there,” a man smiled hesitantly at him. He had a round, doughy kind of face that didn’t look like it could hide anything. But Andrew knew better than to trust an innocent-seeming face. “I’m not sure if I have the right address – are you Andrew Doe? The private investigator?”

“Consulting detective, yes,” Andrew admitted cautiously.

“Oh, good! My name is Dr Joseph, and I need your help. It’s about two zebras.”

Andrew blinked at him. That was certainly a new tactic, if it were some kind of trick.

“I work at the Bronx Zoo,” the doctor went on, “And, well, it’s kind of embarrassing but mostly just alarming. Someone stole two of our zebras late last night.”

“Have you contacted the police?”

“Yes,” Dr Joseph said with an anxious look. “When I stressed it was of the utmost urgency, the captain directed me to you. I think his name was Mackle? Wimma? He said he knew you?”

“Wymack.”

“Yes! Yes, that’s the guy.”

Andrew ground his teeth for a moment. He could smell interference and well-meaning pushiness a mile away.

“What’s so urgent about the zebras?” Part of him couldn’t believe he was having this conversation at all.

“Our unit specialises in breeding and reintroducing animals to the wild,” Dr Joseph said, and started wringing his hands. “Both mares are pregnant. And they’re due to give birth any day now. We absolutely have to get them back into the zoo for a safe delivery of those foals. Equine births can be very tricky, and we don’t want to lose any animals. If they don’t have the right care, we could lose all four animals in one go. Will you help me?”

Andrew blinked at him for a long minute, and slowly relaxed his grip on the baseball bat. A normal – if bizarre – case could be just what he needed to get back on an even keel. And it had been over a month since his last paid case, and money was getting a little tight. Plus, it would be a convenient distraction from the anxious task of talking to Josten about… everything.

“Will the Bronx Zoo be paying my usual rate?”

“Yes, I already cleared it with my superiors. Will you take the case?”
Andrew slowly nodded. “I’ll get my coat.”

***

“Boyd, you’re here. Excellent.”

“Wow, what detective work,” Boyd smiled as he turned away from the jellyfish exhibit. “You texted me to meet you here, and here I am.”

“Shut up,” Andrew muttered. “Are you going to help or not?”

“Sure,” Boyd shrugged and fell into step with him. “It’s my day off though, so you can’t call me Boyd all the time. Matt is just fine.”

Andrew gave him a narrow look and pressed on.

“You do realise I’m doing you a favour by agreeing to work on my day off, right?” Boyd smiled. “When I could be hanging out with my soon-to-be-wife and sorting out wedding stuff.”

Andrew sighed. “Yes, alright, Matt then.”

Matt grinned and looked around. “Is Neil not joining in on the zebra hunt?” He asked, a bit too casually.

Andrew shook his head. “He’s got enough on his plate right now with Wymack and the lawyer.” And neither of them was comfortable with Josten being out and about in easy grabbing distance to any stranger.

“Ah,” Boyd said with a grimace. “Yeah. Yeah, fucking hell. I still can’t really believe… I mean I thought something fishy was going on when Wymack said you were both sick for like three weeks and not to visit, but I didn’t think…”

Andrew nodded as they walked towards the zebra enclosures. Boyd had nearly been in tears once Josten had finished his long story about his parentage and life on the run, and the truth about where he’d been and what had happened during those two awful weeks at Riko’s whim. He’d tried to hug Josten but had almost gotten punched for moving too suddenly – by both Josten and Andrew.

“Is Neil still his name?” Boyd asked thoughtfully. “I mean, I guess we know now it was just an alias when he bumped into you. Should we still call him that, or his birth name?”

“He is Neil Josten,” Andrew replied with a bite in his voice. “I don’t care what his birth name was. He wants to be Neil.”

Boyd gave him a considering look. “Alright,” he said mildly. “Neil, then.”

Andrew shoved his hands deeper into his pockets.

“You know, I asked him once how you two met. He said he broke into your house and you let him have a bed. I didn’t really think he was telling the truth.”

“That’s approximately what happened,” Andrew conceded. God, it seemed so long ago now. And it was, really, it was nearly nine months ago now. But still. He couldn’t imagine a Josten who didn’t trust him, couldn’t imagine holding him at gunpoint either.

“Why did you let him stay?”
“I realised he could be useful.”

“And now?”

Andrew looked away and didn’t answer. Boyd could think what he liked. He was correct, anyway. It was much more personal and emotional now. Boyd hummed and changed the subject.

“So why call me here?”

Andrew shrugged. “I’ve gotten used to working with a partner. And seeing as Josten is busy…”

“Oh, I’m the substitute, I see.” Boyd was grinning, so Andrew knew he wasn’t offended. “That’s fine.”

“You didn’t have to come.”

“I know. But I realised we haven’t worked together since the whole ‘getting shot’ thing, and I don’t want that to come between us anymore. After all this stuff with Neil… you’re both really important to me. I don’t want to fight anymore.”

Andrew glanced down to Boyd’s right hand. He was back on active duty again after more physiotherapy and gaining control of the tremor; it was only a very occasional thing now. And, despite himself, Andrew was relieved. Boyd had been his first real friend as an adult. He didn’t want to lose him, either.

“Alright,” he said gruffly. “Oh look, there’s the zebra enclosure.”

They walked around to the non-public area where there was a loading area connected to a private road, probably used for feed and bedding deliveries. And the occasional new animal, Andrew supposed. He didn’t really spend his free time in zoos; too many people, too many sticky screaming children, too many smelly animals and queues and overpriced food. Although as it was January and there was about a foot of snow on the ground, the park was blessedly empty of the general public. The animals all seemed to be huddled in their houses, too, unwilling to risk the snow. He crouched down to inspect tyre tracks leading up to the back of the zebra house.

Boyd had been looking the scene over too. “So you think someone just led a couple of zebras out the back door and drove away?”

Andrew shrugged and straightened up. “They had to get the animals out somehow. This loading area is the only relatively private way out, unless they drove right out the front gates in a tourist bus. Dr Joseph had a look around once he realised his charges were missing, he found some fresh hoofprints in the soil near these doors.”

“I saw some security cameras dotted around as we walked in,” Boyd suggested. “Have you had a look at the footage?”

“There isn’t any,” Andrew answered with a tight smile. “Not coincidentally, the power to all the cameras in this section of the zoo was disabled shortly before the robbery.”

“And that didn’t trip an alarm?” Boyd asked, then sighed and answered his own question. “Right. This is a zoo, not a bank. They’re probably more concerned with the cameras around the gift shop. They probably thought it was just a power outage or shorted circuit.”

“There are two sets of tyre tracks here,” Andrew said, and gestured to the ground. “The tracks are identical, but the second set is approximately a third of an inch deeper.”
“Heavier with two very pregnant zebras in the back, right.”

“Indeed.”

Boyd joined Andrew over by the loading doors and drew his attention to one of the latches on the door, where some purple paint had scraped up onto the metal. “Looks like they drove against the latch on their way out. So we’re looking for a purple truck with two pregnant zebras in the back. Very low-profile.”

Andrew squinted at the paint in the poor snow-cloud-filtered sunshine, trying to get a lock on the exact shade. “It could be better camouflage than you’d think,” he said slowly. “That pigment is a proprietary shade owned by Axiom Parcel Delivery – APD. They’re even bigger than DHL in New York right now. It’s almost impossible to reproduce the colour without the company’s consent.”

“So if you can’t buy the paint anywhere, they must have stolen the truck as well,” Boyd nodded along. “Or they’re employed by APD and took a joy-ride. But these guys aren’t going to be dumb enough to keep driving around with plates that have been reported stolen or missing.”

“License plates aren’t the only way to find a vehicle, Boyd.”

“Matt.”

***

Matt elbowed his way into Doe’s house with an armful of Indian takeout. “Andrew?”

“In here,” Doe called back and Matt made his way into the front room, where Doe was sitting cross-legged on the floor surrounded by general appliances, a weighing scale, and a giant sheet of poster paper.

Matt decided not to ask just yet and set his bags and cartons down on the coffee table. “Is Neil around?”

“He’s having a nap,” Doe answered without looking up from writing down the weight of a toaster. “The cats are guarding him.”

“Catnaps are good,” Matt smiled. “Why is your picture on the wall of the Indian place?”

“I helped the owner’s family with a misunderstanding about their visas. They were quite appreciative.” Doe frowned and carefully considered the unplugged coffee machine next to his knee.

“Okay, why are you weighing a toaster?” Matt relented.

“I finally got through to APD’s corporate office while you were getting lunch,” Doe replied as he tapped a pen against his cheek, considering the huge list of addresses and weights on the paper next to him. “It seems one of their trucks was stolen eight days ago in Queens. Apparently the driver left his engine running while he was helping carry a large package into someone’s home, and when he came back the truck and all its packages was gone. I think it’s likely that truck was used to steal the zebras.”

Matt blinked at him. He’d worked plenty of cases with Doe before, but sometimes his logic was still obscure. “You say that like it explains why you’re weighing a toaster.”

“APD sent over the truck’s manifest,” Doe said, and waved a sheaf of paper in the air. “For each
package, we know the sender’s address, the recipient’s address, and the weight of each parcel. Using that information, I’m trying to identify the contents of each package. I’m weighing the objects I have handy, and using weights listed online for those I don’t.”

“How is that supposed to help?” Boyd asked as he started serving up their lunch.

Doe held up his giant paper and tapped a finger at one particular entry. “Number 27, from Pet Junction to Marie Buxton in Bayside. 12 pounds, 3 ounces. The weight of a water bowl, a package of dog treats and a ‘tail trail’.”

“What’s a—”

“It’s a pet collar which features a GPS chip,” Doe steamrolled on and placed a hairdryer on the scales. “It comes pre-charged, which means the GPS is active before registering with the pet’s owner. If we can find the GPS chip’s location, we might be able to find the stolen truck and its stripey packages.”

“Or someone who bought stolen pet supplies,” Boyd commented and handed over a bowl of curry and rice. “Why are you still weighing things?”

“Josten’s asleep,” Doe shrugged through a mouthful of food. “And I was bored waiting for you to come back.”

Matt rolled his eyes and took a bite of his own. “I’ve said it before, I’ll say it again – you need better hobbies. Wow, how much chilli powder is in here?”

“A lot,” Doe replied blandly, watching Matt gulp soda. “The restaurant agreed to make my orders as strong as possible.”

“Why?”

“I like spicy food,” Doe shrugged. “And usually restaurants give me the ‘white guy’ treatment when I order something hot, and tone it down.”

“Are you trying to burn off your tongue?”

“No, I like my tongue, thank you very much. I just like spice.”

Matt smiled and took another mouthful. “Well luckily, I quite like it too. Otherwise I’d have had to get a second lunch for myself. I’ll get tech support on the GPS after lunch.”

Doe raised a fork to him in salute and wolfed down half his curry in three bites.

An hour or so later, they found themselves in a deserted alleyway sorting through a giant pile of discarded packages. Seemed like the zebra thieves weren’t interested in any extra profit from selling on the items. Andrew found the package with the GPS collar and waved it at Boyd triumphantly.

“So uh – how is Neil doing, anyway?” Boyd asked as they idly looked through the pile for any more evidence. “I haven’t seen him much since he came back, he’s always locked up with that lawyer or asleep.”

“He’s getting better,” Andrew replied quietly. “It’s a slow process. Physically he’s almost back to
normal. But he’s still not sleeping properly.” He paused to rub at his temple, the usual headache threatening when he thought about how skittish Josten had become again, how dependent he was on Andrew after working so hard to work solo and feel confident on his own again.

“You know, my first partner was involved in a shooting eight weeks into the job,” Boyd said. “I let him walk around with PTSD for the next six months. I offered to help, but we didn’t get anywhere until I insisted. Maybe Neil needs some serious trauma counselling. I’m sure you’re big help to him, Andrew, but he could need professional help too. I’m sure Renee must have some contacts.”

“I’m aware of that,” Andrew replied as he rummaged. He’d already raised the issue of Josten talking to Bee, or someone else, but Josten was adamant in his refusals. “He’s not keen on the idea. I’m going to keep bringing it up, though. There’s only so many tricks from my own therapy that are relevant for him.”

He heard Boyd stop to look at him at that, and quickly rewound his words to figure out what had surprised him.

Andrew glanced coolly up at him. “What? You know some more things about me now. Are you surprised I got help?”

“No,” Boyd said, raising his hands a bit. “I’m just surprised to hear you mention it. I’d assumed – well, hoped – that you would have had some counsel, after…” he coughed uncomfortably.

“After being raped and abused for many years, yes,” Andrew finished for him in a flat voice. “You can say the words, Boyd.”

“I wasn’t sure if you wanted me to say it,” Boyd shrugged. “And it’s Matt, remember. Your good old buddy Matt. Who cares about you and wants you to be okay.”

Andrew had to look away. He couldn’t really stay irritated when Boyd was like that. And he didn’t want to get into another fight when things seemed to be going so well between them. His eyes snagged on a scrap of paper tucked under some of the boxes, and he fished it out with a frown.

“Find something?”

“It’s a receipt,” Andrew said as he turned the apparently-blank slip of paper over in his hands. “Or it was. Modern receipts are printed with thermal ink; it helps the text appear sharp and clean, but it fades very quickly. I’ve got a fix for that, though.”

As Boyd crouched over him, Andrew got his lighter out of his pocket and held the flame under the receipt, being careful not to burn the paper. As it heated, brown ink began to appear again on the paper.

“885 North Sullivan Street, Brooklyn,” Boyd read off the top line. “Criterion Equine Veterinary Services.”

“What do you reckon are the odds on someone at a horse hospital being involved in the theft of pregnant zebras?”

***

Neil lay curled up in his bed, gently stroking the soft fur of Bonnie and Clyde, listening to them purr. He’d had a nap after the latest session with Wymack and Waterhouse; they’d asked him to recount what he’d witnessed of his father ordering some killings. It wasn’t a particularly happy memory, and had set his various scars and the iron burn on his shoulder to tingling. It had left him
drained and unsettled, and he’d retreated to the safety of his temporary room in the study, with the nightlight and the cats. He kind of wished he could get away with sleeping next to Doe again, like he had his first night back. He hadn’t had any nightmares that time. A far cry from the nightly horrors he was enduring now.

He sighed and gently rubbed his cheek against the top of Bonnie’s little head, enjoying their loud purr of contentment as they nuzzled him back. Both cats had been absolutely ecstatic and very territorial since his return, and honestly it felt very soothing to know his absence had made an impression, and they wanted him home.

The latest nightmare had been more of an awful memory, really. He couldn’t stop thinking about those tapes that Riko had forced him to watch, of a young Doe strapped to a table and helpless as a doctor manipulated and coerced and touched him. He knew the man must be Proust, the rehab doctor who Doe had killed in retribution. Even knowing the man was long dead, remembering what he’d seen put a hot flame of rage in Neil’s chest.

Doe had looked so young, he couldn’t quite get over it despite knowing it was footage from more than five years ago. His face seemed softer, rounder, even in the midst of painful drug withdrawal putting bags under his eyes. His hair had been much longer and floppier. He was narrower and skinnier, not yet the heavy muscular fortress Neil knew. His eyes were almost dead-looking, when they weren’t glazed with whatever drugs Proust was forcing on him. He showed no emotion other than rage or extreme distress whenever Proust dug painfully into his memories and laid new trauma overtop the old. But still, he was so familiar. During the worst times in that tiny dank room, Neil had been unsure whether he was watching the old tapes or something more current, with his Doe being hurt.

He hoped Proust had suffered before he died.

But that line of thinking was flavoured entirely too much with his father’s reek, and he pressed his face more firmly into warm cat fur to try and block it out.

He knew why he kept thinking about those tapes, though. It was inevitable that with so many of his thoughts circling around Doe, the association would pop up. But more than that – now he knew a bit more exactly about some of what Doe had survived in his life, it made Neil hesitant to want to act on these tricky feelings of wanting and needing. It was hard to think about wanting to be touched and held when he knew just how much Doe had survived and fought through to get to where he was today.

Neil knew it was a stupid line of thinking – clearly, Doe had done a lot of work to get himself better and recover from his past, and he was just as touchy with Neil these days. Neil had never forced any of those touches, had never touched Doe without implicit or explicit permission. He’d always known about Drake, and Doe had spoken a few times about his childhood. It was nothing new. But still, knowing and seeing visceral proof were quite different.

If he were to broach the subject with Doe – and he’d had a wild moment thinking it was happening at breakfast, though clearly he’d been mistaken – he knew he would want to be very careful. He didn’t want to ever be another source of pain for his friend.

Doe had popped in before going, to say he had taken on a quick case and would be back soon, and to remind Neil that there were two undercover cops watching the entrances and exits to keep him safe. His tone had betrayed his thoughts, similar to Neil’s, that the Wesinskis and Moriyamas had too many people skilled at evading the police to feel completely comforted by it. Knowing it was irrational, they both felt better when they had each other in sight, just in case. Neil just hoped Doe got back soon; he was getting jumpy in the quiet old house by himself.
The sound of a key in the lock raised his spirits for a second and he sat up in bed, though once the person had come in the house his heart started to pound anxiously. He didn’t recognise the tread or sound of the person moving around – Doe always hung up his coat and edged off his shoes, dropped his keys on the side table. Every time. No one else had a key.

“Andrew?” A quiet, female voice asked hesitantly of the empty house.

“Robin?” Neil called back in surprise. “How did you get in?”

“Andrew gave me a key for emergencies,” she called back. “Where are you? Where’s Andrew?”

“He’s out. I’m upstairs.”

He heard her starting up the stairs, and looked around himself in dismay. There was no way to hide the fading bruises on his face and the few bandages still wrapped around his wrists, or the condition of his scalp and hair. The mess of belongings scattered around the study didn’t help the impression, either. He probably needed a shower, after that nightmare. Oh well. They were going to have to tell Robin what was going on eventually. He sat up in bed and pulled the covers up to his chest, trying not to dislodge the cats too much.

Robin paused in the doorway of the study, looking down at him with her mouth a little open in shock. They both seemed to remember at the same time they had never been alone in a room together – Doe had always been there to provide a buffer, and support for Robin being around a strange man. She held her child’s Exy racquet a bit tighter in her hand – a nervous tell, Neil knew.

“Hi,” he said quietly, and brought his knees up to his chest carefully so as not to hurt his still-recovering ribs. He knew he didn’t really pose a threat in his current state, but he didn’t want to stress her any further.

“Are you okay?”

“Not really.” He offered her a small smile.

She slowly looked him over, a frown growing on her face. “What happened?”

“How much has Andrew told you about me, Robin?”

She shrugged and edged forward into the room to sit on the floor, near enough to pick up a sprawled Clyde. “He said I could benefit from talking to you sometime, but nothing specific. I thought that to be with Andrew, you must have some kind of understanding of… that kind of thing.”

Neil lifted a shoulder, and let that ‘being with Andrew’ comment pass. “Yes and no. Not the same, but similar. My family… my family is a lot of very awful people. I’ve spent most of my life hiding from them.”

Her frown deepened, a little confused, so he took the collar of his shirt and pulled it to the side to show one of his scars. Her face went rigid with understanding, and she stroked over Clyde’s squishy paws to distract herself.

“A few weeks ago, someone who knows my family caught up with me. It wasn’t very pretty.”

“Are you safe?”

“Safe enough for now. We’re working on it.”
“So is that why Andrew hasn’t been around recently?” Robin asked. “Renee said he was ill and not to visit for a while. I was getting worried.”

“Pretty much,” Neil admitted. “I’m sorry if you’ve needed him. It’s been a bit horrific for us both, the past few weeks. Is that why you came over?”

“I can understand that now. Um, not really. I was worried, and wanted to talk to him about something, but it’s not very urgent.”

They were quiet for a few moments, each looking to their lapful of cat. “Do you want to talk to me about it?” Neil offered quietly. “I know I’m not your mentor, but I’m a good listener. Doe said he’d be back in a few hours, if you want to wait for him, and you’d be welcome to hang out in the house until he gets back.”

She hesitated, then slowly began to speak. Neil listened, put his own worries out of his mind, and focussed entirely on trying to help this brave, wonderful young woman.

***

“Well, we made it to Criterion,” Matt commented as they sat in his car outside the hospital, watching some tourist carriage horses being led out of the doors, and a horsebox with racetrack logos plastered on it pull up in one of the empty spaces in the lot. “What’s your plan, go in and listen for hoofbeats? We don’t have any kind of warrant or official police presence.”

“I’m confident something will present itself once we’re inside,” Doe said absently. He was preoccupied by a message on his phone, and kept tapping his fingers against the screen.

“Something wrong?”

“Robin showed up at my house,” Doe muttered.

“Who’s Robin?”

Doe blinked, and his face went carefully blank. Matt knew he was hiding something even before he spoke. “A student. I’m giving her science tutoring for her exams.”

Matt gave him a look out of the corner of his eye, but let it pass. He knew if Doe were concealing something, he probably had a good reason for it. If she were another gangster child, Matt didn’t want anything to do with it. He glanced in his rearview mirror as a warehouse behind them opened its doors, wanting to check they didn’t slam into the back of his car. With the impending wedding, he really didn’t want any sudden car costs on top of everything else. As a van pulled out of the warehouse, he saw a flash of purple from further inside.

“By ‘something will present itself’, did you mean the truck we’ve been looking for?”

Doe leaned up in his seat to look in the mirror too, and raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Huh.”

They inspected the warehouse, slipping in through the door. Sure enough, they found a purple APD truck with a scratch on one side sitting off to one side, and its plates matched those of the one stolen. Moving cautiously, Matt went first in case the perps were still around, and they slowly moved to inspect the back of the truck. It was open, and the inside shelves had been taken down. There was hay and some droppings scattered over the bed of the truck, and a distinct horsey smell. Matt exchanged a look with Doe, who was gesturing to a nearby shipping container. It seemed locked at first glance, but Doe easily jiggled off the padlock; it had been cut, and staged to look as if it were still functional. Together, they swung open the doors and blinked at what they found.
The container would have been large enough to transport a car or two, but there were only two occupants in the dark box – two adult zebras, who whickered quietly as they munched on the hay piled deep around their hooves. There was a cut-open barrel filled with water off to one side. The space had a pungent smell of droppings, hay, and blood.

Matt broke the silence. “Why go to the trouble of stealing two zebras if you’re just going to dump them in a warehouse 12 hours later?”

“Technically, there should be four zebras,” Doe commented, and bent to pick up a small glass bottle half-hidden in the hay. He tilted the label to the light; the bottle was almost empty. “They were pregnant, remember? This is oxytocin, a hormone involved in mammalian childbirth. It’s administered to help with equine labour, sometimes, helps with cervical dilation and uterine contraction.”

Matt scrunched up his nose a bit. There was something a bit off-putting about Doe, who Matt was pretty sure was very uninterested in vaginas, listing off clinical terms like that. “You think the thieves induced labour? And took the newborn foals?”

“Seems like it. Neither of those mares look as large and round as I’d been told to expect.”

Matt squinted at the zebras and had to agree. Then he noticed they were huddled together in one corner, apparently avoiding part of the container. He thought it might just be they were frightened in an unknown space, especially after having their foals taken away from them so soon post-partum, but then started to reconsider that smell of blood. Sure, he knew births could be messy things, but he’d also been to a lot of crime scenes in his time. He edged through the hay towards the corner the zebras seemed to be avoiding, and his shoes hit something firm hidden under a pile of hay. With a sinking feeling, he began scooping away the hay, pausing only to put on some latex gloves.

With a sigh, he uncovered a dead body. An Asian man in a labcoat, with an ID badge for Criterion Equine Services. There was at least one gunshot wound that Matt could see. He grimaced and got out his phone. Time to involve the rest of the department, officially.

About an hour later, police cars had blocked off access to the warehouse and crime scene techs had arrived to swarm the scene. Matt found Doe on his back under the APD truck, presumably looking for something, with just his short legs poking out at the side. Matt lightly nudged at his knee with his boot.

“Initial canvassing of the hospital and scene turned up some results,” Matt told Doe’s legs. “David Chang was a vet at Criterion, looks like he didn’t die from the first bullet. We found some skin under his fingernails that must have come from his attacker; he tried to fight after he got shot.”

“What about our stripey friends?” Doe asked from under the truck.

“On their way back to the zoo, they should arrive home within the hour.”

“Dr Joseph will be pleased.”

Matt got out his notebook and flipped through the various thoughts he’d jotted down. “CSU’s still got some things to finish, but here’s what I got so far for a timeline of events: David Chang and a partner steal an APD truck in Queens last week, which they use to transport two stolen zebras last night. Dr Chang oversees the birth of the foals in the warehouse early this morning, after which his partner shoots him and flees the scene with both newborns in a less conspicuous and smaller vehicle.”
Doe was quiet for a moment, then awkwardly shuffled out from under the truck. “Wrong,” he said from the floor.

“What am I missing?” Matt asked in a tart voice.

“All the important parts,” Doe said as he got to his feet and brushed off his hands. “A man who is not David Chang steals the truck, which he then uses to abduct two zebras. Knowing that equine births can be tricky, he drives his cargo to this warehouse a mere 100 metres from a horse hospital filled with trained staff and equipment. The delivery becomes troublesome, and he forcibly enlists the help of David Chang. The doctor delivers the foals, and is then shot to keep him quiet.”

Matt raised an eyebrow. “I assume you have some evidence to support that?”

“I had a look through Dr Chang’s phone before it was bagged up,” Doe nodded. “He has several missed calls and texts from his wife asking why he isn’t at the airport right now to fly out for his son’s graduation. He wasn’t part of the plot, and it’s quite easy to convince someone to help you when you have a gun in their face.”

Matt noted that down in his book dutifully, then tapped his pen against the page. “It seems sloppy of the shooter to leave the truck here, though. We traced it right to the zebras. This guy seems very well-organised, it shouldn’t have been too much trouble for him to hide the vehicle better or dispose of it.”

At that, Doe gave him a pleased little smirk. “My thoughts exactly. But you can’t drive a truck with a broken rear axle.”

“Come again?”

Doe gestured to the underside of the truck he had been inspecting. “The rear axle of the truck is fractured. The damage probably occurred when the thief tried to unload over a thousand pounds of panicked and pregnant zebras into an unfamiliar space with no loading ramps or blinders. I’d imagine our man will be very bruised and battered when we catch up to him.”

“So after the births in the warehouse, the perp tries to drive away in the truck, but it won’t move. So he takes the foals and flees in another vehicle.”

“Probably an SUV judging by the amount of shattered glass just down the street.”

Matt followed his gaze and saw a spill of glass about 50 metres away, and some skidmarks. He raised his eyebrows and made a note to tell the CSU to extend their sweep down the street further. “Okay, I’ll put out a message for officers to be looking for an SUV with a broken window.”

“While they’re looking, we’re going to head to upstate New York,” Doe announced, and produced another slip of paper in his gloved hands.

Matt squinted at the paper – another receipt, this time for Federal Feeds in Thiells, NY.

“I think it could be the dispensary where our criminal got all his hay. Might help to have a description of him.”

“Where did you find this?” Matt asked, perplexed. “The techs already finished with the shipping container.”

“They didn’t examine the zebra dung,” Doe said calmly, and handed the paper into Matt’s cringing hands.
When Andrew got back home late that night, he noted with some surprise that Robin’s coat was still hung up by the door.

“Robin? Neil?”

“Kitchen,” Robin called back. Andrew set down his armful of papers, quickly took off his own coat and shoes and went to investigate. He looked at them in astonishment – they were eating some kind of fruit pie at the table while the cats dug into their own bowls. It all looked suspiciously chummy, considering how nervous Robin got around older men, and how fragile Josten had been recently. He hadn’t even known there was pie in the house; Renee must have brought it and left it somewhere.

“Hi,” Josten said with a warm, shy little smile that made Andrew’s stomach turn somersaults. Don’t think about that conversation earlier, he told himself firmly. Don’t think about it. Especially not with Robin here.

Too late, though. Josten looked even more kissable than usual with tension and fear gone from his face, and calm contentment settled there instead.

“Hi Andrew,” Robin said cheerily once she’d swallowed her faceful of pie.

“What’s going on here?” He asked as he served himself a generous slice of the pie and sat down with them.

“We’ve been getting to know each other,” Josten replied with a small smile in Robin’s direction. “It’s been nice.”

“Uh huh,” Andrew said, looking between them both. “I’m sorry I haven’t been around recently, Robin.”

“It’s okay,” Robin shrugged him off. “Neil explained. Do you think you’re back now?”

Andrew shared a quick look with Josten. “I think so. Did you want to talk about something?”

“Neil helped me out, actually.”

Andrew raised his eyebrows in mock astonishment and took a giant spoon of pie.

“I should be getting back home,” Robin said after a minute of quiet munching. “My mom might freak a bit.”

“Do you want me to escort you?” Andrew asked.

Robin chewed her lip for a minute, then gave a small smile that lit up her whole face. “No, thanks. I made it here all on my own. I’m sure I can get home again just fine.”

Pride made itself a little burning candle in Andrew’s chest, and he smiled back at her. “If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure. I’ll text when I’m back home.”

They waved to her and she saw herself out. Josten tried to stifle a yawn into his pie and didn’t entirely succeed. Andrew just looked at him.
“It was a bit tiring, talking to her. But good.” Josten smiled. “It felt good to focus on someone else, not just my problems. I’m a bit knackered now, though. How was your case?”

Andrew nodded slowly, deciding to accept him at his word. If either of them wanted to say what they had talked about, they would bring it up in their own time. And Josten seemed much calmer in himself, too. “Still ongoing. I’ll be heading out with Boyd again in the morning.”

“How is he?”

“Fine. Asking about you.”

Josten hummed in acknowledgement and pushed the rest of his pie around on his plate. After a moment he just scooped it on top of Andrew’s serving, making a wonderful stack of pie. Andrew nodded approval and thanks and got started finishing it. Josten watched him for a bit, then lowered his gaze to fiddle with his cuffs. He seemed to be chewing over his thoughts very carefully, and Andrew waited for him to order them about to his satisfaction.

“Uh… Andrew?” he mumbled eventually.

“Yes?” Andrew said in a voice as even as he could possibly make it, telling himself not to get ahead of himself, not to think, not to hope, not to want…

“Could I – I mean, could we…”

“Could we what?”

Josten looked up to meet his eyes for a moment that seemed to never end.

Then he sighed and lowered his eyes again. “Could I sleep next to you again?” He asked weakly. “It – it really helped, before.”

Andrew shoved pie in his mouth to cover the awful weight of disappointment pressing on his shoulders. He nodded as casually as he could. “Sure,” he said once he’d swallowed and got more of a handle on himself. “Do you mind if I keep working while you sleep?”

“That’s fine,” Josten said quickly, not quite meeting his eyes. “Thanks.”

Andrew dropped his plate in the sink and turned away to completely control himself as he got out his papers and started spreading them over the coffee table. Josten went upstairs for a moment and reappeared wrapped in his blanket. Andrew tried very hard not to react – he looked very vulnerable, very soft, wrapped up like that. Andrew sat on the sofa and gestured vaguely. Josten settled beside him after a minute of awkward shuffling, the heat of his blanketed body washing over Andrew like a wave of warm water.

They were quiet for nearly ten minutes as Andrew leafed slowly through his packet of information and Josten tried to get comfortable. He shuffled and shifted and sighed and squirmed.

“Can I lean on your shoulder?” Josten finally asked.

Andrew grunted agreement, trying not to read into it, and propped one elbow on the back of the couch. Josten shifted over until he could rest his head on Andrew’s shoulder, curling into his side with a quiet sigh. Andrew very resolutely did not look at him, but after a few minutes of quiet, slowly deepening breathing, he rested his propped-up arm gently around Josten’s shoulders.

Josten mumbled something, half-awake, and curled tighter into Andrew’s side. Andrew’s hand
found its way into Josten’s hair, resting over the back of his skull. His hair had started to grow out a little now, though it was still a fine fuzz under Andrew’s fingertips. It was soft, almost like a cat’s, and sprang gently back into shape as he ran his fingers through it.

Josten gave a hitching little sigh, and sank into proper sleep. Andrew stared up at the ceiling for a moment, wondering why he was putting himself through this.

*Once this case is over, he promised himself. I’ll tell him then. I have to. I can’t cope with this any longer.*

---

Andrew woke slowly, feeling warm and relaxed. The weight of a body leaning against his startled him for a moment, then he realised who it must be and let out a slow breath. There was a hand gently stroking circles over his chest, and slow breaths ghosting over his collarbones, and he didn’t want either of them to ever stop. He slowly realised his head had dropped down to rest on top of Josten’s at some point in his sleep, and his mouth and cheek were pressed to Josten’s soft, downy hair.

Josten kept gently stroking his chest, shy little circles of his fingertips that he would not be brave enough to do if he thought Andrew were awake. It put an ache in his bones and a shortness in his breath.

He had the fleeting thought that years ago, he would have reacted with extreme fear and violence if anyone touched him like that, ever. But now, knowing it was Josten… all he wanted to do was pull him closer and tell him to never stop.

*Look how far I’ve come, Bee,* he thought vaguely as he tried to keep still and calm, so as not to alert Josten to his wakefulness. All too soon, however, Josten sighed and started to sit up. Andrew shifted a bit and faked a yawn as he straightened up, blinking as if he’d only just opened his eyes.

“Sorry,” Josten said lightly, in a morning-scratchy voice. “Didn’t mean to wake you.”

Andrew mumbled something and rubbed a hand over his face. “Didn’t mean to fall asleep on you.”

“It’s okay,” Josten smiled. “I actually managed to sleep through the night. So, thank you.”

Andrew snorted quietly. “Maybe soon you’ll move onto the teething phase.” He said, instead of suggesting they make it a regular thing.

Josten rolled his eyes and carefully stretched his arms and sides. He accidentally knocked some of the paper spread out on the table and bent to take a closer look at them.

“What’s up with the maps?”

Andrew yawned properly and surveyed the mess of maps that spilled over the table and onto the floor where he’d fallen asleep mid-thought the previous night. “Boyd and I are after a pair of newborn zebra foals. No, really,” he added at Josten’s sceptical look. “They were stolen after the vet who delivered them was shot. The thief bought hay and other such supplies at a store called Federal Feeds. Last night Boyd and I spoke to the manager of the store, and he confirmed he sold large amounts of supplies on Thursday to a man driving the truck we have matched to the zebra theft.”

“Did you get a description of him?”
Andrew made a so-so gesture with one hand. “He was six feet and white. That’s all the manager could remember of his appearance, but he did recall the man making small talk about a hailstorm the night before.”

“So you’re looking at weather maps in that area for Wednesday night?” Josten asked. “Trying to see if there’s anywhere around there suitable for stashing baby animals?”

“Pretty much,” Andrew replied. Josten hummed and had a closer look at the maps, looking more energised and more himself than he had in weeks. “We’ve already had the police in the area search every stable, barn and farmhouse in the areas of falling hail. Nothing yet.”

Josten nodded as he leafed through the pages, then paused and started measuring distances with his fingers.

“What is it?”

“There’s an old psychiatric hospital around here, called Letchworth Village,” Josten said, and made a small mark on an empty, rural spot on the map with a pen. “It’s been derelict for a long time now, but it kept a working farm for the patients as one of the attempted therapies, I guess. There are old barns there, and it’s in the middle of nowhere. Could be a good place for your guy.”

“And how do you know about it?”

“I hid out there for a couple weeks when I got injured one time,” Josten shrugged. “It was a pretty good spot, actually. The buildings are still mostly intact, and it was private and secluded.”

“It didn’t creep you out to stay there?” Andrew had to ask. He thought if he ever had the option of sheltering in a rundown version of Easthaven, he would run in the opposite direction regardless of any benefits of the place. Hospitals in general were just creepy places to be with no one else around.

“Nah,” Josten shrugged again. “I quite liked it, actually.”

“Amazing,” Andrew muttered, then carefully evaluated at his bright expression. “Do you want to come along? Maybe coming back to work will help get you settled again.”

The effect was almost instant; his contented and pleased expression shuttered and his eyes went wide with anxiety as he clutched at his arms, huddling back into his blankets. He cast a nervous glance at the door and held his blankets tighter.

“No,” Josten said tightly. “No, not yet. Soon, I promise. I just… I need a few more days.”

Andrew’s chest clenched painfully and he reached out to gently hold Josten’s wrist. For a moment he was reminded startlingly of Robin, and hoped Josten wasn’t developing an agoraphobia as well as claustrophobia. “Okay,” he murmured. “I’m not going to force you. Whenever you’re ready.”

Josten took some slow, steadying breaths and nodded his thanks.

“Do you want me to stay here today?” Andrew asked. “I’m sure Boyd can chase up the Letchworth angle on his own, if you need me here.”

Josten bit his lip, looking very tempted for a long minute. Eventually, he shook his head. “No, it’s okay. I’d like that, but I don’t need it. I don’t want to get in the way of your work.”

“It wouldn’t be getting in the way.”
“It’s okay, Andrew, really,” Josten assured him with a wan smile. “Wymack and Waterhouse will be over soon anyway. You don’t need to worry about me.”

“I’m always going to worry about you,” Andrew replied before his brain caught up to his mouth, and he pressed his lips together to stop any more foolishness from escaping them.

Josten’s eyes had gone all soft again, and for a moment he leaned close enough to rest his head on Andrew’s shoulder again. “Thank you,” he said quietly. “But I’ll be fine, I promise.”

Andrew gently ran his hand over the short fuzz of Josten’s hair. “If you need me to come back, just text me.”

“I will.”

***

They had been exploring the grounds of the abandoned hospital for half an hour before anyone made any discoveries. After finding the body of Dr Chen, the NYPD had officially become involved, and with that came the perks of having officers at their disposal. They had been doing sweeps of the abandoned buildings, covering the large estate much more efficiently than if Andrew and Boyd had been alone. Andrew had been trying to figure out where Josten might have hidden out those few years ago, but he seemed to have covered his tracks, or else they had been wiped away by time, as there were no signs of any people having been there in a long time.

Andrew and Boyd followed the officer who had been covering the north end of site towards one of the old barn buildings, who directed them to a stall down at the far end of the hall. They stepped over discarded burlap sacks, mouldering straw and occasional evidence of rodent nests or the lairs of wild cats, drawn by the soft sound of snuffling.

There, in the very last bay and contained in a new-looking pen equipped with hay and water, was a small horse-like animal. It had a downy brown and white striped coat, and big, liquid eyes. Its ears snapped this way and that and it started to snuffle and whinny in fright as it caught their unfamiliar scent. It didn’t try to get to its feet, but then Andrew reasoned it must be quite weak, for a newborn. It seemed to be shivering a bit, though he wasn’t sure if it was from the cool air or from fear. He hadn’t had much experience with horses and their cousins in his life – but there was something not quite right about this one. He squinted at it more carefully, examining the stripes and the bone structure of its face and sorting through his extensive memory for ideas.

“We’re looking for two, any sign of the other one?” Boyd asked the officer in a hushed voice.

“Nothing yet,” the officer shrugged.

“Alright, thanks. I guess one baby zebra’s better than none,” Boyd added to Andrew.

“You’re not completely wrong,” Andrew frowned, tilting his head this way and that, “But unless I’m mistaken, that’s not actually a zebra.”

“Doe, I don’t know how to tell you that most juvenile animals have different coat patterns to adults.”

Andrew raised his eyes to the ceiling for a moment. “Not the coat colour. This animal is a quagga, an equine species native to South Africa.”

Boyd frowned at the animal too, which seemed to be getting used to their presence. “Never heard of them. How have you?”
“I watched a documentary a while ago about unusual animal species,” Andrew shrugged. “And I’d be very surprised if you knew a quagga at first glance. They’ve been extinct since 1883.”

***

Dr Joseph seemed likely to either faint or start yelling when they told him the news.

“The zebras gave birth to extinct animals?” He asked again in a wavery voice, his hands shaking on the photos that had been taken by one of the officers.

Matt nodded. “It looks like the thief was out on an errand with the second foal when we searched the place. He could be showing the foal to a potential buyer, we’re thinking.”

Dr Joseph gaped at the photos again, then shook his head. “I don’t care if you found one quagga or two – I care that you found any. They’re extinct!”

“It seems that they’re now de-extinct,” Doe commented with a quick smile, rocking on his heels a bit in the corner. “Would you have any ideas how that happened?”

Dr Joseph was quiet for some time before venturing an opinion. “Well… biotechnology has recently had a lot of successes, I’m not sure if you’re familiar with the field. But cloning techniques in particular have made great strides. It’s not quite my field, but as far as I know, it’s possible to take some preserved DNA from an extinct species – some hair, maybe, from an old taxidermied specimen – and place it into a donor egg cell emptied of its own DNA. The hybrid cell could then be stimulated to divide in mimicry of fertilisation, and implanted into the uterus of its nearest living relative. It was done in 2009 I think with a Pyrenean Ibex, after the successes of Dolly the sheep were proven from a similar method.”

Matt absorbed that in silence, and exchanged a look with Doe that quite clearly said neither of them had entirely understood the explanation. Dr Joseph seemed confident in it, mostly, and they could always research it more fully later. For now, Matt was happy enough to accept that someone had done some genetic shenanigans to secretly implant quagga embryos in zebras at the zoo, likely for the purpose of selling the de-extinct animals afterwards – any legitimate venture would be conducted at a proper facility, without the need for theft or murder of bystander veterinarians. To him, that spoke to the black market, incredible monetary motive, and the need for a lot of technical expertise. He got out his notebook and made a few notes, looking casually at Dr Joseph as he did so, assessing.

Doe seemed to be thinking along similar lines. “It sounds like a tricky process,” he suggested diffidently. “I’d imagine the pregnant animals would need a great deal of care and attention, not least so as to prevent any accidental – and very risky and expensive – miscarriages.”

Dr Joseph frowned for a moment, then his eyes went wide. “You think someone’s been giving our zebras secret checkups? No one has access to these animals except zoo employees.”

“Our thoughts exactly,” Matt commented. “So, 17 months ago, a pair of female zebras arrive at the Bronx Zoo. Three months later it’s announced that both mares are pregnant; unknown to anyone except our guy, they are actually pregnant with quagga foetuses. For the next 56 weeks, they enjoy first-rate care and accommodation at your facility,” he said, with an ingratiating little smile, “and when their due date draws near, the criminal drives them away in a truck to give birth in secret.”

“I don’t get that part,” Dr Joseph frowned, scratching at his cheek. “If you’re gonna reintroduce a species, wouldn’t you want to be honoured for it?”
“Honoured. Or paid,” Doe commented. “Not necessarily in that order. The illegal market for endangered and exotic animals is quite robust, unfortunately. The introduction of an extinct species would create quite the feeding frenzy in some shadowy circles.”

“We’re assuming you have an alibi for last night and this morning, Dr Joseph?” Matt asked as casually as possible.

“I was with my wife and kids last night, we had friends over for dinner. I dropped my daughter off at school this morning.”

“Excellent,” Doe said with a bright, excited smile that said very clearly his spirits were high again on an interesting case, “Now that’s cleared up, we need your help.”

***

Matt walked in behind Dr Joseph with Doe, into a break room filled with about twenty zoo employees, some in uniform and some in casual clothes looking vaguely disgruntled. Matt cast a careful look over the lot of them, making note of any people who even slightly matched the description given by the Federal Feeds manager of the driver of the stolen truck. Six feet and white, male. Possibly with dark hair. That matched about two thirds of the room, unfortunately. Still, he made a mental note of their faces and general body language.

“Good afternoon,” Dr Joseph smiled briefly at his colleagues. “Those of you who came in on your day off – thanks. As the group who look after the zebras here at the zoo, I wanted to give you the chance to meet the men responsible for bringing our ladies home. Detective Matthew Boyd and NYPD consultant Andrew Doe.” He extended a hand to them with a wide smile, and his colleagues gave a patter of mixed applause – some only polite, some more genuine.

Matt smiled brightly at them all and nodded a bit; it was nice to have a bit of applause every now and again, he could admit that to himself. He didn’t think Dan would oblige him by applauding whenever he came home, though he would do it for her. He made another quick note to do that later – she was getting quite stressed in the run-up to the wedding, and some harmless flattery and flirting might lift her spirits a bit. He hoped so, anyway.

“Thanks for the welcome, but one of you is a giant hypocrite,” Doe drawled, his own eyes on the move across the crowd. “The man who stole your zebras, who most likely is the same man who murdered a vet named David Chang, is here right now.”

Doe seemed to pause for dramatic effect – then turned decisively to a short, Black man. “Donovan Gaines.”

“What?” The man spluttered, and Matt fought to keep his expression calm and neutral. “No, no, there’s some kind of mistake—”

“Save your protests for the trial,” Doe cut him off, looking rather intensely at him. “You, Donovan, are the man who stole a truck from Axiom Parcel Delivery last week. You are the man who used it to steal two pregnant zebras, and when their delivery did not go as planned, you coerced a vet to assist you and then shot him once he’d done his part.”

“No, you’re crazy, I didn’t—” Donovan kept protesting, starting to look very distressed as his coworkers drew away from him with looks of suspicion and anger.

“Boyd,” Doe muttered out of the side of his mouth, and jerked his head. Boyd followed him to the far side of the room, in half a mind to smack some sense into him.
“What the hell?” Matt hissed. “You remember the description we got?”

“Vividly,” Doe said. “I accused Donovan Gaines because I’m very certain he was not involved at all; I wanted to observe the behaviours of everyone else in the room. The more I accused Gaines, the more a man called Ben Reynolds has relaxed.”

He tilted his head minutely, and Boyd followed his eyeline to a tall man sitting at the back table, who was now leaned back in his seat and casting shocked looks at the increasingly-desperate Gaines with his table companions in between slurps of an energy drink.

“His breathing has slowed, his cheeks have flushed, his hands have unclenched – he’s relieved,” Doe continued in a low mutter. “I’m nearly positive he’s our man.”

Boyd gave him a long look. “That was cruel,” he said in a flat tone. “You’ve sabotaged that man’s reputation among his peers.”

“Only in the short term; we’ll explain everything and I’ll personally apologise to him once we have the culprit in custody.”

“That’s not good enough,” Matt insisted, tugging a bit on Doe’s coat to get his undivided attention. “It seems to me we’ve had a conversation before about ends and means, haven’t we?”

Matt knew it didn’t escape Doe’s attention that the hand holding his lapel was his right one – the one that still had a slight tremor, even now. Doe’s expression went all blank like an empty chalkboard, then a muscle in his jaw jumped. He looked away from Matt’s fierce eyes after only a second.

“Alright,” he conceded quietly, and brushed his hand away. “You made your point. I’m sorry.”

Matt nodded and straightened up. “Good. I know you and Josten do things a certain way, but when you’re working with me, I won’t tolerate that kind of thing anymore. Alright?”

“Yes,” Doe muttered. “Yes, okay.”

“Thank you.” Matt offered him a small smile. “We good, Andrew?”

Doe met his eyes again and huffed. “We’re good.”

Matt grinned and lightly knocked his fist against Doe’s shoulder. He was just glad he didn’t have to get shot again to get his point across.

“Uh,” Dr Joseph interjected as he crossed the room to them, a worried look plastered on his face. “Is everything okay? Everyone’s kind of waiting to see what’s going on?”

“We only have business with one of your colleagues – Ben Reynolds,” Matt said firmly. “And we’d prefer to talk to him at the station.”

***

“Finally,” Reynolds sniped after he’d been left alone to stew in the interrogation room for half an hour – rather effectively, Andrew thought. “I’m gonna say one thing, then I want my lawyer: I did not steal two zebras. Why would anyone do that?”

He folded his arms and leaned back in his chair, a sneer on his face as if this was all so beneath him. Andrew leaned against the wall to observe while Boyd took a seat.
"In this case, to use their wombs to reintroduce the quagga to the world," Andrew replied, examining his fingernails as if it, too, were so boring for him. Reynolds started a little, and his breathing rate picked up with a slight hitch. **Good, Andrew thought. An off-balance suspect is one prone to making mistakes.**

“You’re using your job at the zoo to finance your PhD in zoology, correct?” Boyd asked, reading off another bit of information from his notebook.

“Yeah, so?” Reynolds said, and Andrew very carefully did not smile. So much for waiting for his lawyer.

“So, you have the technical expertise to attempt de-extinction, you have easy access to the zebras, and you have quite a bit of debt. You fit our profile very nicely, Mr Reynolds,” Boyd said. “I’m gonna cut to the chase, here. The man who killed David Chang left DNA behind at the scene. If it wasn’t you, just provide us a sample and be on your way, with our apologies for taking up your time.”

Boyd smiled blandly at the zookeeper as he affected a nonchalant gaze that was rather too direct to really pass as casual. Andrew idly watched as he rubbed his fingertips together under the table, a nervous tic if Andrew had ever seen one.

“Why should I help you?”

Boyd shrugged and flipped his notebook closed. “If you choose not to co-operate, we’ll just monitor your whereabouts until we can amass enough evidence for a court order. It would be in everyone’s best interests to give up a sample voluntarily, before we have to go through a judge to compel it.”

Reynolds was quiet for another moment, then made a rather smart – if inconvenient – decision. “Lawyer,” he insisted. “Now.”

Andrew rolled his eyes and followed Boyd outside again. “I’ll put a team on him until we get the paperwork,” Boyd said in an undertone.

“If we’re lucky, we won’t even need the court order,” Andrew replied. “He might not have given us his DNA, but perhaps he has one floating about in the wild. Free-range.”

Boyd raised an eyebrow at him before grinning in understanding. “Are you coming along?”

“No, I want to get home. I don’t want to leave Neil alone too long,” Andrew replied, and pretended not to see Boyd’s knowing smile. “Have fun in the garbage.”

***

When Andrew got home, he was greeted by the smell of fresh air, and something cooking away in the oven that smelled amazing. He hung up his coat and walked slowly through to the kitchen, where Josten stood with his back to him, busily doing something on the stove.

“You’re washed and dressed,” Andrew said, mildly impressed. “And cooking.”

Josten turned around at the sound of his voice and tried out a beautiful, radiant smile. There was nothing energetic or excited about it, but it seemed to grow from within and lit up his eyes like cool stars. It put all sorts of foolish notions in Andrew’s head and he found himself just staring for a few moments.
“Yeah,” Josten agreed. “You’ve been so great the past few weeks, and I really appreciate it – but I think it’s time to start moving forwards. I can’t stay cooped up in here for the rest of my life, and I can’t keep running to bed whenever I get scared. I want to come back to work, too, soon. I’m not going to let Riko take my life away from me.”

Andrew joined him at the stove and peered down into the simmering tomato sauce he was stirring mushrooms and onions into so carefully; he rested his palm gently at the small of Josten’s back, tethering them both.

“As long as you’re not pushing yourself too fast, that’s good,” he replied. “Did anything in particular bring this on?”

“Talking to Robin, actually,” Josten smiled as he kept stirring the sauce, leaning a little into Andrew’s arm. “She’s working so hard on getting better. I was doing a lot of thinking today while you were out, and I don’t want to live my life in fear. I want this life that I’ve somehow made, and I already said I want to fight for it. Time to get off the couch.”

Andrew had to viciously smack down the urge to curl his arm around Josten’s hip and kiss his shoulder, work up his neck, find his mouth, stroke his fuzzy hair…

Stop that, he told himself. No.

He settled for gently rubbing his thumb against one of the knobs of Josten’s spine through his shirt. “Good,” he said. Very eloquently.

Josten smiled at him anyway and shifted closer, so Andrew’s arm just slipped down to hold his hip instead, and the warm line of his side pressed gently against Andrew’s chest. Andrew’s heart was doing acrobatics while he fought not to wrap both arms around him at that invitation.

“How’s the case going?” Josten asked.

“You’ll be pleased to know your tip about the abandoned hospital paid off,” Andrew told him, and watched his little smile bloom again. “We found one of the foals there, the other one is still missing. A long story and a lot of science I don’t understand later, Boyd and I identified the suspect as a zoo employee called Ben Reynolds. He refused to give us a DNA sample, so Boyd had a fun time digging through the zoo employee lounge’s trash until he found a can of Reynolds’ favoured energy drink. Preliminary salivary DNA analysis indicates a match to the skin found under the fingernails of the murdered vet. Boyd is on his way to make an arrest as we speak.”

“That’s wonderful,” Josten beamed as he added herbs and seasoning to the sauce.

Andrew watched the profile of his face, observing the way the setting sun caught on the lines of his nose, got confused and dizzy in his eyelashes, and curved gently over his mouth and cheekbones. He didn’t want to think, didn’t want to wait, didn’t want to hedge his bets anymore. He wanted to lay it all on the line and see if Josten would turn towards, or away, from him. He didn’t want to pretend this house hadn’t felt even more like a home since Josten had fallen into his life. He didn’t want to pretend like he wanted anyone else, or anything else than what they already had – with maybe some more kissing, if Josten wanted that. If he didn’t, Andrew would be happy with that too. He had never known, or been known in return, by anyone quite like this, and the vulnerability was both terrifying and liberating. He just never wanted this to stop, because he had fallen a long time ago and he was nearing the ground, unless Josten could stretch out a safety net for him.

Yes, he thought quietly, urgently. Yes, him. I choose him.
“Neil—”

A crash like a gunshot made them both yell, and without even thinking Andrew pulled Josten into his chest and curved over his back, offering his own back as a shield to the noise. Josten was panting and shaking and Andrew felt his own hands trembling and head spinning, wondering what the hell was going on, were they hurt, had they been shot at, was Riko coming for them both, were they going to take Josten away, no no no—

“Andrew,” Josten gasped out after a moment, shakily patting at the hands clasped over his chest, “Andrew. We need to see what that was.”

Slowly, one muscle at a time, Andrew unlocked his vise-like grip around Josten’s body and let him go. “Sorry,” he mumbled once Josten was able to step away.

“It’s okay,” Josten said quickly, his fingers clutching at Andrew’s shirt regardless. “I hear footsteps.”

Sure enough, within a few moments the two undercover cops who were supposed to be watching the house burst in, yelling questions and guns out, ready for any intruders. They rushed through the house, doing a full sweep, while Andrew and Josten clutched at each other in the kitchen and attempted to stop hyperventilating. Dimly, Andrew realised they had knocked the sauce off the stove, splashing it all over themselves, the wall, and the floor. He turned the heat off, trying not to think of how much it looked like blood spatter.

“There’s no one in the house,” one of the cops reported to them. “But there’s something in the front room.”

They followed him through cautiously, and Josten made a quiet retching noise as they saw what lay on the carpet.

A dead fox had been hurled through the window, and lay in a gory puddle of its own blood, entrails, and shattered glass. Gritting his teeth, Andrew stepped closer. It looked like an urban fox, skinny and dirty, and its throat had been slashed. Its tongue had been cut out and thrown on top of the corpse. It had also been gutted, and its entrails sat oozing and disgusting on his carpet. Its auburn fur, so close a shade to Josten’s own natural hair, was already starting to get matted from its own blood. For a lurching second, Andrew could feel his hands in Josten’s hair, inspecting his scalp for injuries, trimming away what was left and throwing away the bloody offcuts.

Josten was quietly sick in the kitchen bin, and Andrew stepped back one, two, three. He turned his gaze on the cops. “How did anyone get close enough to the house to do this?” He asked in a steely tone.

“There was a car behaving suspiciously further up the street,” one of them grimaced. “Our focus was on that. Someone must have been waiting for the distraction. I’ll call Captain Wymack, get a team to pull the CCTV, see if we can find our suspect. I’ll call a cleanup team, too.”

As long as it’s not Pumpkin who turns up, Andrew thought. He turned away and walked back to Josten. He was staring at the dead animal with a set jaw, his face pale but his eyes fierce.

“As threats go, that’s pretty clear-cut,” Josten said quietly.

“We should pack,” Andrew said roughly. “We need to get to a safe-house—”

“No,” Josten interrupted him. He was still shaking, but it looked more like anger than fear. “This is an empty threat. This is just meant to make us scared.”
“I know you’re a bit blasé about your personal safety, but—”

“No, listen,” Josten interrupted again, though he softened his tone and reached out to gently wipe a smear of sauce off Andrew’s cheek. “Riko obviously knows I haven’t done as he said. But he also knows that since I got back I’ve been having daily meetings with a police chief and a well-known lawyer, and now he knows there is definitely a protection detail. He knows I’m – we’re – being monitored very closely. He probably doesn’t know how much I’ve said, or to who, or what we’re planning. He doesn’t know how high up we’re going with this. He knows if either of us die or disappear suddenly, he could be signing his own confession with the evidence Wymack could already have on him. He can’t touch us, just make noise. He’s just trying to scare us into silence and running away. Well it’s not going to work.”

Andrew was quiet for a long time, and Josten kept stroking his cheek as Andrew stared, and thought it over.

“You’d better be right about that,” he eventually replied. “Because if you’re not, we’re all going to end up dead.”

“I’m right,” Josten assured him quietly, but confidently. “I’m sorry about the window, though. And the carpet.”

Andrew shook his head at that, unfortunately dislodging Josten’s gentle fingers.

“By the time we’re done, we’re going to ruin him,” Josten promised intently. “All of them. Top to bottom. Enough running and hiding. I refuse to let them dictate our lives anymore.”

Andrew was caught by the hard, unrelenting gleam of his eyes; he was a man on a mission, his previous fear transformed into a white-hot determination that could only be quenched by destroying their enemies. Andrew’s breath caught in his chest, and his blood started to sing. He was a rash second away from kissing him blind when his phone rang and startled him out of leaning in.

“What now?” He sighed into his phone.

“Ben Reynolds is in the wind,” Boyd replied tersely.

“What the fuck?” Andrew said, running a hand over his face. This day was too much, too much. “How’s that possible? You had men watching him.”

“You should get over here,” Boyd said, and hung up. Andrew stared at the phone in disbelief. The audacity.

“You should go,” Josten murmured.

Andrew just frowned at him.

“I’ll be fine,” Josten assured him. “I’ll make the undercovers sit with me, if it makes you feel better. Really, it’ll be okay. This is just Riko trying to get inside my head. Go catch your zebra thief.”

Andrew clenched his jaw. He didn’t like it, but there was nothing he could really do if he stayed here. Josten would be as safe as he could be until they had the whole rotten lot of the bastards locked up or in the ground, and failing that he still had his running feet. He would be okay. And Andrew should go clap some metal bracelets on Ben Reynolds before he got away from them completely.
“Stay safe,” he said reluctantly, and quickly changed into something not splattered with tomato sauce before heading out to meet Boyd again.

***

“Reynolds came home at four thirty,” Boyd greeted him with outside the apartment, looking almost as annoyed as Andrew felt. “We had a unit on the front and back door, he never left. Now, we show up to arrest him at six thirty and the place is empty.”

Boyd spread his arms at the bare apartment as Andrew took a quick look around.

“I take it you’ve searched the other apartments in the building?”

“He’s nowhere,” Boyd said, and grumpily nudged a chair with his boot. “He’s vanished into thin air.”

Andrew ignored that as he looked out the windows; Reynolds had the ground floor apartment, so it was easy enough to see the other buildings surrounding it. He did a bit of quick mental geography, then grinned and started walking slowly, and deliberately, over the wooden floor, listening to his footsteps.

“Did you know the slang to eighty-six, meaning to get rid of something, originated in a speakeasy called Chumley’s?”

“No,” Boyd huffed, though he was watching Andrew’s feet with a confused frown.

“The rear entrance of the bar had the address 86 Bedford Street,” Andrew continued, pressing down with his boots, “And when the manager got word that a raid was on its way, he would rush his patrons out that back door – out of number 86.”

“I assume you’re tiptoeing towards something resembling a point?”

“As it happens, we’re standing across the street from the backdoor of where Chumley’s used to be, before it was rebuilt. Now, police of the time could never figure out exactly—” He paused as a particular floorboard gave an ominous creaking sound, and carefully tested the quieter boards around it— “how Chumley’s was bringing bootlegged liquor onto the premises. It was found after the fact that there was a network of tunnels leading from the speakeasy into the adjacent buildings, which the police weren’t watching.”

Andrew smiled wider and jumped on the spot, and his boots made a hollow sound as they connected with the flooring. “Would you care to guess what’s under here?”

Boyd waved him out of the way, rolled up the rug covering the spot, and laid down to get a proper look at the old wooden flooring. A couple of them had a different look about them, and after a moment Boyd grabbed one edge and lifted; a panel of them, made to look like separate boards, lifted up like a trapdoor to reveal a narrow, brick-lined tunnel.

“Ben Reynolds didn’t vanish into thin air,” Andrew commented. “He vanished into the earth.”

***

“Ben Reynolds is wanted for the murder of Dr Chang and the theft of zoo property and abuse of his position to engineer the de-extinction of the quagga,” Matt recited as they took a short walk around the block to collect their thoughts, while the rest of the cops investigated where the tunnel let out. They didn’t have much hope of catching Reynolds – he had several hours’ of a head start – but they
were hoping for some evidence as to the direction of his flight. “He’s an indebted graduate student 
with very few material assets. If he wants to finance his life on the run, he has only one chip to cash 
in: an infant quagga.”

“Correct,” Doe nodded, his legs working a bit faster to keep up with Matt’s long stride.

“He has to sell the foal,” Matt sighed. “We’ve got no evidence as to where he’s keeping it this 
time, and no leads on where he is himself. We’ve got very little chance of catching him up until the 
moment of the sale, and after the sale our chances decrease even more significantly. It’s not 
looking great.”

“Our best chance at catching him and the foal would be at the point of sale,” Doe agreed. “We 
should pose as buyers.”

“How, exactly? He knows we’re looking for him, he won’t just put out a Classified Ad in the 
paper.”

“No, but he’ll want to create a well-stocked market for the foal; not much point setting up an 
auction with no bidders in the hall,” Doe commented. “Somewhere, there will be a bidding war 
happening for the quagga foal. What we need to do is find it and win it.”

“He’s not going to be stupid enough to put the phrase ‘quagga’ in his auction description,” Matt 
disagreed, then stopped in his tracks at the bleep of his phone. “Ah, shit, I’m late for the wedding 
rehearsal. I need to go, Doe. Regroup in the morning?”

“Oh, yes, sure.”

“Say hi to Neil for me, I’ll drop in for a proper chat soon.”

“Bye, Boyd.”

“Matt.”

***

The next morning found Matt waking up to the incessant beeping of his text messages.

“God, turn it off,” Dan mumbled into her pillow.

“Sorry, babe,” Matt said and squinted at the screen; Doe had been spamming him with an address 
for the past five minutes. “It’s the case, hun, I’m gonna get up.”

Dan just mumbled and shifted to pull the blankets further over her head; she wasn’t much of a 
morning person. Matt smiled, kissed the rise of her shoulder, and quickly gathered up some 
clothes.

Within twenty minutes, he was stepping out of a cab and into a small café, where he could see Doe 
sitting at the window seat.

“You wanna tell me why we’re having breakfast out here?” Matt asked, eyeing the two plates of a 
plentiful cooked breakfast, and hot coffee already steaming in his mug. He fell on it with abandon 
as Doe started to explain.

“Last night, when you went home to your fiancée—”

“And you went home to Neil,” Matt interrupted casually, and grinned at the coldly unimpressed
glare Doe gave him.

“When you went home,” Doe continued as if he hadn’t been interrupted, “I got a load of old cases on animal trafficking and the black market for such things. After a few hours, I realised there was a common thread on one website that deals in animal trading – dogs for sale, unexpected cat litters, selling second-hand pet equipment and the like. Most of the trading there seemed perfectly legitimate. However, on some posts there was the phrase *once in a blue moon.*”

Matt frowned as a dark SUV with a cardboard-patched window pulled up outside the café.

“‘Once in a blue moon’ functions as a dog-whistle in those ads,” Doe carried on calmly. “Each of the bidding sites those ads led to was unmonitored and dealt with the illegal trade of a rare or endangered animal. Once I’d identified this, I started to search for more recent posts made just before the theft of the pregnant zebras, and any made after that. I found five all leading to the same bidding site.”

A blue van pulled up behind the SUV. Matt looked a bit closer at the make and model – “Is that one of our unmarked vans?”

Doe ignored this. “I entered the auction under the name Rowan Deed; a pseudonym I use occasionally,” he added at Matt’s confused look. “I outbid the other parties, arranged a meeting, and called Wymack. And here we are.”

As they watched, the driver of the unmarked van – who Matt recognised as one of their officers – stepped out and knocked on the roof of the SUV. A tall man stepped out, looking around himself with a nervous air.

“That’s Reynolds,” Matt said. “Why isn’t he being arrested?”

“No evidence of the foal yet.”

The undercover cop and Reynolds debated something for a minute, then Reynolds appeared to give in to the cop’s request. He opened the back of his SUV and the cop bent down to get a look. He made a signal behind his back, and two squad cars screeched into position to block the SUV, officers spilling out with a rush of sirens, the undercover cop straightening up to quickly pin Reynolds against the car.

Matt smiled as they watched the officers arrest and haul Reynolds into the back of the police car, and each get an eyeful of the quagga foal concealed in the backseat of the stolen SUV.

“Their work,” he commented, and had some more of his breakfast. He caught Doe’s satisfied smirk as they watched the officers arrange transport for the foal back to the zoo; no doubt it would be hailed as a scientific breakthrough, and completely intentional on the zoo’s part. Matt had a feeling the zebra paddock would be swarmed with visitors despite the cold January weather, once the press got hold of it. When they’d finished their food and their refills of coffee, Doe stood up to leave.

“Hey,” Matt stopped him before he could step out the door. “It was good working with you again, Andrew.”

He held out his hand expectantly. Doe looked down at it for a moment, then clasped it firmly.

“You too, Matt.”

And as they shook, the tremor in Matt’s hand seemed to fade.
Neil had been pacing circuits around the kitchen for hours waiting for Doe to get back from his impromptu hang-out session with Boyd after the arrest of their subject. He’d been thinking hard, and finally came to a decision.

He had to tell Doe about how he had been… feeling, wanting, hoping, whatever the word was. He couldn’t keep pretending it wasn’t there, or that he wanted more than casual touches and comfortable friendship. But he didn’t want to hurt Doe either if this all turned out to be some fleeting curiosity; too many people had betrayed Doe in the past, manipulated and hurt him. Neil never wanted to be those people. But at the same time, he knew how he had reacted to Baskin’s kiss, and he knew that Doe would probably want something like that, if they changed things between them. He didn’t want to get Doe’s hopes up, then disappoint and hurt him by flinching away or freaking out.

But, he thought as he stared at the contacts list in his phone, neither of them would find out until Neil said something, or did something. They couldn’t keep on this limbo; Neil just couldn’t take it.

With a deep breath, he made his decision, and pressed the call button.

Time to figure things out.
EXTRAS - Head

Chapter Summary

A vaguely linear look into Andrew's thoughts over the past couple of months.
(changed update schedule just for today - 3 extras and 1 case chapter)

>This is getting ridiculous, Andrew told himself as his eyes followed Josten across the room, tracking the hard-won confidence in his stride and the easy looseness to his shoulders as he chatted with Boyd and Wilds.

>This has to stop, he told himself as his hands itched to run through Josten’s curly hair and scrunch the strands between his fingers.

>Get a hold of yourself, he said as he admired the way Josten wandered into the kitchen one morning, a baggy shirt hanging loose enough to poorly disguise the fact he was only wearing his boxers underneath and showing off so much leg.

>Just stop, he begged his brain as he woke up breathless and hard for the third time that week.

>It doesn’t mean anything, he said, and nodded to Roland’s little gesture.

>He is nothing, he told himself as Roland tugged off his shirt and stood with his hands behind his back.

>I’m just frustrated, he said, and took Roland down his throat.

>It means nothing, he panted silently as he got himself off thinking of Josten’s hands instead of his own.

>I can deal with this, he promised himself as he tamped down the protective rage sparked from seeing a perp look at Josten like he was street trash.

>I’ll get over this soon, he said as he watched Josten defend their work with an icy precision to a judge ready to fire them both.

>I’ve dealt with worse, he reminded himself as Josten switched seamlessly between three languages with an easy smile on his face.

>Why isn’t it going away, he whispered as they spent hours smoking and staring at the stars in silence.

>How do I get this to stop, he wondered as Josten leaned into his shoulder and held his wrist with a bashful smile.
He doesn’t feel the same way, he said as Josten leaned in closer and closer and tried to stay there as long as he could.

He’s not interested in anyone, he said as Josten stole his cigarette and took a long drag, lips where Andrew’s had been seconds before and a glint in his eyes that Andrew would instantly recognise from anyone else.

Stop fooling yourself, he yelled and paced his bedroom floor.

It will only hurt worse, he said as Josten curled into his shoulder a sobbing mess and begged for stability, and Andrew held him close and firm.

You always knew better than to fall, he scolded himself as his heart beat double-time at the sound of Josten’s key in the door.

I don’t want this, he sobbed as he inspected Josten’s bruises and cuts with careful hands that only trembled a little.

Take this away from me, he pleaded as he watched Josten’s belongings sneak out of his room to scatter through the house and the warmth it gave him.

This is too much, he said as Josten fussed and made him breakfast, only burning the toast a little.

Make it stop, he prayed as he caught Josten’s flushed gaze on his bare chest and arms after walking in during a workout.

There’s no way he wants me too, he scoffed as they shared secrets.

When did I admit I want him, he wondered, and pretended he hadn’t seen Roland’s gesture.

What if I could have this, he whispered, and watched how Josten curved into the guiding hand on his back, arching sleepily.

What if he said yes, his traitor’s heart demanded as Josten stared, stared, and smiled.

I think maybe he likes me, he told his pillow in the silence of the night.

I don’t deserve him, he told himself as Josten offered pale-faced honesty and painful memories for Andrew to keep safe.

Tell him anyway, his heart begged as Josten’s eyes kept searching him out through the crowded room, giving a smile each time they found each other.

He’s sending signals too, he told himself as he unwrapped another small present.

He will say yes, he told himself with trembling uncertainty.

Tell him, the pain in his chest begged when he saw others flirting with him, and Josten’s dismissive
reactions.

_God just tell him_, he pleaded with himself as he dressed with more care than usual.

_It’ll be fine_, he assured himself and walked down the stairs.

_Just say the words_, he said and walked into the kitchen.

_It really meant nothing after all_, he whispered brokenly as he watched Josten lean over, and kiss Renee gently on the mouth.
Chapter Summary

Honesty.

“What’s up with you?” Josten asked as they assessed the replacement window and carpet. “Are you okay?”

You kissed her, I saw you kissing her, you kissed Renee and not me and I didn’t realise I could hurt this much, his brain supplied in a steady stream that had been ever-present since the previous night.

“Peachy,” Andrew replied out loud and focussed on the room. He knew Josten was frowning at him but he ignored him. He knew he was being curt, unresponsive, and couldn’t bring himself to feel sorry even as his hands itched to reach out and hold Josten, as they had gotten so used to doing recently.

They prepared and ate dinner in silence and Andrew absolutely refused to look at him. This was where it had happened, his brain reminded him mercilessly. He hadn’t even known Renee was in the house, too wrapped up in deciding to clear the air to hear her arrival. Apparently there were a lot of things he hadn’t known recently. Some detective.

Andrew desperately wanted a smoke but knew it would involve spending more time with Josten, and he didn’t want to know if Josten would bring up Renee.

Andrew had just finished washing and putting away the dishes when Josten cleared his throat. “Is there anything you need?”

“I don’t need anything,” Andrew replied shortly, and locked himself in his bedroom. He wore a path in his carpet with his footsteps but didn’t notice the time as he wrestled with his thoughts.

How could he do that? I thought he wanted me. I was so sure he wanted me. Of course not, though. Nothing to want. Just getting your hopes up again. Good to see the old self-destructive urges are still there. What happened to him being afraid of women? When did he stop being afraid of Renee? Has she been helping him with that? How long has this been going on? Why didn’t I see, why didn’t I see?

If this is how he wants to heal, I should be supportive. I should be a good person and wish them to be happy.

Why her, though? Why not me?

Is it so much to want this one thing for myself? Why did I expect any different?

I thought he liked me. I thought he wanted me.

Who would, though. He knows too much about me to be tempted in any way. He knows the violence, the abuse, the drugs, the murder, the blackmail. Nothing there to want. Too broken to be wanted.
I'm not broken. Bee said so.

I'm so broken.

Why does he mean so much? Why does it have to hurt like this?

It always meant nothing. You deluded yourself once again. You are nothing to him. You are nothing.

Poor little Andy, so desperate, so needy.

What was I working so hard for if it's just going to feel like this? Emptiness would be better than this. They all said it would get easier but this just hurts, Bee, it's just pain and I'm so tired of having nothing but pain. I thought he could be a good thing but it's just pain.

His phone was in his hands and he shakily texted Renee one word. Explain.

Her reply was fast but not reassuring. I suggest you ask Neil about it.

As if on cue, his phone pinged again. Josten. Can you come downstairs? I want to talk.

He stared at the characters for nearly ten minutes before he forced himself out of his room. Josten was waiting for him in the living room, pacing his own little circuit around the couch. His brows were pinched with worry and Andrew absolutely despised the urge to reach out and comfort him with a touch.

He folded his arms and raised his eyebrows.

Josten looked absolutely miserable as he said, “I kissed Renee yesterday.”

“Congratulations.”

“No, Andrew, not congratulations. I need to talk—”

“I don’t want to talk about your love life,” Andrew said as coldly as he could.

“Me neither, but we’re doing it,” Josten replied, unexpectedly firm. “Look, just listen for a minute. I want to apologise because she was your friend first and I should have asked you if it was okay to barge into things like that.”

Andrew blinked, caught just a little off-guard.

“But it’s not going to happen again, so you don’t need to be mad about it. I’m guessing that’s why you’re so upset?”

“I’m not upset,” Andrew replied automatically. “Why won’t it happen again?”

Josten folded his arms over his stomach and hunched in on himself. He chewed his lip and fidgeted and Andrew stayed resolutely in place. Josten sank down onto the couch with a sigh. “I asked Renee if I could try kissing her because I don’t want to be so screwed up. I wanted to see if I could be normal, and she’s the only woman I trust enough to ask something like that. I thought maybe, because we’re friends, it wouldn’t be scary.”

“But.”

“Yeah. But. It didn’t work. I’m still scared. I nearly had a panic attack a second after I pulled away.
She was nice about it, of course. Very respectful.” Josten rolled his eyes and tugged on his cuffs, speaking to his knees. “But that’s not really what I wanted to talk about. I want to talk about how – how I was wishing it was you, instead of her.”

Andrew stared. And stared. And stayed silent.

“I’ve been wishing that for a while, to be honest,” Josten admitted, still talking to his lap but with a distinct flush in his cheeks. “Which was terrifying for lots of reasons. Mostly because I’ve never… I’ve never wanted anybody. I’ve never wanted to kiss, or touch, or do sex things. I thought it was because of Lola. I thought she messed me up. And my Mom didn’t want me distracted. And I was fine with that. I didn’t want to get close to anyone anyway, and the thought of doing anything else was wrong and bad and made me scared. Like with Baskin, you know?”

He swallowed hard and Andrew slowly came forward to sit on the other end of the couch. He kept a bit of distance, but he was there.

“But,” Josten said, his voice getting a bit breathless with stress, “I’ve been wanting you. To – to touch. And kiss with you. And. And other things I don’t really understand.” He covered his face with his hands and took deep breaths. “You make me feel safe. Like it would be okay, with you.”

“I get it if you don’t feel the same,” Josten continued after a shuddering breath. “It’s fine if you don’t want to do that. I just – I thought you should know. I don’t like lying to you and not saying anything was feeling like lying.”

Andrew’s arms were uncrossed and his hands were reaching out before he made any conscious decision. He gently took hold of Josten’s wrists and pulled his hands down.

“It’s fine if you hate me, for making things messy,” Josten whispered, then his face seemed to crumple. “Actually, no, it’s not fine. You mean everything to me, Andrew. Please don’t hate me.”

He curled a finger under Josten’s chin and gently pushed until Josten met his eyes. Andrew licked his lips nervously and leaned in close, his heart going wild in his chest. He paused with a hair’s distance between their faces.

“You should have said something sooner,” he said with as much calm as he could muster, and pressed a tiny kiss to Josten’s lower lip.

“I was upset because I was jealous,” he said, and kissed the corner of his mouth.

“I need you,” he said, and kissed his upper lip.

“I don’t hate you,” he murmured, and kissed the opposite corner.

“I want you so much it terrifies me,” he breathed, and slowly kissed him dead centre.

When he pulled back, he searched Josten’s face anxiously for discomfort or distress. He saw only surprise, and a whole lot of want.

“Tell me no.”

“I don’t want to,” Josten replied, his breath hitching. “I want you to. Yes.”

“Are you scared?”

“I trust you.”
Andrew took a slow breath and watched the way Josten’s lips parted just a bit, tilting up towards him. “Don’t touch me,” Andrew whispered, and waited until Josten reached up to drape his arms over the back of the couch, letting his hands dangle over the back, before leaning in again.

Neil, he thought as he traced the shape of his mouth. Neil. His lips were soft and yielding. Neil. His breath tasted of coffee. Neil. He pressed back, shy pressure against cautious request. Neil. This mouth that could lie and expose the most beautiful honesty at the same time. Neil. His voice was squashed between their lips, a shaky little sigh. Neil. They moved slow, the drag of warm skin already almost too much for them both. Neil. It felt like home and comfortable routine. Neil. It felt like a runaway with a key in his pocket. Neil. It felt like learning to smile again. Neil. His lips parted under Andrew’s with a hesitant breath. Oh fuck, Neil…

Andrew kissed him slow and sweet and tried to remember ever feeling like this, ever feeling so full of heat and light as if someone else’s breath was igniting in his lungs. He tried to remember ever feeling so content and present and focussed on something so simple.

Happy, he called the smile on his lips.

Home, he called the shape of Neil’s mouth.

Perfect, he called the shy touch of tongue against his lips.

Neil followed his lead slowly, tilting his head and moving his lips in cautious echoes. Andrew’s lips seemed to tingle and throb, both numb and hypersensitive at the same time, and he thought that he could never tire of this.

He slowed right down until they were barely kissing, just resting their lips together, and opened his eyes. His heart seemed to stumble; Neil kept his eyes closed, and his body was open and relaxed and laid out against the back of the couch, there for Andrew to touch if he wanted. His cheeks were rosy and his lips were dark from kissing, his mouth hopefully open and waiting.

He looked… fuck. He looked dazed and lovestruck and desperate to be kissed. And so vulnerable.

He’s never kissed anyone seriously before. He wouldn’t know a healthy relationship if it abducted him and told him to run, Andrew’s brain whispered hatefully. He’s imprinted on you like a baby duckling because you gave him a life and kept him steady after Riko fucked with him. This isn’t real, and you’re taking advantage.

He pulled back, all the comfortable warmth vanished. Neil blinked his eyes open, still hazy. “Andrew?”

Andrew swallowed hard and tried to ignore the shiver that shot down his spine at hearing his name in Neil’s kiss-heavy mouth. He was teetering on a ledge and didn’t know how to find firmer ground.

“How do you know you really want this?” Andrew asked. “That it’s not just – just because I was the first person to be kind to you?”

“I’ve never felt like this before.”

“Exactly,” Andrew said, hating how the calm lines of Neil’s body began to tense up again. “Neil…” His hand reached out without his permission and cupped Neil’s cheek. “You don’t know what you’re consenting to. You’ve never done anything like this. You’ve never felt like this. You don’t know what you’re doing and I shouldn’t be your first. I wouldn’t be good for you.”
Neil blinked soulfully down at him and shook his head. “Just because it’s new doesn’t mean it’s not real. I know how I feel, I know how I feel about you. This is real. This is something. I’m inexperienced but I’m not a child. I want you, I want whatever you want from me. Andrew, I know you’d be careful,” his voice shook a little and Andrew rubbed a thumb over his cheekbone, trying to calm him. “I know you would only ever ask, and accept it if I said no. You’re always so careful with me, always looking after me. I trust you. You’re safety and home and everything good in my life, and I want you.”

Andrew gritted his teeth. One false step and he’d be lost, he’d be damned. “I shouldn’t be your everything, Neil. Nobody should, and it definitely shouldn’t be me. I’m not good.”

He thought his own distress was matched in Neil’s face. Neil leaned into his hand. “Are you saying that because you don’t trust me to draw the right boundaries in my head, or because you don’t trust yourself to respect them? If you’re saying this because you don’t want it – I can live with that. But if you’re saying it because you’re scared of yourself, that’s not good enough. We’re in too deep for lies now.”

“I will not take advantage of you,” Andrew shook his head, feeling ill. “I won’t be that guy. I won’t be like them.”

“And I wouldn’t let you take advantage,” Neil said firmly. “Trust me to say no, Andrew. Trust me to know what’s best for me. I’m not afraid of telling you to stop.”

Andrew closed his eyes and felt Neil ghost a kiss to his palm. Maybe if he fell, he’d be able to control the descent. Maybe there’d be a safety net for him too.

“I want you, Andrew. I want you to kiss me and touch me and make me dizzy and stupid with it. You’re not forcing or pressuring, and it’s not because I don’t know any better or I’m out of my head. I’ve been wanting this for a long time. This is real, and I want it. If you want it too, kiss me.”

Andrew scoured his brain for doubts but found nothing. Neil had unpicked them all and left them without power.

He drifted closer, back towards Neil’s lips and the irresistible terror of falling. “Promise me,” he whispered. “Promise me you’ll say if I do anything wrong or uncomfortable.”

“I promise,” Neil murmured, his eyelids drooping as his gaze fixed on Andrew’s mouth.

Andrew grabbed every scrap of courage he’d ever possessed and threw himself headlong into the void. He kissed Neil.
It felt like hours later when they dragged their lips apart again, and they didn’t retreat far. Neil rested his forehead against Andrew’s temple and shuddered and gasped for breath. Andrew let him lean and tried to bring his thoughts to order.

“Alright?”


“Not scared?”

“Not even a bit.”

Andrew licked his tender lips and let his eyes roam over Neil – the graceful bow of his neck, the planes of his shoulders and chest and arms, the smooth lines and jagged edges all respectfully held back. His arms were still draped over the back of the couch with his hands out of sight, but Andrew saw the tension in his forearms that meant he was clutching his palms.

“Do you want to be touched?” Andrew asked quietly.

“Mmm,” Neil groaned in reply. Desire surged hot and demanding in Andrew’s gut at the sound, but he ignored the burn.

“Where, specifically?”

Maybe Andrew’s cool tone helped him get his brain de-scrambled enough to talk properly.

“I think – my head and neck are fine. And over my chest and stomach. Just over the shirt, though.” Neil ducked his head a little into Andrew’s neck as if embarrassed so Andrew reached up and cupped the back of his neck. He relaxed within a few moments and sat calm and easy against the couch. His eyes were nearly closed, looking lazy and almost sleepy if Andrew couldn’t feel Neil’s rapid breath on his jaw or the jackrabbit pulse in his neck.

Andrew took a slow breath and started pressing small kisses into the corner of Neil’s mouth, his cheek, his jaw, pressing as close as he dared into Neil’s side in both their fragile states and drinking in every tiny noise that escaped Neil’s lips. He let his hand slowly move down from Neil’s neck to his chest. Neil’s breath stuttered and he turned his head more towards Andrew, lips upturned in a wordless beg. Andrew smothered his own sigh into Neil’s mouth and busied himself learning the taste and shape of his lips as he slowly mapped out the expanse of Neil’s chest. He had touched him before, to patch him up, but this was a whole different type of learning. Neil kissed him back drowsily and clumsily but Andrew couldn’t care about anything but the feel of him, the slowly dawning realisation that this was happening.

“Andrew,” Neil mumbled breathlessly when Andrew’s palm passed over the hard bump of his nipple through the shirt.

“Alright?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Neil sighed. His head lolled back against the back of the couch and Andrew took the opportunity to kiss under the edge of his jaw as his hand moved lower. He could feel out the shape of Neil’s ribs, rapidly expanding and contracting with his breaths, the firmness of his stomach and sides. He wanted to put his mouth over Neil’s skin, so badly it was like a fire under his bones, but
he held himself in check. He pressed his hand back up Neil’s front, firm and controlled, and watched from up close as Neil shuddered and arched away from the couch just a bit.

“Fuck,” dropped from Andrew’s lips and he pressed them quickly to Neil’s cheek to hide it. He ran one hand to the side of Neil’s neck and put the other carefully into his hair to tilt Neil’s head back towards himself.

Neil blinked blearily at him, melting into his hands and submitting to Andrew’s silent instruction without a hint of worry or stress. He looked… he looked so beautiful, his lips plump from Andrew’s kisses, his eyes electric and soft, his downy hair rippling under Andrew’s fingers. He was limp and boneless and vulnerable but not in the least bit afraid. So trusting.

He looked at Andrew like there was nothing and nobody more worthy or strong in the whole wide world.

Andrew cradled his head in both hands and fell into his kiss with a helpless moan as a wildfire coursed in his blood, racing hard and fast through his whole body and leaving him shaking and dazzled, his thoughts scorched down to the most basic need for Neil’s mouth, his tongue, the sweet press of his lips and the heat of his skin. He could feel his fingers trembling and pushed them deeper into Neil’s short fuzzy hair, needing something solid and soft to hold onto. It was so much to feel, so much to think, so much good all at once.

“Andrew, Andrew, Andrew,” Neil was whispering, sounding almost like a prayer in between their lips. Andrew felt it in the tingle of his jaw, the slight scrape of teeth, in the squash of his nose against Neil’s cheek. It built and built in his head until it felt like a chorus, his name, spoken so tenderly. He pulled away from Neil’s mouth and thumped his forehead against the couch by Neil’s shoulder. Too much. Too good.

“Do you want to stop?” Neil asked breathlessly. “Are you okay?”

Andrew closed his eyes and hid his face in the couch for a minute to sort through the heady rush of pleasure and relief blotting everything else out. Kissing with other men hadn’t been like this – hadn’t been anything like this. It had been enjoyable, but really just a preamble for other things. This was… this was so much just in itself, because it was Neil and trust and acceptance and hopes and dreams and home and Neil.

“I’m okay,” he replied eventually, his voice wobbly and strange to his own ears. He moved a hand down to Neil’s shoulder and traced up his bicep to his elbow, where the rest of his arm dangled back over the couch. He was still holding himself back, accepting whatever Andrew gave, asking for nothing more.

“I’m here,” Neil said quietly. “I’m not moving.”

Andrew turned his head back towards his friend, his partner, his… everything. He kissed needily along Neil’s throat and found his way back up to Neil’s mouth again and grounded himself in passion. He nosed into Neil’s cheek and tasted him over and over again, hungry and burning up with every touch. One hand stayed cradling Neil’s head and he dropped the other to Neil’s stomach to feel his breaths. Neil sighed and gasped and groaned with him, firm and gorgeous and trusting.

“Touch my shoulders,” Andrew whispered when his head began to spin.

Neil moved slowly, hesitant, but didn’t ask if Andrew was sure. There was far too much respect in that non-ask and Andrew stroked tenderly over the back of Neil’s neck. Neil’s hands felt careful and delicate as they settled where Andrew had asked, pressing only enough to hold, not hard.
enough to startle. Andrew felt Neil’s heartbeat echoed double through his palms; he might as well have been shirtless, he felt each beat so clearly and warmly through the fabric. He rested his brow into Neil’s cheekbone and breathed slowly to get used to the touch.

“You can squeeze,” he allowed, because he’d seen how Neil’s eyes lingered on his arms and shoulders during workouts.

Neil made a soft little noise and firmed his grip in slow increments until his fingers were digging in with delicious strength, rubbing small circles into the muscle and joints. Andrew sighed into his cheek and captured his mouth again to distract them both for a few minutes.

God, but it all felt so good, it felt like nothing else existed but their bodies and their breath, like the rest of the world had melted away but they were safe, safe with each other. Neil’s fingers dug in carefully and smoothed along the ridges of bone and swells of muscle and a shudder worked all the way down Andrew’s spine.

“Good?” Neil gasped against his jaw.

“Very good,” Andrew mumbled back and bit gently into Neil’s lower lip. “Can I – closer?”

“Yes,” Neil breathed, and pulled gently on Andrew’s shoulders until Andrew had him pressed up hard against the back of the couch, chest to chest and stomach to stomach. Andrew cradled his jaw and ran his hands over and over Neil’s velvety hair as they adjusted to being pressed so close they had to sync their breathing. He kissed wonder and joy into Neil’s neck and collarbones and felt Neil rub firm assurance into his shoulders, gasping breathily and groaning as he worked his fingers into the joints.

“Too close?” Andrew asked into his jaw.

“No,” Neil replied in a low moan. “I like it, I like it a lot, it feels safe.”

Andrew pressed his chest just a bit closer at that, holding him gently pinned against the couch and kissing him senseless. Neil’s kisses were turning sloppy and desperate but Andrew didn’t care and chased his tongue and lips wherever they strayed as they held each other tight and secure.

“Fuck,” Neil moaned groggily. “Andrew, you’re so strong and perfect, you’re perfect…”

Andrew couldn’t help the startled, lustful noise that vibrated out of his throat and reached back to push Neil’s hand into his own hair, squeezing his fingers for a moment to assure him of his permission. Neil carded through the long top part and rubbed over his scalp as they traded breaths and gasps.

So good, Andrew thought over and over again. So good, so good…

He lost track of all time and sensation other than their bodies and hands and mouths. He felt like he’d swallowed the sun, like he was bursting with light and heat and it would consume them both if he wasn’t careful. It was a giddy, exhilarating rush, nothing like anything that had come before. Each touch was pregnant with meaning and trust and he never wanted to stop, he wanted to feel out every inch of Neil’s body and press his mouth over it all. He wanted Neil’s hands all over him, safe and considerate and admiring. He wanted Neil’s hands tugging in his hair and pulling on his shoulders and asking, always asking. He wanted free of their restricting clothes, he wanted Neil naked and beautiful and honest beneath him, he wanted, wanted, wanted so much…

“A-Andrew, fuck,” Neil gasped an eternity later and pushed lightly at Andrew’s shoulders. He eased back immediately and watched Neil’s face, his own breath coming in ragged pants. “I’m…”
“What is it?” Andrew murmured.


“That’s okay,” Andrew replied and pressed a slow kiss into his pulse. “I am too.”

“I’ve never wanted anything like this…”

“I know.” Andrew pulled back further to get a proper look at his face. He looked thoroughly fucked just from kissing – eyes wide, mouth hanging slack and lips swollen from kisses. His cheeks were blushed bright and he looked like the most beautiful man in the world. Andrew knew they were both pushing right at their limits, yearning for more but sensible it would be too much, too fast. “Stop?” Andrew asked, half for Neil and half for himself.

Neil chewed his lip briefly then winced at the tenderness there. He nodded with clear reluctance; Andrew let go of him at once and sat back out of his space. His own body was singing with desire and he sternly told himself to calm down.

“That was…” Neil mumbled when they’d both caught their breath. “Wonderful. Overwhelming. Good.”

Andrew hummed agreement and ran a hand through his own hair, feeling how Neil had twisted it up into tufts and cowlicks. Neil smiled softly at him when he caught Andrew looking, and Andrew’s lips curved up in reply and they held each other’s eyes as carefully as they’d used their hands.

*Hello*, it felt like. *I know what your mouth feels like now. I like the way you gasp. I know how you feel under my hands. Hello, new side of you.*

“All good?” Andrew asked, just to be sure.

Neil stretched out his arms with a slow, rolling shudder. His gaze was lazy, weighted, contented. “All good.”

Andrew watched him settle back into the couch with a dopey grin on his face, his shirt rucked up a bit. He tucked his legs up into his chest to hide the erection in his pants but Andrew wasn’t hurt in the least by that – he’d had years to work on his own difficulties there, and Neil was only just broaching the subject with himself. Neil watched him right back, and Andrew didn’t know how he looked but he thought it might be a good look if Neil couldn’t seem to tear his eyes away.

“I was so upset with you earlier,” he muttered, and looked down at his hands where it was safer. His palms were tingling with phantom sensation so he rubbed them on his jeans briefly.

“I see that now,” Neil replied with a hint of amusement. “Can I ask – how long have you… you know?”

Andrew chewed over several variants of his answer and replied slowly. “An annoyingly long fucking time.”

“Oh,” Neil said quietly. Andrew glanced over and saw Neil had put his chin on his knees and was hugging his shins a bit. He looked too small, too folded up after the way he’d leaned back and opened himself up to Andrew’s touch. “I’m sorry.”

Andrew shook his head and ran a hand through his hair again. “Not your fault you didn’t feel the same.”
“I can’t believe I didn’t pick up on anything.”

Andrew huffed quietly and watched how Neil’s eyes softened on him in response. “You’re a good detective, Neil, but these kind of signals aren’t your strong suit. Stick to burglaries and violent crime.”

“Still,” Neil said with a cautious smile. “It’s been a while since I couldn’t read you.”

Andrew considered whether or not to ask, but decided to chance it. He didn’t like leaving doubts lingering; they always gained weight in the back of his thoughts, gorging on his insecurities and fears. “So how does this fit with your – I don’t know, identity, labels, feelings. What have you.”

Neil tilted his head thoughtfully, letting go of his legs a little so he wasn’t so folded up. “I’m not sure,” he replied almost shyly. “I know I liked that a lot, and I like you an awful lot, and you’re very important to me. And that’s all new and strange just as a combination of things. But – I’m looking forward to figuring it out some more. If that’s what you want too.”

Andrew badly wanted to make a sarcastic comment, something scathing and mean-spirited to ease away from the fragile vulnerability of the whole evening. He wanted to move them back to safer territory where they could snipe and joke with each other; so much had happened, he had so much still to process about the whole thing. But he’d worked hard for this mutual trust and understanding, to be in this tentative place with somebody else and with Neil especially. They both deserved honesty.

So he said, “Yes, Neil. Yes.”

Neil was giving him that look again, the one that had kicked up a wildfire in his chest and turned his bones to crystal. Andrew let himself bear up under it for long seconds, then reached out to gently turn Neil’s head. Letting him stare felt far too much like a dangerous answer to an impossible question. He felt Neil’s understanding smile against his fingers, where Neil kissed him so delicately as if thrilled with his own daring. Andrew felt a smile on his face, irrepressible but nothing at all like the rictus grin of his medicated years. It gave warmth to his heart and solidity to his footing instead of ripping away both.

It was still all too much, but it was a good kind of overwhelming.

“I’m going to have a shower and head to bed.”

“Okay,” Neil smiled. “I’ll go after you. Can I – can I have a kiss before you go?”

Andrew leaned in just a bit to cup his jaw and memorised the hopeful, pleased warmth in his expression. “Mmhmm.”

This kiss was softer, slower. It was knowing there was all the time in the world, knowing your safety and security and home was right where you needed it.

“I think kissing you might be my new favourite thing,” Neil sighed contentedly when Andrew pulled back again.

“Mm,” Andrew agreed softly and kissed his jaw once more before getting to his feet on shaky legs. “See you tomorrow, Neil.”

“Sleep well, Andrew,” Neil called as Andrew headed upstairs. After his shower, Andrew fell asleep to the feeling of golden bliss humming under his skin, and the lingering taste of Neil’s lips.
Neil lay in bed for a little while after he woke up, trying to think. It was mostly the same couple of thoughts circling around, though.

*I told him. I told him and he wants me too and we kissed. And it was wonderful.*

He could still feel the anchoring warmth of Andrew’s strong hands on his chest and holding his head, his lips covering Neil’s and turning his world upside down and his brain to mush in the most glorious way. The reality was so, so much better than his dreams or his imaginings, and his whole body felt full of light.

He was just deciding to get up when he heard footsteps on the landing outside, then shuffling down the stairs. Andrew was awake. Neil followed him down in a flash.

He paused at the kitchen doorway, struck shy for a moment by the memory of how things had changed between them last night. Andrew was still in his sleepwear; a baggy old tank top that showed off a lot of his arms and shoulders and back and chest, and some jersey shorts that had faded blue stars on them. He was doing something with the coffee machine as the cats meowed in welcome and rubbed up against his bare ankles, asking for food. Andrew crouched down to pet them, giving each of them strictly equal amounts of attention despite their whines for more, and filled up their bowls with food and water. Once their attention had been happily diverted, he turned back to the coffee machine.

Neil could feel a very silly smile on his face as he stepped into the room to stand beside him at the sink.

“Hello,” he said quietly, trying to get control of his face and failing.

Andrew looked over to him, his expression relaxed but something tight around his eyes, despite his hair being a wonderful mess spilled over his forehead. “Hi.”

“Can I kiss you?” Neil blurted before he could think better of it, before he could over-analyse that tiny frown on Andrew’s face.

Andrew blinked at him a few times, then he seemed to fully relax in a slow exhale of barely-noticeable tension. Instead of answering he simply curled a hand around the back of Neil’s neck to pull his head down a bit, and pressed a slow, gentle kiss to his mouth. Neil was smiling too much to kiss back properly, so he reached out to twirl some of Andrew’s hair around his fingers instead. “Okay?” He murmured when their lips parted briefly.

Andrew nodded, brushing his mouth against Neil’s chin. “I was afraid you’d had second thoughts,” he admitted quietly.

“More like the opposite,” Neil replied in a soft voice, his skin tingling wherever Andrew’s lips had been.
Andrew gave a small sigh, almost too faint to be heard, but Neil felt it against his neck and dug his fingers more securely into Andrew’s hair in reply, gently twirling and twining it around his fingers. Feeling his breath so warm and close on his skin set goosebumps all along his arms, but he didn’t mind at all. It was a nice kind of closeness.

“I want to hold you,” Andrew said. It was a matter-of-fact statement, but the tilt of his eyebrows made it a request.

“Oh,” Neil said, then smiled. “I’d like that.”

Slowly, almost as if waiting for Neil to pull away, Andrew curled his arm around Neil’s hips and stepped up closer. Both arms circled around him and held him tucked into Andrew’s chest. His body was radiating sleepy heat, still bed-warm, and his hands settled flat and reassuring on Neil’s back, carefully holding him together.

“Oh,” Neil whispered, feeling slightly overwhelmed by how wonderfully warm and safe and wanted he felt. He lowered his head to rest on Andrew’s shoulder, and felt a faint kiss to his temple in reply. A small part of him, the part that his mother had trained so well over the years, wanted him to pull back and run away, to hurt so that he would never be tempted to want to revel in this. But he had grown more parts of himself in the past nine months, parts that could recognise how terrible and pointless that would be, parts that wanted to have their own life. So he told that old, frightened part of himself to be quiet, and allowed himself to be cradled so gently, so caringly, in Andrew’s arms.

“I was half-convinced I’d hallucinated last night,” Andrew commented some time later.

“Why?” Neil asked, and laid a shy kiss against his neck.

“I don’t know,” he replied. “I’m not used to nice things like that, I guess.”

Neil kissed his neck again more firmly, and Andrew shivered. “Bad?” Neil asked quickly, pulling back.

“You can do it again.”

So Neil did, and was rewarded with another shiver and a slow squeeze of Andrew’s strong arms, holding him tighter and oh so much better. He sighed shakily, feeling a syrupy warmth all through his body, seeming to pulse out from his stomach with every happy moment Andrew was touching him, holding him. Living with Andrew and growing closer and making friends had accustomed him to the casual touch he had been craving for years, but this was something entirely different. This felt like a forest fire in comparison to a hearth. The simple weight and warmth of someone else’s hands on him was more than enough to make him near-delirious with aching happiness and want. No wonder his mother had tried to keep him away from others; he could just stay here for hours, with Andrew’s wonderful hands on him. Slowly, he ran a hand up Andrew’s arm to feel out the curve of his muscle, and the shape of his shoulder. He massaged in, remembering how Andrew had let him touch last night, and feeling honoured beyond words that he was allowed, and wanted, to continue.

Andrew made a quiet sound in his throat, like a hum, so Neil squeezed a bit harder and kissed the side of his throat. “Good?” He asked tentatively.

“Very good,” Andrew replied in a sigh, and smoothed a hand down Neil’s back to hold his hip. The bony joint fit neatly into Andrew’s palm, and his fingers kneaded gently around it. For a moment Neil was reminded of the cats flexing their paws in the cushions and couldn’t help but smile. He
lifted his head back up off Andrew’s shoulder to meet his gaze.

“What’s that look for?” Andrew asked in a gravelly, rough kind of voice as if he were just as affected by simple hands on him, around him.

“I’m happy,” Neil replied, and lifted both hands to fuss with Andrew’s hair. Rather gleefully he sank both hands in the long curly bit on top and started twirling bed-messy locks around his fingers. He didn’t miss the way Andrew’s eyelids fluttered and his lips parted just a little. Neil thought he could happily spend weeks learning all of these tiny signals and tells he’d never known how to interpret before; he’d always been better learning by experience, anyway.

His thoughts dissipated pretty rapidly once Andrew started again on those tiny, delicate kisses all over his face and neck that had made him so dizzy the previous night. Each little kiss made his breath catch and his heart pound until he was gasping and making embarrassing little noises at each one. Andrew slowed down after that, letting his mouth linger, the tip of his tongue occasionally brushing Neil’s oversensitive skin too. He could feel himself melting, leaning more heavily into Andrew, wanting more, his fingers hopelessly tangled in Andrew’s hair. When Andrew’s slow kisses moved down to his collarbones and gently sucked around an old scar, Neil’s legs nearly gave out and he had to clutch at Andrew’s shoulders for balance.

He could feel Andrew’s smile against his skin for a moment before he pulled away.

“Why’d you stop?” Neil protested weakly.

“I don’t know if either of us are quite ready for me to escalate that just yet,” Andrew replied dryly. “Besides. No need to rush.”

Something low in Neil’s gut seemed to pulse at that, and he could feel his cheeks heating at just the hint of suggestion in Andrew’s voice. Besides, the idea of them having time, lots of time, to slowly explore this new thing and enjoy every step along the way, lingering and savouring… he shivered.

Andrew kissed his cheek once more as if for good measure, then gently let him go and turned back to the coffee machine. Neil could see the soft smile he was trying to hide, and his own cheeks were starting to hurt from grinning, but it was all good. It was all lovely.

He cleared his throat quietly and started getting cereal and fruit out of the cupboards. “What do you want to do today?” He asked, aiming for casual, but his voice still sounded a bit thready and funny from the nice things Andrew had been doing to him.

“I thought we could look over some cold cases, if you don’t want to go out. Could help you ease back into work.”

“That sounds fun,” Neil agreed, though he was also thinking how hard it would be to concentrate with Andrew in such close kissing distance all day. “What cases were you thinking of?”

“I thought the case of Elizabeth Short might be a good one.”

“The name’s familiar…”

“The press dubbed her The Black Dahlia shortly after her murder in 1947,” Andrew replied as he fixed their coffee.

“Oh, so we’re starting small then,” Neil grinned and sat down. Andrew looked like he had a smart reply at the ready too, but seemed to change his mind. Instead, he reached out and traced his fingers slowly over Neil’s cheekbone, gentle over the tender healing bruises. Neil’s eyes closed at
the sensation and he leaned into Andrew’s hand, a quiet sigh escaping him.

Yep. Today was going to be very distracting.

He opened his eyes after a minute to try and scowl at Andrew for disintegrating his thoughts again, but he was smiling too much to sufficiently scrunch up his face. There was a pleased little tilt to Andrew’s mouth, a self-satisfied tug at the corners. Neil’s heart did something floppy and silly in his chest at the sight so he just smiled down at his cereal.

After they got dressed and Neil fetched the relevant case files from the old suitcase Andrew had gifted him, they spent a few hours alternating between working and getting distracted by each other. Neil’s favourite was when he leaned over to hand Andrew a folder, and snuck a kiss on his mouth at the same time. Andrew’s expression had been priceless – harmlessly surprised, and more than a little pleased. It had resulted in some more thorough kissing that had left Neil fuzzy-headed and curled up into Andrew’s side for a while, which had been very nice.

Some time after lunch, there was a knock on the door. They exchanged a look, both thinking that the undercover cops watching the house would have stopped anyone who looked obviously shady or threatening.

Neil got to his feet and hung back in the living room while Andrew went to investigate, his fingers straying to the baseball bat by the door.

“Yes?” He asked the fancily-dressed white woman on his doorstep; she looked far too uptown girl to be hanging about in this untrendy part of the city.

“My name is Jill Horowitz,” she said with a perfectly straight and blindingly white smile. “My friend Allison says this is the best PI firm in the city. Is this a bad time?”

Andrew seemed to just stare at her for a moment, then abruptly stepped to the side. “No. Come on in, have a seat.”

Neil gave her a cautious smile as she stepped into the living room. Her eyes roved over his fading bruises and strange hair for a moment before she jerked her eyes away as if she remembered it was rude to stare at the ugly or strange people in the street. Neil was unfazed; he’d avoided notice very neatly by people like her for years simply by looking homeless on the side of the street. Wealthy people were all too happy to pretend they didn’t see the unwashed and needy at their designer-shoe-wearing ankles. He cleared up some of the more grisly black and white crime photos from the floor before she started getting second thoughts about them.

Mrs Horowitz perched on the armchair, so Neil and Andrew settled on the couch facing her. Andrew gestured for her to talk.

She gave them another wide smile. “My husband Steven is an attorney at Dorchester-Reid,” she announced, then paused as if waiting for congratulations.

Neil and Andrew exchanged another look. “You say that like it’s supposed to be significant,” Andrew commented.

“It’s one of the top law firms in the city, surely you’ve heard of it.”

“And that’s how you know Allison, I’m guessing?” Neil asked.

She nodded and seemed to brush off their ignorance. “Well, anyway. Steven has been a bit distant lately. Works odd hours, makes ridiculous excuses. For a lawyer, he’s a terrible liar.”
There was a beat of silence.

“You suspect your husband is having an affair,” Andrew stated blandly. Neil, who knew him so well, could hear the undertone of stung pride that someone would want to hire them for something so mundane.

“He has to be. They work long hours, but lately it’s been worse than usual. Steven has pulled plenty of all-nighters, but I haven’t seen him in two days.”

That made them both twitch.

“You haven’t seen or spoken to your husband in 48 hours?” Neil clarified. “He’s missing?”

Mrs Horowitz rolled her eyes. “Oh, please. You have to have an interesting life to be missing. All Steven does is work. He left me, obviously.” She shrugged. “I want you to do the PI thing, you know, find where he is, who he’s with. Get me some pictures I can use in court for the divorce suit.”

Andrew held up a hand. “You keep using the phrase ‘PI’. That’s not what we do, and we’re not a firm. We’re consulting detectives, and this is a private partnership concerned with investigating murders or large-scale crimes. The petty marital squabbles of two bourgeoisie Manhattanites are not within our parameters.”

“Andrew, wait,” Neil said, biting his lip. He gently touched Andrew’s hand and switched to German. “I know it’s not our usual thing, but an easy case might be good for me right now. And I’m assuming she’d pay us pretty well for it.”

Andrew gave him an unamused look. “Are you sure you want to waste your time on this garbage?”

Neil shrugged and fiddled with Andrew’s sleeve. “It shouldn’t take too long to find him and get a few pictures. Would you mind coming along? Just until I get my bearings again?”

Neil could tell from the look on Andrew’s face that he was going to agree, and made a mental note to kiss his neck some more later in thanks; he seemed to enjoy that.

Andrew sighed but nodded. “Fine, we’ll take the case.”

***

Within an hour, they were sitting in the minimalist-elegant waiting lounge of Dorchester-Reid.

Neil had been nervous about leaving the house again, but after hearing that one of the undercover cops would be tailing them and having Andrew right there were obviously settling him. Nonetheless, as they’d walked, Andrew had noticed Neil crowding close to him and watching everything with a tense vigilance. So, Andrew had gently held onto his wrist; a reminder no one would be grabbing Neil unnoticed or without a fight, that he was not alone, that Andrew was watching out for him too. He had felt Neil’s pulse pick up beneath his fingertips, before steadying out. Then, somehow, more fingers had gotten involved, and they’d spent the last hundred yards or so of the walk up to the firm holding hands.

Andrew hadn’t held hands with someone before.

It was quite nice, he’d decided as Neil’s thumb had shyly rubbed over his knuckle. He wouldn’t mind doing it again, especially when it put such a happy, relaxed look on Neil’s face.
They’d needed to stop when they got into the building, which had been annoying, but Andrew was ready to work if Neil wanted this silly case. He wasn’t about to let this distracting new jewel of happiness significantly impact their work, and wandering around holding hands might undermine their professional integrity a little.

Neil had asked the receptionist for a meeting with Steven Horowitz, but they had both been surprised to learn that there was no one of that name working there. So they had sat down while the receptionist called someone to talk to them about it. The space was clearly not meant to be comfortable for anyone for long periods of time, if the thinly-cushioned designer chairs and array of honest-to-God oil paintings of the firm partners posing down at them were any indication.

Neil was tapping his fingers on his knees as they waited, eyes on the windows and exits. Andrew quietly cleared his throat and tugged on Neil’s jacket sleeve. Neil’s gaze snapped to him and he slowly smiled, his fingers going still on his knees.

A smartly dressed young man with a towering sense of self-importance walked up to them abruptly. “You’re the ones looking for Steven?”

Neil was about to reply when the man just rolled right over him. “Look, I dunno what to tell you. Steven was an associate here until about six months ago. They let him go.”

“Do you know why?” Neil pressed as the man made to walk off again.

“We have a bloodletting from time to time,” the man replied with a smug grin. “Guess they didn’t think he was partner material.”

“His wife is under the impression he still works here,” Neil tried again. “She gave us a phone number which matches your general numbers.”

The man rolled his eyes and shrugged his so-very-valuable shoulderpads. “Like I said, I dunno what to tell you. But I got to go – this isn’t billable time.”

He waltzed off again, and Andrew caught Neil wrinkling his nose in annoyance. “Well then,” Neil muttered and got out his phone. Andrew peeked over his hand and saw he was dialling the number Mrs Horowitz had given them for her husband’s office phone.

It went to dial tone for a second, then a woman picked up the line. “Steven Horowitz’ office,” she said expectantly.

Neil raised an eyebrow. “Yes, hello, is that the same Steven Horowitz who works as an associate at Dorchester-Reid?”

“That’s right,” she replied calmly. “Can I make an appointment for you?”

Neil hung up and frowned down at the phone. He was still for a second, then started speed-walking towards the main office area. Andrew jogged a little to catch up to him, pleased by his near-instinctive plan of action. Neil was calling the number again, and they both listened out for the sound of a phone ringing, and a woman picking up.

“Steven Horowitz’ office?”

Andrew gestured subtly to a woman sitting at a desk outside a closed office door, a telecom earpiece hooked onto her head as she typed at her computer.

“Hello, is he in?” Neil asked the phone.
“Not at the moment, can I take a message?” They watched the secretary reply without batting an eye.

“I’d really like to speak with him, we’re supposed to be playing racquetball right now.”

The woman started to frown, and they approached her, but she was too focussed on her screen to see them. “Racquetball? Steven doesn’t play racquetball…”

“Are you telling me I’m not on a racquetball court right now?” Neil asked, a mischievous glint in his eye that Andrew really wanted to see more often and maybe kiss him for – and realised with a jolt that he could do that now. He was so caught up in that he almost missed the secretary’s reply.

“I – I don’t know where you are, sir, um—”

“Well, that’s a shame,” Neil smiled. “If you had a bit more spatial awareness, you’d realise I’m standing right by your desk.”

The woman stilled, then slowly looked around to them.

Neil hung up and spoke to her directly. “Would you mind telling us why you’re pretending to be the secretary of a man who hasn’t worked here in six months?”

She went completely pale and untangled herself from her headset before gesturing them into the empty office behind her, shutting the door firmly and wringing her hands.

“Please, you can’t tell anyone I’m still answering phones for Steven,” she said tremulously, not quite meeting their eyes directly. “They’re always looking for excuses to fire people around here. Admins like me are in charge of deactivating the phones when someone leaves, but Steven begged me not to.” She started to bite her lower lip and fidget with her bracelets, spinning small globes and bobbed charms around and around between her fingers. “H-He pays me a little every week just to keep answering them.”

“So he wants people to think he’s still working here?” Andrew asked, watching her hands. He idly thought something like that might be good for Neil, to stop him shredding his sleeve cuffs and fraying out his hems.

“I guess,” she nodded. “It’s mostly his wife who calls, I just forward it to his cell most of the time.”

“That’s kind of a big lie – she never caught on?” Neil asked.

The woman shook her head, seeming to relax a little as she realised they were more interested in her ex-boss than getting her fired. Maybe her fiddle bracelets helped too, Andrew mused.

“Steven and Jill are not the most ‘connected’ couple,” she explained with a shrug. “He works long hours, she does a lot of charity and club work. I guess she would have found out eventually, but I’m not surprised he managed to fool her.”

“Is there any reason he didn’t just tell her?”

“He never said. But being employed at Dorchester-Reid opens a lot of doors,” she said. “Steven and Jill live in an expensive house, they belong to the Braebury Club, they have a lot of snobby friends… I guessed he just wanted to keep up appearances until he found another job.”

“Well, that’s all fine until the bill comes in,” Neil frowned.
“I handled Steven’s mail for two years,” the secretary said, rubbing her fingertips over a charm shaped like a die, with embossed number dots. “He didn’t have much savings, but there was extra money coming in from somewhere.”

“Do you think Steven is involved in something illegal?” Andrew asked, and she quailed again, her hands starting to shake.

“I don’t know, okay? I didn’t really want to know,” she fretted. “But his wife wasn’t the only one who called. Some of the other people sounded a bit, uh, shady? Most of them wouldn’t leave their names or a message. A-And, when Steven offered me money to keep answering, I assumed I’d get a cheque each week. Instead, I keep getting cash in the mail. Like he doesn’t want there to be a paper trail.”

Andrew thought that despite her anxiousness, she had rather good instincts. “What’s your name?”

“Martha Hudson,” she replied as she fiddled with her bracelets some more.

“Did you get paid recently, Martha?” Neil asked.

“Yeah,” she said reluctantly, opening her purse. “I got an envelope yesterday, I was gonna bring it to the bank at lunch today.”

As she brought it out, Andrew spotted an interesting-looking stain on the envelope. “May we? We’re not interested in the cash, just the envelope.”

She handed it over unhappily, and he and Neil examined it carefully.

“No return address,” Neil murmured. “Postmarked 11101 – Long Island City. That’s nowhere near his home. Maybe his new business?”

Andrew hummed thoughtfully, then held the envelope up to the light for a second to examine the stain. Without a second thought, he gave it a good lick and sucked on the paper, frowning in concentration.

“Andrew, why do you always…” Neil sighed, rubbing at his temple wearily even as the secretary’s mouth dropped open in shock.

Once he’d finished tasting, he smiled at Neil. “Taste is a severely underrated sense, specifically with how it links to our memories and sensory experiences. I thought the stain looked familiar, but it took tasting it to determine exactly what it is.”

“Or you could have brought it to the NYPD crime lab for chemical analysis,” Neil pointed out, though his mouth was twitching in amusement.

Andrew shrugged. “That would take too long.”

“I think you have an oral fixation,” Neil said with a smug smile, his hand lifting for a second to touch his own neck where Andrew had lavished some attention earlier.

Andrew decided not to respond to that accusation. He raised the envelope again, looking at the damp stain. “That is horchata. Specifically, Salvadoran horchata; the morro seeds give it away.”

“I’ll take your word for it. So, his new office might be near a place that serves Salvadoran food. Okay, I can work with that.”
“Mm,” Andrew smiled and handed the envelope back to the wide-eyed secretary, as well as a card with Doe & Josten – Consulting Detectives and the house phone number printed onto it. “Thank you Martha, you’ve been very helpful. If you want to leave this shark-pool someday and do some more interesting work, give us a call.”

“O-Okay?” She replied as they left, blinking down at the card.

***

Once they’d brought their undercover tail up to speed on what they were doing, they headed off to Long Island to chase down any Salvadoran restaurants within the postal area 11101. It didn’t take too long to find one, and for Andrew to look up the reviews on his phone as they stood across the street from it.

“Apparently the food is thoroughly authentic,” he read off his screen as Neil held his free hand. He couldn’t help but feel more than a little daring for doing so again, but Andrew had just squeezed his hand in reply when Neil had slipped his fingers into Andrew’s palm for safekeeping. Walking around holding hands had put a happy little heat in his chest, a spring in his step he couldn’t really stamp out, and didn’t really want to either. “But the ambience can be ruined by the appearance of an occasional rat.”

“That would explain the love-notes from the health department,” Neil said, nodding at the yellow Public Health Notice posters over the windows and door.

Andrew sighed in disappointment; he’d been saying something about wanting to try their fresh horchata, as what he’d sampled from the envelope had been pretty good, apparently. Neil was just glad he wouldn’t be risking his health again so soon after the flu that had laid him low. Neil squeezed his fingers gently.

“We can try making it at home,” he suggested.

“It wouldn’t be the same,” Andrew shook his head, but he looked a bit less disappointed. He stroked his thumb lightly along Neil’s, and they smiled briefly at each other before getting back to business. They kept walking down the street, keeping their eyes open for signs of their missing lawyer.

“Has your friend called you back yet?” Neil asked.

“No, yet,” Andrew replied, his jaw tightening a bit. “I might have to physically find him and smack him to make him talk to me again, who knows. That could be fun.”

“Let’s wait another couple days before we resort to police brutality,” Neil said wryly.

Andrew sighed dramatically. “If you insist, I suppose.”

Neil grinned and swung their hands a little, happy to be happy, and to have Andrew happy too despite everything else going on. After a couple minutes, Neil thought he spotted something.

“What was Horowitz’ license plate again?”

“PCT 2093, black Lexus,” Andrew recited promptly. That eidetic memory of his came in very handy on cases, Neil thought, and pointed at that exact car sitting clamped a little way down the street. Andrew hummed in interest and tugged on Neil’s hand a little to walk faster towards the car.

They broke apart to examine the car, and Neil picked up the sheaf of parking notices stuck under
the windscreen wipers, flicking through them. “Parking violation, illegal length of stay,” he read off. “ Clamp applied Wednesday afternoon – it’s been here a few days.”

Andrew had been peering into the windows to see if he could find any clues in the interior, but turned and looked quickly around the nearby buildings. He pointed to one with a new, temporary-looking logo of SMH Incorporated propped up in the window. The lights weren’t on, and no one seemed to be home.

“SMH – Steven Matthew Horowitz?” Neil said.

Andrew had picked the lock in a few seconds and got them inside the busted-looking office space. There was almost no furniture, nothing on the walls, and raw wires dangled from the ceiling where light fixtures had been ripped out. There was a temporary bin, a toilet paper roll stuck on the handle of a door that hopefully led to a bathroom, and fold-out desks completely covered in a good forty or fifty phones, all plugged into an electrician’s nightmare of interconnected extension cables. Andrew poked through the trash while Neil looked at the phones and a few scattered pens and notepads.

“Maybe they were running a call centre?” He thought out loud. “Looks like they got shut down in a hurry, though.”

Andrew had picked up a takeaway coffee cup and was squinting into the bottom. “Judging from the age of the mould in here, I’d say it was active less than a week ago.”

“So around the same time Steven disappeared.”

“The two are very likely connected,” Andrew agreed and joined him in looking over the rest of the tiny, shabby premises. “The main question is, which came first?”

They stopped in a little hallway that led to a back exit. There was a glass case for a fire extinguisher embedded into the wall, which stood conspicuously empty. Neil crouched to look at the spill of glass from the broken case, while Andrew looked at the floor.

“There was a carpet runner here,” he said, his finger tracing an outline of a slightly paler rectangle of space. “See the way the dust has settled? Just a few days.”

“And the fire extinguisher is missing with no sign of a fire,” Neil added, then pulled on some latex gloves from his pocket to move some of the glass shards to reveal a few dark brown droplets. “That looks like blood to me.”

He got down on his knees and had a look at the skirting board, which showed a few scrapes and dents directly under the empty case. With a quick pop of his hand, he jounced it out of its fixture and a few grisly surprises dropped out from behind it; they were squishy and grey, with some bits of dried blood on them.

“That’s reason enough to call Wymack,” Andrew said as they peered at the bits. “Brain matter.”

Neil carefully put them down again, grimacing.

Andrew, however, was grinning. “Trust you to turn a simple cheating-husband case into a possible murder.”

“It’s a gift,” Neil said with a shrug.

***
They regrouped back at the station a few hours later. Neil had walked into the bullpen cautiously, too aware of the fact they all suspected the Moriyamas, Wesninskis and Riko probably all had ears somewhere in the department. But he had found it full of friends – Matt, Dan, Renee, Allison, Seth all sitting with Wymack in his office, having some kind of conference. Neil suspected it was about him, but didn’t want to get too paranoid about that.

He didn’t realise he’d stopped at the edge of the room until Andrew gently nudged his side. For a moment Neil very desperately wanted to hold Andrew’s hand again for strength, but Andrew was not out at the precinct, and Neil didn’t want to compromise that or force anything. So he just gave a shaky smile and led the way towards Wymack’s office. He knocked quietly, hanging back a bit.

Everyone inside looked around at the knock and as one, smiled warmly at him. His breath caught in his chest at the sight, and the reminder that his friends, his family, were here for him too. He hadn’t seen any of them since telling his story, and he hadn’t realised how much he’d missed them in such a short amount of time.

“Neil!” Matt was the first one on his feet, and caught him up in a gentle hug. “Hey, buddy. Good to see you up and about.”

“Hi, Matt,” Neil replied into his chest, closing his eyes for a second at the feeling of Matt’s protective hold. It didn’t feel exactly the same as Andrew’s arms had, but it was a wonderful feeling nonetheless. He rested his forehead on Matt’s broad chest briefly before patting his sides.

“Don’t hog him,” Dan said, swatting affectionately at Matt’s arm, before hugging him too. Neil was astonished, but every one of them wanted to hug and hold him for at least a couple of seconds (except Seth, who gave him a weird fist-bump and muttered something inaudible). Renee was the briefest, but there was a bit of a twinkle in her eye as she let him go and glanced to Andrew. Neil could feel his neck heating in embarrassment, remembering how he had reacted after trying to kiss her.

“All good?” she whispered to him.

He just nodded, not quite able to summon the words. She smiled fondly at him and squeezed his shoulder.

Wymack was the last in line, and he held back from a hug. Instead, he looked Neil up and down and nodded approvingly. “Good to have you back,” he said gruffly, then gestured for everyone to sit back down again.

Neil found himself in the middle of the group of chairs while Matt and Renee greeted Andrew for a little longer than the others had. Neil looked around for him, feeling a bit uneasy not to be able to see him, but Andrew settled into a chair behind him with a quick touch to his shoulder.

Neil told himself that was fine; Andrew was guarding his back, as always.

“We can finish that little powwow later,” Wymack said by way of calling them to order. “Doe, Josten, as you’re here we may as well talk about your case.”

“I just talked to the ME,” Matt said, leaning on the arm of his chair to smile at Neil. “Preliminary DNA confirms the blood and brain matter both match the hairbrush sample for Steven Horowitz, as donated by his wife this afternoon. We have canine units combing the area, but no sign of a body just yet.”

“The killer most likely wrapped the body in the carpet runner and transported it elsewhere, so he
could have gone anywhere,” Andrew shrugged.

“‘He’?” Dan asked. “New evidence, Doe?”

“Steven Horowitz was nearly six feet tall and very athletic. I think it’s unlikely a woman beat him to death with a fire extinguisher.” Andrew paused, then smiled. “Though not impossible, of course. I have no doubts any of the three of you could bludgeon a man to death with ease.”

“That’s very sweet of you to say,” Renee smiled, and Allison laughed while Dan obviously tried to keep a straight face.

“You’re in a good mood today,” Matt pointed out.

“It’s a nice day,” he replied blandly. Neil smiled back at him, catching his eyes for a second. When he looked away, he saw Matt had watched the micro-exchange with a shrewd look on his face. He didn’t say anything, but he smiled too as he turned back to the front. Wymack cleared his throat.

“What about the wife? You say they didn’t get along?” Wymack prompted. “You think she could have hired someone to do this?”

“We can’t rule it out, but I don’t see why she would commit murder then hire us,” Neil said.

“Allison, you know her, what do you think?”

“I don’t think Jill could order a stone-cold assassination,” Allison said. “Her and Steven don’t really talk much, but they don’t hate each other. They’ve just grown apart, is all.”

“Alright,” Wymack accepted. “Where are we on SMH Inc?”

Matt pulled out his notebook. “It’s been around since August, but it’s a bit vague about what exact business it does. Steven Horowitz was the only owner on record, so we’re pulling the W2 forms for employees. I’ll let you know what we get.”

“What about the phone records?” Neil asked him. “The offices were clearly some kind of call centre.”

“I’m running that down,” Matt nodded. “Tech services are closed for the day, but we should have them first thing tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Matt,” Neil smiled, and received a pleased grin in return. Matt reached out and gently rubbed his knuckles over Neil’s fuzzy hair, startling a laugh out of him.

“Look at that smile!” Matt grinned and did it again. “Aw, Neil.”

“Shut up,” Neil smiled, covering his mouth with his palm and vaguely warding off another headrub. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Probably.” Matt allowed. “I kinda dig the new hair and colour, though. I think we all miss your curls, but this isn’t half bad.”

“Thank you,” Andrew said dryly. At Matt’s confused look, he elaborated. “I cut it for him.”

Matt laughed and thankfully no one brought up the issue of why he had needed the cut in the first place, or why he had suddenly changed from a brunette to a redhead. They spent a couple minutes chatting and Neil just basked in feeling surrounded by his family, at peace, and safe.

Wymack kicked them out of his office after a while, saying he wasn’t paying them to gossip
(“You’re not paying us at all,” Andrew had commented with a gesture to Neil) and that they should either go home or get back to work. Matt managed to extract a promise to take Neil out for breakfast the next day with him and Dan, and Neil leaned tiredly into Andrew’s shoulder as they left the precinct to go home.

“You okay?”

“Tired,” Neil replied. “It’s been a bit of a day.”

Andrew hummed agreement, and gently held his hand again once they were a block or two away from the precinct. When they got home, Andrew firmly told him to nap on the couch with the cats for a bit while he sorted dinner, and Neil agreed without a fight. He fell into a light doze as the cats curled up around him.

Andrew woke him with a soft hand in his hair, and the sound of his name. Neil smiled up at him as he blinked awake again.

“Hello,” he murmured. “What time is it?”

“Seven thirty,” Andrew replied, and ran his hand slowly over the fuzz of Neil’s hair, against the grain. Neil grinned and shivered a bit, not quite used to the sensation but enjoying it. He reached back to find Andrew’s fingers, and pressed a small kiss to each of his fingertips.

“Dinner smells good,” Neil sighed into his hand, vaguely tracing the lines of Andrew’s palm with his lips.

“I should hope so,” Andrew said, though he seemed distracted by what Neil was doing to his hand. Neil slowly kissed his palm, then let him go. He felt all full on soft contentment already, but some pasta couldn’t hurt either.

Andrew traced the edge of his smiling mouth for a moment. “And you said I have an oral fixation,” he muttered.

“Well, I already know I like kissing you,” Neil replied bemusedly. “I guess I’ll have to find out what else I like.”

He thought he saw Andrew shiver, just a little. “Come have dinner. We can figure that out after, if you want.”

Neil’s mouth suddenly dried up and he felt his face getting warm again; Andrew kept getting the drop on him with these sudden, exhilarating statements of his, leaving him tongue-tied and flustered. He nodded mutely and took his place at the table, pleased by Andrew’s satisfied little smile. He seemed to be getting a great deal of wicked enjoyment out of teasing Neil, and Neil didn’t really mind at all.

After they’d eaten, they found themselves back on the couch with the cats and an Exy game playing in the background. And Neil wasn’t quite sure how it happened, maybe with a playful poke to Andrew’s cheek or a ruffle to his hair or the cats trying to sit firmly between them like fluffy chaperones, but he blinked and there was a quiet question and a nod from Neil and Andrew’s arms were around him again, and everything was alright. He ran a hand down Andrew’s arm until he found the hand curled on his hip, then followed it back up again to the shoulder.

“Do you like this, then?” Neil asked, tilting his chin up to see Andrew’s face properly.

“Yes,” Andrew said quietly, and squeezed his hand a little. “I like feeling you close to me. Do
Neil nodded into his shoulder. “It makes me feel very safe, and secure. I think… I think this will pretty much always be a good thing. So you don’t need to ask every time, I think, though I like that you do, but you don’t have to. It’s really good.” His tongue got all muddled again and he rested his forehead against Andrew’s shoulder, feeling vaguely annoyed at himself, his shoulders twitching up and his back tensing. This was all so beyond his knowledge, all so new, and he didn’t know how to talk about it without sounding like a damn twelve year-old.

“There’s nothing to be embarrassed about,” Andrew commented quite calmly, his mouth brushing Neil’s temple. “I know it’s difficult. But I’m not going to laugh at you for saying you like or want something, or want to try anything or stop anything. Okay?”


“Okay,” Neil said again, letting the tension out of his shoulders and relaxing back into Andrew’s hold again. He laid a hand flat on Andrew’s chest after a quick nod of permission, feeling the smooth rhythm of his heartbeat – a little faster than usual, Neil thought, and felt rather satisfied that he was having an effect on Andrew in return – and the wave-like regularity of his breathing. He could feel his own eyelids drooping, soothed by his warmth and solidity and calm.

“This is good,” he breathed out eventually, feeling almost on the edge of sleep, but too content in wanting to stay present and enjoying this as long as possible to let himself drift off.

“Can I move your legs?” Andrew murmured.

Neil mumbled assent, and Andrew gently reached down to take hold of the backs of Neil’s knees, then pulled them up over his own lap. It curled Neil into Andrew’s side completely, resting against his strong chest, and as Andrew carefully settled his arm along the line of his thigh to hold his hip again, Neil couldn’t help the quiet sigh of pleasure that escaped him.

“Is this okay?”

“Yes,” Neil said, nodding rapidly into Andrew’s shoulder again. “Yes. Very yes.”

Andrew rubbed gentle circles over Neil’s thigh and Neil clutched at his shirt until he felt less dizzy with how good it felt. And not even in the hot-and-heavy way they had touched each other the previous night, with all the confusing want-want-want that had set Neil’s heart pounding and his body very much responding. This was… like a warm bath after being stuck in the freezing rain, like a long drink of cool water after an exhausting run, like soft new clothes fresh out the tumble dryer. Neil didn’t know how to explain it, even to himself, but he knew that this was the best thing, and he wanted it forever.

He gave a shaky exhale and traced little circles onto Andrew’s chest too, and felt Andrew’s smile against his temple. He could hear the Exy coverage from the TV, but he wasn’t listening anymore. Much more captivating was the simple arrangement of limbs that felt like a home, and a steady heartbeat under his hand. He could have stayed there for hours, sleepily content but too happy to sleep.

After a while though, he felt a vague stirring of guilt, and remembered what Andrew had said before dinner. He tilted his head up to see Andrew’s expression, and discovered a loose, tender kind of look on Andrew’s face that he had never seen there before. Andrew blinked himself more
alert once he realised he was being watched, and Neil was almost sad to see his face change.

“What is it?” Andrew asked in a raspy voice that said just how long they had been laying there without talking.

“Is doing this stopping you from wanting to do – something else?” Neil asked, clumsy and awkward. He winced. “I mean – did you have something else in mind? To try?”

Andrew blinked at him, looking a little confused. “I’m happy with this.”

“But,” Neil struggled on, “I know you must – want. Things. That I’m not ready for yet. That I don’t know if – if I’ll ever want. I don’t want to stop you from enjoying those… things.”

True to his word, as always, Andrew did not laugh at him for his undignified phrasing. He seemed to think very carefully about it instead, his hand absently squeezing and massaging into Neil’s thigh in a very nice way.

“That’s true,” he said eventually, slowly. “But like I said before, there’s no need to rush things. If we get to that point, then we can deal with it as it comes. But if this is all you’ll ever want, Neil – holding, being close, maybe kissing – then that’s just fine by me too. I like this, I’m happy with this. I don’t need more. It can be fun, and if you want to try some of those things I’d be happy to try with you, but it’s not a big deal. You don’t need to worry so much.”

“Oh,” Neil whispered, his breath catching a little in his chest.

He felt Andrew kiss his cheek. “Relax, Neil,” he murmured.

So Neil let his thoughts drift away as Andrew held him closer, his head slipping down to rest over Andrew’s chest, his heartbeat slowly lulling them both to sleep.

***

Andrew decided he very much liked the feeling of waking up with Neil tucked nice and warm and secure into him, held tight and snug. His back didn’t agree quite so much, and he winced as his spine and neck protested at spending yet another night asleep on the couch in a strange position. His thighs had gone numb from the weight of Neil’s legs being draped over them all night, and his shoulder was tingling a bit with imminent pins-and-needles from the weight of Neil’s dreams. Plus, he’d fallen asleep fully dressed with his shoes and jeans on, and that always made him feel a bit weird in the morning.

Still worth it though, he thought as he listened to Neil’s quiet snuffles in his sleep, and felt Neil’s slow breathing against his neck. It might have been nice to lay there all day, like they had for the majority of the evening before, but the cats had internal clocks more precise than anything artificial, and they knew very well when they were supposed to get fed.

Neil woke to the dulcet murmurings of their piteous whines, and Andrew smiled at the slow, befuddled expression on his face before he came fully awake. “You should feed the cats,” he mumbled instead of a ‘good morning’.

“I would, if I could move,” Andrew replied.

“Hm?” Neil looked confused and blinked down at them both, trying to deduce the answer to the great mystery of Andrew’s Missing Legs. When it dawned on him, he gave a distinctly sheepish smile and shuffled off Andrew’s lap. “Sorry.”
“You’re a bit like a cat yourself,” Andrew commented as he stood and stretched out his twinging back. Several things cracked and clicked, much to his annoyance. Okay, he thought, as nice as cuddling on the couch is, we can’t really keep doing this every night.

Neil stretched as well, a few small noises happening in the process. When they had both settled themselves and no doubt caused some issues for future chiropractors, Neil smiled up at him.

“Good morning kiss?” He asked.

Andrew cupped both his cheeks in his hands, admiring the pleased gleam in Neil’s eyes and the bright smile on his inviting lips. Neil smiled trusting up at him, waiting, hoping. So Andrew kissed him; nice and slow, more of a tease than a proper kiss, dragging out each press and pull of lips, sucking ever so gently on the tender skin under his mouth. Neil leaned up into him, trying to get closer somehow while still sitting down, making needy, breathy noises. He could feel Neil’s tongue valiantly trying to do something, so he gently showed Neil just what to do.

Neil shivered and gasped a little, and kept straining up towards Andrew until Andrew thought he might topple himself off the couch. He closed the distance between them by resting a knee on the couch and leaning down a bit more, and Neil gladly wrapped his arms around Andrew’s head once he was in reach again.

“You’re teasing me,” Neil mumbled against his mouth.

“Yes, I am,” Andrew replied, and kissed a smile into the corner of Neil’s mouth. “Do you want me to stop?”

“Not at all,” Neil said, finding his lips again with a certain determination. They might have gone on a little further if a combination of crying cats and a knocking at the door hadn’t happened.

“Oh shit, that’s Matt and Dan,” Neil said, pressing a hand to his flushed face. “And the cats – oh.”

“You, get dressed and go,” Andrew said, pressing one last quick kiss to his cheek, “I’ll deal with the cats.”

“Okay, see you later?”

“Bye,” Andrew replied with some amusement as Neil raced upstairs for a change of clothes, and then fell outside into Dan’s waiting hug as they sped off for breakfast. He rolled his eyes and went to placate the cats, who were now screaming murder and vengeance.

Once they’d turned back into demure little fluffballs with full bellies, Andrew got himself dressed and opened the fat file of phone records Matt had left in his mailbox before taking Neil away.

Work time.

It was not a very fun work time.

By the time Neil returned, he was in the process of being yelled at by the thirtieth suspect on his list.

“Do you feel good about yourself?” The woman was screaming, “Seriously, at the end of the day do you think ‘wow, I really harassed a load of people today’? ‘Cause I think if I had your job I’d just about kill myself!”

“Ma’am, once again, I just want to ask you about SMH Inc, I am not affiliated with them,” Andrew said in a weary voice.
“I’m warning you, don’t call here again!” And she hung up the phone. Andrew sourly dropped his phone onto the table and ran his hands through his hair as Neil let himself in.

“New friend?” Neil asked from the doorway.

“That was Mrs Talbot from Taos, New Mexico,” Andrew huffed. “Boyd left me the phone records from SMH Inc. I’ve been calling their most recent recipients in an effort to find out what exactly the company did, and to try and find some suspects.”

“Seems like you found one,” Neil commented, and sidled up to his side to gently kiss his jaw, looking thrilled with his own audacity. When Andrew wrapped an arm around his hips to hold him closer, Neil started to kiss down his neck as well, in fleeting, shy little kisses that were far more teasing than Neil probably realised. Andrew heard his own breath hitch and his eyes closed without his permission, his head tilting back. Neil caught on very quickly and started to linger in his kisses, a hand smoothing up to his chest and rubbing firmly with his palm, even as he dared to suck just a little on the sensitive skin under his mouth.

Andrew shuddered and gently turned Neil’s head away. “I’m trying to detect, here,” he muttered, though he wasn’t annoyed in the least.

“Well you teased me this morning, I thought it was only fair to repay you,” Neil replied, a smug look on his face that was kind of… cute, if Andrew could admit that. “Is that something you like?”

“Is what something I like?”


“Yes,” Andrew admitted. “But it’s very distracting.”

The smug look on Neil’s face only grew. “I thought so. I wasn’t entirely sure.”

“Congratulations. How was breakfast?”

“Good,” Neil said, his expression softening to simple contentment. His hand kept rubbing over Andrew’s chest, and Andrew gently stroked over his hip in return. “I forgot to be nervous about being outside without you, with both of them there. It was nice. Fun.”

“Good,” Andrew replied, and laid a soft kiss on Neil’s pretty mouth. When Neil tried to kiss back, he pulled away and regretfully let go of his hip. “Later,” he promised.

Neil sighed, a little flushed, but nodded and smiled in agreement. “Okay. So, suspects?”

“I found thousands,” Andrew said blandly, and gestured to the reams and reams of names and numbers tacked up all over the walls, that Neil had obviously been too distracted by kisses to see at first. “Everyone who received a phone call from SMH Incorporated had motive to kill Steven Horowitz.”

“What the…”

“Steven Horowitz was a debt merchant.” At Neil’s confused look, he explained. “Say someone buys a jet-ski on credit. Then she loses her job and she stops paying. Another person splurges on cosmetic surgery, but can’t cover the insurance costs without some extra money on loan – which he then can’t pay back before the interest goes through the roof. Someone else buys a supercar and forgets they also have to pay for all the fuel every other day, so they borrow bits and pieces each week to keep up with it instead of just selling the car on again.”
“People buy things they can’t afford, I get that part,” Neil said, his eyes still moving over the sheer mass of names all over their living room.

“Much of it is frivolous, some of it is not. But every purchase flows into a massive ocean of consumer debt. In the US alone, it adds up to more than $2.4 trillion, most of it owed to credit card companies.”

“But Steven Horowitz was a corporate lawyer, not a financial broker,” Neil frowned.

“True, but credit corporations have a policy of giving up on trying to collect an unpaid debt after 180 days,” Andrew smiled, thinking fondly for a moment of the college-related debt he had sidestepped by vanishing into a new identity, seeing as the Exy scholarship had covered his tuition and board costs, but not much else. “The company has decided it’s just not worth the financial effort to get it back. So they sell it on.”

“They sell the debt? To who? Why would anyone buy an unpaid bill?”

“Because you can get it at an outrageous discount,” Andrew replied, starting to bounce on his feet a little. “Say you buy $10,000 worth of debt for just $1,000. You then manage to bully $5,000 out of your unfortunate creditee.”

“And you’ve made $4,000 profit, where the credit company would have made a $5,000 loss if they kept the debt,” Neil said, his eyes going wide.

Andrew nodded. “It’s more than a bit contemptible as a way to make a living, which is probably why Horowitz kept it hidden from his wife. But, it can be extremely lucrative – which is why he started doing it in the first place.”

“Well that’s… neat,” Neil said, rubbing thoughtfully over his scalp as he looked around at all the potential suspects. “But we’re going to need to open an office of our own to check all these people’s motive.”

Andrew made a so-so gesture with his hand. “The debt collection industry is notorious for hiring ex-convicts and recent parolees – always useful to have some scary-looking muscle on hand when you show up on someone’s doorstep with a hand out for cash. I think it’s equally likely Horowitz ran afoul of one of his associates. I asked Boyd to sort through those W2 forms from SMH Inc, he said he’d call us in if he sees a viable suspect.”

Neil just smiled at him for a moment. “I thought you didn’t want this case? And yet you’ve done all this work in about two hours.”

“I didn’t want the cheating-husband case,” Andrew corrected. “This one is much more interesting.”

“As long as you remember it’s still my case,” Neil said, grinning.

“I wouldn’t dream of stealing it completely. It’s still all yours. I thought I’d do you the favour of all the grunt-work of making the lists, is all.”

“Oh huh,” Neil said with a raised eyebrow, but he was still smiling. “I guess that’s alright then.”

Andrew picked up his phone again and was about to call the next person on the list, when Neil lightly stroked down his arm again, instantly pulling his attention away. From the look on Neil’s face, that was exactly what he’d intended.

“So,” Neil said quietly, “If we’re waiting for Matt to call us in, is ‘later’ now?”
Andrew wanted to object, but his arms were already curving around Neil again as he stepped up close. “I thought you wanted to work,” he murmured instead, his mouth brushing along Neil’s jawline.

“I like kissing you,” Neil replied with a shrug, rubbing appreciatively over Andrew’s biceps. “It’s a bit hard to concentrate on anything else just now.”

Andrew thought he should probably say it couldn’t be that difficult, but his own brain was fuzzing out from having Neil so close, so gently wanting, so contented.

“Five minutes,” he compromised. “Then we’ll get back to work.”

“Of course,” Neil agreed quickly.

They did not get back to work after five minutes.

***

Later that day, they found themselves back in the precinct to watch Wymack and Boyd question one of Horowitz’ employees, an ex-con called Eddie Perkins, who had stood out from the list of his co-workers due to a rap sheet of violent assault, rather than an assortment of non-violent crimes. He was giving them the ‘cool customer’ treatment, apparently unbothered by anything that was going on.

Andrew was slightly distracted as they watched the interview; his neck felt very tingly and over-sensitive from all the kisses Neil had laid on him, and it was hard to think of anything else. He gave Neil a look out of the corner of his eye, but Neil was having no concentration issues at all, apparently, and was leaning towards the two-way mirror in interest. Andrew crossed his arms and sighed quietly to himself. He’d managed to put up with wanting him in silence, he could surely handle having him in silence too.

“Steven and I worked our first debt package together a few months ago,” Perkins was explaining, examining the tattoos on his knuckles. “It was his first time, I showed him the ropes.”

“And you were working on another project together, right?” Boyd asked. “Out in Long Island City?”

Perkins gave a slow, oily smile. “Steven got tipped to a big package. He called it the motherload. Millions and millions of debt that he picked up on the cheap.”

“How many millions exactly?”

“I don’t know,” Perkins said with some show of indifference. “Steven never showed me the whole list. He’d just give us names to call every day.”

“Okay, why were your offices shut down?” Wymack asked.

Perkins shrugged. “He didn’t say. Sometimes when Steven had his hooks into someone who owed big, and they lived nearby, he’d drive out to see them in person, try to collect there and then. He went out on one of those errands last week, came back, told us all to go home.”

“Well, who did he see?” Boyd asked.

“No idea. He just said we were done collecting on the package – which was stupid, ’cause we hadn’t even called a third of the names yet.”
Boyd frowned at him. “How d’you know that? I thought you said you never saw the full list.”

Perkins paused for a moment, then smiled wider. “Just a guess, based on what we’d collected already.”

Neil snorted and got out his phone. Andrew watched with a smile as he called the phone company, putting on a very creditable impression of Perkins’ voice.

“You must have been pretty upset, losing a big job out of nowhere,” Boyd was suggesting while Neil asked about ‘his’ recent bill.

Perkins raised one eyebrow. “I was wondering when you’d get to that. You think I killed Steven, right?” He shrugged calmly. “Makes sense. He fired me, I’ve got a rap sheet. He died what, a couple days ago?”

“Approximately.”

“Steven let everyone go last week and I left for Springfield, Ohio, the next day. I only got back last night.”

“What were you doing there?”

“Nephew’s birthday party,” Perkins said, a little smugly. “I can show you the travel receipts if you want.”

Neil finished his call and pressed the button on the intercom that let him talk into the interrogation room. “Captain – he may not have killed Horowitz, but he stole the complete list of debts. He just installed fourteen new phone lines at his apartment, he’s opening a call centre of his own.”

“Nice,” Andrew murmured as they watched Perkins fail to react other than a twitch in his hands.

Neil grinned at him, fingers lightly brushing against Andrew’s for a moment before turning back to the room.

“Is that true?” Wymack asked, brandishing his pen in a vaguely businesslike way. “If we take a look around your place, are we gonna find Steven’s list of debts?”

“If we do, that’s a felony charge and a parole violation,” Boyd added. “Now, of course, if your alibi checks out and you give us the list voluntarily, we might be able to work something out with your parole officer.”

Perkins scowled at him, and caved.

***

Later that day, they wound up walking on a snowy road leading to a rural house in Naugatuk, Connecticut. Boyd had managed to get Horowitz’ cell phone tower pings, which had revealed he had been en route to the town shortly before his disappearance. Andrew had thought that he must have been visiting a debtor out there, if Perkins had been telling the truth, so they had delved into the *motherload* to find any names in that general location. They had found a potential man, called Owen Downey, who had accumulated several hundred thousand dollars of debt, and who also had a criminal record. Andrew had postulated that Horowitz might have gone to try and squeeze money out of him, and been intimidated or threatened into ending his business.

Neil smiled at Andrew as they walked; Andrew had practically jumped at the chance to drive all
the way out here, seemed to relish being behind the wheel again. Even with a discreet escort following a few cars behind, he had seemed free of all tension and worries as he drove. Neil had rather enjoyed the drive too, seeing as Andrew had rented an automatic for the two-hour journey, so they’d been able to hold hands the whole way. It had been very, very nice.

They struggled up the snowy track towards the house; a car had driven up there recently, but this isolated place hadn’t been properly plowed or gritted, so there was still a lot of snow to contend with. Neil rung the doorbell, and they both blinked in surprise at the motherly woman wearing scrubs who opened the door.

“Hello,” she greeted them cheerily.

“We’re consultants with the NYPD,” Neil said. “We’d like to see Owen Downey.”

“Oh, Owen’s having his treatment right now,” she said regretfully.

“It’s just a few quick questions,” Neil pressed, a self-deprecating smile on his face. “And it was kind of a long drive out here. We won’t take long.”

The nurse shrugged and gestured them inside. “Well, if you’re willing to wait, you can talk to him in twenty minutes, but right now Owen ain’t saying anything.”

She showed them inside and they found that the front room of the house had been converted into a sick-room, complete with a hospital-grade bed surrounded by monitors and medical equipment. A side table was stacked up with medication boxes and spare gloves. Owen Downey lay in the bed, eyes closed with an oxygen mask strapped to his face as he wheezed for breath. He had a couple IVs in his veins, and his arms looked shockingly spindly where they lay over his chest. His skin sagged unhealthily, as if he’d lost a lot of weight in a short amount of time. The nurse monitored his airflow for a moment as they looked around.

“I don’t think he’s bludgeoned anyone recently,” Neil murmured to Andrew, who grimaced.

“What’s his diagnosis?” Andrew asked the nurse.

“Emphysema,” she sighed sadly. “Owen thinks he picked it up working construction without masks, but his suit was rejected by the company. Oh, I’m Owen’s aunt, I work at the hospital in town. I come by whenever I can, try and help him look after himself.”

Neil nodded thoughtfully and pulled out a picture of Horowitz. “During your visits, did you ever see this man, or did he ever come to the door? He might have been here about a week ago.”

“Oh sure, that’s Steven,” she smiled. “He’s been out here a few times. Is he okay?”

Neil and Andrew shared a quick look.

“He’s missing and presumed dead,” Andrew said carefully.

The nurse pressed a hand to her chest in shock. “Oh, goodness. I’m so sorry to hear that. I know Steven was struggling to find his way, but he was a good man.”

“A good man?” Neil couldn’t help but say. “He was trying to collect money from your nephew.”

“At first, yeah,” the nurse allowed. “But then he talked to Owen for a while, listened about how he’d racked up so much medical debt, with the company refusing to compensate him, and his insurance refusing as well. The second time I saw Steven, he brought groceries. Then last week, he
told Owen he didn’t owe him anything anymore.”

“Really?”

“Oh yeah,” the nurse nodded, looking fondly at her nephew. “It was like a miracle. Steven said he couldn’t live with what he was doing anymore, he couldn’t bleed money out of people who were down on their luck. He was forgiving Owen’s debt.”

“Maybe that’s why he closed the business,” Neil mused. “He wasn’t just absolving Owen’s debt, he was doing it for everyone on that list.”

One of the monitors started beeping, so they excused themselves from the house as the nurse attended to her nephew.

By the time they reached the precinct again, they had a new workable theory. And after some calls to Matt during the drive, they hadn’t even needed to compile the evidence themselves.

“Steven Horowitz may not have been killed because he was a debt collector,” Neil said as he sipped on some terrible coffee in Wymack’s office that evening. “He may have been killed because he was a debt forgiver.”

“Like some kind of Robin Hood?” Wymack said sceptically.

“Kind of,” Neil nodded, then made a face and put the coffee out of his reach. “He didn’t set out to forgive a massive parcel of debt; he had every intention of eking every possible dollar out of the motherload. But along the way he had an epiphany, and resolved to stop the business.”

“Well good on Steven,” Wymack said, “But what does that have to do with his murder?”

“Mm. Before he could file the paperwork that would register the debt as actually forgiven, he was murdered. I think someone had a very vested interest in collecting that money, and wanted to make sure the motherload didn’t suddenly vanish.” Neil absently reached out for the coffee again, so Andrew snatched it and put it in the bin. Neil smiled at him before continuing. “I think Steven had very little in the way of savings. Someone would have alerted him to the existence of the motherload, and if worked properly, it would have set the Horowitz’ up for life. But a package of that size would have cost a significant amount to buy in the first place, even at a discount.”

“You think he had investors who’d take a cut of the final share,” Wymack said.

Neil nodded and gestured to Matt, who turned over a flipchart which had about ten mugshots on it.


“The man in the middle there is Sam Gianini,” Neil pointed out quietly, hugging himself a bit. “He’s invested through a shell corporation named after his niece. He’s a friend of my, um, father.”

He closed his eyes for a second; it felt so unnatural to admit something like that out loud, as if he hadn’t spent almost all of his life trying to distance himself from his family. He heard Andrew moving, but Matt got to him first and rubbed gently over his fuzzy hair. Neil leaned into him gratefully before clearing his throat.

“The woman at the bottom is Grace Yee, organiser of Brooklyn’s offtrack betting culture; the man in the middle is Walker Tolan, who runs the largest prostitution ring in the city, and curator of several sex clubs; the man on the left side is Marco Sinclair, contact for one of the major drug
cartels working through New York. You get the picture – no one you’d want to invite to dinner with your grandmother.”

“No one you’d want to stiff on their payments, either,” Wymack pointed out thoughtfully. “Would Gianini be a problem for you, Neil?”

“Maybe,” Neil admitted quietly, leaning into Matt again. “He didn’t come to the house very often, but he might remember my face. I’ve been told I look a lot like my father, with the hair, and everything.”

Matt rubbed more firmly over his scalp as Andrew spoke up. “You look like Neil Josten. You don’t look like him.”

Neil smiled weakly at him in thanks. “Anyway. I think Horowitz’ moral awakening might have had the side-effect of angering a large selection of unscrupulous people. And with that lot, it would have been a race to the finish line.”

***

“Is everything sorted?” Renee asked Andrew as she helped him to his feet again, sweaty and tired after their sparring session.

Andrew nodded and gulped water. “Oh, yes.”

She smiled gently at him. “I’m happy for you both. I was concerned, when Neil told me what he wanted to try, but I’m glad it helped. I’m sorry it caused you pain, though.”

Andrew accepted that with a nod and wiped his face free of sweat. “It was Neil’s choice. I’m not angry with you for helping a friend when he asked.”

“Are you happy, Andrew?”

Andrew rubbed the back of his neck, thinking to how awful he had felt just two days ago, and how he felt now. “Yes,” he said quietly. “I’m very happy.”

Renee gave him a gentle smile and squeezed his shoulder as she drank from her own water bottle. “I’m proud,” she said simply.

Andrew cleared his throat before things could get too mushy, and directed his thoughts back to one of the reasons he’d asked Renee for this session.

“Do you still have Jean Moreau’s number?”

She blinked at him in surprise, her pastel hair sticking up in tufts out of her ponytail. “I haven’t seen him in a long time, Andrew,” she replied dubiously. “It might not be his current number.”

Andrew just looked at her. He was well aware of how the two had met the previous year – Moreau’s team at the time had been doing a charity spot for the press, and had picked one of the many that Renee was involved in. That particular one had been some kind of youth centre, as Andrew recalled. They had dated in secret for a few weeks, but Moreau had broken it off, saying he’d been too afraid of the consequences if they were found out. Renee had said she’d tried over and over again to get him to see a therapist or a police officer about the abuse he hadn’t been able to hide from her trained eye, but he had refused each time. Renee said they hadn’t spoken since, but he knew she watched all of his games, as pathetic as they were as he and the rest of the Perfect Court languished in mediocrity.
“Why do you want it?” She said reluctantly.

“You know why,” he said.

She sighed and handed over her phone. He copied the number into his own and handed it back.

“I can’t believe he might be complicit in what his – friend – is doing,” she murmured.

Andrew shrugged. “We won’t know unless we talk to him. And either way, he will be able to testify some kind of evidence of violence.”

“Jean needs help, not an interrogation.”

“We’ll have to get him away from Riko first, anyway.”

Renee grimaced unhappily and tucked her hair behind her ears. “Protect him as much as you can, Andrew. For my sake.”

“I’ll try,” he said quietly.

They called it quits soon after that, and Andrew headed home. When he got there, he found Neil sat on the floor with a laser pointer, agitating the cats with a smile on his face.

Andrew sank down next to him with a small groan as it pulled on his sore muscles. “I thought you were working.”

“No, though I’m glad you’re back,” Neil said, and pressed a quick little kiss to his shoulder. “When you left, we were assuming that Steven Horowitz was murdered by one of his investors. Matt and I were doing some more digging, and it turns out that Horowitz managed to work enough of the motherload to pay off all of his investors before closing the operation. So we found ourselves without any suspects. Matt called it a night at that point. Since then, I’ve been thinking about the nature of debt.”

“Do tell,” Andrew said, settling an aching arm casually around Neil’s waist.

“Well, really, a debt can be thought of as a formalised piece of leverage one person – or corporation – holds over someone else. Given that, I’ve been wondering if our killer had reason to want someone on that list – or multiple someones – to stay in debt.” Neil paused to neaten Andrew’s hair a bit where it had dried into a strange shape from being roughly towel-dried in the locker room without his usual wax. Andrew closed his eyes a little and tightened his arm so his hand could brush over Neil’s stomach.

“Now,” Neil continued, “Before he had his change of heart, Horowitz drove all the way out to Connecticut just to harass Owen Downey. But there are other people listed on the motherload who owed significantly more money and who lived closer to Long Island. I was wondering why Steven picked Owen in particular, so I started looking into his background a bit more, his online activity, what Naugatuk is like, the usual. I found something quite interesting – all of the properties within a five mile radius of Owen’s house were purchased over the past two years by the same property company. Stern Investments is the name.”

He picked up a map from nearby and showed it to Andrew, who pursed his lips at the notations
Neil had made for dates of the house acquisitions. “What for?”

“Don’t know,” Neil said brightly. “The company hasn’t made it public yet. It’s a secret project. So I contacted one of your irregulars to have a look at it for me.”

Andrew narrowed his eyes a bit. “Who?”

“Mason,” Neil replied with a grin.

Andrew rolled his eyes. “Of course you did.”

“Well I wasn’t going to ask The Nose, he wouldn’t be any help – his properties are all strictly city-based.”

“Instead you asked a fourteen year old hacker with an ego problem.”

“He was reliable the last time,” Neil protested mildly. “He didn’t even doxx us once.”

Andrew sighed and rubbed at his temple. “What did he ask for as payment?” He asked in a resigned voice. Mason didn’t care much about money in the way of payment for his services, and usually demanded outrageous favours or hard-to-legally-obtain items for the bragging rights.

“I wrote his Spanish essay for him,” Neil shrugged. “It had to be a 5,000 word piece on formal versus informal grammar modes in different settings and groupings, for his advanced college class. It wasn’t too hard. He agreed to have a peek into Stern Investments for me once he received the copy back.”

“That’s not as bad as usual,” Andrew conceded.

“I think he has midterms coming up for school and college. Anyway, I’m just waiting for him to tell me what he’s found. He said it would probably take until tomorrow morning, but he might have some initial findings later tonight. I thought the cats could do with some exercise in the meantime.”

“I see.”

“How was your session?”

“Good,” Andrew nodded and carefully flexed his fingers. “Renee said she’s happy for us, by the way.”

Predictably, Neil flushed. Andrew could see it rising up his neck into his cheeks, and leaned in to kiss a particularly bright spot under his cheekbone, vivid under a newly-healed knife slash.

“I didn’t say anything to Matt,” Neil replied, a bit distracted, “But I think he’s guessed something.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if he did. He’s been trying to get me to admit to it for ages.”

“Really?” Neil pulled back in surprise.

Andrew smiled at the honestly shocked look on Neil’s face. He gently stroked over Neil’s lips with his thumb and settled a bit closer. “I told you those signals aren’t your strong suit, but Matt’s known something’s up for a while now.”

“Oh,” Neil said bashfully. “I think I’m learning one or two things now though.”

“Oh yes?”
Neil grinned then ducked his head to suck a wet kiss into the hollow of Andrew’s throat, earning a surprised shudder. He gave it another kiss for good measure before surfacing again with a cheeky smile.

“Stop that,” Andrew mumbled, rubbing over the spot and shivering. “It’s very distracting.”

“You like it,” Neil smiled fondly. “I like that you like it.”

There was no good answer to that other than a good kiss, so Andrew did that instead. He tucked Neil into his arms and stopped him from saying any other silly things by occupying his mouth more completely and productively. His hands made their way up to cradle Neil’s head, rubbing gently through his soft hair, careful over the last few tender spots. Neil sighed into his mouth and smoothed warm, caring hands over Andrew’s shoulders and the top of his back, working heat into the sore muscles.

Andrew groaned quietly as he worked into a particularly tight spot, and Neil smiled against his mouth and kept going, working his fingers firmly and squeezing with all the strength in his hands. Once he’d worked a full shudder out of Andrew, he pulled back, his lips wet and tantalising.

“Couch?” He suggested, a hopeful little look on his face.

Andrew mouthed gently at Neil’s lower lip as he thought, not really wanting to stop kissing him if he didn’t have to. “I don’t think my back can take another night there, especially not right now,” he admitted.

“Oh,” Neil replied, with a quick smile to try and hide his obvious disappointment. “That’s okay, never mind.”

Andrew swallowed and tried to keep his voice as calm and non-suggestive as possible before he spoke again. “I know you don’t want to sleep on your own at the moment. So – I was thinking… do you want to try sleeping in my bed, instead of the couch?”

Neil looked stunned by the very possibility, his eyes wide. “With you?”

Andrew nodded, steadfastly ignoring the part of his brain that wanted to make an innuendo. He kissed very gently at Neil’s lip again, admiring how it gave softly under his mouth. “Only if you want.”

“What would that be okay? For you?”

“I think so. I’m not used to having anyone else up there with me, but I liked the other night. I think it would be fine.”

Neil was quiet, kissing him back kind of absent-mindedly. Andrew was happy to let him think, but he started to get a little concerned after a couple minutes. He eased away slowly from the kiss and stroked behind Neil’s ears.

“Too fast?”

“It’s not that,” Neil assured him quickly. “I’m just thinking it over. I was thinking that if I have a nightmare anyway, I don’t want to alarm you and for us both to have a bad night.”

Andrew kissed his cheek. “I’m happy to try. I’m happy to stop here. It’s entirely up to you.”

Neil went quiet again for a while, concentrating on just sharing kisses and breath. Andrew let him
be, more than willing to wait for an answer, especially with Neil’s sweet mouth distracting him. His butt was starting to go numb from sitting on the floor by the time Neil replied.

“Yes,” he said quietly, but firmly. “Let’s try.”

Andrew kissed his jaw and they helped each other up, finding each other’s fingers as they made their way upstairs. Andrew opened the door to his bedroom and they both paused for a moment on the threshold.

“You can come in,” Andrew said quietly, turning to face Neil from inside the room. With a shy smile, Neil joined him inside. He looked around a bit, and Andrew remembered Neil had never been in here, aside from a quick look when he first broke into the house. Since then, he’d respected Andrew’s boundaries and hadn’t set foot in there.

Andrew turned his back and changed into his sleepwear, not bothered by having Neil in the room. He was actually rather gratified by the small intake of breath he heard, and could practically feel Neil’s gaze on his back, his tattoos, and his legs.

“Can I borrow some pyjamas?” Neil asked quietly. “It might help, if I get startled.”

“Bottom left drawer on the dresser.”

“Thanks.”

Andrew kept his back turned as Neil changed too, and waited until Neil said he was done. He couldn’t help but smile when he turned around; Neil had picked out a baggy tee that swamped him and some shorts that showed off some very nice parts of his thighs. Neil plucked at the shirt self-consciously, and Andrew pulled his eyes away. He rearranged the pillows into two piles and pulled back the covers before getting settled on one side of the bed. He gently patted the space next to him.

Neil lay down hesitantly, and they both took a few minutes to adjust to the feeling of another person on the mattress beside them. Neil smiled cautiously at him across the small gap between them, curled up on his side with his legs scrunched up into his stomach. Andrew smiled back, laying on his back. Neil reached out with a shy hand, a question in itself. Andrew gently pulled it to rest on his chest, squeezing Neil’s fingers and resting his hand on top.

“Can I come closer?”

Andrew nodded, and watched as Neil shuffled in closer into the curve of his side, until he could rest his cheek on Andrew’s shoulder. Andrew curled an arm around his back to hold him close, lightly holding the curve of his hip. Neil sighed and relaxed into him with a shiver. Andrew kissed his forehead and closed his eyes to see what it felt like when he couldn’t see who was beside him. It didn’t make him panicked, as he thought it might. His body was already learning exactly what Neil’s felt like pressed up against him, and the precise shape of his hand on Andrew’s chest.

“Okay?” Neil asked.

“Yes,” Andrew said quietly. “I’m good. Are you okay?”

Neil nodded and kissed his shoulder. Andrew muffled a yawn into Neil’s fuzz and fell slowly asleep to the feeling of Neil’s hand pressed over his heart.

There were no nightmares, only sweet dreams.
He woke the next morning to the feeling of a shy kiss on his cheek, and cracked open one eyelid to peer at him.

“Can I help you?”

“Good morning,” Neil smiled, his eyes bright. For a second Andrew wondered why Neil had woken him up, then he registered the cats making noise outside the closed bedroom door.

“It’s your turn to feed them today,” Andrew said, before Neil could convince him otherwise with sweet kisses and gentle touches.

“I guess that’s fair.”

Andrew pushed vaguely at him. “Go on. Up.”

Neil laughed and rolled away to sit on the edge of the bed to stretch. Andrew shifted onto his side, watching the clean lines of Neil’s arms and the arch of his back, the way the baggy shirt slipped and slid over his shoulders and was rucked up to Neil’s ribs. He could see a few old scars on his back, but paid them no attention. He could see those little dimples at the bottom of Neil’s spine, and the excellent shape of his ass against the mattress. It was a good morning, he decided.

Neil looked back over his shoulder and caught Andrew watching him. He smiled and tugged the shirt back into place.

“Your hair is a mess,” Neil informed him.

“I can fix that later,” Andrew said, shrugging one shoulder. “May I try something?”

Neil tilted his head curiously, then nodded. Andrew got up and_shifted to kneel behind him on the bed. Moving slowly, he wrapped his arms around Neil’s torso, one arm curving up to hold his shoulder and the other down to his hip. He squeezed Neil gently in his grip, holding him tight back against his chest, and kissed the side of his neck.

“Mmm,” Neil said, his head tilting back onto Andrew’s shoulder, a shuddery sigh escaping him. “Good. Yes.”

Andrew gently kissed the sharp corner of his jaw, then let him go. Neil sighed regretfully and stood up, sending another smile back at Andrew before leaving to attend to the cats. Andrew got himself dressed and tamed his hair, then brought a carrier bag out of his wardrobe and placed it on Neil’s pillow before making the bed neat again. Neil slipped back into the room as he was opening the curtains and vaguely tidying some knick-knacks laying around; he hadn’t really been expecting company in here last night.

“What’s this?” Neil asked, pulling a set of designer jeans and a few shirts out of the bag.

Andrew leaned back against his windowsill, perching on the bay. “When you were gone, I wasn’t thinking completely clearly,” he said quietly. “I kept thinking how impermanent your room is, how you don’t have any furniture in there. How you haven’t got any more clothes since that one trip, ages ago. So I ordered you some more expensive clothes.”

He folded his arms across his chest, trying not to think of that awful fortnight where he’d been convinced he’d never see Neil alive again.

“I just kept thinking, you should have nicer things. It was kind of stupid, considering, but the clothes turned up last week and I didn’t really know what to do with them. So – there. You can
Neil crossed the room to him and gently rested his palm along the side of Andrew’s face, lightly bringing his gaze onto his own face. His thumb stroked along Andrew’s cheekbone.

“Thank you,” he said in a hushed voice, and darted in for a small kiss. “I’ll see how they fit.”

Andrew took a steadying breath once he was gone, and went downstairs to fix breakfast and see if Mason had emailed them back yet with the results of his snooping. When Neil came down again, he nearly dropped his coffee mug. The jeans were snug and flattering in all the right places, and he was wearing a tight white long-sleeve shirt under a loose, pale green top with a neck so wide it came off his shoulders, curving down below his collarbones. Andrew had kind of forgotten some of the things he’d ordered, but he was glad he’d ordered that. The colour looked even better with Neil’s auburn hair, and though he wasn’t surprised Neil had chosen to cover his scars with the white shirt, it still looked great on his trim, toned frame.

“What do you think?” Andrew asked.

Neil smiled down at himself and plucked at the green shirt. “I like it. It’s different, but it’s good. You don’t need to send any of it back.”

Andrew smiled down at the oatmeal pot. “Mason emailed, by the way. He said Stern Investments are planning to turn the land in Naugatuk into a ski resort – they certainly get enough snow up there. At the moment, the details of the project are known only to the six members of the board, and the CEO. They’d like to unveil the plans next week, but there’s one problem: Owen Downey’s house sits right in the middle of the proposed ski slopes.”

“He’s a holdout,” Neil said curiously, taking over at the coffee machine.

“Mmhmm. He’s unwilling to uproot his life, considering his current condition. Stern thinks they’ll be able to force a sale, since Owen won’t be able to repay his medical debts unless he sells his last asset, his home.”

“But if Horowitz forgave Owen’s debt…” Neil said, starting to smile.

“There’d be no need for him to sell,” Andrew nodded. “The entire ski resort would have to be scrapped. I’d call that motive.”

“I’d say.”

“Mason also turned up something else – he said the main organiser of the resort had hired Dorchester-Reid as their legal representatives for the whole process, contracts and all that. It all seems a bit too coincidental to me.”

Neil nodded in agreement. “So, who do you want to visit first?”

***

The first trip to Stern Investments turned out to be a bust. They managed to bull their way into a board meeting to see all seven suspects together, but had just as quickly ruled them all out as suspects. Three of them were women less than five feet tall, one was in his late sixties with arthritic hands, another was trying to conceal his incipient blindness, one of them had been at an appointment with his dominatrix (thanks to Mason, they were well aware of that fact), and the last was sporting a poorly-concealed sunburn. They hadn’t proved it yet, but they were fairly sure he would have an alibi of a holiday somewhere sunny at the time of Horowitz’ disappearance. Neil
had suggested one of them could have hired a killer, but Andrew had shook his head, saying that professionals didn’t muck about with fire extinguishers and carpets unless they were truly incompetent.

So they ended up back in the insufferably minimalist waiting room of Dorchester-Reid, looking once again at all the smug oil paintings lining the wall. Specifically, the one man who was in charge of the Stern ski-slope venture – Coleman Brown.

The receptionist, suspicious after their last visit looking for a non-existent employee, had pointedly asked them what they wanted when they turned up. When they said they wanted to look at the paintings, she’d looked ready to call security. But Neil had pointed out the paintings were on public display, so there wasn’t much she could do with that, and had gone back to her desk in a stress.

“What’s the thinking here?” Neil asked in an undertone as they made a show of admiring Coleman Brown’s portrait.

“Coleman Brown was working as a legal negotiator for Stern Investment,” Andrew replied, just as quiet. “He would stand to earn a huge commission once the resort became a reality, after securing all those land opportunities over the course of two years. Mason did some more digging, and found that Brown and Horowitz were both members of the Braebury Club, and regularly play golf together on Sundays.”

Neil snorted quietly. “Of course they did.”

“Mm. I suspect it was Coleman Brown who made Horowitz aware of Owen Downey’s inclusion in the motherload in the first place, hoping that SMH Incorporated would help squeeze Owen out of his land.”

Neil nodded slowly, thinking out loud. “So this guy points Horowitz at Owen. But he forgave Owen’s debt instead of breathing down his neck, so now Brown could lose millions, if not his position, if Stern fails to deliver on the resort.”

Andrew hummed agreement.

“Excuse me,” a polished voice said from behind them, and they turned. A tall man, fit and in good shape for someone in his fifties, in an expensive suit had approached them. The man in the portrait was wearing a rather handsome pair of hornbeam glasses, while this man was wearing rimless ones. Otherwise, the painting was a near-photographic copy of his features.

Neil looked between the man and the portrait and smiled. “Mr Brown, good morning. It’s a good likeness.”

“Patricia said there were two people here to look at a painting of me – can I help you with something?” He asked, polite on the surface but annoyance lurking underneath.

“Oh, no,” Andrew said. “We just wanted to see the art, we’re quite involved in the art world these days. Thanks, though.”

Brown looked at them both in bafflement, then turned around and left, muttering under his breath.

“Now what?” Neil asked as they watched him walk away.

“Now we build a case against Coleman Brown.” Andrew looked away, distracted by something, and Neil followed his gaze to an office off to the side. He blinked in surprise; Martha Hudson,
Horowitz’ old secretary, was peeking out the partially-open door, watching them. Andrew raised two fingers to his temple in salute, and she paled and quickly shut the door.

“What was that about?” Neil asked.

“I’m not sure,” Andrew replied thoughtfully. “Come on, let’s go home. If you feel up to doing more of Mason’s essays for him, we have some dirt to find.”

***

The next day found them in an informal questioning room with Matt and Wymack, waiting for Coleman Brown to graciously answer the summons. He strode up to the door, outpacing his uniformed escort, and his eyes immediately snapped to Neil and Andrew.

“These two jokers again? You’re not serious.”

Wymack looked at him oddly, then clearly decided to just blow past that and whatever they had done to annoy the latest suspect. “Mr Brown, thanks for coming down. Have a seat. We want to talk to you about Steven Horowitz.”

Brown gave them a guarded look, but sat. “The guy used to work at my firm. We played golf together. That’s about it.”

“We know you alerted him to a package of debt including Owen Downey’s medical bills,” Neil said calmly. “We also know that you stood to earn millions if Stern Investments could compel Owen to sell his home. Unfortunately for you, your pet debt collector – who probably felt he owed you some sort of gratitude for helping set up his new business – had a sentimental streak.”

“I don’t know what you’re on about.”

“When Steven told you he planned to forgive Owen’s debt, and everyone else’s, you couldn’t believe it,” Neil carried on, borrowing one of Andrew’s tricks of just ignoring whatever lies the suspect was blustering. “You went to his offices in Long Island City and confronted him. And you killed him.”

Brown rolled his eyes. “That’s ridiculous. I never even set foot in his offices.”

“Are you sure about that?” Neil asked sharply, noting with some satisfaction that he had already contradicted himself.

“Yes, I’m sure. I’m getting an attorney.”

“That’s a good idea, ‘cause you’re gonna need one,” Wymack said, rather ominously, and Brown settled slowly back in his chair.

“You recently bought a new pair of glasses, didn’t you?” Neil said smoothly. “For years you’ve had the same pair, with hornbeam rims. You even went to the extent of wearing them in your oil portrait. But today, and the other day at your firm, you were wearing rimless ones.”

“Are you planning to arrest me for having multiple pairs of glasses?”

Neil ignored that as well, leaning back in his seat. “You needed to buy a new pair when you shattered your previous ones when you attacked Steven Horowitz, and he tried to fight back.”

Brown’s cheek twitched minutely.
“We picked through the evidence again last night,” Andrew chipped in with a smile, and got out an evidence bag filled with glass shards. “Most of what we found matched the shattered glass from the fire extinguisher case. But some of it was polycarbonate, like you’d find in a pair of glasses.”

Neil got out another bag, containing a small, rectangular piece of glued-together shards. “When we put those pieces together, a fingerprint very nicely assembled itself on the reconstituted lens. Would you like to guess whose it was?”

“And what were you saying about never setting foot in SMH Incorporated?” Andrew added slyly.

Brown looked between them, a tight look on his face. “I did not volunteer my fingerprints. You have no evidence; this is an intimidation tactic. My attorney will rip you, and this department, to shreds.”

“Oh, but we do have your fingerprints,” Neil informed him brightly. “A secretary at Dorchester-Reid showed us to your office when we asked for an appointment with you this morning – sorry we missed you, by the way, you must have been in a meeting –, and we had a quick look at your keyboard. I’m sure your attorney can advise you on the laws regarding evidence uncovered in public areas.”

Wymack leaned forward in his seat, a grim look on his face. “We have very strong evidence putting you at the scene of Steven Horowitz’ disappearance and presumed murder, and you had plenty of motive to want him dead. Be advised – you have exactly one bargaining chip left. The location of Steven Horowitz’ body, and the fire extinguisher used to brain him. We’ll go ahead and call your attorney just as soon as we finish reading you your rights.”

***

Understandably, Jill Horowitz was more than slightly shocked to find out exactly what had happened to her husband, and that their good old buddy Coleman had been the one to do it. Matt and some others were on their way with a coroner and CSU to the location of her husband’s body. While she was processing that, Andrew got out the giant folder that contained the motherload and held it out to her.

“What’s that?” She asked, subdued.

“It’s your property,” Andrew said. “You’re Steven Horowitz’ next of kin, so legally it belongs to you. You have now inherited ownership of a package of debt that, if worked properly, could set you up in high style for the rest of your life.”

She just blinked woodenly at them.

“Steven decided he had other plans for this information,” Andrew said. “But what you decide to do with it is up to you.”

She looked at it for a little while, then gathered her purse and got to her feet. “Thank you for finding out what happened to my husband. You’ll receive payment for your time via a cheque in a few days.” Then she turned her back on the folder and walked out the door.

Andrew looked to Neil. “What do you reckon?”

Neil grinned. “I think the cats need some new litter for their trays. I’ve heard paper works quite well.”

“That’s a wonderful idea. I’ll get the shredder.”
Later that evening, once Neil had finished gleefully destroying every last trace of the motherload, Andrew sat up in his room with the door closed, listening to the dial tone on his phone for the twentieth time that night. He was at the point of considering finding Eddie Perkins and offering him a new job to just endlessly call this one number all day, when to his shock a familiar voice actually picked up.

“I swear to God, if whoever this is calls me one more time, I’ll—”

“Kevin.” Andrew interrupted him. Ah, like the bad old days. “It’s Andrew.”

The man on the other end gave a sharp gasp.

Andrew waited for him to say something, but Kevin Day was still in the habit of disappointing him, apparently. “I’ll keep this brief. I held up my end of our deal in college, but you did not. Now I need a favour, and you had better come through this time. Your team will be in Brooklyn next week for a game. Meet me behind the home team changing rooms once the place is empty. Tell no one.”

He pressed the disconnect button almost hard enough to crack his screen, and took a slow, deep breath. If Kevin didn’t have the goddamn balls to meet him, then he would go down in flames right alongside Riko by the time Andrew was done, and deserve it. And if Andrew found that Kevin was a part of Riko’s little gang, if he had been one of the men who had hurt Neil… well. Andrew still had his knives. He would solve that problem.

“Andrew,” Neil called up from the kitchen, startling him from his grisly thoughts. “Dinner’s ready.”

“I’ll be right down,” Andrew called back, and shook off the old anger that always surged when he thought of Kevin. Time enough for that later. For now, he had a dinner to eat, cats to play with, and a partner to hold.

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