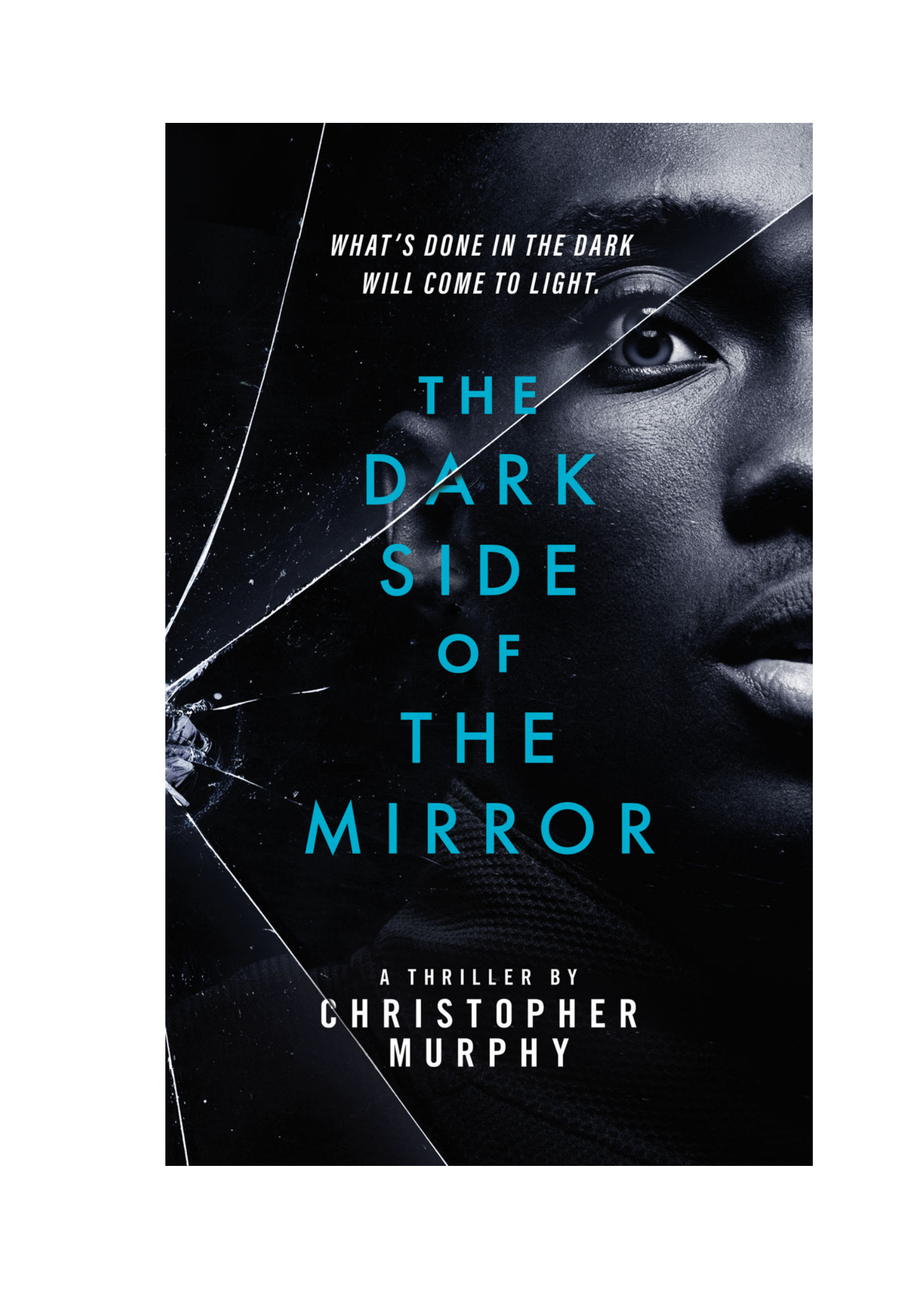


*WHAT'S DONE IN THE DARK
WILL COME TO LIGHT.*

**THE
DARK
SIDE
OF
THE
MIRROR**

A THRILLER BY
**CHRISTOPHER
MURPHY**



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The Dark Side of the Mirror

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First edition

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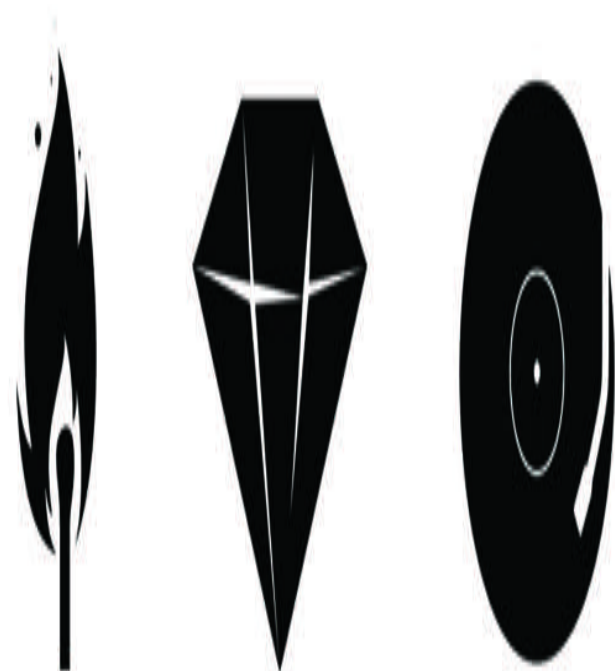
Note to the Reader:

*This book is the sequel to *The Other Side of the Mirror* by
Christopher Murphy.*

“Every man carries with him through life a mirror, as unique and impossible to get rid of as his shadow.”

— W.H. Auden

FIRE, DIAMONDS AND THE BROOKLYN BLUES



THE DARK SIDE OF THE MIRROR

CHRISTOPHER MURPHY

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1 / THE 'LECTRIC CHAIR

Jace Lannister grips the handle of the knife with firm, callused hands... and slices.

The blade melts through flesh, cutting past soft layers of skin and oily fat, as it was forged to do.

He makes delicate cuts, slow and deliberate, giving Caitlin Price a quick upward glance to ensure she's watching. Her vacant eyes are ice-blue with threads of caramel at their center, fixed on the blade carving into red canvas.

Jace works at a steady pace, making firm strokes with the edge of his knife to remove the last bit of fat as the familiar fragrance of blood on metal fills his nostrils.

Heady and intoxicating.

After a final slice, he steps back, and his full lips settle into a content smirk on one side of his handsome face.

"See? That's how you clean and prepare skirt steak! Nice and thin." He wipes the palms of his black latex gloves on his leather apron and gives Caitlin a smile. "Easy."

Caitlin stares at the lifeless slab of meat on the cutting board with dull eyes and nods firmly, knowing she'll be quizzed on this later. Jace hired her to answer the phone and work the register at Cassex Deli, but lately he's been showing her the ropes when the shop is empty of customers, and now's as good a time as any for a quick demo. The afternoon rush is over, and they have time before pickups and deliveries start trickling in.

"Easy," she chirps, quietly trying to assure herself. She grinds her teeth as her mind replays the movements of his knife. Her right hand flutters by her side, weaving patterns.

Jace peels off his gloves and cracks his knuckles.

"Just takes practice," he says to calm the swell of anxiety rising in her eyes. "Just like everything else."

As a fifth-generation butcher, that's easy for him to say. Butchering is in his blood, and although they've never spoken on the subject, Caitlin's well aware that it was Jace's ill-famed father who taught him everything he knows. She's read the articles and has seen the true-crime documentaries about the monster who once owned the infamous Cassex Deli in Brooklyn, New York.

The Brooklyn Butcher. It's a topic she doesn't speak on, in fear that parting her lips to breathe his name might awaken a curse, rising from the murky depths of the basement below. Of course, there hasn't been an incident at Cassex Deli in well over a decade. So, any strange static in the air quickly dissipates when she reminds herself of this fact.

There are no ghosts in the basement... despite the stories a handful of customers have rattled off to her as they pay for their brisket and shanks of lamb.

There are no hexes or curses at Cassex Deli. Only a son doing his best to save the family business.

Caitlin wills herself to match Jace's disarming smile and shakes the darkness from the forefront of her mind.

Jace smooths a hand over his hair, a soft crown of thick black curls; the sides faded, leading to a brawny neck and square shoulders. With a once-lean swimmer's build that's filled out over the years, he stands slightly taller than Caitlin with cool gray eyes that glimmer against brown skin. Skin that glows like copper in the sunlight streaming through the storefront windows.

Caitlin tucks a portion of her strawberry-blonde bob behind an ear, showing off a single pearl earring; a gift from her husband, Bradley. It had been his idea that she should find something to do with herself; to volunteer or get a job of sorts to stay busy and escape the monotony of their brownstone in Cobble Hill.

Bradley's a junior partner at a civil litigation firm Jace can never remember the name of, no matter how many times Caitlin says it. Bradley assumed Caitlin would easily get herself hired at some frivolous, overpriced boutique on Fifth

Avenue where she could blow her earnings on shoes. Or maybe find a cute pastry shop to work in part-time, slinging cupcakes and scones. With her blue-blood pedigree, rosy skin, and darling debutant looks, Caitlin could have easily done either of the two to feed her shoe addiction or come home smelling like baked sugar and frosting. Bradley would have liked that. But here she is, in her pink Ann Taylor cardigan and kitten heels, putting in an honest day's work at a deli, where she learns how to butcher... and now comes home with sore feet, smelling like raw meat and carnage.

And not just any deli...

A deli that resides in what was once a historically Black neighborhood.

A deli with a sordid past that keeps the locals' mouths fed and full of whispers and superstition, despite Jace's efforts to rebrand it upon reopening.

Honestly, Jace was just as stunned as Bradley when Caitlin walked through the door to apply. She looked like the Vice President of the PTA rather than a seasoned candidate for the job, but Jace had zero applicants at the time. Despite the good pay and energy he put into advertising the deli's reopening, no one wanted the job.

Launching under the deli's original name was a gamble. Add in a global pandemic, bad press, and a few uneasy neighbors raising a fuss, and it's a wonder the lights have remained on.

Some of the neighborhood's original business owners, those who survived gentrification and remember the original Cassex Deli, wish it had burned to the ground long ago... Not that that didn't cross Jace's mind.

He'd once stood at the bottom of the basement stairs, mere seconds from tossing a match and wiping the slate clean. But, in the end, something within him rose to the surface and tore past his lips... blowing out the flame that scorched the darkness.

It's the building he couldn't bring himself to destroy.

Over the years, it's lived many lives, surviving the ages like a relic from his childhood.

When the original Cassex Deli closed its doors, it sat empty and abandoned, ripped from the family legacy. Then, new life breathed through its brick and drywall after being bought by a throng of investors and entrepreneurs, who burned through their savings to resurrect it. It returned from the dead as a bakery after riots pierced its windows with rocks and baseball bats. It came back as a bistro and even became a stop on a New York ghost tour for a short time. It's been an ice cream parlor, various restaurants, and a legitimate deli once again, after being purchased at auction by a Jewish family with the highest of hopes. But that endeavor, too, failed in a matter of months, leaving the building barren. Until Jace walked back in, a man now and no longer the awkward wide-eyed youth who once trailed behind his father in the deli, soaking up knowledge like air.

From birth, Jace has been groomed to carry on the family business. And after running from his birthright and the dark memories that stain his family name, he found himself right back where it all began... in the belly of the sleeping dragon, with a match and a chance to set things right.

As daunting as the idea was, he knew he had to try to save the family business.

It was now or never.

It took a few months to return the deli to its former glory, largely due to leery contractors who refused the job or wanted double the pay to work at the site. Even the skeleton crew who innocently agreed to the job threatened to quit midway after learning the building's history.

After renovations were finally completed, the grand opening turned into a media circus once the press caught wind that it was, in fact, the son of the Brooklyn Butcher who returned to New York to purchase the building; contentiously reclaiming it into his bloodline after it sat abandoned for months following another string of failed businesses. Reporters flew in from far

corners of the world, just to see the prodigal son all grown up and to witness the awakening of Cassex Deli.

Photos of Jace behind the deli's counter made the front page of hundreds of newspapers.

It doesn't help that Jace is a mirror image of his father, Sam "the Brooklyn Butcher" Mader, who murdered nineteen innocent people by luring them to the deli's basement after-hours to butcher them alive.

The resemblance is chilling. They both have the same cold, gray eyes and good looks.

"Looks that could kill," as one of the newspapers impishly noted.

Jace's legal name, written as Jace Lannister on leaked copies of the lease, confused reporters until a local network explained that Jace, born Jason Mader, changed his name and moved away to Portland. Only to return to New York and possibly pick up where his father left off.

After the grand opening, business was slow, but the shop's phone rang constantly. One-third were prank calls. The rest were a mix of death threats and heavy breathers hanging up. But nothing could have prepared Jace for the day Jennifer Felder came into the shop.

Her husband was victim #8 on Sam Mader's list during the '90s.

Jace looked up to find her disheveled, standing in the middle of the shop in sweatpants and her gray dingy bathrobe, the color drained from her face as she took in her surroundings – having finally willed herself to visit the place where her husband died an agonizing death. She choked out a sob and dug through her purse, muttering words that fell just short of where Jace greeted her from behind the counter with a smile. Merely happy to see a new customer venture in.

She glared at him through wild, unkempt graying hair, and it was then that he recognized her. She'd sat only two rows behind Jace in the courtroom where his father confessed his crimes. She'd watched his father plead guilty and coolly

explain at length the callous measures he took to entrap and murder his victims; stripping them of their hair, teeth, and fingernails before butchering them like pigs while they were still alive... paralyzed by the Halothane he'd drugged them with. She'd listened with a weak stomach, imagining her high school sweetheart bleeding out on Sam Mader's table as his flesh was carved from bone. She'd followed the news and public outrage when Sam Mader killed himself in prison – hanging himself with a belt mere days into his sentence. She'd watched the streets fill with red angry mobs that included family members of the victims, robbed of justice when Sam Mader took his own life.

Jennifer Felder didn't join the marches. She didn't get in touch with the other victims' families or go to any of the candlelight vigils churches hosted throughout the city. She didn't join a support group or pay an obscene amount of money for therapy, though her elderly mother begged her to seek help for her depression. Instead, Jennifer sat alone in her apartment stewing and bathing in her grief, amidst photos of her dead husband on the walls. She rarely left her apartment for anything other than work and to buy groceries. Days rolled by like thunder, and nothing piqued her interest or brought back the spark in her eyes, until the day she saw an advertisement for Cassex Deli's grand reopening. The ad even had the audacity to boast London broil at \$1.98/lb...

Jace watched as Jennifer searched through her purse for what he could only imagine was a gun.

She looked much older than he remembered, older than she should appear as he did quick math in his head. Gray ripped through her auburn hair like lightning, making her look twice her age. Twice as weathered by time's cruel hand.

He's familiarized himself with his father's victims, at least by name and face. It also never escaped him that the nineteen victims had families, children, and wives left shattered and staring at empty place settings at the dinner table every night. Knowing their loved ones will never walk through the front door again.

Jace raised his hands, expecting the worst to come reeling out of Jennifer's purse with her hand on the trigger.

Instead, she whipped out a faded photo of her husband. Her wedding band sparkled under the fluorescent light of the deli as the photo shook in her trembling hand.

"His name was Bryan Felder!" She sputtered and swiped strands of wild hair from her face with her free hand. "He was my husband! He was murdered here..." Her voice cracked and her knees buckled beneath her. "Your father – that devil – he took him from me!" Her eyes then traveled about the deli in near disbelief, as if suddenly remembering she was in the one place she never thought she'd willingly walk into. She shuddered and her chest rose and fell beneath her bathrobe. Frightened but standing her ground on weak legs and sneakers she threw on to make the eight-block trek.

She breathed rapidly, taking in the same air her husband once did as his pulse faded, just one story below where she stood.

"Jennifer..." Jace locked eyes with her and slowly side-stepped, making his way from behind the counter.

For a moment, she appeared startled that he knew her name, but the surprise soon soured into rage.

"He mattered!" She spat. "My husband mattered and your father took him! Look at him!" She thrust the photo forward as her words melted into sobs. A tangled language of grief, full of syllables and words that have spoiled and turned rotten from years of festering in her empty apartment.

The lanky, sandy-haired man in the photo smiled at Jace from the depths of the past, unaware of his fate as he posed behind his grill, tongs in hand. The photo was from a cookout, full of sun, smoke, and barbeque sauce that stained his "Kiss the chef" apron.

The back of Jace's throat tightened as he faced Bryan, but he swallowed hard and willed himself to inch forward, slowly closing the gap between himself and Jennifer.

"Why?" She gave an unearthly cry that shredded Jace's nerves. "Why did he do it?"

Why.

It's the question left on everyone's lips. Even when Sam confessed in court, he didn't give a reason for methodically murdering nineteen people. He offered no logic or motive for butchering and disposing of the bodies.

Jeffrey Dahmer... Aileen Wuornos... Even the most prolific killers in history eventually explained what drove them to commit their crimes, whether it was former abuse or a voice in their head. But Sam never gave any clues before he killed himself.

So, it's remained a mystery. One that still haunts Sam's victims and his fandom alike.

Jennifer folded and crumpled onto the floor. Her cries filled the air, then muffled as she buried her face in her hands.

Jace dropped to his knees and scooped her into an embrace, holding her tight to his chest as though she were a bomb set to explode... as if to absorb the blast and her pain.

Through tears, he whispered the words he wished he could tell every family member who lost someone under his father's knife.

The world may never know why his father did the things he did, so he had no explanation for Jennifer. Instead, he said everything that his father should have said in the courtroom that day, instead of the deadpan admission of guilt that lacked any hint of contrition. Jace shared his condolences as he consoled her, rocking her in his arms as she finally released her grief.

Jace bought a gun shortly after Jennifer's visit. She may have come for some semblance of closure, but there are plenty of others who would come for revenge.

He keeps a Ruger MAX-9 under the register and prays he'll never have to use it. Only he, Caitlin, and his second in command, Yuri Nakamura, know where it's hidden.

He hired Yuri, a late-forty-something Army vet, during the pandemic. After launching the deli's home delivery service as

a solution to New York's occupancy restrictions put in place to combat the virus.

If customers couldn't come to Jace, then he would go to them. With Yuri out making deliveries and leaving menus at doors, Jace could reach more people, including those in quarantine who dared not venture from their homes. Yuri also brought donations Jace made to local homeless shelters and food banks during the pandemic, anything Jace could spare at the end of the day.

Yuri narrowed his eyes at the sight of the pistol when Jace introduced it, wanting no part of it, having left his military life behind at Fort Irwin in Barstow, California.

These days, he's a gentle giant, moving about the shop in peaceful silence. Content to have found work and comfort in a daily routine that doesn't ask more of him than making deliveries and helping with orders.

Guns would only disrupt that peace and routine.

It's Caitlin who took to the gun first.

One afternoon, while Yuri was out on a delivery and Jace was in the back office on a call, Caitlin looked up from the register to find herself facing the barrel of a gun.

She later told Jace she didn't know what kind of gun it was, nor could she give a decent description of who was behind it. A white male in a ski mask... gray hoodie... dirty fingernails was all she could recall. That and his warning.

"Open the register, bitch, 'fo I make you swallow this shit," muttered between a spray of spit and yellow, clenched teeth.

She stared back with dull eyes spread a few centimeters too far apart on her face, which some might argue make her modelesque. Jace has grown used to the vacant runway look she often wears, making it hard to tell what's going on in that head of hers, but for the gunman, her numb stare iced the small of his back.

Without pause or breaking eye contact, she reached for the gun under the register and began to fire. She managed to squeeze

out three shots while the robber fled, one of the bullets clipping his shoulder as he staggered out the door.

It's lucky she didn't kill him.

The last thing the deli needs is another death under its belt from Jace's trigger-happy cashier.

Running out of his office and finding her brandishing the gun, Jace was sure she would quit. Perhaps find something in retail to appease her husband, be a normal trophy wife like the rest of the guys at his firm have. But Caitlin didn't resign. The next day, she arrived to work early with a baleful smile, as if anticipating who else she might have a chance to take aim at.

After the incident, Jace jokingly declared her Employee of the Month and began teaching her how to butcher, which she'd taken to faster than either expected.

Caitlin now gives a final glance to the skirt steak bleeding on the cutting board as Jace glances at the empty shop. The faint perfume of blood hangs in the air as if suspended by a thread.

"Some music?" He calls out over his shoulder.

She returns to the register where her phone is charging under the counter. With a few taps of her manicured fire engine red nails, jazz streams from the wireless speaker beside the meat slicer. She softly sways her hips to the rusty brass notes and rich contralto voice teetering in and out of pitches with finesse.

"Name that tune!" Jace throws her a smirk. A game they play to pass the time.

Caitlin puts down her phone, bites her glossy bottom lip, and takes a stab.

"Ma Rainey?"

It's a good guess, especially when you consider she would have had no clue who the hell Ma Rainey was a few months ago.

"Bessie Smith." Jace points a finger and she throws her head back in defeat. "The Empress of the Blues," he reminds her.

“I like Billie Holiday,” Caitlin says definitively and turns her attention back to her bejeweled phone case. “Her voice is so haunting.”

Jace played Billie’s live 1959 recording of “Strange Fruit,” and Caitlin’s been obsessed with her ever since.

Before he has a chance to tell her the title of the song playing, Bessie cuts in with the chorus to “Send Me to the ‘Lectric Chair.”

A rush of cool air hits them as Yuri appears, opening the door for Miss “Hattie” Turner. They both hobble in, her hunched over her cane and Yuri with a slight limp he picked up in a motorcycle accident two birthdays ago.

“There’s my favorite girl!” Jace shoots Miss Hattie a wink.

Her face lights up, warm like gingerbread, seasoned with age and wisdom. She’s at least 70 by Jace’s rough math and comes into the shop every week for lamb chops she prepares on Sunday, something she did without fail for her husband, Warren, who passed away from colon cancer last year.

She’s one of the originals. She remembers when Sam Mader ran the shop and Jace was just a boy at his side, a shadow always following his father – none the wiser as to what lurked just below the surface of the smile Sam greeted customers with.

It’s nice to have one of the originals still supporting the business.

Another of the shop’s originals, Jeremy Catlett walks by now and then but refuses to step foot inside. Mr. Catlett had been Jace’s favorite customer when he worked at the shop as a boy. He was always well-dressed with lengthy, elegant fingers and fingernails he kept long. Much too long for a man, in Jace’s opinion back then. But Jace could tell Mr. Catlett was different. Different like himself. Jace would peer at him adoringly from behind the counter and sneak extra slices of roast beef into his usual order, which always inexplicably came to \$14.98, much to his father’s befuddlement.

These days, when Jace tries to catch him walking by – to offer a few free pounds as a peace offering – Jeremy Catlett quickens his pace, ignoring Jace’s calls. Never looking back.

“You got my lamb chops ready?” Miss Hattie’s voice crackles as she gives a mischievous grin. Two beady eyes peer from under her red beret. A crown fit for a queen who’s persevered through the lynchings of the civil rights movement, the sweltering ‘70s and ‘90s riots that tore through the neighborhood, and a global pandemic that claimed millions of lives.

She’s a bad bitch.

Jace turns to Caitlin with panic in his eyes. “Shit. Did we sell the last of the lamb chops?”

Caitlin winces. Her lipstick bends out of shape. “I think we did.”

Jace shrugs. “Sorry, old lady. We’re fresh out.”

“I know y’all lyin’!” Miss Hattie croaks and points her cane at Jace menacingly. “Don’t make me come back there. You still not too old for a whoopin’.”

He surrenders with a grin and holds up her order, neatly wrapped and ready for Caitlin to ring up. “Thought you’d be in before now.”

“Missed the goddamn bus!” She hoots.

“How come Junior didn’t bring you?”

Junior’s her grandson, who just graduated high school and apparently has better things to do than chauffeur his elderly grandmother around.

Like chase fast girls and run the streets.

She waves a hand, not wanting to get into it. Not wanting to get riled up. She left her blood pressure medicine at home and doesn’t need another stroke. The last one nearly took her out.

A cold look passes over Jace’s face. “I’ll have a word next time I see him.” He clenches his jaw and passes the order of lamb chops to Caitlin. He’s thrown in an extra portion Miss

Hattie will discover once she's home in her housedress, shuffling about the kitchen.

Caitlin waits as Miss Hattie digs through her change purse and produces a few wrinkled bills.

"Ezra come in for tonight's order?" Yuri asks, scratching the scruff on his face. Hair like black silk falls into his eyes. He doesn't bother to move it. Most days, his shoulder-length hair is slicked back into a messy bun of sorts, but today it's left to its own devices. Loose and unruly.

"Not yet." Jace glances at the clock behind the counter, hanging against white subway tile. "You running back out?" He tilts his head toward Miss Hattie, still digging through her purse. Fingers that could once type 70 words per minute fumble clumsily through quarters and pennies.

Yuri nods. "Yeah. Miss Hattie?" He rakes a large hand back through his hair, revealing rugged good looks and creases under warm, deep-set eyes that give away his age. "I'm gonna take you home, alright? You're on my route."

She doesn't hear him.

"Miss Hattie..." Yuri walks over to get her sorted as Jace smiles to himself.

Almost on cue, Jace's phone chimes with a text.

Miss you babe. Come home to daddy

Jace rolls his eyes but can't help the grin that spreads across his face like peanut butter. He supposes he could leave early... Caitlin and the Ruger can take care of the shop and Yuri's making good time on deliveries, even with taking Miss Hattie home clear across town. But then there's the order for Zora's that Ezra Weyl, its chief sous-chef, has yet to pick up.

Zora's is the deli's biggest restaurant client, so Jace likes to be in the shop to go over everything, down to the number of filets he'll sometimes allow Ezra to handpick. One mistake can wreck an entire dinner service... which leads to bad reviews...

which leads to bad press – and that’s the last thing Zora’s needs after their successful launch five months ago.

Jace looks up from his phone and jumps at the sight of a new customer, staring at him from the other side of the meat case.

He hadn’t heard the tall, slender man come in, which makes him second-guess his decision to disable the shop’s door chime last week. It had finally reached a point when neither Jace nor Caitlin could stand the constant ringing during busy hours. Now, something about the sight of the man before him makes him regret that decision.

“Welcome to Cassex Deli. What can I get for you?”

Green eyes, the color of absinthe, drag over Jace, and a sudden smile breaks through the man’s inscrutable gaze. His face is haunting, like he hasn’t slept in days or might just sleep with his eyes open.

“I’ll take two pounds of turkey... and, umm...” He blinks rapidly. “A pound of your pastrami.” He says this in a deep voice that sounds misplaced in his rail-thin frame.

There’s an excitement in his stare that causes Jace to release a slow ragged sigh under his breath. He recognizes the sheen in the man’s eyes. A sparkle that reveals he clearly recognizes Jace from the papers, that his visit goes deeper than turkey and pastrami.

Before the man has a chance to ask if he can see the basement or ask where Jace’s father hid his victim’s remains, Jace turns and works fast to fulfill the order. To send him on his way.

As Jace wraps the cold meat in butcher paper, he looks up to find the man still staring, his hands stuffed deep in the pockets of his dark jeans. A tattoo with symbols Jace can’t make out is etched into the pale skin of his forearm. His black t-shirt hangs loose on his shoulders, one size too large, and his dark, tussled hair reminds Jace of a mad scientist who hasn’t left his laboratory in days. Except now, to gather provisions to make himself a sandwich.

His mouth parts to speak, but Yuri interrupts.

“Heading out!” Yuri has one hand on Miss Hattie’s shoulder and carries her order in the other.

She waves as they prepare to leave.

Jace points a stiff finger. “You stay outta trouble, Miss Missy!”

“No promises!” She bites back, head held high.

Yuri stifles a laugh and turns to Jace. “Feinstein’s changed their drop to Thursday,” he gets out as he holds the door open for Miss Hattie. “New driver.”

Jace gives a nod, makes a mental note, and finishes wrapping the pastrami from the digital scale. “Caitlin will ring you up,” he says curtly and hands the man his order, briskly walking off.

Another sigh escapes him, this time heavy with relief as he slips out of his apron. He leaves the counter and turns down a hallway to his office – his father’s old office – tucked away in the back of the building. Once there, he grabs a pen and hovers at the calendar on the wall to make the date change for Feinstein’s delivery before he has a chance to forget.

Once done, he takes a step back, glares at the red circle on the calendar and his breath catches in his throat. His eyes pass over dates in boxes, counting backward until...

“Fuck.”

He hadn’t realized what day it is. All day, he’s been going about his normal routine, unaware of the significance the day holds... and the darkness that awaits him on the other side.

He wonders for a moment if Caitlin or Yuri realizes what tomorrow’s date on the calendar signifies and what it may mean for the deli. He wonders if the press will come, ready to dig up old bodies long laid to rest. He wonders what ghosts may rise and walk through the door, dead set on dragging him into an early grave.

The pit in his stomach grows heavy and his mind instinctively flashes to the gun stashed away under the register.

He’s hoped he’ll never have to use it, but with the past once again making its way back to haunt him, he knows the

countdown to that day has begun.

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2 / CROCS

The air is muggy and dense with the scent of curry.

Jace slides the large industrial door to his loft closed behind him, feeling the weight of the day slip off his shoulders. Stress melts and drips down his arms and off his fingertips like warm, thick molasses.

He's home, among beloved framed art on the walls and a record collection that's grown to fill two metal shelves, set against a wall of exposed brick. The warmth of a lamp from the living room and his worn-in leather furniture call to him. He's been on his feet all day. All he wants to do now is collapse.

The burnt-brown hardwood floors creak in their usual places as he moves to kick off his shoes and eyes the bar in the corner, his mouth fixed for a stiff gin and tonic. The smell of food bubbling and voices whispering from the kitchen steal Jace's attention, and he makes his way toward the large stone island, where he's stunned to find his boyfriend and the elusive Ezra Weyl lingering at his side.

Before Jace can utter a word, Stella jumps up from her spot on the floor at the sight of him and trounces over, tail wagging. Derek turns to spot Jace, and he and Ezra go quiet and separate. Each of them plasters on a thick smile.

"You're home!" Derek rolls his broad shoulders and his smile stretches wider, on the brink of cracking.

"You texted me," Jace reminds him. The words taste surly on his tongue, and he fights not to make an exasperated face. He shoots Ezra a quick look before bending to pet Stella, who whimpers and spins in circles.

At least someone looks happy to see him, even if she's moving slower these days. The first signs of arthritis are sprouting in her joints, and Jace can't help but quietly wonder now, as he often does, how many years she has left.

How long do pit bulls typically live anyway?

Derek got Stella as a rescue, so her true age is anyone's guess. Still, it doesn't help that Derek refuses to acknowledge the streak of white at her nose growing more prominent as the months pass. He'll be devastated when she passes, and Jace will no doubt need to be the stronger one. The one who saw the signs. The one who recognized the stench of death slowly seeping its way closer... petting Stella on the head and coaxing her closer toward an endless slumber.

"Thought you'd be on your way to pick up tonight's order," Jace addresses Ezra, wiping Stella's hair off his pants. He left the order at the shop with Caitlin.

"I asked him over to help with dinner specials," Derek interjects with a smile. Suddenly, he's all smooth, dark skin and dimples. The charm has taken over his baritone voice, softening the edge in Jace's hard gaze. He walks over to kiss Jace; lips press past his meticulously groomed beard smelling of grapeseed oil and sweet notes of vanilla. "Thought we'd be done by now," he whispers.

"Marcella Hall's coming to review Zora's," Ezra says over Sabrina Claudio playing softly in the background. He straightens his posture in an attempt to look more formal now that Jace is home. His greasy brown hair is combed neatly to one side, the usual stubble on his face shaved clean. He's in his baggy, black chef pants, dressed for dinner service with the sleeves of his chef's coat rolled up. The tops of his arms are covered with sweeps of dark hair that have found their way to his knuckles. He looks like any other sous-chef in the city, minus a barrage of ink on his arms. Derek has enough tattoos covering his wide arms for both of them.

With the exception of one crooked tooth next to his top-right canine and a faint accent that grows more pronounced when he speaks fast, there's little that stands out about Ezra Weyl. He's not particularly handsome, but also not an ogre. He's quite average in appearance.

His nondescript looks could easily cast him as a movie extra if this were LA.

Jace eyes Ezra's black crocs and can't help but frown.
"Marcella from Bon Appétit?"

"Yep!" Derek gives Jace a squeeze with his massive arms. His stocky build and the "spare tire" at his waist feel like home. "Could be my first major East Coast feature, if she likes the menu." There's hope in his voice. Making the jump from Portland to New York to open Zora's was a leap of faith, and he's still trying to find his footing.

Zora's is one-part high-end steakhouse and one-part soul food eatery with Derek at the helm as its Michelin Star chef. From five-spice short ribs to collard greens and a deconstructed bread pudding torte that always sells out, the current menu is a labor of love and tribute to his late grandmother, who often let him stir pots and dice things in her tiny kitchen as a boy.

With his accolades and butchering skills that rival Jace's, he hopes to earn a seat at New York's top culinary table, among the titans who reign over the city's most esteemed kitchens.

When he first came to New York, he wasn't a total stranger to the culinary community. He's largely known for being the first person of color to win "À La Carte" – a high-pressure reality TV show now under fire for sexual harassment allegations against its host, Thomas Stone.

Since winning the show and running kitchens at multiple restaurants along the West Coast, he's dreamt of opening his own restaurant in a food capital like New York. But, of course, Zora's isn't his only reason for leaving Portland. There's Jace, whom he met there and never stopped loving, even through the darkest of times. Even despite another man who somehow managed to wrangle Jace's heart and claim it as his own.

When Jace left Portland for New York, Derek visited often to make sure he was settling in okay. Something Jace's self-proclaimed long-distance boyfriend at the time, Detective Mateo "Banks" Hernández Grijalva, hardly bothered with.

Derek was leery of Banks from the start, insisting Banks couldn't possibly know Jace the way he does. Not well enough to know that when Jace says on the phone that things are fine,

the opposite is likely true... that he may very well be on a ledge, dangerously close to falling into old patterns.

Derek knows Banks can't see through Jace's smile the way he does. The handsome detective had been enamored with Jace's beauty and the light in his gray eyes, but he couldn't possibly understand the darkness that sometimes clouded them. Derek doubted he'd be able to weather the storm that swirls around Jace's dark past and, soon enough, the distance between Banks and Jace stretched too thin, and their commitment to giving things "a proper go" was broken.

Derek remained supportive of Jace's decision to move back to Brooklyn and helped pick up the pieces, holding Jace together during the breakup and early stages of the deli's reopening.

He'd visit as much as his schedule and the pandemic would allow – even driving cross-country in the beginning, to avoid flying. This was well before vaccines were foreseeable and a topic of debate. Once New York began to reopen, Derek insisted during his visits that they dine at the top restaurants on Goodeats. One, to get a lay of the land and study what was trending, and, two, to treat Jace to a good meal. Something they both enjoyed, even at the start of their courtship in Portland.

It was like old times when they were together; bouncing from five-star hole-in-the-wall restaurants to underground bars requiring a password to enter. Sampling exotic appetizers here... ordering off the city's most exclusive cocktail menus there... adding kindling to the spark that still flickered between them.

Then, one weekend, Derek came to visit and never left.

He couldn't fathom returning to Portland, just to wait another month to come back and see Jace. Their goodbye hugs at the airport, often the only time they dared touch for fear of igniting something they might not be able to control, grew longer and more desperate. Until the day Derek leaned in for a kiss. A hungry kiss that sent travelers in the passenger drop-off lane into a tizzy, honking and clapping like something out of a movie.

“I don’t wanna leave you,” Derek said, out of breath from their kiss. His husky voice carried the same brassy notes Jace fell in love with when they first met at speed-dating, years ago.

Jace could hear the pain in the notes diving off his full lips. He could feel the strain in the lovesick melody playing between them. “So, don’t go,” he said with a shrug.

It was almost a dare. A test to see if Derek would stay after so many others had abandoned him.

An easy smile took over Derek’s face as he warned, “I’m not letting you go this time.”

And true to his word, he hasn’t.

Derek holds Jace for a moment longer now, then gives him another squeeze before returning to his notebook and beer on the kitchen island. The kitchen’s a mess. The island is covered in produce, half-empty spice jars, crumpled pieces of paper, and rejected ideas.

Jace notices the green beer bottle in Ezra’s hand now. The two do this sometimes; drink and feverishly debate over menu changes like two coaches assembling the perfect roster of flavors to win over the next food critic. In this case, it’s Marcella Hall, the ruthless food and drink editor at Bon Appétit.

This was once Jace’s job, helping Derek come up with new recipes, but now the deli keeps him so busy he’s rarely home for these moments.

“Her reservation’s next Friday.” Derek tents his fingers in prayer and pleads, “I need you there. You’re my good luck charm.”

Given his own past rotten luck, Jace nearly laughs at the compliment.

“Promise you’ll come? It’s at seven.”

“Sure.”

“No, I really need you to promise. 7 p.m. next Friday. No working late.”

“Got it. Promise!” Jace testifies with one hand up. “I’ll be there.”

Besides... How can he say no to that face?

He watches the worry lift from Derek’s expression and throws him a bemused smirk.

Erza watches the exchange with a gleam in his eyes and a crooked crocodile smile. “I’ll stop by the deli on my way in tonight.” He points his beer at Jace. “Yuri’s there?”

“Caitlin is.”

Ezra nods and turns to rest a hand on Derek’s arm. “We’re ‘bout done here, right?”

Derek has just gulped his beer, lips locked around the glass mouth of the bottle. He nods through the long sip and tosses a glance toward the large pot of curry chicken simmering on the stove. He’s in jeans and a black Trail Blazers tank top, not dressed for work yet.

“We’re not full tonight,” Ezra says, although no one asked. “Should be slow. The Burnsteins are coming in though. I saw Roslyn’s name under reservations. Her husband, Jeff, always orders the Porterhouse. Gonna need a big cut or he’ll complain again,” he says, for Jace’s benefit. His accent has made a cameo. Although he’s mentioned growing up in Delaware numerous times, it doesn’t seem to fit.

What do people from Delaware even sound like?

Not like this.

Jace winces as his words bend out of shape, becoming sing-songy, wide syllables and elongated vowels swirling around his tongue.

“What an odd pair those two are.” Ezra’s beady brown eyes go large as he takes a breath. “Did you know she was Miss Michigan back in the ‘70s?” He turns back to Derek, giving his bicep a sudden squeeze. “Or maybe she was runner-up...? I forget. Anyway, total pageant queen. Did I tell you his family owns a fifth of the real estate up in Chelsea? They’re loaded...”

Ezra drones on, his voice growing higher as it shoots into the stratosphere.

Jace grinds his teeth, eyeing Ezra's hand on Derek's arm.

Lingering.

He counts back from ten in his head, just as his last therapist, Dr. Kessler, had often advised him to do when his blood pressure reaches a rumbling boil.

He doesn't know he's doing it, Jace calmly tells himself. Ezra's one of those people who insist on touching you when they're speaking to you – as if to make sure you're dialed in and paying attention. As if to make sure you catch every word ejected from his mouth.

Given how much Ezra talks though, it can be maddening.

Outside of their business with deli orders for Zora's, Jace and Ezra thankfully have little interaction. But Jace can recall a few times Ezra cornered him at the deli. Jace thought he'd never shut up, and it had taken all his strength and a dozen counts from ten to look as if he were paying attention, even giving the occasional, "Oh, wow," and slightly off-cue nod.

"There's no way they're real!" Ezra barks. "I mean, how are they up by her neck? At her age, she'd be trippin' over them by now, right?"

"Oh, wow. Well, I'm no breast expert... being a gold star and all..." Jace mumbles and pinches the bridge of his nose. "Hey, what time is it? I wanna make sure you catch Caitlin at the shop."

He glances at his watch. "Yeah. I should head out. This has been fun. Good progress." He pats Derek's shoulder and grins stupidly at Jace. "Good to see you, as always."

"So good to see you..." Jace manages as Derek bites back a smile.

"I'll unlock and start prepping," Ezra calls over his shoulder, waving his fingertips. "Byeeee!"

"See ya!" Derek waves a hand and waits until he hears the front door slide open and click shut.

Jace instantly deflates and shoots Derek a pained look.

“I know, I know.” He smirks and sets his beer down to lower one of the burners on the stove. The flames dim, licking the bottom of the pot with a faint blue-red glow. “Hungry?”

And mentally drained. Jace is ready for that gin and tonic now. Something to wash down the strain of the day and drown the voices in his head.

“I’m starving. Smells good.” Jace nods and leans against the marble counter, slowly folding his arms. “You do know he has a crush on you, right?”

A test. Surely, Derek must see it. But will he acknowledge it?

“Ezra?” He scoffs, furrows his brows, and wipes at the sweat collecting on his bald head. “Nah. I don’t think so. ‘Sides, he’s talkin’ to somebody.”

“You mean Nate, the bartender at Seven? Or do you mean that bike messenger from last week? Was it Robert? Something with an R...” It could be any of his one-date wonders.

Adding to the confusion is the fact that Ezra swears every man he encounters wants him. Even Jeff Burnstein, liver spots and all, allegedly gave him “the eye” from the dining room when Roslyn wasn’t looking.

“I know he’s a lot. He’s a good sous-chef though.” Derek dips a spoon into the golden, bubbling mixture of chicken, carrots, and potatoes, blows, and takes a quick sip of the earthy broth. Satisfied, he gives his usual, curt chef’s nod and starts to plate. “He came highly recommended. And, look, he helped me workshop two new entrees tonight. I feel good about these for the menu.” He points in the general direction of his notebook. “It’s gonna help me wow Marcella next Friday.”

It’s all for the success of the restaurant, Jace reminds himself. Everything Derek does is for them.

“That’s... good,” Jace concedes. He shrugs a shoulder and pushes off the counter for a closer look at Derek’s notes. “I’m glad he’s working out.”

Good help is hard to find, especially in an industry where servers and sous-chefs come and go. Loyalty is something even harder to procure, as Jace learned the hard way from his last assistant, Alex Cruise – who betrayed and nearly killed him during his marketing days at Moxy, a fast-rising ad agency in downtown Portland.

Jace scans Derek's messy handwriting...

Sriracha Honey Chicken and Waffles

Coconut-Bourbon Sweet Potatoes – scratched out.

Lobster Gumbo and Jalapeno Hush Puppies

Cajun Baked Catfish with a star next to it.

“He likes you, you know. He's impressed with what you've done with the deli. He talks about you all the time.” Derek faces him with both plates in hand and a pointed look. “If he's infatuated with anyone, it's you.”

It's an odd thing to say, but also a convenient defense.

What better way to disarm the significant other of the man you want for yourself than with flattery? Jace is too tired to make the argument though, so he shrugs again and mumbles, “I'm just glad you guys made progress.”

Jace lets it go – for now – but he hasn't forgotten Derek and Ezra whispering at the sound of him coming into the loft. Or the look of surprise splattered across their faces. “Any word from LA?” Best to change the subject. He knows that if he presses the issue he won't stop until he accuses Derek of the unthinkable. It's the Taurus in him. Once he latches onto a theory, he can't let it go.

Derek's face dims. “No word yet.”

“They'll call. They'd be crazy not to. And you said your screen test went great, right?”

“I thought so.” He makes a face. “And they definitely wanted to see if I got along with the judges. If we have chemistry, you know?”

Probably.

Derek tilts his head. “How crazy would it be to host the show I won five years ago?”

“That’s what makes you a great fit!” Jace says. That, and the fact that Derek’s a Black, queer chef. Accolades and Michelin Star aside, it’s diversity that the network is after since Thomas Stone’s fuckup. What better way to up their diversity score than by replacing the show’s middle-aged, white, predatory host with someone like Derek, who’s Black, openly gay, handsome, and gifted? Plus, Derek’s great on camera – though he swears he’s camera shy.

“If it’s meant to be, it’ll be,” he says. And it’s now his turn to change the subject. “Glad you were able to dip out early.” He finds a smile and hands Jace a plate. “Thought we could have an early dinner before I head in tonight. That’s why I texted.”

“Dinner. And here I thought you had dessert for me.” Jace winks.

Derek’s eyes go dark with desire. “Oh, you wan’ somethin’ sweet?” He growls. “That can be arranged.”

Jace playfully flexes an eyebrow and takes a heaping bite of his food.

A moan escapes.

The flavors are a symphony in his mouth. It’s a shame Derek’s curry chicken isn’t on Zora’s menu, but Derek only makes it for him these days.

“I can be a few minutes late goin’ in.” Derek chews on his food and the idea as he puts down his plate. He swaggers over to collect Jace in his arms again.

The thought of swiping everything off the kitchen island and going at it like untamed animals would normally be a given at this point, but Jace simply gives Derek a benign smile. “You can’t be late.” He sets his plate down. “You’re the boss.” He wraps his arms around Derek’s neck and gives him a slow, sweet kiss.

When it’s over, Derek leans back with a questioning glare in his eyes. “You alright, J?” His fingers caress the small of

Jace's back and the look on his face confirms what Jace has suspected... that he's aware of what tomorrow is.

Derek hasn't said it, but it's obvious now. It also explains why he called Jace from the deli early and made his favorite meal.

Anything to distract Jace from what tomorrow may bring.

Jace gives a brave smile, then a firm nod. "I'll be okay. Tomorrow just snuck up on me. That's all."

Derek's face draws tight with sadness, his mouth a thin line. He'd give anything to push fast-forward and get Jace through the next 24 hours unscathed. He remembers how hard last year was on Jace and how helpless he'd felt, watching him retreat into himself; unable to tell what was going through Jace's mind – a rarity that scared him more than anything.

"Tomorrow will pass." Derek gently kisses his forehead. "I'm here for whatever you need tomorrow. You know I got you, babe."

Jace pinches his eyes shut and exhales onto Derek's chest. Derek's talent for finding the right words never fails to comfort him, but he knows that words alone are no match for what awaits.

Tomorrow is the anniversary of his father's suicide in prison. The day that sparked national rage and an inferno of unsettled anger from the surviving families of the nineteen victims Sam Mader slaughtered.

At minimum, Jace expects a bomb threat or three. At worst, another Jennifer Felder will march in to confront him, this time armed with a loaded gun and a vendetta.

The anniversary is always a time when people air out their frustrations and grief. It's a time when the media digs up old bones that never have a chance to rest, a time for those touched by the Brooklyn Butcher to lash out again.

It's the reason Jace isn't on social media. It's the reason he changed his name when he moved to Portland and lived and worked under an alias at Moxy, only telling his true identity to those close to him, Derek included. Over recent years, Jace has managed to evade most of the backlash he endured as a child,

but tomorrow will be his first anniversary back in Brooklyn... back in the deli, of all places, where his father's killing spree first began.

Adding salt to a wound that won't heal is the fact that tomorrow is also the anniversary of Alex Cruise's death. Alex had been Jace's mousy assistant at Moxy, who ultimately revealed himself to be Liam Garvey, the scorned son of his father's first victim, Gordon Garvey. Unlike Jennifer Felder, "Alex" didn't directly confront Jace with old photos and tears. Instead, he infiltrated Jace's life in Portland, posing as an ally – a friend – who not only wanted Jace's new life for himself but went to great lengths to frame Jace for a murder he didn't commit. All in the name of seeking justice for his murdered father.

"You don't get off easy like your father did," Alex had sworn with a cleaver gleaming in his hand. "I wanted you to rot in a jail cell – the way he should have! Someone has to pay!"

If it hadn't been for Derek swooping in to save him, Jace would have died at Alex's hand that day. Derek surprised them both by stepping in, providing a distraction and a window large enough for Banks and Portland PD to enter the scene... ultimately firing the shots that took Alex down.

Despite his betrayal, Alex's death was a hard pill to swallow. He turned out to be another soul claimed by his father's legacy of bloodlust that seems to have no end.

Jace hated himself for not being able to see Alex for who and what he was. Even while trying to avenge his father's senseless death, Alex proved himself to be no less ruthless than Sam Mader.

Just another monster in a different mask.

How could Jace not have seen it?

"Hey..." Derek's voice slips in, weaving through Jace's thoughts. "Come back to me..." He rubs Jace's back softly, their foreheads nearly touching. "Are you alright?" He asks this for a second time, but his tone is more urgent. What he's really asking is whether he should call Dr. Kessler or try to

find Jace help elsewhere. What he's really asking is whether it's time for Jace to go back on his medication... the pale, blue pills that always remind Jace of cotton candy – sweet and sticky – but taste sour on his tongue.

Jace shakes the haze of stardust from his eyes. "I'm fine." He blinks rapidly. "Really."

He hasn't been sleepwalking or having panic attacks, which is an improvement. He also hasn't been drinking nearly as much as he did in Portland. All things he counts as progress on his long journey of recovery.

"You could close for the day." Derek hunches his shoulders by his ears. "We could both close and play hooky! Drive down to Rehoboth." He's kicking himself for not thinking of this sooner. He should have booked them a quick getaway. Anywhere far from Brooklyn. A cute, Black-owned bed and breakfast for a few days would have done the trick, and Jace would have no choice but to pack a bag and allow Derek to whisk him away.

"I can't close," Jace says, turning his gaze upward, peering through his eyelashes. "You know that."

Derek massages his temples with one hand. He hates this stubborn side of Jace but has to admire his tenacity. Anyone who's gone through life swimming against the tide and has survived so many dangers, seen and unseen, might have given up a long time ago. But not Jace.

He kisses Jace's forehead once more with gentle understanding and whispers, "Yeah. I just worry." Even as he says this, he tries to temper the fear in his voice.

When Jace reopened the deli, they both knew he'd have a target on his back. Bad press and empty bomb threats over the phone – and even the occasional fanatic strolling in – are one thing. But Derek hasn't told Jace about the death threat that arrived in the mail two days ago.

He was sitting at the dining room table with a beer, doing payroll and tallying up invoices. He opened the envelope by mistake during his rush to sort through the mail, and the

blood-red marker tearing across the pages in large menacing letters caught his attention. His stomach clenched as he read the sick love letter from a “fan”. Words lashed out at him from the pages...

SKIN YOU ALIVE

CUT OFF YOUR HEAD

Derek barely made it to the end of the letter before nausea and vomit climbed up his throat, and he had to race to the kitchen to retch into the nearest trashcan.

Jace has always been careful about where he’s listed their home address and often takes different routes home after work. But now, somehow, the threat has followed him home.

Derek looks at Jace now with a heavy heart. “One day closed won’t kill you,” he says and winces at his poor choice of words.

Jace grits his teeth. “When I reopened, I swore I wouldn’t run...” He untangles himself from Derek and folds his arms with resolve. “I’m not gonna start now,” he says. “I’m through running.”

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3 / WAR

Jace holds his breath as he rounds the corner by the deli, a tight grip on the keys in his hand.

He's hardly slept, nodding off for what must have only been a few minutes before Stella jumped on the foot of the bed and stirred him awake.

Between Stella and the large breakfast Derek made that now sits heavy on his stomach, Jace is fighting to keep his eyes open. A wave of nerves passes over him and, for the second time this morning, he finds himself wishing he'd heeded Derek's pleas and closed for the day. Also, a date with his bed and a bottle of melatonin sounds tempting. Even more tempting is the prospect of sleeping through the entire day and waking up on the other side of it with the dismal holiday behind him. But closing isn't an option, he reminds himself. However unintentional, closing would publicly acknowledge the building's dark history. It would send a message that he believes there's something to hide from on today of all days, something to be ashamed of.

Closing would send a message to the neighborhood that he's running scared. And if he ever wants to truly turn Cassex Deli around for the better, he has to work through its challenges. It's trial by fire, but he's given the building a new life. And Jace is not his father.

He turns the lock on the front door and panic floods his stomach, finding the door unlocked.

He takes a step back, then peers through the storefront windows, cupping his hands around his face as he leans into the glass. Peering through the darkness. He's seen enough horror movies to know better than rush in. Plus, everyone knows it's always the Black characters who die first.

Not today, he thinks, nearly whispering the words aloud.

There's no movement inside and everything looks untouched. It doesn't appear that he's been robbed at first glance. Nothing looks out of place, and he finds no graffiti on the walls or splattered across the outside brick façade of the building.

Thank God for small favors.

Still, something nasty may be crouched inside, waiting for him.

He reaches for his phone in the back pocket of his jeans, seconds from calling Derek before he stops himself.

Derek is already sick with worry and has given him strict instructions to check in throughout the day and call if anything comes up. Jace left home a mere fifteen minutes ago. Surely, he can last longer before calling in reinforcements. He has to show Derek and everyone watching that he can do this. He'd been so adamant – almost militant – in reassuring Derek he'd be fine the night before, so he can't back down now...

So, after pressing his eyes tight and sending up a quick prayer, he opens the door and steps inside.

All is quiet, but he can't help but note the electricity hanging in the air. It's like walking into a room with a television that's been turned off – but not completely – and now the air is filled with static.

Someone's been here.

Jace glances around the deli... peers over the counter... no one... and cautiously makes his way to the back, where his office and the stair rails to the basement reach out from the darkness to greet him.

He flips a light switch.

Again... why the character who's on the verge of being killed never turns on the fucking lights in the spooky house is beyond him...

The lights switch on and Caitlin appears from the shadows of his office, sending his heart into his throat.

“Oh-my-fucking-god! Cait-lin!” He screams.

She winces and jumps, equally spooked with her fists balled by her side and shoulders hunched to her ears.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

It’s early. Nearly an hour before her shift.

“I just—” She pushes out a breath. “I thought I’d come in early, help get the day started.”

Jace stares at her. She’s serious.

She points to a pastel pink box on his desk. “I brought cronuts.”

Caitlin tucks her hair behind her ears and gives him a small smile. The pastry box matches the dress she’s wearing. She clutches the thin chain at her neck. The name Shannon in gold-plated script hangs from its center.

It once belonged to her sorority sister, Shannon Byrne, who died in a tragic fire when Caitlin was still a wide-eyed sophomore at Dartmouth. Caitlin bought the necklace as a Secret Santa gift from a kiosk in the mall, even though it was more than triple the dollar amount the girls in the house settled on before pulling names from a sunhat. Caitlin was a new pledge in the house and, looking back, probably just wanted to impress everyone. Even though she was working two jobs to cover her tuition and wore little jewelry herself.

Before Jace can say anything, there’s a noise from the basement. A bang, like something hitting the floor.

“It’s me!” Yuri yells up. “Just me!”

“Jesus...” Jace grabs his chest as Yuri bounds up the steps, two at a time. He’s in an apron and black gloves, slick with blood. They shine under the yellow fluorescent light. A black and white bandana wraps around his forehead, keeping his hair out of his face. He looks equally surprised to see Jace.

“Getting some tri-tip ready for the case,” he huffs once he’s reached the top of the stairs.

Jace looks between them, his face muddled with confusion.

“We thought we’d help out. Make things easier on you today,” Caitlin explains, wringing her hands. She shoots Yuri a glance, but Jace catches it.

It’s hard to tell if Derek has gotten to them or if they were already aware of what’s happening.

Jace inhales sharply and crosses his arms. “Okay, but listen...” He decides to level with them. “I appreciate it – and the cronuts. Plus one for the cronuts.”

Caitlin beams.

“But I’m not expectin’ you to stay. Actually, it’s probably best you go.” He wishes now that he’d made something up and given them the day off, paid. “I don’t know what’s gonna happen today,” he adds in a small voice.

A warning of sorts.

“We’re not going anywhere.” Caitlin steps forward. Her gold earrings dangle and sway in tow with her head.

“We have an hour ‘til we open,” Yuri says. “You do what you normally do. We’ve got the rest, boss.”

Today may turn out to be anything but normal. It may indeed be the day Yuri’s military training is called upon – or the day Caitlin gets reacquainted with her old friend, the Ruger. Jace hates the thought of putting them at risk.

“Have a cronut!” Caitlin sings and spins around to retrieve the box.

“I’m not making any drops today,” Yuri says. “Just breakin’ down stuff for orders. So, just holler if you need me.” He gives Jace a nod that may as well be a salute, then retreats into the basement, ready for war.

A bit dazed, but also never prouder of his motley crew, Jace plucks a maple bacon cronut from the box Caitlin holds and takes a bite. “Let’s fucking do this then,” he says, mouth full of savory sweetness. “Caitlin? Put on some music.”

• • •

Fats Waller sings “Ain’t Misbehavin’” as Jace wraps another order.

There’s a line forming in the shop and Yuri has hopped behind the counter, snapping on a fresh pair of gloves to assist. It’s been like this all morning. Steadily busy, even for a Friday.

At one point, Jace and Caitlin exchange amused glances, in awe over the amount of business that’s funneled through the door. It’s been a mix of old and new faces, and everyone seems content to order and leave without incident. Only a handful of people have given Jace “the look” – the one that says they know who he is – but no one’s challenged him thus far. No one’s spiraled out of line to make a scene or avenge a lost loved one. The phone has also been on its best behavior. No death threats or heavy breathers calling and hanging up.

It almost feels like a normal day.

The delivery of a conspicuously large bouquet caused a small scare. Jace glared at the cluster of crimson petals like a bad omen as the short, round delivery driver made his way to the register with them.

Bradley never sends Caitlin flowers at work, so surely they were meant for Jace. He braced himself for the worst as he removed his gloves to open the envelope lodged in the crown of thorny roses – but he instantly relaxed, seeing the bad handwriting.

Have a great day babe. You’ve got this.

Derek, of course.

Any other day, Jace might have fawned over the flowers for a few seconds before dismissing the gesture. He’s never understood why people spend so much money on something – a “gift” – that the recipient will be forced to water and nurture until it inevitably wilts and dies and must be tossed out – but

today he takes his time inhaling the rich floral notes and places the roses behind the counter where he can look at them all day.

Done now with his last customer, Jace stops to thank Derek with a text, who swiftly scolds him for not messaging sooner.

Was getting worried! I told you to text me throughout the day

Sorry. We've been crazy busy

*been

Jace sees a stream of dots indicating Derek is typing. He imagines Derek's large clumsy fingers tapping the screen of his tiny Motorola. He's been begging him to upgrade to the newest iPhone for months now, but "a phone's a phone" according to Derek.

Any trouble?

Jace can almost see his lopsided frown. No doubt eyeing his car keys on the side table by the door.

Just some old ladies w/ expired coupons causing a ruckus. I told Geraldine she don't want this smoke! lol

More dots. Then they vanish. Then more dots.

Funny. I'm heading in to prep. Call you from Z's.

Knowing Derek, he'll drive by the deli on his way to Zora's. Maybe even pop in to see for himself that everything's copacetic.

Jace sends a string of heart emojis and tucks his phone away, but not before glancing at the time. The morning has flown by, but the next few hours seem to drag on listlessly.

They pass the time with music and small talk about babies and last night's episode of Love to the Rescue that Jace missed. Yuri eventually stretches his arms wide overhead, loudly cracks his neck on both sides, and returns to the basement to take inventory of the walk-in freezer.

A half-hour later, Jace sweeps another glance across the empty shop and makes a face. "Really slowed down."

No one's been in since the lunchtime rush.

Caitlin mumbles a response, barely glancing up from her phone. She's too busy still mulling over the bombshell Bradley dropped on her last night, asking if she wants to try for a baby. All this in the same breath of mentioning a senior associate at his firm just gave birth to twins. So, his question wasn't really the question he presented her with. What he was really asking was, "Why don't we have a baby yet?"

It's no different than when his boss bought a Tesla, and Bradley spent the next few weekends test-driving his way into a used one.

Caitlin once confided in Jace she has no idea what she'd do with a baby. She suspects there isn't a motherly bone in her body, a trait likely passed down by her mother, who spends more time day-drinking gimlets than calling her children. A cross look consumes her face as she scrolls through maternity clothes, unable to curb her curiosity. She sharply swipes her finger across her greasy phone screen with mild disgust.

Jace stretches and looks, just in time, to see someone peering through the right storefront window. She's short with braids and a round face that turns to surprise as they make eye contact. Jace smiles but she briskly backs away from the window and walks off, head down.

Soon after, a stream of people passes on the sidewalk, staring through the windows as they slink by. Nearly everyone tosses

a glance in the direction of the deli, but no one stops to come in.

Jace thinks little of it at first until he notices Jeremy Catlett standing across the street, glaring at the building.

Jace removes his apron and races from behind the counter. It's his chance to finally have a word with him, and perhaps even ask about the scathing interview he gave a few years back, painting Jace as a chip off the old serial killer block...

He's a few feet from the door when he realizes Jeremy Catlett isn't alone. Two men stand a few feet from him – now three – all staring in the deli's direction. A woman drifts into the frame and it's now that Jace realizes these people aren't with Jeremy Catlett.

They've joined him.

There's a small crowd surrounding the deli now. People slow to stare and throw cautious glances over their shoulders as they cross the street. Some aim their phones in the direction of the shop. Others fold their arms, phones in hand, and whisper among themselves.

Jace scrubs a hand over his face, imagining the worst. "Are you seeing this?"

Caitlin's phone pings but she ignores it, rendered speechless as she peers at the crowd from her seat at the register.

"Think someone did something?" He means graffiti. Someone may have done it when he wasn't looking, back when they were at their busiest... Angry red paint strokes spelling out KILLER or something equally uncreative, if he had to guess. "Why's everyone... just staring?" His voice breaks as fear seeps in.

Why won't they come inside?

After a few minutes that feel like eons, Caitlin calls out from behind him, her eyes trained on her phone once again. "It, uh..." She swallows and shoots him a troubled look. "It might have to do with this."

She cringes and hands him her pink, bejeweled phone case, showing him the news alert that just rang through. One of many, no doubt, now airing over all the local stations.

Jace scans the headline and his knees nearly give out from under him.

He looks back to the crowd outside... then back to the article and yells for Yuri.

The sound of footsteps on old wooden stairs comes like thunder before Yuri appears, clutching the handle of a cleaver.

“Get your shit. We have to go,” Jace breathes, inching back from the front door. “Now!”

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4 / COOL GRAY

Jace uses his spare key to enter Zora's.

He finds Janie, the hostess, folding silverware into napkins at an empty booth. A few servers linger about before their shift. Most have congregated around the bar to gossip with Charlie, who stops mid-sentence to shout, "Hey boo!" and serve Jace a wave from behind the counter.

Charlene "Charlie" Staten is one-part Nubian goddess and one-part classic New Yorker, served straight-up and garnished with a cherry. To Zora's regulars, she's known for breaking hearts and making the best ginger lemon drops in the city.

Not necessarily in that order.

The men who sit before her, perched like gargoyles on emerald-green leather bar stools, are easily bewitched by her beauty and potent elixirs. If her large hazel eyes and long lashes don't make them weak, her whiskey sours will.

She's all curves, honey brown skin, and smoky eyes with well-kept locks dripping down her back. Out of all the staff, her dress code is the most relaxed by design, allowing her to wear a black, fitted bodycon dress that stops mid-thigh. Since she's behind the bar all night, Derek allows it, hip to the fact that it's the men by a large margin who notice and stay longer to drink and tip.

An army of men have shot their shot with Charlie, only to stagger away with empty wallets and bruised egos by the end of the night.

She waves at Jace from her fortress of glass bottles, sending the stack of gold bracelets on her arm into a chorus. Her makeup, which took over an hour and two Instagram tutorials to perfect, is flawless, but her face dims as Jace rushes by, sweaty and out of breath.

He marches across the dining room decorated in rich gem tones, tufted leather, and antique crystals that hang from the

ceiling like falling stars. The décor is a mix of old and new, and the canopy of reclaimed mismatched vintage chandeliers Jace walks under is always a draw for first-time diners. That and the food, which Jace can already smell being prepped as he cuts through a sea of white linen tables and makes a sharp turn into the kitchen.

The scene is orderly chaos. Bubbling pots and hot skillet make the air heavy to breathe in, and his senses are seized by the smells and sounds swirling around cooking stations, occupied by staff in black coats. They chatter as they chop and fill the air with fire and spices.

It doesn't take long to spot Derek at the far end of the kitchen. He's laughing with Ezra by one of the tall industrial mixers – the kind that sits on the floor, used for hefty batches of bread and pastries.

As Ezra cackles and rests a hand on Derek's chest, all Jace can think about is putting Ezra's hand between the metal arms of the oversized beater and turning the machine on.

He can't fathom it would be a first.

Accidents happen all the time in kitchens...

How many cautionary tales has Derek told him about line cooks getting burnt by grease, chopping off their own fingers, and even getting stabbed by running behind someone's station unannounced?

Dinner service can be anarchy. It only takes the slightest of distractions for an accident to occur.

Ezra's fingers rake down Derek's chest playfully, but his crocodile smile sinks as he catches sight of Jace. He stiffens and barks, "Jace!"

It's more of an announcement than a greeting, causing Derek to turn and rush forward, meeting Jace halfway.

"What – what are you doing here?" He stammers and gives Jace a once-over. "You alright? Did something happen?"

Jace can't help but launch daggers at Ezra, who's coiled into a tight stance, hands and arms folded across his belly. "Hope

I'm not interrupting..." He says with frost coating every syllable.

Ezra says nothing, but there's a dark glimmer in his eyes that's almost taunting. It's there and then it's gone, like the quick flicker of a reptile's eyelids, coyly camouflaging a secret.

The warmth of Derek's hands cupping Jace's face snaps his attention back, and Derek's words slowly register, matching the movement of his lips...

"What happened?" He repeats. "Talk to me."

The look on his face tells Jace that the news hasn't reached him yet. There are no TVs over the bar and Derek has a no-phone policy for his chefs when they're on the line.

Jace doesn't bother trying to explain. Instead, he thrusts his phone at Derek and mutters, "Look. It's happening again."

Derek's eyes go wide and darken as he reads the headline...

DISMEMBERED BODY DUMPED ON COURTHOUSE STEPS

A gruesome headline at first glance, it may have passed as innocuous and of no consequence to either of them. It may be the work of any random psychopath. God knows, New York must be full of them. But the details that follow in the article cause Derek to stop breathing.

The body had been dismembered, each limb wrapped in butcher paper and twine. A white, unmarked delivery van screeched to a stop in front of the courthouse and opened its doors to toss out the body parts before speeding off. Bystanders assumed it was some sort of prank or act of political protest until one of the bundles came undone, unwrapping itself to reveal a severed arm as it rolled down the stairs.

The body has yet to be identified, but the article noted the hand on the exposed arm was missing its fingernails.

Derek blinks hard and rereads the opening paragraph before giving Jace a stunned glare.

“You think it’s a copycat,” he realizes.

Copycat isn’t the right word. Jace’s father had quietly disposed of his victims’ remains with the help of an accomplice – a deranged delivery driver who buried the bodies on his property in Warwick; buried in a dying orchard that was once a tourist attraction until the land dried up. His father would never have been so ostentatious to dump a body in broad daylight, in front of an audience.

This seems sloppy. Brazen.

“It’s the same courthouse my father was sentenced at,” Jace says. “I doubt that’s a fucking coincidence.”

It also can’t be a coincidence that this occurred today, of all days.

While the execution may differ, it won’t take much for people to relate what’s happened back to the Cassex Deli murders. Illustrated by the crowd assembled outside the deli, the locals have already begun to connect the dots, drawing imaginary lines spun from their disdain for the deli’s revival – a stain on the neighborhood that won’t go away.

Even to those outside the neighborhood, the news alert must sound vaguely familiar.

A bit of history repeating itself.

Still, the details of the crime are more reminiscent of Alex Cruise than the Brooklyn Butcher. When Alex attempted to frame Jace for the murder of Graham Tate – a blind date caught in the crosshairs – he left Graham’s dismembered body to be discovered in a half-burnt delivery truck in an abandoned warehouse. It was the smoke from the fire that drew attention to the crime scene. Alex had wanted the body to be discovered. Just as someone had wanted witnesses to see the body at the courthouse and a delivery van speeding off.

Jace has grown strangely accustomed to the litany of accusations and conspiracy theories that follow him, but it’s

this sort of theatrics that brings the most alarm. It's the devil hiding in the details that he's grown to fear the most.

"You closed shop?"

"I had to," Jace seethes. "We had a mob outside." All that was missing were the torches and pitchforks.

Derek's mouth turns into a firm line. He grunts and rubs a hand over his scalp, letting it rest at the back of his neck. "We don't know what this is," he points out. "It could have nothing to do with—" He stops, remembering Ezra is close by. He lowers his tone and gives Jace a meaningful look. "Lemme finish up here real fast. Hang out – don't leave – and I'll come find you."

Jace nods, reading between the lines, and shoots Ezra one last leery look before backing out of the kitchen. The last thing he needs is Ezra Weyl in his business. He'd make an awful character witness if things escalated and Jace found himself on trial again for a crime he didn't commit.

Back in the dining room, Charlie quickly calls him over.

"Look what I found!" She waves a hand, Vanna White-style, over a fresh gin and tonic.

Jace gasps, "For me? But I didn't get you anything...!" He forces himself to put on his best smile and takes a sip. It's more gin than tonic, which tells him she can sense something is off.

"Rough day, babe?" She slings her locks over one shoulder and tilts her head, doe-eyed with pouting lips. She's doing her bartender thing, questioning the obvious to get him to open up and spill whatever troubles are plaguing him.

For a second, he considers it. News will find its way to everyone at Zora's eventually and people will draw their own conclusions. It wouldn't hurt to share his reaction to the news and try to preserve whatever allies he has here.

He's always considered Zora's a safe space. Even though Zora's is Derek's "baby", it's become a home away from home when he needs a break from the deli. Retreating to Zora's was

the obvious choice when he fled his own business earlier. No one will think to look for him here.

Jace has kept his relationship with Derek out of the public eye to protect Zora's. Few outside the industry know Jace is Derek's supplier. He's seen how cruel people can be, so he can easily imagine what they might say...

"Did you know Zora's steaks come from that Cassex Deli?"

"No! Where all those people were butchered alive?!"

"It was a fucking slaughterhouse and now it's back. The owner gets all his meat from there. I bet it's human meat!"

The potential backlash makes Jace cringe. One business is hard enough to keep afloat without nasty rumors spreading into Zora's.

"I'll be okay," he tells Charlie.

"You stormed in here lookin' upset," she points out.

"Everything okay? You and Derek good?"

Why would she ask about Derek?

"Yeah! We're good." He shrugs and reaches for an extra lime wedge to squeeze into his glass. "Why do you ask?"

Could it have something to do with Ezra?

If anyone would know cause for alarm on that topic, it's Charlie. She seems to be the hub for workplace gossip and sees everything from her position at the bar.

Has she seen Ezra and Derek flirting when Jace isn't around?

Does she know something Jace doesn't?

An odd look passes over her face, and before she can answer they're interrupted by the familiar voice of Janelle Carter.

"What a fuck-ing day!" She bellows as she slides onto a stool with an incensed nod of her head. "Those damn people 'gon drive me crazy. Lit-ter-rally! I'm like, fuck it. Throw me in a padded cell too!"

It's funny because she's a nurse at Hawkins Psychiatric Center. She's lit-ter-rally around lunatics all day.

She sets her motorcycle helmet on the bar and cracks her neck on one side. It's hard to tell how long she's been awake, but it's clear she's coming down from a long shift.

Charlie melts and leans over the bar to give Janelle a searing kiss.

They're a cute couple – and couldn't be more opposite. Charlie's a curvaceous vixen with a gift for gab and fashion. Janelle's a stout, no-frills homebody with a buzz cut and the same gray scrubs and sneakers every day.

She rides her motorcycle everywhere, which explains the helmet and the backpack she hands Charlie to stow in the break room. Inside is her equivalent of a purse, along with her medical pack she keeps close by for when she's on call. From scissors and medical tape to saline flushes and syringes full of God-knows-what, she's ready for any emergency or irate patient on the job.

"I had to tackle and sedate Miss Pearl today," she says in disbelief.

"Uh-uh!" Charlie's mouth falls open. "Not Miss Pearl!" She grabs a shaker and a bottle of rum by the neck.

Jace has heard Janelle mention Miss Pearl before, so he's equally shocked. "Isn't she, like... in her 60s?"

Charlie narrows her eyes at Janelle. Her lipstick twists to one side. "Really, babe? We're tacklin' sweet old ladies now? That's what we're doin'?"

"Sweet?" Janelle rocks back on her stool. She's round and built like a linebacker, so she nearly topples over. "That old bitch was two seconds from stabbing an intern in the throat, babe! It's Rafael's second day! And, of course..." She digs her fists into her wide hips. "No one seems to know how she got her hands on a letter opener. Complete fuckin' mystery!"

"She probably just got confused, babe." Charlie adds a splash of grenadine to the brew she's creating and taps a glass into place before shaking.

"She might look like somebody's sweet old grandma, but everyone's in Hawkins for a reason, babe," Janelle reminds

her. Her face turns somber. “Looks can be fuckin’ deceivin’.”
Something Jace knows too well.

“You know they say she killed her first husband, right?”
Before Jace or Charlie can object, Janelle waves a hand and explains, “There’s no way in hell that old man climbed those stairs to the attic with arthritis and two knee replacements. I don’t give a damn what the—” She stops to take a hearty sip of the blood-red cocktail Charlie hands her. “Ugh! So good. Why are you so good to me?”

Charlie blows her a kiss and Janelle finishes her theory on how Miss Pearl got away with murder. Both Janelle and Charlie’s New York accents grow thicker, almost doing battle, as the conversation goes on. Janelle gives them the latest on her favorite patients and Jace gives them a watered-down version of how things are progressing with the deli.

Just as Jace is about to ask if they’ve heard anything about a commotion at the courthouse, Derek comes to pull him aside. He gives Janelle and Charlie one of his signature smiles, promising that they’ll all do dinner soon – somewhere outside of Zora’s. He apologizes for stealing Jace and waits until they’re alone in the downstairs wine cellar before saying anything more.

The temperature-controlled cellar is narrow with a low ceiling, barely large enough to accommodate a group of six and a sommelier, but Derek has made it comfortable and filled its walls with award-winning wines from Black-owned vineyards across the globe. There are two high-top tables tucked into a corner and a small dining table they once snuck away to have sex on during dinner service.

Seeing it, Jace can’t help the tiny smirk that finds its way to his lips as Derek closes the door behind them.

“Okay, so, look...” He’s had time to read the article again and think. “There’s a lot we still don’t know, right? This thing could be totally unrelated and blow over in a few days. For now, this has nothing to do with the deli unless we react and make it about the deli.”

It's a valid point.

"I think the best response is no response," he insists.

"It just feels like Portland all over again." Jace rubs at a chill that prickles his arms. "I don't have a good feeling about this." He's also not thrilled about returning to the deli tomorrow to sell pastrami and blocks of Gouda as if everything is normal.

"I know." Derek takes Jace's hands into his own and levels his eyes at him. "You haven't done anything wrong though. Remember that, J. You've worked so hard to get things back on track! Don't let this derail all your hard work. You deserve to be happy."

He's right, as usual.

"You're right," Jace sighs. "As usual." He gives a steadfast nod and squeezes Derek's hands in acknowledgment. "I'll open tomorrow, business as usual."

"I'll stop in and hang out for a bit."

"No, I don't wanna take you from everything you have goin' on here."

"You know I got you. And, hell, you can put me to work!" Derek winks. "Like the good old days." He means when it was just Jace and himself running the deli after its launch. Before Jace found Caitlin and Yuri.

Jace pulls him in for a kiss. "One day, it won't be like this, you know? One day, things will be normal." It's a promise he's not sure he can keep, but it's enough to win him another kiss from Derek.

"This isn't Portland," he reminds Jace. "You're not alone in all this. You have me... and I'm not gonna let anything happen to you."

It's just what Jace needs to hear. He smiles up at Derek and gives him a final peck on the lips. "I love you, Mr. Brooks."

"I love you, Mr. Lannister." He gives Jace a spin and eyes the dining table suggestively.

"We can't!" Jace laughs. "You have dinner service."

He makes a face. They're booked solid for the night. "Wanna hang out? I could use some help from my favorite sous-chef."

It would be like old times, the two of them working together in the kitchen again. Feeding each other spoonfuls of this and that... Putting finishing touches on each other's dishes...

"That sounds good." Jace feels his spirits lift. "I'm gonna run back to the shop at some point though. Just to grab some paperwork. I'll finish it at home."

Derek gives a slow nod. "I want you to be careful. In and out."

"Promise." Jace does his version of a Boy Scouts salute, which isn't remotely close to the official Boy Scouts salute. "I'll see you at home once you finish up."

"Yep! And uh... Don't worry about the mail," Derek says. "I'll check it before I come home." A muscle spasms in his neck.

"Kay..." Jace stares at him for a moment before releasing another smile. "Shall we go check on the kids?"

"Make sure they're not burnin' down the kitchen?" He raises both eyebrows and opens the door for Jace.

Together, they make their way up the stairs, back to the world waiting above. Back to employees and businesses that won't run themselves. Back to the unknown and unidentified, severed body parts in the news.

• • •

It's half past nine when Jace kills the lights at Cassex Deli. He's found the paperwork he was looking for – exactly where he left the stack on his desk. Next to the half-eaten box of cronuts and coffee he didn't get a chance to finish earlier.

He grabs the mug and makes his way to the small sink behind the front counter to toss out what's left of the sludge, moving about the darkness with ease. Only the dim glow of streetlamps reaching through the storefront windows provides

enough light for him to clean up the mess everyone left behind when they fled the shop.

Jace was surprised to find the building undisturbed when he returned. No graffiti or broken windows, which gave him cause to quietly celebrate. Perhaps the worst is behind him now that the day he's dreaded is ticking away. Maybe tomorrow will be a fresh start, and as Derek has predicted, today's sordid news will already be old news. Leading the locals to turn their suspicions elsewhere.

He does a quick wipe-down of the counters and fills the dishwasher with dirty knives and plastic cutting boards he's been meaning to replace. Making the switch to all-rubber cutting boards is on his list, but they'll have to be washed by hand – a small price to pay for the investment. Perhaps by then, he'll have hired more staff; a dishwasher or even a general manager to run the shop in his absence. The thought of hiring someone to run the deli – and being attached to the business only on paper as the owner – was never something that appealed to Jace initially. But lately, he finds himself revisiting the idea.

He double-checks that the register is locked and tidies up Caitlin's pile of odds and ends she keeps nearby for when it's slow: a few fashion mags, a trashy romance novel he makes a mental note to borrow later. A gold, tarnished cigarette lighter; the kind you flip open to activate. An open bag of gummy bears. A phone charger. Two elastic hair ties.

He picks up the lighter, wondering for a moment if a customer might have left it. He's never seen Caitlin smoke and knows Yuri doesn't. He rubs a thumb against the faded inscription that reads G.R.P.

Initials.

But whose?

Jace flicks the lighter open and closed, recalling it wasn't that long ago that he'd stood on the basement steps with a pink book of matches from Ethel's, debating whether to burn down the building and demons hiding within it.

How different things would be if he had tossed that match, instead of blowing it out.

Hell. He might even have stood a chance at collecting the insurance money!

Jace chuckles at this now as he places the lighter back where he found it and looks up, catching a glimpse of movement outside.

The sidewalks are empty, except for a lone figure standing just shy of the streetlights on the opposite side of the road. They abruptly stalk off, head down under a dark baseball cap. Hands stuffed deep in the pockets of their black rain jacket.

Jace notices the gloss on the pavement now; the way the spattering rain is visible under the glow of streetlamps.

He has no clue how long they'd been standing there in the mist, watching, but slowly his stomach tightens and twists on itself. He stands frozen in place, unbreathing and in disbelief of what his mind is screaming as it registers what he's just seen.

He might have passed off the incident as just another stranger from the neighborhood, curious about the deli after today's news. He might have shrugged it off as just one of many shadowy figures who deal and hustle after dark in the surrounding alleys.

He wouldn't have thought much of it, had he not caught a glimpse of their face.

It was vaguely familiar. But there was no mistaking their eyes.

Eyes that he's peered into before.

Cool gray eyes that look like his own.

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5 / SPOOKED

Sweat drips into Jace's eyes as he runs. His chest is tight, heaving with labored breaths as he quickens his pace.

It's well before 5 a.m., so the gym is abandoned apart from the cleaning staff, a few overachievers in the free weight area, and a boot camp that looks like the purest form of torture from his view on the treadmill. The very thought of paying a stranger to scream at you and demand burpees first thing in the morning has no appeal to Jace. Normally, he wouldn't be caught dead in the gym this early, but here he is.

He couldn't sleep. He couldn't shake what he saw the night before.

But it's not the first time Jace has seen his father.

He saw him once at a baseball game on TV; a face in the crowd the camera passed over before cutting to commercial. He thought he saw his father a few months ago on his way to work, sitting in the back of a cab... Once, at the grocery store, squeezing avocados... Once, behind the counter at the bank Jace frequents, cashing a customer's check. He's seen his father dozens of times in passing, in his dreams, and on occasion, glaring back at him from the other side of the mirror.

The older Jace gets, the more he resembles his father. It's in the way his face is filling out... the fine lines under his gray eyes... all a cruel gift from genetics that make it impossible to place his father out of sight and out of mind for long.

Thinking more on it as he presses a button and pounds his legs faster, Jace wouldn't be surprised if it was his own reflection he caught in the storefront window last night.

It hadn't dawned on him until now, but it's possible he simply spooked himself.

The more he thinks on it, the more seeing Sam "the Brooklyn Butcher" Mader makes perfect sense. Given everything that's happened with the recent homicide in the news, of course his

mind would conjure up images of his father on the anniversary of his death! It's a wonder Jace didn't raise Alex from the dead as well.

The irony of Alex dying on the same day his father hanged himself in prison feels painfully ironic. The entire day might as well have been a séance, dredging up memories and old ghosts he wishes he could keep locked in the past.

That third gin and tonic from Charlie couldn't have helped either, he thinks now. He hadn't meant to have a third drink, but he told himself he'd earned it after the day he had.

Jace frowns at this now, recognizing old habits making a comeback. He's only thankful he had the good sense not to mention the "sighting" to Derek last night, once they'd settled into bed. If Derek knew how many dead-father-sightings Jace had been having, he'd insist he go "see someone."

A shrink.

But not one like Dr. Gretchen Kessler, his therapist in Portland who sang like a red-headed songbird to the police when Jace was under investigation.

Perhaps a man this time. Perhaps someone queer.

Jace takes a swig from his water bottle and pictures what they might look like... He's graying and in his early golden years with a steady, calm voice that belongs on a sleep app. He's not from New York, so there's no accent. Perhaps just a hint of a New England inflection that rears its head when he says things like, "Mohnin'," instead of, "Good morning." He wears sweater vests and loafers and his name's something unassuming like Dan or Peter. Something that screams, "You can trust me." Even through the haze of billable hours and bitter blue pills he'll force down Jace's throat.

Going off his medication had been Jace's choice. A bold one Derek has supported thus far. He'd hate to give Derek reason to suspect he needs to be medicated again. Even if Jace is beginning to question the decision himself.

Seeing things that aren't there is a solid argument that he should go "see someone." A sign that his mental health isn't

where it should be.

Jace swipes his forehead with the back of his hand and pops in his AirPods to drown out his thoughts. Lil Nas X's baritone voice fills his ears through the steady bass, replacing the negative thoughts racing through his head.

After three more miles, Jace is off to the showers to rinse the worry and sweat from his body. He gets as far as the ellipticals when Hayden Bernard steps in his path.

"Jace!" He grins and puffs out his chest like a proud, sweaty peacock. "Been a while, man. What's good?"

Hayden's a stallion. He's six feet, two inches of solid muscle with bulky shoulders, diamond-cut calves, and an ass that can only have come from the good Lord and too many squats to count.

Jace gives his fist a pound and shrugs. "Not much."

Just quietly losing his sanity.

"Puttin' in that work, huh?" Hayden leans against the closest machine, giving Jace a quick scan. "Saw you runnin' out there. Lookin' good."

Jace is a hot, sweaty mess.

His gray tank top and navy gym shorts cling to him like a second skin. He feels gross and can't wait to shower.

Meanwhile, Hayden looks fresh from the pages of a fitness magazine. His ebony skin glistens under the gym lights in all the right places. If Jace didn't know better, he'd swear Hayden's airbrushed. A fitness model who's escaped the glossy pages of Body Sculpt Magazine.

Hayden's muscles flex, veins bulging, as he folds his arms across his sculpted torso. It seems wildly unfair that one man should have such a perfect body. Add in his classic good looks, wavy hair, and a smile worthy of a toothpaste commercial, and he's easily the gym's most delectable piece of resident eye candy.

The problem is, he knows it.

Hayden's eyes gradually lower from Jace's chest to the outline in his shorts. He points to a bench press. "Wanna give me a spot? I was just about to—"

"I'm on my way out. Gotta get to work," Jace says. He eyes the entrance to the locker room, a few feet away.

Hayden's smile dims, but only for a second before he turns the charm back up, full voltage. "Still at the deli, huh? I've been meanin' to come through." He wets his lips and they twist into a slick smile. "Gotta support our Black businesses!"

He has no intentions of stopping in. It's all just pretty words from pretty lips Jace can do without.

His eyes light up like a pinball machine. Jace can almost see the springs and gears at work as Hayden sputters, "Hey! A, uh, a spot just opened up on the team! We're hirin'!" He must have been holding onto this for the next time he ran into Jace and just remembered. "I could put in a good word, yeah?" He spreads his arms wide like a petty crook peddling stolen gold watches out of a trench coat. "Job would be yours."

By job, he means a mid-level marketing position at ThinkTank.

"I've looked you up." He tilts his head playfully. "The stuff you did out in Portland was great."

It was better than great. Jace was a senior account executive at Moxy, on track to make partner. He managed multimillion-dollar accounts and churned out award-winning campaigns for breakfast.

ThinkTank's by no means a big fish in the pond, but it would be a foot in the door if he ever wants to revive his marketing career. Jace could still own the deli, hire someone to be the face and manage the staff... and put his creative hat back on full-time.

It could work.

"The hirin' manager's a buddy of mine from Howard," Hayden says. "We both rushed Omega Psi Phi. He didn't make the cut." He slices his hand across his throat. "He's cool people, though. He'll hire whoever I vouch for." He shrugs his

shoulders. Shoulders that jut like mountains out of his cut-off, sleeveless t-shirt.

Jace gives a faint nod to show he's listening, just before his eyes find their way back to the locker room entrance. More people file in, half-awake, lugging duffle bags and pricey to-go cups of coffee. Trying to will their bodies awake.

"How 'bout we talk about it over dinner?" Something flashes in Hayden's eyes. "I could fill you in on the job."

A deal with the devil.

Jace can see it now. Sure, it would start out dull and innocent enough... Dinner at the same three-star, Asian-fusion restaurant Hayden no doubt takes all his conquests to. Followed by inane small talk and very few details about the job. But if Hayden has his way, he'd twist Jace's arm into going for drinks afterward at some hole-in-the-wall bar with greasy menus and poorly-crafted martinis. Then, he'd do his best to lure Jace to his bed in Chelsea with the promise of Olympic-level sex that would turn out to be... well, probably pretty close to that, Jace has to admit.

He'd probably keep his socks on the whole time though and kick Jace out as soon as he comes.

"That's really generous of you." Jace shakes his head, as if unworthy of the offer. "But I'm happy at the deli, you know?" His voice peaks. "Business is really picking up!" A small white lie. "Plus, I help out at Zora's when I can—"

"Oh, right." Hayden's mannequin smile is wiped clean from his face. "You still seein' 'ol boy? The chef?"

"You mean, Derek?"

Hayden's lips press into a frown. "Right. Derek." This also isn't the first time he's conveniently forgotten Derek's name.

"Yes. Still happily seeing my boyfriend, Derek," Jace chirps, eyes wide. He manages to whip up a polite smile, but it's a thin veil for his agitation.

Derek may not have a body carved from stone, but he's twice the man Hayden will ever be. There's no amount of brawn and

muscle to make Jace seek affection elsewhere.

Derek is his home.

Even if Jace were single and mingling, he'd know better than to give his pearls to a pig like Hayden and expect a happily ever after.

He can only give a wild guess as to how many men Hayden has wrangled into bed during his career, and no job at ThinkTank – assuming there's even an open position – is worth risking the relationships and life Jace has worked hard to rebuild.

Although...

In an alternate dimension where Jace is single, he might take Hayden for a spin. He's heard the locker room rumors and lurid sauna stories detailing what Hayden is capable of with his long tongue and ten inches tucked neatly away, sleeping soundly in the sweet musk of his jockstrap like a serpent.

But, in this world, Jace will never succumb to Hayden's charms.

A pang of guilt fills his chest even thinking about Hayden cornering him in the gym's showers from behind... The sensation of his legs being pushed wide apart by Hayden's feet... Their hips rocking in perfect synchronicity as Jace's low cries echo against the cold blue and white shower tiles his face is pressed firmly against... The wap wap wap sound of wet skin making contact, hitting hard... Hayden's hot breath wrapping itself around Jace's throat as he curses in his ear, "Yeah. Fuck-in' take all this fuck-in' dick!" A syllable for every thrust of his hips that dig deeper until—

"I gotta run!" Jace pushes out a flustered breath and excuses himself. "Gotta open the deli... all that..." He mumbles a few incoherent words and doesn't bother finishing his sentence before racing out of Hayden's reach.

Jace is headed for the showers, but it will be a cold one. Alone.

He throws up a hand but doesn't look back.

“I’ll stop by sometime. At the deli!” Hayden calls out after him. There’s confusion and the hint of a promise in his voice. A promise Jace hopes he’ll fail to keep.

• • •

“Welcome to Cassex Deli. What can I get for you?” Jace peers over the scale with dull eyes at the customer slouching before him.

He’s pudgy with a receding hairline and a thick beard that consumes half his face. Chomping on a fresh stick of gum, he points to his t-shirt with a sadistic grin. Bold, white letters on black fabric read:

WHAT’S THE MADER?

OUT OF BEEF?

There’s a graphic of a dead stick figure with X’s for eyes beneath the text. A cleaver sticks out of its head.

“Cute.” Jace frowns at it. He’s seen it before in blogs and underground chat forums run by Brooklyn Butcher superfans who fill the screens with half-baked conspiracy theories. They call themselves “pork chops”, which Jace finds equally clever and disturbing.

He dares to poke around in the forums, mostly to see how often his name comes up since the reopening of the deli.

Once, there was a thread that hinted at organizing a break-in to “infiltrate” the basement and “look for clues”, followed by a séance but, thankfully, nothing ever came of it. For as many screen names as there are flooding the dark web pages, it seems they’re terribly unorganized and divided as a unit.

The latest hot topic in the chats is a timeless one: How did Sam Mader choose his victims? Most argue it was random, while others insist there was a connection between Sam's victims. A single, red thread woven into their destinies that tied them together, and eventually pulled them apart and under.

Jace briefly wonders what side of the argument the superfan before him is on, then finishes up his order – three pounds of ground chuck – and glances at the clock on the wall.

Almost closing time.

“Thank God,” Jace breathes aloud.

It's been a full day of numbskulls parading in to get a glimpse of Jace and the deli, like a sideshow tourist attraction. Only these were dark tourists. Instead of museums and historic landmarks, they prefer graveyards and infamous crime scenes.

A few came in livestreaming for their serial killer podcasts. At least a dozen snuck photos of Jace without his permission and asked if the special of the day was brains... A small group wandered in wearing t-shirts with Sam Mader's face plastered on them in black and white pixels, trying to pry information from Jace about the murders. Amazingly, Derek just missed them when he brought Jace lunch, stopping in to see for himself that all was well. The shop had been empty at the time. Soon after, a fresh batch of fanatics strolled in. One man even offered a wad of cash to be shown Sam's old “kill room” in the basement, which has long been sealed off, but Jace had Yuri escort him out.

“I just got him up to \$300!” Caitlin hissed and pouted as the man left angrily.

“This is not a tourist attraction,” Jace said, loud enough for everyone in line to hear. “So, if you're not a paying customer, you need to leave. Now!”

He gave the same speech to reporters who stopped in, frustrated by their questioning...

“JASON! What are your thoughts on the recent homicide at the courthouse?”

“Do you think it’s a copycat killer?”

“Jason! Channel 6 News here – DID YOU KNOW THE VICTIM?”

“What do you say to those who think this horrific killing is linked to your deli? There is... history here, is there not?”

Jace’s PR training told him not to comment and, likewise, they were smart enough not to accuse Jace of foul play. Not directly. Not on air. And not in front of an audience of shoppers and a handful of curious locals still lurking about outside. No one has accused Jace of anything at this point, but the implications and optics are far from ideal.

By the skin of his teeth, Jace was able to navigate through the firestorm of questions before Yuri shooed the last reporter and cameraman out the door.

“Whew!” Jace exhales, now that it’s just Yuri and Caitlin in the shop. “Should be a fun news night, kids!” He laughs at the trash fire that is his life and aims a finger-gun at the side of his head.

He pulls the trigger and crosses his eyes.

Yuri shakes his head dubiously. “Let’s see how they twist things around for a story. Fuckin’ vultures.”

It feels like history repeating itself, and this is not the kind of press he’s been trying to land for the deli since its relaunch.

Jace promises himself he won’t watch the news tonight. No good can come of it and, with any luck, Derek won’t see it either. But he worries Yuri may be right. What if they misquote him or use a soundbite in a way that vilifies and incriminates him?

It wouldn’t be the first time.

Should he hire a lawyer?

The bell rings over the front door and a petite woman walks in with pretty brown skin and natural locks swept into a clumsy bun atop her head.

With all the recent happenings, Jace caved and turned the door chime back on. The last thing he needs is unannounced visitors.

“We’re closing in five minutes,” Caitlin looks up from her register with a tight smile. She uses a hand to flatten her hair on one side and drapes her mint green cardigan over her shoulders. The sleeves dangle, empty at her sides. Her shine has faded, and it’s clear that the events of the day have taken their pound of flesh.

At one point, a customer flashed a knife at the register and turned to take a selfie, play-stabbing himself in the neck with the Cassex Deli sign in the background. Jace saw Caitlin reach for the gun under the register. She was seconds from unloading it on him before she realized it was a toy knife, made of rubber.

Now, five minutes and a single customer stand between Caitlin returning to the peace of her brownstone in Cobble Hill, where there are no crazed serial killer groupies. Only her idiot husband and their housekeeper, Aliana, who should have arrived by now to start laundry and dinner.

She hopes it’s taco night.

“Oh!” The lone customer pauses at the door. Her hazel eyes, brown infused with green and gold flecks, spot the clock on the wall. “I’ll just be a sec. Promise!” She winces and teeters over to Jace behind the cold display case of meats and pasta salads.

Jace uses the last of his strength to find a smile for her.

“Welcome to Cassex Deli. What can I get for you?” She looks normal, if there is such a thing. There’s no Sam Mader t-shirt or props sticking out of her purse, so they’re off to a good start.

She matches his smile and crosses her hands over her chest as she heaves, “I’m having a party – well, a small get-together.

Nothing big. Like... fifteen people?" She sounds overwhelmed, already regretting the decision. "Do you do party platters? You do, right? Oh! And I have this!" She plucks a coupon from her purse and holds it high in the air, like a golden ticket. She arches her eyebrows, desperate for help.

"Sounds like you need our premium charcuterie platter." He points to the chalkboard menu behind him and assures her, "Feeds up to twenty. Really hearty, filling. You can't go wrong. I'll even toss in a small side of macaroni salad and a few of our kosher pickles."

Neither of which have been selling well, but she doesn't need to know this.

She squints at the sign over his shoulder, reading under her breath, "Prosciutto... Brie... okay... Sooo Soppre-satta?" She sounds it out and her face morphs into a frown. "What's that?"

"It's an Italian dry salami. Goes great with creamy cheeses, like a, uhm, Pecorino cheese."

She takes his word for it with a nod. "Okay! Yes. Let's do it."

Jace gets to work and eyes her coupon, happy to see his advertising dollars at work.

"Thanks for bringing your coupon in. Most people forget and just say they saw it in the paper."

"Oh, I'm the coupon queen! You should see my coupon binder."

"Yes, queen!" Jace snaps and immediately regrets it.

"I'm 'one of those'," she muses. "Kinda have to be. Single mom. I look through the papers every day," she testifies with a hand in the air. Her nails are the color of tart raspberries. "My high score's \$131.57 off at the register."

An extreme couponer in the wild.

Jace can't imagine the patience it takes. He gives her a smile and an extra heavy scoop of macaroni salad as he works to complete her order.

“Sorry I caught you closing. I drove by earlier.” She glances at the clock as he wraps her platter in cellophane. “You had company though.”

“Company?”

“The news? I saw a news van parked outside.”

“Right.” Jace lowers his eyes. “That.”

She watches for a reaction. “Anything to do with that body at the courthouse?”

Jace shoots Yuri a look. He’s standing by the door, ready to lock up once she leaves.

“You a reporter?” Jace rakes his eyes over her, more carefully this time. She doesn’t look like a reporter in her colorful necklace and tangerine sundress. Her right ear is lined with silver piercings and hoops, and he spies a tattoo on her wrist with a name, surrounded by flames, he can’t quite read upside-down. Perhaps the name of a boyfriend or girlfriend?

“Oh, no.” She waves a hand. “Not a reporter. But I am someone you can talk to...”

Jace’s muscles tense. He glances between Caitlin and Yuri, confirming they both heard it too.

The suspicion in their eyes adds to the fire that’s sparked, threatening to billow and consume the room. A rush of heat fills Jace’s chest as he passes the platter over the counter and gives their final customer of the day a discerning look.

“Caitlin will ring you up,” he says, feeling a burn in the back of his throat. “Enjoy your party.”

Her lips curve into a smirk, but she nods and makes her way to the register quietly, cash in hand. There’s a sudden swagger in the tick-tock of her hips Jace didn’t notice before. Gone are the frazzled edges that defined her small, shapely figure and body language when she first appeared.

Yuri flips the closed sign on the door, signaling it’s time to clear out.

She pays, gives Caitlin a polite smile, and promptly sways back to Jace with a shimmer in her eyes.

“In case you think of anything – or just want to talk to someone,” she offers. Her voice is even-tempered, void of any emotion that might ruin her poker face as she hands him a business card on heavy stock paper.

Jace waits until she leaves; until he’s seen her walk past the storefront windows and get in her car, before he glares at the card she’s left behind. Like a hex.

His mouth goes dry as he reads her name aloud...

Special Agent Denise Bradshaw

OceanofPDF.com

6 / SALTY

“Hell I do with that grater? I just had it,” Derek curses. He’s tearing about the kitchen in red basketball shorts that leave little to the imagination and a faded t-shirt from the 1989 Spike Lee movie, *Do The Right Thing*. With an arsenal of knives and whisks and wooden spoons within reach of his callused fingers, he chops, dices, and mixes until he’s composed the perfect bite that threatens to topple off his spoon.

Treading lightly, as if on a high wire, he balances the spoon and feeds Jace a heaping mouthful of gumbo. He rocks back on his heels with hardened anticipation.

“Too salty?”

Jace furrows his brow and chews thoughtfully. “Maybe a little,” he huffs through the steam swelling in his mouth. “You could lose some.”

Derek licks the hot spoon clean. “Yeah. It’s a little sharp. If you think it’s salty, Marcella prob’ly will too.” He won’t risk it.

Jace rests his elbows on the cool granite of the kitchen island. He leans forward on his stool and feels Stella walk by, her tail grazing and tickling his bare feet dangling above the floor. “You’re putting way too much pressure on yourself. There’s no way she won’t love the menu,” Jace shrugs a shoulder by his ear. “You’re gonna do great. Watch.”

“I’ll do great with you there.” Derek winks and wipes his palms down the front of his apron.

Oh, right.

Jace is his “good luck charm”, which feels highly improbable, but Jace gives a meek smile and accepts the compliment. Jace has never believed in good luck charms. Omens and premonitions, certainly. But the notion that an object or person can bring good fortune feels like something his mother spoon-

fed him from a storybook; something far too subjective and nothing more than a convenient means to see what you want to see in a person. Instead of what's really there.

“How's the lobster? Is it chewy?”

Jace's stare scrapes past Derek to the simmering pot on the stove. He inhales the rich earthy spices that hang in the air and yawns. He's in black boxer briefs and an old track tank top, ready for bed. Ready to let the day fade to black, behind closed eyelids. He suddenly can't remember the last time he slept through the entire night...

“J.”

“Hmmm?” Jace's eyes go large and find Derek slouching against the edge of the fridge.

“Where'd you go?” His expression turns grim. “You're still thinking about that cop, aren't you?”

Jace sucks in a breath and corrects him. “Federal agent.” One who's no doubt looked into his past and what happened in Portland. The murder of Graham Tate... Jace's arrest...

“Fine.” Derek wipes his hands on a dishtowel. “But like I said, if she wanted to bring you in, she would've. It's probably just routine canvassing when something like this happens.”

Or when someone calls in an anonymous tip.

“You think the feds paid a visit to that old racist bitch at Whitman's today?” Jace gives a cynical tilt of his head. “Or that new ‘delicatessen’ over on Willoughby? Someone's behind this.”

Jeremy Catlett springs to mind, pointing a long, condemning finger at Jace.

“I'm sure they're lookin' into everyone. They have to. It's the whole butcher paper thing they mentioned in the news.” Derek waves a hand, shooing away any suspicion that Jace is being targeted, but more than ever, he wishes the body hadn't been wrapped in the stiff wax paper Jace uses every day. Naturally, this Agent Bradshaw would zero in on delis in the area. Jace has to be high on her list, given the history of Cassex Deli.

His face draws tight with anxiety. He doubts he'll sleep at all tonight.

“Don't get yourself worked up, babe. This thing's bound to blow over any day now.” Derek takes another bite of his gumbo and aims his spoon at Jace. “Think I should finish this off with chives or parsley?”

“Why don't you ask your precious sous-chef,” is what Jace wants to say. “Parsley,” he says instead.

“I think so too.” He goes back for another spoonful, then caves and swaggers over to Jace, seeing there's no piercing the cloud hanging over his head. “Why don't you take some time off? Let Caitlin and Yuri run the shop. Maybe bring in an intern or two.” He wraps Jace in a tight bear hug. He smells of sweat, remnants of sweet musky cologne, and sassafras.

In theory, it's a good idea. But Jace isn't convinced they could run the shop alone for any real length of time. And why should they? This is his mess.

Jace sighs into the warmth of Derek's chest and shakes his head. “I told you, I'm through running.”

“Will you at least talk to someone? It might help...”

There. He's said it. The thing he's been holding off saying for months now.

“You mean a shrink?” Jace knows what he means but looks up at Derek with large, skeptical eyes anyway.

“They have these apps now. Like, online therapy? Video sessions on your phone, I guess.” Derek shrugs.

It's obvious he knows more about this than he's letting on. It's obvious he's been researching options to bring up when the time was right.

Jace mulls the idea over and swiftly decides—

Absolutely not.

It's hard enough ripping yourself open and spilling your guts to a total stranger. The thought of doing it on camera, seeing

his own poorly lit, fishbowl reflection glaring back at him puts the final nail in the idea.

“It’s just a thought!” Derek backpedals, sensing the dissension building in Jace’s body pressed against him. Tense like a time bomb.

“No... wait...” Jace taps Derek’s arms. “I actually think you’re right! I should talk to someone.”

Just not a shrink.

“Yeah?” The lines on Derek’s forehead iron themselves out, and a sigh of release slips out. “You’ll give the app a try?”

Not a chance.

Jace won’t be venturing into the land of online therapy, especially with the risk of having recordings of his sessions leaked, but Derek’s given him an idea. Something he kicks himself for not thinking of sooner.

Jace faces Derek, jaw clenched. “There’s someone I have to talk to. In person.”

“Who?”

Someone Jace hasn’t spoken to since he moved to New York.

Someone who knows what he’s been through and the pain that comes with being a survivor.

Someone who knows what it’s like to be haunted.

• • •

The lobby of The Davenport Hotel is half-deserted and still, like calm waters after a storm. A small stream of travelers and suitcases drifts across polished Calacatta tile as the front desk staff watches from their side of the black marble counter, ready to reel in lost souls.

The servers who float around The Davenport’s restaurant, Salt and Marrow, wear a familiar shade of lethargic relief now that the lunch rush has passed. It’s a look Jace recognizes from the

team at Zora's as he's ushered past the hostess desk and through the dining room decorated in lush hues of cerise, green, and gold.

Jace's shoes sink into the teal carpet as he sneaks glimpses of half-eaten plates over shoulders. A colorful pasta dish catches his eye, and he makes a note to look for it on the menu.

It feels good to be dressed up today, a departure from his usual deli uniform of jeans and a branded t-shirt he doesn't mind getting blood on. Even if his floral print shirt and navy slacks and blazer are a few seasons old, he's grateful they still fit. With how much Derek keeps him fed, it's a wonder—

“Enjoy your meal!” The hostess extends a smile and a grand gesture toward a table in the far corner of the room, presenting it like a showcase on “The Price is Right”.

It's not a great table, but he's relieved to see Quinn Harris already seated. The fact that he's not only on time – but is early – is priceless in Jace's book.

Quinn flashes a rogue smile and stands, pulling Jace into a brief hug. “Hey, you. Hope this is okay.”

He means the table he chose, which, now that Jace thinks about it, is purposely out of earshot from the bar and cluster of diners mulling over their cold salads and warm soups.

“This is perfect.” Jace hugs him back. “Thanks for doin' this on short notice.”

“For you? Of course.” Quinn sits and gives Jace a look that's spiked with curiosity. And worry. There's no mistaking the worry on the edge of his polite smile.

Quinn Harris is a journalist at The Chronicle. He's all mousy, brown hair, strong Italian features, brooding eyebrows that give away what he's thinking, and eyes like spring clover that got him into a world of trouble once upon a time. He's handsome in a faded boy-next-door way. You wouldn't suspect he's a journalist, a hungry shark with his thumb on the pulse of the city.

They haven't seen each other since Quinn wrote a feature on Jace, following Jace's exoneration in Portland.

When so many doubted Jace, Quinn was first in line to tell Jace's side of the story, securing an exclusive that helped Jace reintroduce himself to the city he once called home and a curse all in the same breath.

"It's been a while, huh?" Jace is embarrassed to admit. "We've been meaning to have you and James come in for dinner!"

A slow dinner service preferably, when Derek can peel himself from the kitchen and sit with them in the dining room.

"We'd love that! Looks like business is going well."

It's not a question. Quinn knows which restaurants have a foot in the grave. The ones a health inspection away from closing and the hidden gems that will stand the test of time.

"Hey!" Jace jolts in his seat. "What are you doin' this Friday? Marcella Hall from Bon Appétit's doin' a feature on Zora's. Derek's been planning this special menu tasting thing for weeks." Honestly, Jace isn't sure what the hell it is anymore. It started as a review and seems to be growing into something larger. All he knows is that he has to show up and put on a smile. "He's inviting a few industry friends. You should come!"

"Off duty?" He chomps down on his bottom lip and raises a brow. "I'd hate to step on Marcella's toes. She gets a bit territorial."

"Right. Of course!"

"And I'll have to see if James is off duty. You know he's on the force now. A few months in," he says, running a nervous hand through his hair. He smiles but it looks painful. "They have him pulling a lot of late nights, patrolling."

"Oh, wow." The enthusiasm slips from Jace's face. It must be hard having a cop for a boyfriend, he thinks. Always wondering if they'll make it home alive...

His anxiety couldn't take it. He has enough to worry about.

Thankfully, chefs rarely find themselves in the line of fire. Save for a grease fire or freak gas leak, like the one at

DeFazio's a few months back, Derek is in little real danger at Zora's.

"I'll check if he's working," Quinn says, shimmying out of his jacket to reveal a pale blue, fitted polo that barely hides his farmer's tan – something he likely picked up on assignment somewhere warm. "If nothing else, we'll pop in another night. I'll assign Christiana to come do a review too. I'll give you a heads up." He winks.

"You're the best," Jace huffs. "Derek'll love that."

He waves Jace off, seemingly happy to demonstrate he can use his powers for good, and someone glides over to take their drink orders. They both quickly scan the menu and order food while they're at it. Jace locates the pasta he saw earlier; a "Mediterranean Carbonara" it turns out, and Quinn gets the BLT and a round of drinks from the bar.

"It's a work lunch," he smirks and raises his beer glass.

They toast, spilling some of Jace's gin and tonic, and continue to catch up.

"So, things are good at work?"

Quinn blinks and slides forward in his chair. "Marcus announced his retirement." He means Marcus Styles, The Chronicle's Editor-in-Chief. "I've been 'filling in' here and there. But he wants me to take over."

"That's amazing!"

"Right." He grimaces though and rakes his fingers through his dark hair again. Gripping a handful. "So, between that and the second leg of the book tour, I've had my hands full."

Jace smiles. "When it rains, it pours, right?"

Pleasantries.

This goes on for a few minutes more before Jace loses his patience, cutting to the reason he's called this lunch. Even having waited as long as he has, he feels like the shift is sudden.

Obvious.

Quinn's sharp, so Jace is sure he sees through the haze of small talk, but here goes...

"So, I'm guessing you've heard. About what happened at the courthouse," Jace clarifies. His shoulders drop and his stare falls to the crushed lime in his glass, drowning under ice cubes and watered-down gin.

Quinn's green eyes gleam with something dangerous. "I figured that's why you called."

"Denise Bradshaw came to see me. I know you two have—"

"History." A wry smile surfaces.

Jace recalls Quinn referring to it as an "entanglement" in his tell-all book that's landed on the New York Times Best Seller list.

Denise was a detective when they met and had pressured Quinn to kill a salacious story that tied Ted Collins, a problematic New York politician, to a serial killer.

When the story broke, Quinn's stock as a journalist skyrocketed. After a whirlwind bout of TV appearances and job offers, Quinn wrote a book about the ordeal. He titled it, *Where The Boys Are*, a tribute to the childhood friend he lost during the killers reign and the eleven other victims who were finally put to rest.

Denise made a few appearances throughout the book.

Jace recalls flipping through the pages at night, wearing his durag and a confused scowl while Derek snored softly beside him. Denise's "character" in the book was complicated. Fiercely savage one minute and then endearing and motherly the next. He wasn't sure what to make of her motives. Just as he wasn't clear what to make of their encounter at the deli.

What's maddening is that he's fairly sure she actually needed a platter for a party, but paying him a visit to rattle his chain was just an added bonus.

Two birds, one stone.

"Denise Bradshaw." Quinn rolls her name around in his mouth, like a memory. A sweet and sour candy from his past

that he hasn't held on his tongue in ages. "Well, that was fast. Her visit." He flexes his eyebrows. "I hear she's with the FBI now. She's still in bed with some heavy hitters and the DA apparently." He leans in further for this next part. "I swear she has something on everyone in this city."

Which means she's definitely done her homework on Jace.

"Should I be worried?"

Obviously. But he wants to hear Quinn's take.

"Be careful." He inhales deeply, nostrils flaring, then releases a quick huff before cherry-picking his next words. "It's the ugly stories they want to bury the quickest. Child killers. Murders too gruesome for the evening news. Body parts left on the steps of federal buildings." He tilts his head. "If this doesn't go away – if they don't have a 'bad guy' in custody to put away forever and make everyone feel safe again – that's when the Denise Bradshaws of the world start to get creative. That's what you should be worried about."

"If they don't find the killer soon."

He makes a grim face and sips from the edge of his beer glass. The glass sweats between his fingers.

"Are there any suspects? Any leads?"

This is what Jace came for. This is why he phoned Quinn under the flimsy pretense of catching up.

Quinn twists his lips into a coy smile. "You know if you were anyone else – if I didn't spend months getting to know your ass, writing an entire piece on you – I'd tell you to fuck off."

"But you do know me." The next words are scarcely audible as Jace swallows a lump in his throat. "And you know I didn't have a hand in this. I'm not like my father," he whispers.

Quinn frowns, looking older suddenly. Less like the fresh-faced journalist he met years ago and more like the new Editor-in-Chief at The Chronicle. Peppered with more experience and a natural talent for playing the game.

He does a song-and-dance about protecting the integrity of the investigation and not revealing his source before caving. "Off

the record.” He points and swears. “This conversation never took place and I’ll deny it ever did.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Jace nods and leans in.

The air changes between them. The space between them grows warm and conspiring, like a cave of secrets.

“Word is... all the buzz is about the delivery van,” Quinn whispers. “They’re trying to trail the van from the scene, of course. But these fucking eyewitnesses...” He tosses his hands in the air flippantly. “What, maybe three of which can be deemed reliable witnesses – all three have different accounts of what they saw. One says they saw two people in the van. Another swears it was just a driver who stopped and tossed out the body.”

“What about traffic cameras?”

“I looked into it. Only one person visible at the wheel, wearing a mask. A second or third accomplice could have been in the back. Who knows? Word is, they’ve been trying to backtrack – to trace the van’s route to and from the courthouse, right? But, of course, there were no plates. They lose it at certain points – possibly when it was on the highway. But the pieces they do have don’t match up.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s caught flying through an intersection on Kensington five minutes away from the scene, then someone’s doorbell cam catches it at a stop sign roughly four minutes after it left the courthouse – but it’s in the complete opposite direction.”

“So, a decoy then? Multiple vans to throw off the trail?”

“Could be.” He rolls his green eyes and slumps in his chair a little. “But at the end of the day, we’re talking about leads that are only as good as the intel. Witnesses who all saw somethin’ different. A van – or multiple vans – all over the city with no tags.” He’s talking fast, absentmindedly as Jace tries to keep up. As if he’s on the newsroom floor of The Chronicle. “I hear some of the routes the van was found on don’t even make sense... like, just way too populated. I don’t think it’s poor planning. I think they wanted to be seen.” He shrugs.

“So, like a decoy!” Jace says again. “Like how the President’s in one car but there’s five of ‘em, so who fuckin’ knows which one he’s really in.”

Before Quinn can answer, they’re interrupted by the arrival of their food. Neither of them has much of an appetite at this point, but Jace has a taste of his pasta while Quinn picks at the fries on his plate.

“I have a theory,” Quinn says with a mouthful. “I think the van didn’t go far from the scene. Yes – there was more than one van driving around. But if they got stopped, they would have been clean. So, what if the real one pulled into a garage close by? Switched cars and drove off.”

Or parked it in a garage on a route free of cameras... and returned to the scene on foot.

Killers like to stay close to their crime scenes, something both Quinn and Jace know very well.

“So, no suspects,” Jace surmises, replaying what Quinn has told him.

“Not yet. But honestly, the investigation’s a dumpster fire, from what I hear. Lots of bad leads on the tip line. Fuzzy witnesses. Police don’t know what to think. And if Denise already paid you a visit, it’s just her way of letting herself be known. If she wanted you in handcuffs, we’d be talking through three-inch plexiglass right now.”

Jace frowns and twirls strands of cold noodles around his fork. “She left her card.”

Quinn raises his brows at this. “That’s interesting.”

“Think it means something?”

A small laugh escapes. “You watch any old spy movies?”

Jace shakes his head. He doesn’t. Just CNN, bad reality TV, The Food Network, and “The Golden Girls” with Derek.

“Denise is like that one shady character you can never quite pin down,” Quinn chuckles. “Is she one of the good guys? Is she a double agent?”

“She’s an extreme couponer,” Jace offers. “Bet you didn’t know that.”

“No shit.” Quinn can’t hide his amusement. He pops a fry in his mouth and chews thoughtfully.

“So, what about the victim?” Jace thinks to ask. “Who was it?”

“I can’t give you a name.” His mouth clamps shut, clearly drawing a line. “All I can tell you is that he didn’t show up for his usual bed at St. Mary’s and his sponsor identified the body.”

“St. Mary’s?”

“They serve meals and offer nightly shelter to the homeless in the area. But, you have to show up by nine to claim your bed. He always shows and didn’t one night. His sponsor had been working with him for over a year. Says he was turning a corner.”

Jace mulls this over with a heaviness growing in his stomach.

“How are you gentlemen enjoying everything so far?” It’s their server. Back to refill their waters and offer them another round.

Jace and Quinn decline and eat in silence once she’s gone.

Eventually, when he can’t stand the quiet any longer, Quinn cuts through it. “I see that brain of yours working.” He shoots Jace a rueful smile from across the table. “Everything’s going to be okay.” He offers the words as if they’re a promise.

“There’ll be some new reports going out with the vic’s name,” he winks. “Keep an eye on Channel 12.”

Jace gives a small smile.

Theirs is certainly an odd friendship, one forged by their bloody past in dealing with killers.

It’s a shame they aren’t closer, Jace thinks now. They have so much in common, and James and Derek would likely get along well. He’ll have to make it a point to reach out to Quinn again soon, for a friendly lunch next time. No talk of murder and suspicion.

The rest of their time passes with them picking over the remainder of their food, venturing back into the land of small talk and pleasantries. Jace insists on covering the check and thanks Quinn for his time.

They stand to hug and Quinn's five o'clock shadow grazes Jace's cheek, setting it aflame like a brush fire.

A thought sparks, springing from the back of Jace's mind at the last second.

"Hey, before you go, can I ask..." Jace steps back and stalls before taking a breath and asking in a low voice, "Do you ever still see him?"

"Who?" He asks the question but knows who Jace means. A dark glimmer passes through his green eyes, and he scoffs, "All the time."

Jace blinks hard at this. Stunned.

"In dreams. On the subway. Leaving my yoga class." Quinn shrugs. "My therapist says it's normal – whatever 'normal' is." He sighs through closed lips. "It was really bad, at one point. Like... I'd see him, like, fuckin' everywhere." He blinks. "A few times a month."

"It's gotten better?"

Maybe with medication?

Jace has been dead set against seeing a new therapist.

But if it's helped Quinn...

He can't help but think back to Derek, encouraging him to consider therapy. Even if it's just speaking online with someone.

He makes a mental note to get the name of Quinn's therapist. He'll make up an excuse to call later in the week and casually ask. He'll call to remind Quinn about dinner and will mention it then.

Perfect.

Quinn's slow to respond, trying to decide how to best answer Jace's question. "Better. But not gone." He seems to weigh his

next words before leaning in to confide, “He’s never really gone. Sometimes, I wake up at night, and it’s like I can’t breathe. It’s like I can still feel his dead body on top of me... bleeding out.”

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7 / PUSH

The acrid scent of burnt bread bites at Jace's nose as he walks in.

The front door chimes overhead while Caitlin flags a dishcloth through the air.

"It was me!" She sings out frantically. "I burned the bread."

"Again?" He can't help the edge in his voice. "'Damn, Gina!'"

"I knooow," she winces. Sections of her bangs are plastered to her forehead and the Martin reference is wasted on her.

Jace cuts his eyes at the smoky bread oven, grateful the shop is empty.

"We've been slow," she says, knowing where his mind is going next. "Oh, but Ezra just got here. He's downstairs with Yuri. For Zora's order." She drops the towel, rests her arm for a moment, and adjusts the straps on her yellow '50s-inspired sundress.

"Great," he says, as if unfazed. He's in no mood for Ezra's antics though. He's spent the morning running all over Brooklyn in search of a cooler to replace the one that's been on the fritz since last week. The light is on, illuminating rows of sugary soft drinks and beer bottles from a local brewery, but in a few minutes, almost like clockwork, the light and the fan will go out, and the fridge will stop cooling.

"Any luck with the cooler?" Caitlin asks, on cue again. She plays with the gold chain at her neck with Shannon's name, rubbing the thin pendant between her fingers.

It dawns on Jace that he's never seen her without it. He imagines she can't put it on and not think of her fallen sorority sister. But perhaps that's the reason she wears it. In remembrance.

"I found a used one we can get delivered tomorrow." He presses his eyes tight for a moment as they adjust from the

brightness of the outdoors to the fluorescent lighting. He sighs, “The guy wants too much for it though. I’ll call him later. Try to talk him down.”

“How much is a new one?” Her arctic blue eyes grow larger than their usual large. “I could chip in. Just take what you need from my next few checks or whatever.”

It’s not like she needs the money or Bradley would question why she didn’t bring home her usual check, but Jace knows he can’t entertain her offer. He’s also sure it must be illegal somewhere on paper for him to dock an employee’s check to pay for appliances.

“That’s beyond kind of you, but I can’t.” He smiles softly. “It’s not for you guys to worry about anyway. I’ll figure it out.”

“You always do,” she chirps and commences to clear the air of smoke.

Frankie “Half-Pint” Jaxon sings in the background and she hums along loosely to the melody.

Frankie is an old favorite of Jace’s that he hasn’t heard in a while. Outside of his vaudeville repertoire, Frankie was also known as a female impersonator. In “I’m Gonna Dance Wit De Guy Wot Brung Me” he sings both the male and female parts in a high camp tour de force that always makes Jace chuckle.

“I’ll be back.”

He’s off to check on Ezra and the order for Zora’s. Zora’s felt slower than usual the last two times he was there, so he’s curious how much is on the ticket.

Jace makes it to the top of the stairs leading to the basement when he catches someone in the corner of his eye.

Ezra.

He’s hunched over Jace’s desk, turning over paperwork and flipping through Jace’s receipt book. Searching for something.

“What are you doing in my office?” Jace surprises him.

Ezra jerks back from his desk and goes stiff. “Thought you might have some Wite-Out...” He pushes the air out of his chest slowly, quietly releasing what might have been his shock. Then, a slow crocodile smile breaks through the surface of his murky expression. “I completely mucked up this order form.” He plucks a folded piece of paper from the edge of the desk and waves it like a white flag. “You know how Derek gets about the accounting.”

Jace eyes Ezra’s patronizing smile, lingering on his crooked tooth. “I don’t have any Wite-Out,” he says flatly.

A dense silence stretches between them. Quiet enough for Jace to hear the fan in the cooler up front go out.

“Oh!” Ezra’s smile droops. He wrings his hands together, grinding his hairy knuckles into his palm before huffing, “That’s okay. I’ll just redo this one when I get back, so it’ll be nice and neat.”

Jace says nothing. He watches Ezra remove himself from his office, shimmying past him in the hallway.

“You’re early today,” Jace notes.

He hardly ever comes for pickups this time of day.

Has he deliberately come when Jace might be out?

Did he call ahead and Caitlin confirmed Jace wasn’t there?

He’s dressed for work but is unshaven. A coarse patchwork of dark brown hair covers his weak jawline.

“Packed house tonight,” he says as his accent flairs. “We’re runnin’ a few of the new entrees as dinner specials. Derek wants to test ‘em out.”

There’s something about Derek’s name on Ezra’s thin, chapped lips that makes Jace’s skin burn. A rush of heat covers his arms as they hover in the hallway. The stairs to the basement are at Ezra’s back, dark and cavernous like an open mouth.

Just one push, Jace thinks.

He'll make it fast and scream when Ezra goes down, so Caitlin and Yuri will hear his shock.

Accidents happen all the time... around stairs.

Right?

"I think we should have kept the sweet potatoes," Jace hears Ezra say.

Jace blinks and his eyes refocus on Ezra. He's leaning against the doorframe to the stairs now.

"Derek thinks they're too 'expected'. He said they're too heavy with that dish," Ezra's tone suddenly spikes, "But I liked 'em!" He shrugs his shoulders wildly. "Maybe, if we did a touch more bourbon and less coconut, you know?"

Jace shifts his weight onto his heels, his balance slightly off as he peers around the hallway.

How long has Ezra been talking?

Jace nods quickly in agreement, but a slow sense of dread trickles down the back of his throat. It fills his stomach and tumbles within his belly like a handful of jagged rocks, shredding his insides.

Did he just blackout?

He suddenly realizes he doesn't recall seeing Ezra move to lean against the doorframe. It's as if he blinked and missed a few frames.

Ezra stands closer to the edge of the steps now, the darkness and the stairs only inches away. A hard landing on the basement's gray concrete waits below.

Jace takes a small step forward.

"Derek's the boss though. And he's so brilliant in the kitchen!" He melts against the wood frame. "I just love watchin' him work, you know? He's so... inspiring!"

Jace nods. He's a heartbeat from reaching Ezra when Yuri's voice echoes up from the basement.

"That you, Jace?"

Jace freezes and crosses his arms, bringing them tight across his chest like a lifejacket.

Or a straitjacket.

Shame pricks at the hairs on Jace's arms as he tears his stone-gray eyes from Ezra to answer. "Yeah – yep!" He clears his throat. "It's me!" He squints down the stairs to find Yuri gawking up at them.

"Can you toss down some wrap?" His bloody gloves hang by his sides.

"Yep!" Jace takes off to grab a roll of Saran Wrap.

Ezra smiles and calls after Jace, "That's probably for me. I think he's finishing up my order."

Jace doesn't turn back. He's halfway down the hall, walking to the front of the shop to grab a new roll of plastic wrap from under the counter before he hears Ezra's steps descend the stairs.

He'll be glad when Ezra's gone.

Well, not gone-gone.

He means far away. His presence around the shop brings out the worst in Jace. Even if Ezra does have a harmless crush on Derek, that's no reason to push the man down the stairs.

Jace shakes his head dubiously at his own behavior. He catches a glimpse of his reflection in the tall beverage cooler and reminds himself that he's not the man who once reigned over Cassex Deli.

"You're not like him," he says under his breath. "You're nothing like him."

"Hmm? What'd you say?" Caitlin perks up behind the paperback book in her hands. Eyes wide, like a pastel owl figurine.

"Nothing. Just talking to myself." He squats behind the counter and finds what he's looking for in a cabinet next to the cold case. "Talking to yourself's actually a sign of intelligence," he tells Caitlin over one shoulder, in case she's

looking at him strange. “When you start answerin’ yourself’s when you need to worry.”

She says nothing and returns to her book, popping a yellow gummy bear in her mouth.

Jace makes his way back toward the basement, determined to be rid of Ezra before he says or does something he’ll regret.

On his way back, he passes the cooler once more, catching a glimpse of himself in the cold sweaty glass, just before the light goes out.

• • •

Derek hands Jace a warm plate of shrimp and grits.

“Extra bacon,” he says. Just how Jace likes it.

“Thanks, babe.” Jace looks up from his spot on the sofa to press his lips to Derek’s. He sits cross-legged and barefoot, wearing a pair of old gray sweats and one of his tank tops from the gym that reads, “NO THANKS.” He tosses the remote in his hand onto the coffee table, then picks up the fork resting on his plate for a quick bite. A moan escapes and he licks the sauce from his lips. “So good.” With his mouth full, he pantomimes a chef’s kiss.

Derek plops beside him and frowns at the TV. “Babe, you’ve been glued to the news, like every night.”

Glued to Channel 12.

Jace just shrugs and returns his gaze to a blonde and busty Hannah McAvoy.

She breaks into a glossy newsroom smile as she reads the teleprompter. “The Bronx Zoo’s newest giraffe calf, Astrid, made her big debut this morning! After a long nap, she took some time to explore and get used to her new home. Lulu, the 13-year-old momma giraffe, gave birth to babygirl over the weekend and both are doing well.”

Fluff.

And odd names, even for giraffes, Jace thinks.

“Giraffes only need to drink water once every few days,” Derek says, pointing to B-roll of Astrid stumbling onto her face. “Bet you didn’t know that.”

“Did you know giraffes only live to be about twenty-four, twenty-five?”

Derek shoots Jace a morbid look and lowers his eyes to the plate in his lap. “Wanna go for a jog after dinner?”

“That sounds nice, but I’m tired, babe.” Just saying the words prompts Jace to yawn.

Derek nudges Jace with his knee. “You were talkin’ in your sleep again.”

Jace dares not ask what he might have said. “I had some ice cream before bed. Prob’ly shouldn’t eat so late.”

“Oh!” Derek’s face lights up. “Guess who I heard from today.” He taps Jace’s knee with his free hand. “That’s what I meant to tell you!”

“Who?”

“Natty.”

“Oh, yeah?” A smile overcomes Jace as he pictures Nathaniel “Natty” Boyle, Derek’s boisterous, red-head ex-coworker from Portland. They both worked as line cooks at a steakhouse that’s since closed down. “What’s he up to?”

“He’s sellin’ his truck.”

“His food truck? He just got it up and running, right?”

“Well...” Derek’s handsome face turns grave. His baritone voice dips lower. “He ain’t been doin’ too good, babe. He told me he lost his sense of taste. You know, ‘cause of COVID? He was in the hospital. Like, for a while.”

“No...” Jace gasps and shifts his weight, uncrossing his legs that have fallen asleep. “I didn’t know that! That’s so sad. I love Natty,” he sighs.

“Right? That’s my boy. But, yeah.” He shrugs his husky shoulders and drops his fork to toss his hands in the air. “Can’t taste shit. So, he’s selling his truck. Gonna go do construction work. At his dad’s company.”

It feels like a waste of talent, but Jace doesn’t say it.

“He asked if I want to take it off his hands...”

“His food truck?”

“I know what you’re gonna say!” Derek brings his shoulders by his ear with a droll smile. “We already have a lot goin’ on.” His eyes wander and get stuck on an animated commercial flashing across the TV screen. A purple 3D character resembling a walrus frowns under a raincloud, apparently in need of whatever antidepressant the fifteen-second spot is selling. “I just always wanted one when I was younger.”

“Ugh! You say that like you’re so old,” Jace laments.

“Feels that way some days.”

A moment passes as the walrus leaves his doctor’s office to join his friends, a teal-colored seal and a magenta octopus, at the beach for a picnic. He’s all smiles and sunshine now.

A slow grin spreads across Derek’s face. “Could be fun...” He squeezes Jace’s knee. “Me on the grill... you at the window.”

“You’re serious!” Jace laughs.

“I’m just sayin’ it could be fun!” He cracks and his excitement breaks through, joyful and infectious. “Babe! Think about it, though. It could be so dope. It could be our thing, right? Somethin’ we both put our spin on. Together.”

Jace deflates and lays his plate on the coffee table. “Who would even run it? I mean, really,” he asks. “You have Zora’s. I have the deli to worry about.”

“We’d figure it out.” His hand finds Jace’s, rubbing his knuckles as his gaze softens.

Jace shoots him a surly look. He’s been charmed too many times by Derek’s sad, bottomless brown eyes to fall for this again. “Don’t look at me like that.”

Derek smoothly tilts his head, inching closer on the sofa. “He offered a fair price. It’s in good shape, new tires... You could rebrand it. Full creative license!”

“Oh, is that – what – like, a bargaining chip?” Jace laughs as Derek pounces, wrapping him in his strong embrace.

“I’ll let you drive it,” Derek sings. He nuzzles his head in Jace’s neck.

Jace smooths a hand along Derek’s clean-shaven scalp and can’t help but shake his head in wonder.

Boys and their toys.

Some men buy sports cars when they reach “a certain age”. Derek wants a food truck.

Derek tightens his arms around Jace, searing kisses along his neck, down to his collarbone and shoulder blade. “I’m sure we can come to...” He plants another kiss. “Some sort of agreement. Can’t we, Mr. Lannister?” He peers up at Jace with playful eyes. A spark of something dark glitters behind his long eyelashes.

“Are you offering to make me a deal, Mr. Brooks?”

Derek rakes his eyes over him and answers with another kiss. His full lips melt over Jace’s in a slow, sweet kiss that steals Jace’s breath.

Their lips break apart and the playfulness in Derek’s eyes is gone, replaced with an insatiable hunger.

“What if I said you can have anything you want?” He leans into Jace with a whisper. His fingers skillfully work their way down Jace’s body. From the peaks of Jace’s chest and nipples... over the ripples in his stomach... landing in the warmth gathering between Jace’s legs. “Anything you want,” he says again. His voice is raspy and slick in Jace’s ear as his tongue dances tiny circles up Jace’s neck. “For as long as you can take it.”

Even through the layers of Jace’s clothes, his arousal swells against his sweatpants, betraying him. It may as well be a neon

sign, a dead giveaway that every move Derek makes is working.

They haven't had sex in a while. Not since the anniversary of Jace's father's death. Not since the dismembered body reported on the news. So, the thought of Derek diving and plummeting deep inside him makes Jace light-headed, making it hard to come up for air as Derek slips a hand past the waistband of his sweats.

Finding his treasure, Derek gives a low moan and starts to stroke.

A cruel smile crosses his lips as he delivers painfully slow, deliberate strokes that cause Jace to squirm and arch his back. "That good?" He teases.

Jace whimpers softly under Derek's touch.

"You like how Daddy does that?" He starts to swivel his wrist. His fingers travel the length of Jace's thick shaft as he cranks with more speed.

Jace lets out a shuddering moan and Derek works his hand faster, feeding the flames building between them as Jace slowly gives in to pleasure.

Derek continues his steady pulsing, watching Jace's face distort in response. Each note sounds from Jace's lips like a symphony on fire.

Derek's thumb circles Jace's swollen head, already slick and sticky from his body's awakening. He waits until Jace's eyes start to roll back... until Jace is biting his bottom lip, close to falling apart in his arms before he stops and withdraws his hand.

Slipping back from the edge, Jace groans and braces himself as Derek finds the remote to turn off the TV.

Derek peels out of his shirt, chest proud and heaving.

"Be gentle with me..." Jace says. His tone is light but provoking with a dare woven between the lines.

Derek growls under his breath and his mouth twists into a snarl as he lowers the zipper on his jeans. He leans in until

their faces are inches apart and whispers, “I’m gonna tear you apart.”

• • •

Jace lies across Derek’s chest, their bodies still throbbing.

He can still feel Derek inside of him and a raw heat spreading across the top of his neck where Derek’s hand held him firm against the mattress. Music plays in the background. Sultry, bittersweet déjà vu blues by Gaye Adegbalola. She plays her guitar as Jace trails the tips of his fingers up and down Derek’s burly chest, strumming him like a mandolin, in time with the music.

“So, do we have a deal?” Derek grins sheepishly, back to business.

Jace laughs and swats his arm. “I don’t know what kind of negotiating you’re used to, sir, but, uhm...”

“Oh, come on. That was 5 stars!”

Jace feigns indifference and winces. “Maybe four and a half.”

“Psssch!” He balks and retaliates by tickling Jace.

Soon they’re wrestling, tangling themselves in the sheets again as Jace writhes and laughs uncontrollably.

Jace curls into a ball, trying to fend Derek off, but it’s useless. Derek’s the only person alive who knows he’s ticklish. A weakness he’s weaponized. And it’s not long before Jace is pinned down and surrenders for the second time in one night.

“Fine!” Jace laughs. Tears blur his eyes as he catches his breath. “Fine, you brute! I’ll have my people call your people to draw up the paperwork.”

Hovering above him, Derek gives a satisfied smirk, then leans in for a kiss.

Jace melts and something warm and unspoken passes between them.

They both know the addition of a food truck would be maddening. It's Derek's craziest idea yet, but it's fun to imagine what could be.

Derek lies beside Jace and passes him a pillow for his head.

"So, you ready for tomorrow?" Jace asks, cuddling closer.

"Tomorrow's the big night."

His eyebrows shoot up as he stares at the ceiling. A surge of nerves seems to course through him, but he pushes them aside as he turns on his side to face Jace. "I've never been more ready for anything in my life," he says and gives Jace an adoring smile.

Before Jace can ask what time he needs to be at Zora's – because he's completely forgotten – Derek smiles and announces, "Gonna hop in the shower!" He grunts as he swings his legs over the bed and stands to waddle into the bathroom.

Jace catches an eyeful of his bare physique and the sheen on his beautiful dark skin before he walks out of sight. He grins and buries his face in his pillow, squealing like a schoolgirl on the inside.

It's amazing how alive Derek makes him feel.

Jace's stomach rumbles, quaking with a pang of sudden hunger. His mind flashes to the tub of crème brûlée ice cream in the freezer. A plan forms to retrieve it with two spoons, but first, he'll join Derek in the shower. Round three followed by ice cream and "The Golden Girls" is the perfect way to end the night.

Jace crawls out of bed and puts his feet on the floor with a content sigh. Stella peeks her head from around the doorframe, wondering if it's safe to come in.

Judging by the noise, she probably thought Derek was killing him.

Jace beckons her over with an exaggerated smile. "Hey, pretty girl! I'm okay! Daddy's okay," he promises.

She wags her tail, relieved, and trots over.

Jace scratches her head from his seat on the edge of the bed, just as Derek's phone lights up on the nightstand.

He wonders if it might be the producers calling from LA about "À La Carte" – or worse, something that's happened at the restaurant this time of night. He stands and starts to call for Derek when he catches sight of a message on the locked screen.

His face sours, seeing it's a message from Ezra, and then goes from bitter to enraged as he reads...

Saw Jace earlier. He doesn't suspect a thing. Clueless lol

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8 / THE BODY

Jace runs full-speed with his AirPods blasting. No matter the distance or how hard he pumps his legs, he can't outrun his thoughts. His mind is stuck on Ezra's clueless.

How long has this been going on?

Was it only once? Or every time Derek told Jace he was closing late?

The words are stuck in his head, like a record skipping.

Saw Jace earlier.

He doesn't suspect a thing.

Clueless lol

Of course, the sensible thing would have been to ask Derek about the message, to give him a chance to explain or come up with a convincing untruth, but then he would know Jace saw the message to begin with. Then he would know Jace is onto them and not so clueless after all.

They've always had an unspoken rule about not looking through each other's phones. Even in bed, when Derek's on his phone, seemingly holding it at an impossible angle for Jace to read, Jace gives him the benefit of the doubt. Jace tells himself it's just his imagination playing cruel tricks. His mind conjuring up the worst.

Now, every encounter he's witnessed between Derek and Ezra takes on new meaning.

Now, more than ever, he wishes Ezra didn't exist.

If he could wipe him clean from the earth, even blast him into space and be rid of him once and for all, Jace would.

He laughs now, as he ups the speed on the treadmill, thinking how close he was to pushing Ezra down the stairs less than twenty-four hours ago. If he'd known then what he knows now, he probably wouldn't have beaten himself up the way he did over the idea.

To think Ezra would be bold enough to try to replace him sets Jace's skin on fire. Others have tried before, to take the life Jace has built. Liam Garvey tried to end his career and even went as far as creating a twisted mirror-image of Jace's loft in Portland before earning himself two bullets to the chest, taken down by Banks.

Still, Jace's stomach tightens into a knot with the thought that Ezra may appeal to Derek. Ezra may not be as handsome or Derek's "type", but he certainly has less baggage and notoriety.

What if that's a welcome departure?

Jace shakes his head in dismay.

He opened the deli this morning, going about his regular routine. Even bringing Derek his coffee and kissing him goodbye on his way out. After the lunch rush, he's decided to take the afternoon off, now finding himself at the gym that's growing more crowded by the minute.

Perhaps on cue, Hayden strides over with a cocky half-smile before tossing his head back with his water bottle. He's in black trainer leggings, matching shorts, and a white muscle tee. Perspiration beads along his forehead and muscular arms, slick with sweat.

His mouth moves without sound, until Jace grimaces and removes his AirPods.

"I said, 'I thought you were a morning person!'" He flashes a blinding-white smile that nearly knocks Jace off-balance.

"What are you doin' here?"

Jace could ask him the same. It's as if he fucking lives at the gym.

He curses internally, slowing the treadmill with a huff. "Took the afternoon off."

“Good for you,” he croons, resting a massive hand on the treadmill’s console. “Boss man makin’ boss moves!”

Words Jace can picture on a t-shirt. If he had a t-shirt with every corny line that spewed from Hayden’s lips, he’d have a corny t-shirt empire and could retire. He flits his eyes up to the ceiling. “Right. Boss moves.” He can see the layout on the t-shirt and everything. Bold, white Bebas Neue font on stiff black cotton.

“Guess that’s one perk, havin’ your own business.” He leans in and pushes onto his toes, stretching his calves.

“I haven’t forgotten about your offer,” Jace says. Although he hasn’t given it much real thought, seeing Hayden gives the proposal fresh life.

What if everything goes to shit and it’s the bronze parachute he needs to start over?

“So, dinner then? I know this great spot. It’s Asian-fusion.” He flexes his eyebrows. “So good!”

Jace does a poor job of hiding his amusement. Hayden’s proving himself to be as predictable as Jace has...well, predicted.

It’s all painfully expected. Like a script he’s been using for years and hasn’t bothered to refresh or improvise on. Then again, why switch it up if it’s been working? Plenty of men would be happy going anywhere under Hayden’s arm.

Hayden matches the smile on Jace’s face as he raves about the menu’s spicy Jidori fried chicken, blissfully unaware Jace is smiling for a different reason.

Hayden must give this pitch to anyone he finds attractive. If it’s not a job offer, it’s free personal training lessons, or some other carrot he dangles to get closer. He’s a textbook fuckboy.

“I know the bartender. We sorta had a thing,” he confides, waving a shaky hand. “Ended a little messy, but he makes one hell of a Manhattan!”

“Oh, wow.”

He leans in, sneaking a glance at the numbers on the console. “Wrappin’ up soon? I was just ‘bout to hit the showers.” He leaves it at that.

Perhaps it’s an invitation to join him?

A chance to show off his assets?

An amuse-bouche of sorts!

Jace smirks and a sharp laugh escapes. “Sorry! I’m not laughing at you,” he lies. “I just thought of something funny. My, uhm...” He trails off, trying to think fast as his eyes land on the row of TVs hanging behind Hayden’s head.

What he sees makes him stop breathing.

Capturing Jace’s attention is a close pan of Hannah McAvoy, pointing to an image of the courthouse in the top left of her screen. A breaking news alert flashes, and she cuts to feed of a press conference outside the courthouse.

“So, you wanna—”

Jace hushes him and yanks the treadmill’s magnetic safety key to come to a stop. He squints at the screen, trying to read the broken string of closed captions in black boxes popping up in succession.

“Can we turn this up?” He points and yells to no one in particular. “TV four! How do you...” He looks to Hayden.

“I’ll get it.” He looks confused but sprints off to find the remote. Or someone on staff.

Jace steps off the belt and peers closer at the row of TVs suspended above the ellipticals. The deputy district attorney is speaking rapidly to a line of reporters. His heather gray suit and tie match the melancholy sky behind him. Painted into the backdrop, Jace catches a glimpse of Detective Denise Bradshaw in a lineup of uniformed officers and the chief of police, who stands solemnly with his hands folded and resting on his round stomach. Jace can’t be sure how much of the captions are missing, but he gathers they’re asking for anyone with information to step forward.

The phone number for Crime Stoppers appears and the screen cuts back to the studio, telling Jace this is only a clip of the full press conference that must have aired earlier.

Hannah McAvoy's lips move as a man's photo appears on her left.

"Aaron Gilbert," Jace whispers, reading the caption aloud.

REPORTER: THE BODY HAS BEEN IDENTIFIED AS FORTY-TWO YEAR OLD AARON

GILBERT, A LOCAL MAN WHO

NOTICED MISSING FROM ONE OF SAINT MARY'S REHABILITATION

PROGRAMS. >>> NOW ADVOCATES FOR

THOSE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS WANT TO KNOW EXACTLY

HOW THIS HAPPENED.

The photo is a still taken from B-roll. Something they snipped from a past story on St. Mary's Annual Christmas Dinner, a free community event for those in need during the holidays. Aaron is in an oversized, blue sweater, wearing a half-smile beneath a graying, tangled beard that covers most of his face. His dark auburn hair – likely a key distinction when identifying the body – is clumsily smoothed to one side. The apples of his cheeks are red and angry from the biting cold outside as he waits in a food line. A sister is reaching for his plate that's half full of what looks like turkey, some sort of pasta salad, and green beans. Aaron looks tall in the screenshot. At least, taller than the sister and men in line planking each side of him. He looks like any number of the men who live below underpasses and in camps along the freeway, wearing layers of mismatched, dirty clothes and ill-fitting shoes they never remove in fear of having them stolen

while they sleep. Jace may have passed him on his way to work without a second glance.

ADVOCATES ARE SAYING THIS POINTS TO A LARGER
ISSUE OF HOUSING AND
THEY'RE CALLING ON LAWMAKERS TO — DO
SOMETHING.

Aaron looks grateful in the photo. Who knows how long he stood in line for that plate – or how he'd come to find himself at the mercy of the sisters at St. Mary of the Angels in the first place? More inexplicably, who would want someone like Aaron Gilbert dead – and in such a horrific method?

Jace should feel relieved that Aaron doesn't look familiar to him – that this appears to be a random act of violence not linked to the deli or himself. However, seeing the face of the man who'd been murdered and scattered on the courthouse steps gives him no solace. The news report does little to quench his curiosity or provide answers. It only leaves him with more questions and a troubling sense that the motive behind Aaron Gilbert's death may be more sinister than the deputy DA and law enforcement suspect.

Like a slow ache churning in bone before a thunderstorm, Jace predicts more blood will spill before the mystery of Aaron's death is solved.

Even if the locals in his neighborhood are already thinking it, none of the early reporting has dared to breathe the possibility of a serial killer at large or the likelihood of this happening again. Panic is the last thing—

“I got it!” Hayden holds up the remote proudly, waving it. He grins at Jace, just as Hannah McAvoy goes to commercial.

Jace swallows a sigh, lazily accepts the remote, and pushes start on the treadmill.

• • •

Jace's breath hangs in the air, a warm mist in the bitter cold of the walk-in, as he sings lightly with the radio. He's rummaging through shelves, doing inventory in the basement of the deli after hours. Happy to get work done without interruption and equally mortified at how Yuri's left things.

There's a tray of veal shanks missing a label with a storage date and a spill he forgot to clean up.

Jace makes a note to talk to him tomorrow because he refuses to be taken down by something as routine as a health inspection. Patrick Wilkins, the portly health inspector assigned to the deli's district, doesn't like Jace to begin with, so there's no room for error or silly mistakes. Especially when they can be avoided.

Jace counts boxes on a shelf above him, making tick marks on a clipboard he cradles in one arm.

"The fuck is this...?" He peers inside a half-opened box and glares back at his paperwork.

It's only Jace, his work, and the ghosts of Cassex Deli in the belly of the basement, listening to Aretha wail about her disrespectful man.

He checks off an order of brisket and stops singing mid-sentence as his ears register a familiar sound from upstairs.

It's the door chime – he's sure of it – which shreds his nerves since he's certain he locked the door behind him when he returned to work after the gym.

He leaves the chill of the walk-in and glowers at the steps leading up into darkness. He inches forward, straining to hear over the radio, and shouts, "Hello?"

It's a rookie move, too often made in horror films.

If someone has broken in, they surely know where he is now. He's a sitting duck with no way out but up, where God-knows-what awaits.

Jace makes a move toward the stairs as a pair of shoes suddenly step out of the darkness. They trot down the old

stairs that give and creak under their weight, barreling toward him like thunder.

He hears Ezra's grating voice before his stunned face plunges into the light.

"You're still here?" Hands on his hips, his beady eyes rake over Jace incredulously.

"Uhm! What are you doin' here?" Jace boils over and meets him at the foot of the stairs. "And how the hell did you get in?" A better question.

He dangles Derek's keys in front of him. "Derek gave me his key to come check on you. He's been calling. We both have. You're supposed to be at Zora's, remember?" He waves a hurrying hand. "Marcella's starting apps."

Zora's!

What time is it?

Jace pats his pockets for his phone. He finds it lying on one of the metal prep tables. Dead.

He's sure he plugged it into the charger in his office when he arrived, but perhaps it never charged. He has to wonder now if the outlet wasn't working after all... if it's more of the building's faulty wiring at play. The same wiring impacting the coolers upstairs.

He's also not dressed to dazzle Marcella Hall, or anyone for that matter. He'd set a reminder on his phone to run home, shower, and change, but it never rang once his battery died. And time has a way of slipping past you in the basement.

It must be pitch-dark outside, Jace realizes.

All he can think about is his empty chair at the table Derek's reserved for Marcella and a small group of his industry friends. Chefs, bartenders, and influencers he's heard Derek mention in passing but has yet to meet in person.

He could run the few blocks to Zora's on foot, but not in gym shorts and a smelly tank top. Not dressed the way he's dressed. As upset as he is at Derek, he's not mad enough to ruin his night further.

It's an important night for the restaurant.

"Come on, hurry! Let's go."

"I need to wrap up – and change!" Jace snaps. He spins on his heel, heading back to the walk-in. "I just need to label this last bin, then I'll close up!"

Ezra follows him, begging, "Just come as you are."

He'd love that.

Jace gives a wayward glance over his shoulder.

Gone is Ezra's usual frumpy work uniform and crocs. He's in navy dress pants and a matching vest with his hair greased and slicked back. A large broach glitters on his lapel and his dress shoes sparkle like black diamonds on his feet. He's dressed as though he has a seat at the table. As if he's a guest tonight instead of Derek's right hand in the kitchen.

Jace frantically starts to piece together a new outfit in his head. The outfit he set aside, pressed and hanging in their closet, won't do now. If he's going to make a late entrance, he has to make it worth the wait now.

"I really need to get you over there," Ezra insists. He wrings his hands and shakes them by his side. "Derek's losing his mind."

"Look at me!" Jace turns back, arms spread. "I'm not goin' like this. Text him. Tell him I'm on the way," he shrugs. "Tell him I'll be there for dessert."

Ezra doesn't reach for his phone. Instead, his voice goes high and pitchy as he follows Jace to the walk-in. "Trust me, boo. He doesn't care what you're wearin'."

"I'm not your 'boo,'" Jace spits. He turns back, aiming the clipboard. "I'm not your 'boo,' I'm not your friend..." Something inside him breaks and he finds himself heading toward Ezra. "You work for my boyfriend. That's it! You and I have—" He stops at the sound of the door chime.

They both look toward the stairs, straining over the music for the sound of footsteps.

Ezra winces. “I forgot to lock it back.”

Jace narrows his eyes and yells, “Hello! We’re closed for the night! Come back at nine!” He starts to go up but the chime goes off again.

“They left.” Ezra sounds relieved and nervous all at once.

It’s only the two of them again, with fire gleaming in Jace’s charcoal eyes.

Jace jabs a finger in Ezra’s direction. “After tonight, you and I are gonna talk.” He clutches his clipboard and marches back to the walk-in.

Ezra spreads his arms, like withered wings, and gasps, “About what?”

“How about we start with you and Derek?”

“Me and Derek? What do you—”

“Yes!” Jace barks impatiently. He bends to pick up a tray of neatly trimmed pork chops and grunts. “Yes. You and Derek. You touching and fawning over Derek every chance you get. You texting my boyfriend how I ‘don’t suspect a thing.’” Jace’s eyes cut to Ezra. He throws a callous look over his shoulder, like a grenade.

The mention of the text silences Ezra. His mouth falls open, revealing that crooked tooth that makes Jace’s skin crawl.

Jace huffs and turns back to finish tidying up the walk-in. He hadn’t meant to reveal his hand so soon, but fuck it. He’s tired of this game. He’s tired of playing nice. “Once we’re done with that, we can talk about you rummaging through my desk when I’m not here.”

“Jace...” Ezra’s shoulders fall. “That text – it’s not what you think.”

“You do realize that’s what people say when something’s exactly what someone thinks it is. Right?”

“It’s not. I swear! And I never meant to disrespect you guys’ relationship. Really. I... I think what you guys have is fucking

beautiful and I'd never wanna come between you guys. You have to know that!"

This goes on for the next few minutes, Ezra doing what he does best.

Talk.

Jace rests his hands on his hips wearily, staring at the shelves of meat before him. He half-listens with his back to Ezra, listening to his sad appeal grow higher in pitch with every passing sentence.

He can't face him. He can't stomach the sight of him, so he lets Ezra droll on in the doorway to the walk-in, as he closes his eyes and counts back from ten.

The loud hum of the cooler's fan starts to fade. Jace breathes in through his nose and out through his mouth, letting his anger blow out. It swirls in the air and fades before his eyes, like smoke.

A warm mist in the bitter cold.

He sighs and reminds himself that Derek and Marcella Hall are waiting, so he turns back to face Ezra. To put an end to his babbling.

"And I swear nothing happened!" Ezra says, out of breath. "Yes, Derek's gorgeous – I mean, don't get me wrong, have you seen the man? Of course you have," he laughs tensely, "but I would never cross that line. I promise we'll sort this out. Everything will make sense once we get to Zora's."

Jace faces Ezra head-on, and a wave of panic paralyzes him. The blood drains from his face as his mind races to make sense of the sight before him.

"I'm not the bad guy here. I promise." Ezra chuckles weakly, but the laughter dies in his throat as he realizes Jace isn't staring at him.

Jace is staring past him.

His piercing gray eyes are frozen, fixed on a figure standing behind Ezra.

Spooked and suddenly sensing they're not alone, Ezra spins around and comes face-to-face with their late-night visitor.

Jace is too stunned to move, but an eerie grin spreads across Ezra's face at the sight before them.

Pure glee fills Ezra's voice as he shouts, "I knew it!"

And before Jace can react, a thin flash of light cuts through the air, a blade that slits Ezra's throat open.

Ezra gasps, but only the gurgling sound of blood gushing from the gash in his neck can be heard as he drops to his knees and Sam Mader, the Brooklyn Butcher, snaps into focus.

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9 / LIKE THE NIGHT

Jace's knees buckle.

He sways as the room spins and collides with something hard, the edge of the doorway to the walk-in. He holds tight, clutching onto the cold metal as he feels his weight give and slide to the floor.

“No... No. No, this isn't real.” Jace shakes his head, eyes clamped tight. “You're dead,” he says, logically. A laugh escapes his clenched teeth, and he squeezes his eyes tighter. “You're not real.”

He tells himself that when he opens his eyes, the image of his dead father will have evaporated. He'll find Ezra alive, quietly watching him hallucinate and melt down in the cooler. It's the best Jace can hope for as he counts back from ten, fast and aloud this time. He does it twice, squeezing his eyes together before opening them to find Sam glaring down at him.

His vision blurs, and a heavy lump forms and tightens in his throat as Sam kneels, hovering over Ezra's body.

Sam rubs his thumb over the flat side of the knife in his hand, stroking it like a pet. It's a small, tarnished blade, no larger than a paring knife, making it easy to conceal itself and strike without warning. The spots of rust on the handle tell Jace that it's been with Sam for a long time. A small, deadly companion during his travels and time in hiding.

It looks like a part of him now, an extension of his arm.

Sam is dressed like the night. Under his dark clothes and black baseball cap, he looks the same despite the darkness and fine lines around his eyes. It's like looking into a mirror, twenty years into the future.

Jace guesses Sam's hair has started to thin – or maybe grayed or departed entirely by now. Jace has always taken pride in his full head of curls, so he'd love to know what's under the cap.

He'd also love to know where his father has been hiding all these years.

Aside from blood on his pants and boots and a thin ring of grit under his nails, he looks clean and put together. There's no odor or sign of homelessness. No tears or rips in his clothing. Nothing to indicate he's been living in the shadows like a hermit in deplorable conditions since staging his suicide in prison.

"You can't be here..." Jace shakes his head. The words are a soft cry on his lips. A plea that questions everything he knows to be true.

Among countless conspiracy theories buzzing in dark chat rooms and blogs, the notion that Sam faking his death to escape prison has never completely left the conversation. There have been whispers of sightings around the globe. There was even a video, claiming to have caught a glimpse of Sam in a hardware store, but it was later revealed to be doctored. A hacksaw was in his right hand, but Sam is left-handed. Any real true-crime buff would have spotted this right off and denounced the video.

All the hype, peppered with false hope, only led Jace to further discount any hearsay and wild theories about an escape. It seemed the stuff of movies; too fantastical to be true and too daring for his father to pull off without help. And, even in prison, where the guards make daily shady deals and push drugs for cash, who would be bold enough to help construct the death and release of the Brooklyn Butcher?

The New York City Medical Examiner's Office ruled it as a suicide by hanging, done quietly in Sam's cell around 2:15 a.m.

The guard on duty, Arthur Tate, is rumored to have handed Sam his belt to facilitate the hanging – a claim Alex made in Portland. A claim that spawned Alex's taste for revenge, pushing him to murder Arthur's son, Graham.

Now, staring into Sam's cold, gray eyes, Jace has to wonder if Arthur did more than hand Sam his belt. Did he open his cell and help smuggle Sam out with the morning laundry? Could it

have been a delivery truck with provisions he snuck into? Paying off the driver and riding out to freedom after the truck made its drop?

After news of Sam's "suicide" hit, it was only a few weeks before "doctored" medical records floated around the internet, claiming the injuries found at the time of the autopsy – assuming an actual autopsy was done – are inconsistent with those of an actual hanging. Odd fractures of the left and right thyroid cartilage and the left hyoid bone in the neck are rarely if ever seen in the type of suicidal hanging proposed, according to a forensic expert who wrote a book on the case, Dr. Rialand Bell – as much a fanatic as a genius, in Jace's opinion.

Jace was never sure what to make of the claims or "doctored" medical records. Much like the fan video of Sam magically appearing in a hardware store in Queens during the middle of the day, Jace knew it was best not to put much stock in it. It was best not to obsess over it.

Jace was much younger when Sam went to prison, still in grade school. He only has fading memories, his gut, and what his mother, Lorna, told him of the incident to rely on.

The piss-poor job the prison did of investigating the incident failed to bring forth any suspects who might have had a hand in Sam's death – or alleged escape, in hindsight.

All Jace knew back then was that he'd lost his father twice. Once, during Sam's shocking arrest – gone was the man Jace had looked up to. Then once more, when the prison called to inform his mother that Sam had been found dead, alone in his cell while in isolation.

He's always felt that his father no longer walks the earth, but, if he's honest, it's always gnawed at him that neither he nor his mother saw Sam's body for themselves before it was cremated. Had Jace been older, he might have had the wisdom to question it, but his mother had taken charge back then. Eager to put the past behind them during the whirlwind of the news and hordes of reporters staked outside her job at the hospital, Lorna was adamant she didn't want to see it.

She wanted to remember Sam as the colorful neighborhood butcher providing for his family. She said she couldn't bear to see him on a cold table with his neck snapped, so she quickly signed whatever papers the prison pushed at her and declined all interviews. She never went back to claim Sam's clothes or the possessions he was arrested with, including his wedding band. She told them she didn't want his ashes either because there would be no funeral.

"Flush 'em down the toilet, for all I care," she'd said before hanging up the phone.

Of course, the part she played in all this is still questionable. Whether it was a full-blown cover-up or just the warden keen to be rid of Sam Mader's black cloud, Lorna cooperated fully without question. Then, there are the rumors of her being complicit with the murders.

But who else could have given Sam the Midazolam and Halothane he used to sedate and subdue his victims before slaughtering them?

They never could link the empty vials found at the crime scene to Lorna or the hospital where she worked. She fled Brooklyn, with Jace under her wing, waitressing and cleaning rooms in a rundown motel until she went crazy and walked into traffic one day.

Crazy or not, she'd been better at covering her tracks up to the bitter end.

If she wasn't in on Sam's escape, she must have known he was alive somehow. She must have felt him, perhaps even feared he might come back for her one day.

Maybe she saw his reflection outside her window one aimless night, just as Jace had a few nights ago...

Jace had passed it off as his mind and reflection joining forces to play tricks on him. Now he knows just how wrong he'd been.

"You kept it open," Sam says. There's a hint of rasp and wonder in his voice as he looks about the basement in approval.

Jace slowly realizes that by “it” he means the deli. “Came this close to burning it down,” he says, flashing a small space between the tips of his fingers. “Hindsight’s a bitch.”

Sam smirks and coughs out a laugh, showing some of his teeth. It’s here that the age is showing. His teeth, once perfect, have gone jagged and dingy in color.

It must be impossible to do ordinary things like go to the dentist when you’re supposed to be dead, Jace thinks to himself. Even if Sam’s been living a quasi-normal life under an alias, it must get tricky.

Jace’s stare moves to Ezra and the trail of blood making its way toward the drain in the floor. He shudders, “I can’t believe he’s dead.”

“Did the world a favor.” Sam clears his throat loudly and swallows.

“And Aaron Gilbert? Was that an act of kindness?”

“Who?”

“Oh, right. You probably didn’t catch his name before you chopped him up and left his body outside the goddamn courthouse! Why, Dad? Why any of them?” Jace sputters and his face twists in surprise, stunned at how naturally the word dad slipped past his lips. Even after all this time, he still sees a glimmer of the man who raised him in the monster standing before him.

“Wait. Hold on. That?” Sam scoffs, as if insulted. “I had nothin’ to do with that shit show at the courthouse.”

“Right. Just like Bryan Felder, right? And Gordon Garvey?” Jace throws his arms wide and cries, “You’re telling me you didn’t kill them right in this FUCKING BASEMENT?”

“Jason, look now... I know you’re upset, son, you hear? I know.”

“‘Upset.’ You’re a murderer,” Jace seethes. “Do you even realize that? You’re sick, dad.”

“There are things in this world you don’t understand. But you will, son. With time. I promise, Jasey.”

“Don’t call me that. You don’t get to call me that anymore!”

There’s a ripple of pain across Sam’s face, but as quickly as it finds the surface of his weathered, brown skin, it’s gone, sinking and fading to black. “People should be on their knees thanking me for what I did!” He bites. There’s a rage in his voice that burns bright. “I did what no one else was willin’ to do!”

“And why Ezra?” Jace asks. “Why here? Like this?”

“He saw me.”

A fair answer.

And perhaps if Ezra had locked the door behind him, he’d still be alive. But the door chime had tricked Jace and Ezra into thinking someone had come and gone when Sam had merely let himself in and pretended to leave.

“It’s amazing what you’ve done with the old place.” Sam shifts gears, turning his attention to the exposed pipes in the ceiling. He looks at the row of shiny new prep tables and the shelving unit Jace had Yuri build a few months ago.

“You’ve been watching me.”

His lip twitches, hinting at a smile. “You’ve done good. You know this place is special.” He nods to himself, pride floating back up to the surface. “It belongs in the family.” He creeps closer and Jace flinches.

He attempts to scuttle out of his reach but his legs, void of circulation, have forgotten how to work. He stumbles, scraping his knees, and braces himself on the dirty, blood-splattered floor before making his way up to lean on one of the prep tables. “There’s no place for you here,” Jace huffs. “I’m doing things right. This place is better off without you and so am I.”

“Okay. Not the best start,” Sam admits. He throws his hands up. “I didn’t plan on this fuckhead bein’ here, just so you know.” He aims a finger down at Ezra and chuckles once.

Ezra stares back, eyes wide and lifeless.

“Interesting company you’re keeping these days. You got staff and everythang!” Sam whistles. “And that Caitlin’s a hoot!”

“Stay away from them.”

“Suuure, yeah.” He waves the thought away as though it has angry, dragonfly wings. “They’re an interesting bunch. And then there’s... Derek...” He strokes the blade in his hand.

It glows in the light, as if springing to life.

“If you go anywhere near him, I’ll kill you myself.”

Sam’s eyes light up with cold delight, pleased that he’s hit a vein. “Kill me? Your own father?” He squints as he laughs.

“I promise I won’t say anything – you were never here. Just don’t hurt Derek. I... I love him, Dad.”

Not exactly the coming-out speech Jace imagined as an awkward preteen, but perhaps better late than never.

Something bobs up to the surface. Something sinister projects across Sam’s face, like light and water reflecting on a wall. He appears to savor his next words, tasting every delicious syllable the way cartoon villains deliver a line before the plot twist and dramatic music kicks in.

“Shouldn’t you be at Zora’s by now?” He arches a taunting eyebrow. “You shouldn’t have kept him waiting, you know.”

Jace’s heart stops.

“What does that—” His mouth goes dry. “What did you do?”

A slow grin spreads across his face, showing every jagged tooth.

“What did you do?” Jace screams.

Sam points the knife over his shoulder, toward the stairs... and winks.

With the blood returned to his legs, Jace barrels up the stairs.

Before he knows it, he’s pushing past the front door of the deli and racing down the street. He cuts through half-crowded sidewalks and traffic, ignoring the blare of car horns, cursing, and screeching tires.

His breath and the rhythm of his sneakers beating the hard concrete are the only sounds.

Zora's is just a few city blocks away. Jace can't help but sense he's already too late.

• • •

Zora's neon sign glows and blurs in the distance like a beacon in the storm.

It begins to rain as Jace closes the distance on Zora's black, brick exterior that sits adjacent to a warehouse often rented out as event space and a row of brownstone-style apartments. Above Zora's are three stories of apartments with their lights half-on and a fire escape used mostly for plants by whoever lives on the top floor.

The rain pelts down on him, stinging his eyes as he stops for traffic. He's drenched in sweat, feeling the cool night air and weather bite through his gym clothes.

He's realized, two blocks back, that he left his phone at the deli. It's just as well. With the battery dead, there's no way to check on Derek or call the police on his way over.

His chest heaves as he curses, watching traffic speed and splash by until there's a break large enough to race through.

Finally, he breathes easier as he reaches the entrance – telling himself that despite how late and disheveled he is, it doesn't matter now. But his relief is short-lived as the door slams against the deadbolt.

Locked.

It's here that he notices the window shades are down, and Zora's usual roar is all but a whisper. He recognizes the faint sound of music, one of the playlists that rotate during dinner service, but there's no sound of laughter or forks and knives clattering against plates. No voices.

Something's wrong.

Jace steps back slowly with a fresh batch of nerves, then rounds the block to trek down the narrow alley behind Zora's.

In his haste, he's forgotten his keys but knows he'll find the back door open. The staff leaves it unlocked so they can pop out for smoke breaks and complain over the glow of their phones.

He grimaces and side-steps a puddle collecting at a row of trash bins spilling over with garbage.

His pulse quickens. There's no way to foresee or prepare himself for what he'll find inside. His father has a history of being unpredictable, demonstrated by his miraculous resurrection tonight. So, regardless of what awaits inside, the best he can do is use his knowledge of Zora's layout to quickly find Derek – hopefully in one piece – and call for help from the hostess stand's phone.

Oh, and that should be a riot...

Explaining the Brooklyn Butcher's alive and up to his old tricks won't make him sound crazy at all.

And that mess back at the deli?

"It was Sam Mader," he'll say. "Completely unrelated to the ongoing murder investigation at the courthouse, by the way."

Jace shakes his head, pushes out a breath, then quietly turns the handle at the back door.

It clicks and swings open with ease before he steps inside.

The lights throughout the kitchen are on, but there's no staff. The aroma of food suspends in the air like a fading memory, but there are no rumbling pots or food on the grill. Only empty stations, stacks of dirty glasses in the sink next to the commercial dishwasher, and the faint sound of voices leading to the dining room...

Jace presses on, turning the corner into the dining hall, and he is met by a small crowd, including—

"Miss Hattie...?"

Her eyes bulge at the sight of him. Hunched over her cane, she waves her free arm frantically and shrieks, "Surprise!"

There's a ripple in the crowd before the rest chime in, equally surprised to find Jace standing there, soaked.

There's Yuri, in a bowtie, pumping both fists in the air... and Janelle off to the side, sipping a cocktail.

There's Mr. Dandridge, who always pops into the deli on Thursdays... and Ben Hanson, a writer at NY Eats. Jace recognizes him from his column by his green, oversized eyeglasses and dark, bushy eyebrows.

Caitlin bounces with excitement as Syd Aldridge, Jace's best friend from Portland, steps into view with a wide grin. Jace hasn't seen Syd in close to a year, so a small cry escapes at the sight of him.

Jace sees a few more of his regulars, the ones who have supported him since day one, even through Cassex Deli's darkest days. Zora's staff make up a majority of the familiar faces in the crowd, although it takes a moment to recognize the servers out of uniform. The remaining faces smile and join in the chorus of hoots and greetings, but Jace can't put a name to them.

A buffet sits near the bar with platters of hot hors d'oeuvres and champagne glasses, and the music grows louder as the crowd parts to reveal Derek.

Jace chokes out a relieved sigh and rests a hand on his heart to keep it from bursting out of his chest.

Derek rushes forward, looking handsome in a navy and black suit Jace hasn't seen before. His chef's coat is nowhere in sight, and the same can be said for Marcella Hall.

Jace feels faint. He starts to blurt out the bloody details of what's occurred at the deli and yell for someone to call the police, but Derek's anxious smile stops him.

"Hey, you." There's a tremor in his smooth, baritone voice before he drags the tip of his tongue between his lips to wet them.

"Derek. Oh, my God. Hi! What is going on...?"

“Okay...” He gives a dry laugh. “So, this didn’t exactly go as planned.” He smiles anyway, tossing a glance over Jace’s shoulder as if he’s expecting someone else. For a moment, he looks just as bemused as Jace but shakes it off and turns his attention to Jace’s gym clothes. “You’re soaked!” He peels out of his jacket and swiftly hugs it over Jace’s shoulders, rubbing his arms through the sleeves for warmth.

“Derek. We need to talk,” Jace whispers, clenching his jaw. “And what is all this?” He looks about wildly, then a sinking feeling floods his stomach. “Wait. Shit. It’s my birthday, isn’t it?”

It wouldn’t be the first time he’s forgotten his own birthday. The majority of his twenties was spent flying under the radar with no family or friends to celebrate the occasion with, so the occasion’s paled into just another day.

Derek shakes his head softly and pulls Jace into his warm orbit. “No. Not yet,” he answers.

“Then... what—”

“It’s all for you.” Derek pulls back, clearing his throat. “And, babe? Look, I know you hate surprises,” he gives a slow grin. “But, you’re just gonna have to trust me on this one...”

Without another word, Derek takes Jace’s trembling hands into his own and drops to one knee.

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10 / COTTON CANDY

Just as quickly as the crowd erupts with squeals and excitement, they hush each other to hear what Derek will say.

“Y’all shut up! He ‘bout to do it!” Miss Hattie thumps her cane.

Derek wets his lips and takes a breath to steady himself. A tiny wobble shakes his confidence, but he finds his balance quickly with Jace holding tight to his hands.

“Jace...” He peers up at Jace with eyes already brimming with tears. “We’ve come a long way, babe.” He cracks a smile.

“From coast to coast, through ups and downs, having you by my side has been the greatest blessing on my life. You’re my everything. You’re the reason I breathe. You’re the reason I wake up every morning and try to be the best version of myself that I can be. And I’m in awe of the man that you are! You inspire me, you challenge me, and you’ve completely turned my world upside-down!”

The crowd chuckles.

“And I love you for it. I love every part of you...”

The light and the dark is what he means.

“I know it’s been a crazy few years, and... I don’t know what the future holds,” he admits, “I also don’t know if Bon Appétit will ever really write a feature on me.”

Everyone laughs and Jace manages a dull chuckle, his mind whirling.

“But I do know that my world is better with you in it. I do know that you’re my person, Jace. And now I’m hoping you’ll become my husband...” He takes a deep breath and releases Jace’s hands to reach for a ring box, tucked away in his back pocket. “Jace Lannister... Will you marry me?”

Jace tastes a tear at the corner of his mouth and cries out, “Yes! Yes, Derek, I’ll marry you! Yes!” He cries, overcome

with emotion and the events of the night.

Derek slides the ring onto his finger and stands, beaming. He takes Jace's face in his hands and kisses him hard on the lips.

Charlie pops a bottle behind the bar as the crowd cheers and rushes in to swallow them in hugs and congratulations.

Caitlin's the first to reach Jace with an embrace that smells like strawberries and the beach. "I can't wait to plan the wedding!" She kisses his cheek. It's hard to tell if she's joking.

Derek is whisked away by two of his line cooks who have brought him a shot, and in the shuffle, Jace bumps into Ben Hanson, who shakes his hand firmly and leans in to speak over the chatter.

"Congratulations. Derek's told me all about you. Nice to put a face with the name—"

"BITCH!" It's Syd with his arms wide and stardust in his eyes. He cuts in with a bone-crushing hug, then slings his purple locks from his eyes. "I am SO happy for you guys," he coos. "And so glad this is done. Keepin' tonight quiet has been KILLING ME!"

Jace belly-laughs for the first time all evening. "Syd. Jesus. You have no idea how fucking glad I am to see you. Also?" He circles a finger down Syd's lengthy dreadlocks. "Love the purple."

"Right?!" He shrugs a shoulder.

Jace waves to one of his customers and gives more hugs before turning back to grab Syd's elbow. "Hey," he maintains his smile but mutters, "Tonight's been completely insane. You won't believe— Angel! Hi!"

Syd's boyfriend, Angel, interrupts. He jumps out from behind Syd and shouts, "Felicidades!" The hint of a dimple accents his lopsided grin. He's been told he looks like a young Mario Lopez, but that's debatable. "Man, you should've seen your face," he smiles and strokes his beard. "I thought you were gonna faint!"

“We both did. And what’s the sitch with this outfit? What’s happening here?” Syd asks, genuinely concerned. He leans against Angel, wrapping an arm around his waist, and scowls.

They’re both dressed in sleek cocktail attire. Syd, in a designer purple suit that stops short to show off his studded loafers, and Angel, in tight trousers and a dark merlot blazer that looks a size too small for his biceps. One of Syd’s broaches glitters on his lapel.

“It’s my fault. I was supposed to be here earlier for, well...” He sees why Derek made such a fuss about Marcella now. It was his way of getting Jace to dress up. “It’s been a crazy night.”

“You okay, babe?” Syd asks slowly. He must sense something’s off, the way only a close friend can, at a glance. He recognizes the charged look in Jace’s eyes. The mania that’s seeping through Jace’s pageant smile.

Syd’s one of a chosen few privy to Jace’s struggles and mental history. But he also knows better than to ask if Jace has been taking his meds – especially on tonight of all nights.

Jace starts to suggest they go down to the wine cellar where it’s quiet to “catch up”... to unload the horrific news of what’s happened at the deli. Ezra’s name won’t be familiar to Syd – unless they met by chance – but the mention of Jace’s father will mean something. Syd’s seen firsthand the damage his father’s shadow has caused.

But seeing Syd laugh and cuddle closer to Angel makes him second-guess the idea. It’s been a long time since they’ve all been together for what ought to be a happy occasion.

“Yeah. It’s nothing,” Jace says as Ezra’s red, slit throat flashes before his eyes in a blink.

“You sure?”

“Nothing for you to worry about right now. Promise.” Jace pushes out a weak smile.

It occurs to him that telling Syd about his father would lighten the burden, but it would also make Syd instantly involved in what’s happened.

Best to keep him out of it at this point, he decides.

Best to protect the ones he loves and let the police handle it.

There's a tap on his shoulder and Jace turns to accept a hug from Mr. Dandridge, who proudly tells Jace he's known about the engagement for weeks.

"Everyone knew but me, huh?" Jace laughs along merrily, perhaps laying it on a bit too thick.

"Derek thought of everything," Angel says, plucking a deviled egg from one of the trays circulating.

Derek's given his staff the night off but has hired a small team to serve refreshments that no doubt came from the kitchen.

Jace sees another tray with small cups of lobster gumbo going fast. His eyes follow and land on the front hostess stand where the phone sits beside a stack of menus.

"It's so good to see you," Syd's voice cuts in.

Jace blinks and sputters, "How long have you guys been here – in New York? How long are you staying?"

"We got in yesterday. We fly back tomorrow night though." Syd pouts and locks eyes with a tray of veggie skewers floating by. "There's this conference in Seattle for non-profits I signed up for back in January. It's all about development and fundraising..." He drops his shoulders and stops himself from babbling. "I'll tell you more later. Tonight's about you. And Derek."

"Ethel was supposed to be here," Angel says grimly. "She said to tell you 'congrats' and she loves you guys. Big hugs and kisses."

Jace can picture Ethel's warm, protective smile all the way from Portland. She's perhaps the closest thing to a mother he's known outside of Lorna, who forfeited her maternal duties when she walked in front of a freightliner.

Ethel's a mother to the lost souls who wander into her neighborhood bar on Fridays with its pink awning and five-dollar Jägerbombs.

The bar once belonged to her son, Calvin, who bought it in the early '90s before gentrification ate its way through Portland's historic Black neighborhoods. Back then, it was called Nationz, with a Z, because Calvin thought the Z made it sound edgy. After Calvin passed from colon cancer she remodeled and renamed the place Ethel's, and now it's a staple in Portland's "gayborhood".

"I would have loved to see her," Jace mumbles. Knowing she's missing makes the night feel different somehow.

Angel releases a quick sigh and removes his jacket. "She's dealin' with some stuff at the bar."

It's odd seeing him in a shirt, Jace realizes. He's used to seeing Angel run around Ethel's, sweaty and shirtless, balancing trays of sugary neon cocktails and beer. "Everything okay?" He asks.

Syd sends Angel a sharp look and says, "Just a little trouble with the books. Nothin' that tough old broad can't sort out."

Angel beams, "We're organizing a fundraiser!"

"She's having money trouble?"

Syd shoots daggers at Angel. "Nothing to be alarmed about though, right, baby?"

"Right!" Angel stuffs his mouth with a meatball. Best if he just stands there and looks pretty.

"Let's talk about anything else," Syd says. "Like this rock!" He scoops up Jace's hand. "I knew he'd pick this one."

"You helped him with the ring?" Jace angles his hand, watching the stones sparkle. He steals another glance at the phone, his other hand twitching by his side. He feels faint suddenly, but he pushes his weight onto his heels, standing tall.

"He asked me for help."

"Adorable."

"Right?" Syd melts. "And you know your boy looked out. I told him you need a carat for every year of dating!" He laughs

and nudges Angel. “Baby, look at this. Look. It’s gorgeous, right?”

Angel leans in and gawks at the rows of black diamonds wrapping around the platinum band. “It’s, uh…” He shakes his head lightly and lands on, “It’s nice.” He nods and grins to drive the point home. Inside, he’s probably quietly wondering how many tables he’ll need to flip to afford anything close for Syd.

“It’s stunning, right? Princess cut’s my favorite. Derek really went all out. No wonder Jace said yes.” He laughs and sneaks Jace a look that says, “See what I did there?”

Jace tilts his head as if to say, “Very subtle.”

“I can’t wait for the wedding,” Syd says.

“Yeah. Guess we gotta plan a whole wedding now, huh?” Jace cracks, aiming a finger-gun to his head.

He’s met with blank stares.

“I, uhm, need to make a call actually.” He points in the direction of the phone, thankful for the break in conversation. “Real quick. I’ll be right back.”

“Oh. Okay!” Syd nods. His smile makes a slow return to his face. “Just no more work after this. Tonight, we party, damn it!”

Jace gives a pained smile as he excuses himself, rushing for the phone at the hostess stand. He dials 911 and pushes out a slow breath as his fingers twist around the phone cord.

A woman’s voice answers, tired and husky. She asks what his emergency is and before Jace can help himself his voice breaks and he pours out the entire saga of Sam cutting Ezra’s throat in the basement of the deli.

He doesn’t divulge his name when she asks, he just gives the address of the deli and instructions to hurry.

“Send an ambulance and as many police cars as you can to search the area. Send a helicopter! He might be on foot. He can’t have gotten far,” Jace hisses into the phone.

“Can you describe to me what he looks like, sir?” She asks dully, seemingly annoyed Jace has refused to identify himself. Her fingernails type in the background with rapid speed.

“What he looks like? Yes! That’s... easy!” Jace scoffs. “It’s Sam Mader, The Brooklyn Butcher. The Sam Mader! I’m sure the FBI has a photo of him on file. You can even Google him, for a photo. But that’s him. He’s the one you’re looking for.”

The typing stops and Jace feels a wave of nausea return. It hits hard, twisting and tipping his stomach on its side as it travels through his body. He holds tight to the edge of the hostess stand, breathing heavy through his nose. Trying not to get sick.

“Sir...” The line goes quiet before she asks, “I’m sorry, did you say ‘The Brooklyn Butcher?’” Her lips break apart on the line in a sharp tsk and her tone shifts. “Sir, this line is for emergencies only – and it’s a bit early for Halloween, don’t cha think?”

“No! No.” Jace squeezes the phone in his hand and whispers, “Listen. This isn’t a fucking prank. I know everyone thinks he hung himself, but I saw him! I saw the whole fucking thing! He’s alive—”

“Sir, I’m going to ask you not use that language with me, mmm-kay?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Who’s with you, sir? In the background. Who’s that laughing?”

Jace turns to see Mr. Dandridge laughing with Miss Hattie at the bar.

He cups the receiver with his hand, but he’s sure the operator must hear the music over the speakers. The sounds of life, champagne bottles popping, and the party behind him.

“Sir, if this is not a real medical emergency – if you are not in immediate need of fire, medical or a police dispatch, I’m going to end the call. Mmm-kay?”

“Wait! I know how this sounds, but I’m not crazy.” He can’t help but wince at this, hearing how crazy he sounds. “The

Brooklyn Butcher is back and he's killed again. Send someone to Cassex Deli. Please! You'll see. There's a dead body in the basement."

"Just one?" She asks pointedly. "You don't want to report the others?"

"What?"

She pulls the mic on her headset closer, and what comes next is in a hushed tone. "A lot of good people died there for no good reason. Mmm-kay? Including my cousin's husband who was an EMT and a father to four girls – who miss their daddy every day – so I don't find this particularly funny or amusing." Her voice shakes before it spikes and comes down to earth.

"This line is for emergency calls only. Prank calls are punishable by misdemeanor or felony charges and fines, and I need to keep this line open for real emergencies," she says in her normal voice, loud enough for anyone nearby to hear. "I advise you not to call back unless you have a real emergency, sir."

There's a click, then nothing.

Jace is shocked but realizes he should have seen this coming.

Who would believe the crackpot theories about Sam faking his death are actually true?

He can go to the police station in person and report Sam, but they'll share the 911 dispatcher's disbelief. They'll probably ask, "Why would he resurface now after all these years?"

A question Jace wishes he knew the answer to.

In a daze, Jace drifts back to where Syd and Angel are chatting.

Jace chews his bottom lip, half-listening to the conversation, and flinches as a pair of strong hands seizes his shoulders from behind.

"Mind if I borrow my handsome fiancé?"

It's Derek, with whiskey on his breath and a twinkle in his amber-brown eyes that makes Jace's heart ache.

“Just bring him back when you’re done. We’re still gagging over this ring.”

He smiles, proud, and slugs Syd’s shoulder playfully before lulling Jace away by the hand.

“Sooo... Marcella Hall, huh?” Jace says once they’re alone. Once he’s found his voice again. It comes out dry and cracked, fractured and bruised by the dismal 911 call.

Derek winks. “Had to think of something. Or you’d still be at work right now.”

He’s not wrong. Jace likes squeezing in a few hours of work once everyone’s left. There’s something about the stillness of the deli after-hours he finds comforting. Listening to the old building creak as it settles in for the night puts an odd little smile on his face. But that smile had been stripped clean tonight by Ezra and Sam. Replaced with a horrific scream that caught and tangled itself on the sharp edges of his teeth.

As Ella Fitzgerald declares, “At last!” Derek and Jace find a quiet booth close to the kitchen, out of earshot from guests mingling and making quick work of the hors d’oeuvres.

“Sorry I was late to my own engagement,” Jace muses as they sit. He removes Derek’s jacket and rolls his shoulders. “And sorry about the outfit. I was at the gym earlier. As you can see.”

“Doesn’t matter.” He reaches for Jace’s hands from across the table and squeezes them. “You’re here now, Mr. Brooks.”

Jace would normally have a crack about Derek assuming he’ll take his last name, but he falls silent. He’s too consumed with how to tell Derek why he was late.

“Did you walk here?” Derek suddenly thinks to ask.

Jace shrugs. “No big deal.”

“No, it is a big deal.” His jaw tightens, agitated. “Ezra was supposed to text, right before he drove you over. That’s why we didn’t know you were here and the whole surprise moment got jacked up.” He deflates and leans back into the booth with a thud. “I wanted tonight to be perfect for you, babe.” His face

softens as he rubs Jace's knuckles, his thumb passing over the band of diamonds weighing Jace's finger. "I know you said you don't have a lot of happy memories growin' up... You didn't get to go to prom... You didn't get to enjoy all those big moments everyone sort of just takes for granted, you know? I remember you tellin' me that." He taps his temple with a finger to show he'd been listening and filed the information away. "So, I wanted this moment to be one of the best nights of your life."

Derek smiles brilliantly and Jace's heart sinks into a dark abyss, realizing he can't tell Derek the bloody details of what's transpired at the deli.

At least, not this second.

Derek must have been planning this night for months – and it's his night too, Jace reminds himself. Gathering the courage to propose can't be an easy feat, especially with an audience of his employees and peers.

What if Jace had said no?

The possibility, however dim, must have flashed across Derek's mind.

Jace decides he should let him enjoy the night and fruits of his labor. He should allow Derek his happiness – at least for one night. Before shattering their world with more news of death and his father – both of which seem to have no end.

He'll have to sneak away though, back to the deli to try summoning the police again. This time with evidence.

Perhaps they'll believe him when they trace the call and see he's calling from inside the deli – and not blocks away. And maybe he'll get someone on the line next time who doesn't have a direct family tie to The Butcher.

"Where the hell is he, anyway?" Derek asks.

"Who?"

"Ezra."

Jace thinks fast. "He's not coming."

True...

There's no chance of Ezra walking through the door. Sam has seen to that.

Derek's eyebrows shoot up, exasperated. "Not coming?"

"Something about a sore throat."

Also, sort of... true?

Slit throat. Sore throat.

It's a stretch, but Derek seems to buy it.

His broad shoulders sink like mountains crumbling. "He had such a big hand in planning tonight." He blinks. "How could he not be here?"

"He helped plan tonight?" Guilt washes over Jace, heavy and sticky.

"Yeah." Derek shakes his head, at a loss. "The menu, the guest list. Getting invitations out... Pickin' up Syd and Angel from the airport. You know you're really hard to surprise, by the way." He squints one eye. "But this is one time I got you. You had no clue, did you?"

"No!" Jace balks. "Totally... clueless..."

He thinks back to the text he'd seen by mistake.

Saw Jace earlier.

He doesn't suspect a thing.

Clueless lol

"You got me good," Jace finishes his thought as his breath turns shallow. He scratches at a tightness in his chest. His gaze trails off and he's left the building, replaying the last few weeks in his mind, frame by frame. He thinks about the last thing Ezra said to him.

"Babe." Derek breaks the trance, bringing Jace back to the warmth of their private booth at Zora's. "You okay?"

“Yeah! Fine. I just...” Jace gently rubs his forehead, feeling a headache announce itself. “I just wish Ethel was here to see this,” he says, thinking fast.

Derek leans back in with a heavy sigh. “I guess Syd told you? About the bank?”

“Not... entirely. What the hell’s goin’ on?” He’s happy for the change in subject. Happy that Derek hasn’t thought to call Ezra yet.

“He says she got sick, was in the hospital on a ventilator and everything. It was bad.”

“How did I not know this?”

“She didn’t want people to know. She told Angel to tell everyone she was visiting her sister in Spokane.”

“So, it’s medical bills.”

“That, and she took out another loan, trying to keep the bar afloat after everything shut down. Even with everything reopened, she’s upside-down. The bank could take the bar.”

Jace huffs, “We should help her. What about that, uhm, Restaurant Revitalization Fund program... thing?” He forgets what it’s called, but he’d looked into it himself for the deli when the city shut down. “It’s a bar, but she sells food. She could qualify, right?” Or perhaps it’s too late. “She needs someone to research that kind of stuff for her! I’m gonna call her tomorrow. And fuss her out for not telling me she was sick. Heffer.”

“See?” Derek smirks and leans in for a kiss. “That’s why I’m marrying this man!” He shouts over a shoulder. “You’re so sweet, babe.”

Jace meets him halfway and their lips collide. He feels anything but sweet though.

He wonders if Derek would still be happy he proposed if he knew Ezra is dead and bleeding out on Jace’s basement floor. If he knew Jace had been there to witness it.

The optics are already not in his favor. How is he going to explain partying the night away with friends, having left a

dead body at his place of business? Sure, there will be a record of him calling 911, but he has to try again – and hope someone answers who might believe him.

Jace could roll the dice and wait until morning... Go in, as usual, open up and “stumble” on the body... But the thought of leaving Ezra until morning makes his stomach churn again.

“We’ll figure out what to do in the morning,” Derek says.

It takes Jace a second to realize he means Ethel’s dilemma and not Ezra’s body that’s likely starting to stiffen with rigor mortis.

“Tonight, we celebrate! Come dance with me.”

When they return to their guests, the music shifts from cocktail hour jazz to hip-hop pulsing over the speakers in the ceiling. Charlie pushes a gin and tonic into Jace’s hand and, somehow, Angel has found his way behind the bar to make a round of his infamous “unicorn shots.”

Where the hell did he find the edible glitter to make them?

It’s the beginning of the end.

Jace blinks and two hours shoot by in a blur. The last thing he remembers is Derek’s face, smiling at him from across the room as he downs one of Angel’s glittery concoctions.

Jace is the happiest and the most devastated he’s ever been.

He raises the shot glass to his lips, swallows, and razor-sharp swirls of purple and pink slip down his throat, sweet like cotton candy.

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11 / DOPPELGÄNGER

Morning breaks, ripping Jace out of his sleep. Its rays reach through the blinds like warm fingers casting golden shadows on Jace and Derek's tangled limbs.

Jace blinks and awakens from the sweetest dream. He dreamt Derek proposed to him in a room full of their friends. There was music and dancing, and all was well with the world.

He's never witnessed a proposal before last night, so all he's had to go on are the surprised gasps and crocodile tears from white women in the romcoms Derek makes him watch. But now, he gets it. Now he knows what it feels like to be loved so much that someone declares (with witnesses!) that they want to spend the rest of their days with you.

A man like Derek can have anyone he wants, but he's chosen Jace to marry. To build a life with. A normal, beautiful life.

A new sensation, the weight of his ring finger, steals his attention, confirming last night wasn't a dream. He admires the stacked band of black diamonds, watching his reflection and the light bounce off their polished edges. He can't guess what small fortune Derek has paid, so he makes a mental note to coax this information out of Syd later.

That shouldn't be hard.

He spins the ring around his finger, stopping at the sight of dried blood under the thick platinum band. And just like that, the image of Ezra gasping and choking on his own blood returns.

He sees his father swinging the knife.

He feels the rain beating down on him as he runs down the street.

Jace flips his hands over to find small flecks of dried blood peppering his skin in the daylight. It must have happened in the basement.

If Derek noticed during his proposal, he didn't think much of it. Jace is a butcher, after all. He's up to his elbows in blood and organs all day when he's not upstairs, behind the counter.

Jace groans. He rubs the top of his head and sits up in their bed that's full of too many pillows. Trying to recall the hazy events that followed Derek's proposal.

He must have been in shock last night, he realizes now. The shock of witnessing a murder mixed with the shock of a public proposal was all too much. He wasn't fully himself, not fully in his own body. Instead, he drifted through the evening as if it were a dream.

He remembers pitching a clever excuse to swing by the deli on the way home, but Derek shot down the idea. Instead, they went straight home to "continue the celebration," as Derek put it, with a wink, when they said goodnight to Syd and Angel. Jace was halfway through the door when Derek started tearing at his clothes and kissing his neck. He remembers stumbling into the softness of their bed, his body thankful for the familiar coolness of their sheets. Derek excused himself to go to the bathroom and doubled back to nudge Jace awake, but alcohol and fatigue of the day triumphed over Derek's libido.

Jace passed out. And now morning has arrived with Derek snoring softly into his shoulder.

Jace watches... granting him these last few minutes of calm before he turns their world upside-down again.

He needs to get to the shop. He needs to deal with the mess his father has left behind. A mess, thick and sticky like black tar, that's followed and stuck to Jace for most of his life. Always there. Always threatening to pull him under.

Carefully, Jace untangles himself from Derek and plants his feet on the floor. He tiptoes to their shared closet and grabs the first thing in sight that looks clean.

Camo joggers, a black Rolling Stones t-shirt, and Derek's new red Nikes. Having a boyfriend – well, fiancé – with the same shoe size has its perks. Jace despises shopping, and malls, and crowded shopping malls, but Derek loves all those things, so

his shoe collection more than doubled when they moved in together.

“Babe?” It’s Derek.

He’s always been a light sleeper.

“I’m runnin’ out real quick.”

Jace makes his way for the door as Derek rubs at the sleep crusting around his eyes.

“You goin’ for a jog?”

It’s actually a perfect excuse for sneaking out this early. Far better than anything Jace can conjure up in the moment through his champagne headache. But he suppresses a sigh and answers with a ragged, “No. I’m swinging by the shop.”

God, please don’t let him ask why.

“Why? I thought you were takin’ the day off.”

“I left a mess in the basement last night. I wanna get to it before Yuri comes in.”

Very true.

Thankfully, he’s too tired to argue. “Don’t stay long,” he says through a yawn. “We’re doin’ brunch with Syd and Angel before they fly out.” He pinches the bridge of his nose, wipes a few crumbs of sleep from his eyes, and rolls over, giving Jace a clear view of his backside.

Jace sinks his teeth into his bottom lip at the sight of it.

Stay focused...

Deal with the dead body in the basement.

Then, brunch with friends.

Then, sex.

It’s a solid plan. But he knows all bets are off once he notifies the police. It’ll be a miracle if he doesn’t end up spending the day at the police station, detained for questioning.

It feels wildly unfair to Derek, who must have presumed he was signing up for a normal relationship when they first

started dating. He must have imagined it would all lead to a cute house in suburbia with kids, competitive bake sales, and PTA meetings where they'd be the only gay, Black couple in the room. He couldn't have foreseen or factored in how death has a way of following Jace. He didn't know he was dating the son of a monster. And now, when he's accepted Jace for who he is and visions of a happily-ever-after are in reach, Jace is about to rip the rug from under him once again.

Imagining Derek's reaction to news of his father's return makes him queasy.

It felt like they'd finally turned a corner, left the bloodshed in Portland behind, and were headed for a normal, happy life together. But, now he can't help but wonder if news of Ezra's murder will be the straw that breaks them.

Derek is the best thing that's ever happened to Jace, and he can't lose him. Not to the weight of the body count piling up around them... and not at the hands of his father.

He spins the ring around his finger with a dim frown and gives Derek a final look over his shoulder as he leaves.

• • •

He's relieved to find the front door of the deli locked.

Jace ran out in a panic last night and never had a chance to return, but at least his murderous father had the courtesy to lock up on his way out and arm the security system. It's the same archaic system that's been in the deli for years.

He guesses Sam didn't want the place to be looted or to be walked in on.

Heading straight for the basement stairs, Jace can only wonder what Sam got up to once left to his own devices... after scaring Jace into leaving to check on Derek.

Did he take Ezra's teeth and fingernails? Did he shave Ezra bald, robbing him of his identity, the way he did his other nineteen victims?

Does Ezra's naked, stripped-down corpse await him in the dark? Or has his father left another nasty surprise?

Jace flips the switch at the top of the stairs and grips the wood railing as he descends. The varnish on the railing has long faded and chipped away, leaving the wood coarse and weathered, threatening to splinter into the pads of his hands. It's not until he reaches the bottom that he lets go and his lungs deflate with a sigh.

There, in the cool stillness of the basement, he finds precisely what he's dreaded the most.

Nothing.

There's no sign of Ezra or his father.

Ezra's body is gone, and the concrete floor is clean and bone-dry, as if everything Jace recalls about the night before never happened. As if it were all an illusion.

There's no blood. Not even the faintest suggestion of bleach in the air or foul play circling the drain in the floor.

Jace does find his phone on one of the prep tables where he left it.

Still dead.

"Fuck."

He walks the basement, silently unraveling in circles, in search of evidence he might be overlooking. But everything looks in order. Even the cooler is how he left it, nearly finished, with only one more bin to sort and label.

If this were a horror movie, he might have found Ezra in the walk-in, dangling on a meat hook with his tongue hanging out of his head. But thankfully, Sam isn't one for such dramatics.

In his office, he plugs in his phone to charge – using a different outlet this time – and checks the security footage from the camera; the shop's only camera that covers the entire main floor and register. But even before pressing play, he knows the last twenty-four hours have been deleted.

It's what he would have done.

He's also certain that if any street cameras caught Sam entering the deli last night, they only caught a glimpse of him in disguise. Head down, hiding under his baseball cap and dark clothes, he was a mere shadow slipping in and out of the dark that could have been anyone in grainy camera footage.

Sam knows how to navigate the world in plain sight. He hasn't been able to stay invisible this long by being sloppy. And he certainly wouldn't make any careless mistakes around the deli, of all places.

Also, should a stray camera pick up an angle of his face, he knows no one is actively looking for the Brooklyn Butcher. The average person would sooner pass it off as an eerie resemblance.

"A doppelgänger with an unfortunate likeness to that mad butcher," is what they'd say.

And fingerprints?

Aside from Sam's pet knife, Jace can't recall Sam touching anything. He'd know better.

Any tangible sign of Sam Mader has left the building, along with Ezra's body.

If Jace hadn't seen his father for himself, he'd have no reason to believe he's alive.

If Jace hadn't seen Ezra bleeding out, he'd have no reason to believe he's dead.

With a new level of angst, Jace pushes back from the CCTV monitor, slumps in his chair, and drums his fingers on his cluttered desk, pondering over his new dilemma. He'd entered, ready to face the horrors of last night and notify the police, but Sam and Ezra are now both out of the equation.

This is also problematic since this is how he planned to tell Derek about Ezra. Opening the shop and "finding" Ezra was a plausible course of events and a better option than ruining Derek's proposal last night.

So much for that.

He could call 911 again and explain what he's witnessed, but why should they believe him with no signs of foul play and a dead man as a suspect?

Jace brings his thumb to his lips, biting at the nail haphazardly.

The removal of Ezra's body is also worrying...

It feels less like a favor and more like leverage. Like something that will come back to bite him in the ass if he doesn't navigate the next few hours carefully.

He sits for a moment with the idea of calling Denise. He tenses, looking at it from all angles, before retrieving her business card from the top drawer of his desk.

He's not in love with the idea of involving Denise, but at least he knows she'll listen to him. The police might file Jace's phone call as another prank, but Denise has already shown interest in Jace and the deli. She's already invested and has the resources it takes to locate his father if he can convince her Sam is alive.

He dials from the deli's landline and holds the receiver to his ear, listening to the line crackle and ring. Eventually, her voicemail clicks over and Jace does his best to calm the swell in his voice.

"Detective Bradshaw, hi. This is Jace Lannister from Cassex Deli. Please call me back at your earliest convenience."

He leaves his number and hangs up, dismayed she didn't answer but pleased with the brief message he's left. It was wise of him to keep it vague with no specifics about his father or Ezra. The last thing he needs is to incriminate himself on a recording.

When she calls back, he'll ask to meet and explain everything in person, he decides.

In the meantime, all that's left is to tell Derek and pray he doesn't call off the wedding.

Jace spends the next few minutes tidying up his desk and opening envelopes of mail Caitlin's left for him. Anything to bide the time while his phone charges.

When it finally lights up with enough charge, half a dozen notifications flood the screen. Most are from Derek and Ezra from the night before, asking where the hell he is. There are five missed calls, an Apple news alert, and a notification with his horoscope – “You’re reaching a turning point; it’s time to finish off any work that’s been left undone, once and for all,” it warns. There’s a final text from Ezra asking if Jace is en route, and the most recent text is from an unknown number, sent just before midnight.

It doesn’t take long to decipher the nefarious series of emojis...

A red X.

A pig.

A knife.

Followed by a photo of Derek, an old promo shot from when he was a guest judge on “Kitchen Wars”, probably taken from a Google search.

It’s a message from his father, and it’s a clear one.

NO COPS... OR DEREK DIES.

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12 / UNDONE

“Bad things happen when I fly,” Angel says with a mouthful of French toast. “Watch.”

“He gets a little anxious. He’s had bad luck with airplanes,” Syd explains.

“Bad luck.” He laughs, giving Jace and Derek a glimpse of his chewed food. “First time I ever flew was to see my cousin in Miami. Plane fell outta the damn sky!” His hand does a nosedive toward his stack of bourbon French toast.

“The airplane stalled.” Syd can recite the story by heart but cuts to the end. “Luckily, they were at a high enough altitude for the pilot to correct it. It happens.”

“Does it?” Jace winces.

“Estoy maldito. I’m cursed,” Angel swears. He glances at the rowdy table next to them, distracted by their screaming toddler. It’s boggling how something so small can be so loud. “Even on the way here, our connectin’ flight was delayed.”

“Some kind of mechanical... issue.” Syd shrugs and runs his tongue over his teeth. He finally removes his oversized sunglasses, apparently not the only one nursing a hangover. “We had to wait for another plane. But we got here just fine,” he reminds Angel, petting his knee under the table. “And we’ll get home just fine, too.”

“Can you sleep on planes?” Jace asks. “I can never sleep on planes.”

Angel shakes his head and swallows. “Nope.”

“Which is why we’re getting sloshed on mimosas, so he can sleep on the ride home,” Syd teases. He laughs along with everyone but points to their half-empty pitcher the moment their server walks by.

Karma is bursting at capacity with a line forming outside. Securing a table without an hour-wait is near impossible.

Unless you happened to sit on a food panel with its head chef, Korey Datuimam, at the 2017 Calabaras Food & Wine Festival, where you became fast friends because you were the only people of color on your panel...

Such was the case, as Derek and his party were promptly seated upon arrival, Korey waving and aiming a peace sign at Derek from the kitchen. Barely tall enough to see over the line of hot plates going out, Korey's super-sized smile and shaggy, black bob were the only other hint of her among the steam and bustle in the galley.

"When we get back, we're swingin' by Ethel's, and then I have to unpack and repack for Seattle." Syd downs his mimosa, eyeing the pulp stranded at the bottom of his flute. "But don't worry. As soon as I get back, I'm all yours to help with wedding planning."

Aside from Angel's fear of flying, this has been all anyone wants to talk about all morning: the wedding. Which is lucky for Jace because the initial thought of sitting through brunch and not telling the people closest to him about his father's horrific return seemed impossible. He didn't know how he'd get through it without blurting out every gory detail in tears.

But Sam's text has swayed him to keep his mouth shut.

If he's threatening to kill Derek, he won't blink at harming Syd and Angel. They're nothing to him, just as Ezra was no more than an inconvenient blood bag in his way. A loose string to tie up.

When it comes to the topic of Sam, this isn't the first time he's had to hold his tongue. Growing up in the aftermath of one of America's most gruesome crime stories, Jace grew accustomed to harboring secrets about his father. Nothing good ever came of talking about Sam in school or as he meandered his way through adulthood. He's learned the hard way not to speak his father's name. And given his father's warning, the consequences are more dire than ever. So, if keeping his mouth shut means keeping Derek and the people he cares about safe, then that's what he'll do.

For now.

Albeit a threat, the fact that his father was able to assemble such a well-composed text message, complete with emojis, is mildly impressive. Then again, what choice did Sam have?

Leave a voicemail?

Forensic voice analysts at the FBI would eat that up. Sam must know this. So, he must have learned to adapt to the times; learning to text and doing what he must to leave as small of a footprint as possible.

Catching Sam is going to be a marathon, not a sprint. There will come a time for action, but this isn't the time to be impulsive or risk a misstep. Jace has to be strategic. He has to be even more cunning than Sam, who has managed to evade being discovered and recaptured for all these years.

There has to be a way to stop him...

Derek suddenly laughs at something Syd says, nearly choking on his drink.

“True story!” Syd says. “Thirty-two thousand dollars for a wedding dress and the whole thing went up in flames! Bitch had second-degree burns. Be glad neither of you are wearin’ gowns. I mean, unless?” He shrugs.

“No,” Jace is quick to answer. “No wedding dresses. Just classic tuxedos.”

“Yeah?” Derek gives him a mildly surprised look. “I was thinkin’ more like coordinating suits. We don’t have to be, like, matchy-matchy, right?”

“You don’t want to match?”

“I was just thinkin’, like, what if I’m in a navy or eggplant suit and you’re in the same colors, but it’s flipped or somethin’.”

Jace stares at him incredulously. “Eggplant?”

“Oh, shit. It has begun!” Syd drums his fists on the table. “My money’s on Jace goin’ bridezilla first. Easy money. No offense, babe.”

Jace half-shrugs.

“Derek’s the chef though,” Angel says. “If the food ain’t perfect, he’s gonna lose his shit. Watch.”

“Baby, no. Why would they pay a caterer when he can do it himself?” Syd cuts his eyes and purses his lips. “That’s one less thing on their list. You know how much money they’ll save on food alone?” He waves a hand in Derek’s direction, then collects the bracelets on his arm to form a neat stack.

“I was actually thinkin’ about that.” Derek turns back to Jace, eyes wide and hopeful. “What if we did a destination wedding? We’d be stuck with whatever prix fixe menu they offer,” he frowns on one side, “but how dope would it be to get married in Hawaii or Bali?”

“Bali in Indonesia? That Bali?”

“You wanna get married here? In Brooklyn?”

It’s a loaded question. One that presumes Jace wouldn’t want to be married in the city he once fled.

“Well, why not?” Jace offers a laugh but is met with blank stares.

The toddler at the next table lets out a loud stream of gibberish, screaming until his mother bends and gives him a bite of her frittata.

“Looks like we have some things to figure out.” Derek gives Jace a playful nudge with his shoulder and forces a smile. It’s the same half-hearted, diplomatic smile Jace has seen Derek give Ezra over menu changes he lost the war on.

“You guys have time,” Syd chimes in with the save.

Before Jace can match Derek’s smile in solidarity, a gunshot rings out – or what Jace assumes is a gunshot. He looks to find Korey standing by their table with a cork in one hand and a misty bottle of Veuve Clicquot in the other.

“Congratulations!” She smiles so hard that her eyes clamp tight behind her long bangs. It’s a wonder she can see anything – but somehow she’s made it this far, through the maze of tables, high chairs, and strollers. “I hear we have an engagement in the house, mutha-truckahs! Let’s kick these

mimosas up a notch!” She makes her way around their table to hug everyone as Derek introduces Angel and Syd.

On cue, a server swoops in with a pitcher of orange juice and four fresh glasses.

“This is so sweet,” Jace says as she hands off the bottle.

“I wanted to be there last night! I got the invitation.” She grunts and throws up her hands, an angry little storm cloud with black lighting for hair. “Cal had papers to grade and his brother popped up. We haven’t heard from him in weeks, so you know.” She doesn’t go into the significance of this in front of mixed company, but Derek and Jace know what she means.

Cal’s brother, Nathan, goes missing for weeks at a time, in and out of rehab facilities and shelters. He’s what you might have called a functional alcoholic once, until the alcohol became pills that became liquid poison in syringes he injects between his toes. Korey and Cal have been trying to get him off the streets for years, so when Nathan does pop up, they drop everything to feed him and give him a bed and words that are warm and encouraging. Hoping to break the cycle.

The quick glimpse of defeat on her face tells Jace that Nathan’s already gone again. He evaporated with the rising dawn, leaving a warm dent in the pillow on their sofa where his head laid, the only sign he was ever there and not a dream.

“I’m sure you fed him well,” Derek says, not knowing what else to say. Korey’s tried everything else – including giving him a job in the kitchen a few years ago, but that stint ended with Nathan stealing tips and money from the safe. He slept under her and Cal’s roof for a week last summer before he yanked up his roots and vanished again. Now, all she can do for him is what she does best: cook and feed him when he comes around like a stray cat, quietly dreading the day he stops coming around.

“I just fired up a quick adobo. He always seems to like that.” She presses her lips together, muffling a sigh before her eyes light up again. “Oh, my God! You guys! Lemme see...” She purrs and leans over the table.

It strikes Jace that she means his ring.

She peers, straining to look at his fingers wrapped around his forkful of roasted potatoes and onions.

He's forgotten that this is a thing; he'll have to get used to it now that he's engaged. It's something people oddly seem to have an invested interest in appraising, so he flashes the ring and watches her come undone.

“OH-MY-GOD, JACE. IT'S GORGEOUS! Look at that.”

It is gorgeous, but he can't help but feel like she's overdoing it. Everyone around them is staring now, trying to decipher what she could be going on and on about.

Even the toddler at the next table's curiosity gets the best of him and his jaw hangs open, trying to decrypt what the short lady with the wild hair is gushing over.

A warm rush ignites the back of his neck. Korey has his hand, examining the ring, and has yet to let go.

“He done good.” Syd sends Derek a wink, while Angel merely nods and chews.

Jace opens his mouth to agree wholeheartedly, to express how touched he was by the proposal and Derek's sugar-sweet words he must have practiced over and over to make perfect. He gets as far as the first syllable when his phone rings and vibrates, making his pulse spike. “Oh, that's me.” He takes the opportunity to win his hand back and digs for his phone in his pocket.

Even before glaring at the screen, he knows it's Denise calling back. He recognizes the last four digits, confirming it, and chews on his bottom lip.

His thumb hovers over the screen, as if daring to answer the call, but the noise of the restaurant and Derek and Korey's curious faces dissuade him.

“This must be the repair shop calling back with a quote,” he lies. “One of my coolers is on the fritz. He can leave a message.” Jace silences the phone and stuffs it back in his dark denim jeans.

It's enough to satisfy everyone as Jace braces against a shiver that glides down his arms. He hates himself for lying. He hates how easily the words slid off his tongue like ice and wonders if it's a trait he inherited from Sam. His father's the best liar he knows. During the murders, Sam had everyone convinced he was paralyzed from the waist down, confined to a wheelchair for a year and a half after being hit by a car. It only served as the perfect alibi. Who would ever suspect someone in a wheelchair of being a serial killer? How could Sam overpower and kill nineteen people from where he sat? He could scarcely do work around the deli, and it was left to Jace to do the heavy lifting and traipse up and down the basement stairs for inventory, because Sam couldn't handle the stairs. It wasn't until Sam's hearing, when he walked into the courtroom, that everyone – including Jace and his mother – realized it was all a farce.

“So, how long are you guys visiting?” Korey's moved on to Syd and Angel, handing them a fresh mimosa. She squints and gushes, “I like your hair, by the way. Purple's my favorite color.”

“Aww, thank you!” Syd slings his hair and pops one shoulder. “We fly out today,” he pouts. “In a few hours.”

Angel shoves a hand through his dark, glossy hair, grunting at the reminder.

“He thinks we're gonna fall out the sky,” Syd translates.

“Oh, noooo.” Korey brings her hands to her chest, crossing them over her heart. “You're afraid to fly?”

Angel gives his beard a quick stroke before launching into his history of near-death experiences.

Derek takes the opportunity to give Jace a bite of his pancakes. They're fluffy and taste of coconut and vanilla. “Everything's gonna work out,” he whispers.

It's day one of being engaged, Jace reminds himself. Despite wedding colors and outfits being the least of his worries, he deserves to feel some remnant of happiness and the buzz from

Derek proposing – even if it’s only for a short while before news of Sam’s bloody return shatters everything.

“I just wanna marry you,” Jace whispers back.

“So, let’s get married.” Derek slides his arm around the back of Jace’s chair and leans in for a quick kiss; his lips soft and fluffy like Korey’s pancakes. “I don’t care where we do it, babe. I just want you to be—”

Derek’s phone rings and they grudgingly pull apart.

Jace doesn’t catch a glimpse of who’s calling, but he can tell from Derek’s face he doesn’t recognize the number. “I should get this. It might be Ezra. You guys keep goin’.” He squeezes Jace’s shoulder before excusing himself. “Be right back.”

They all nod and Jace follows Derek with his eyes, through the dining room. He holds the phone to his ear, squinting to hear over the noise until he walks outside.

It’s clearly not Ezra, calling from the great beyond. It could be anyone calling, so Jace tells himself not to worry. But the sentiment soon dissolves as his mind conjures up the worst case.

What if Ezra’s body has been found... after being dumped somewhere to be discovered?

Like Aaron Gilbert.

Or what if it’s Denise on the line, trying to get in touch with Jace since he didn’t answer?

Jace has no disillusion about her connecting the dots between the deli and Zora’s – and playing that card. He keeps only a handful of people around that he’s close with, so it wouldn’t take much for her to find out Jace is romantically involved with someone.

“You can tell he’s excited about the wedding,” Syd swoons. “You should have heard him on the phone tellin’ us he was gonna propose...”

Jace listens with a smile, but his eyes keep traveling back to Derek in view out front, through the large storefront window

with Karma's logo. Pacing with the phone clutched tight in his hand.

"He was so nervous last night. Especially once it started getting late."

"Yeah, I got hung up at the shop," Jace says.

Derek's eyebrows suddenly shoot up, but Jace can't make out what he's saying. His lips are moving too fast to read. Then, he turns to face the street.

Shit.

"I'm glad you two are finally makin' it official." Syd taps the table. "They've been dating off and on for years." He directs this to Korey.

"I always say – I tell people all the time," Korey swears.

"What's meant to be will be."

"Exactly!"

"You two are couple goals," Angel says. He gives a salute with his glass.

Jace shrugs, "We just take it one day at a time. One foot in front of the other."

He's lost sight of Derek now.

"That's easier said than done," Korey laughs, admitting defeat.

"There are days I could kill my husband. Like, actually poison him the next time he leaves the seat up. We've been married for nine years. It's not gonna get better," she sighs.

"Sorry 'bout that." Derek shuffles back to the table in a daze.

Jace is the first to ask, "Everything okay, babe?"

He holds up his cell phone. "I just got the call."

"What call?"

"That was LA. That was the casting director for 'À La Carte'," he blinks. "I didn't get the job."

The table falls silent as the news sinks in.

“Wait. You didn’t?” Jace takes a breath, sharing in everyone’s stunned silence before reaching for Derek. “Babe, I’m so sorry!” He rubs his shoulder and the back of his neck, the muscles tight with tension.

Syd shakes his head. “It’s their loss!”

“That show’s gone downhill, ever since season five.” Korey folds her arms. “I don’t watch it anymore. No one does.”

“Here’s my thing though... They had a chance to have their first openly gay, Black host and they blew it!” Jace’s eyes bulge. “They blew it. Derek would be a perfect host! How can they not see that?”

Derek cuts in, still in a haze. “They don’t want me to host ‘À La Carte’ because they want me for something else.” His eyes turn glossy as they skirt around the table. “They’re giving me my own show.”

Everyone’s disbelief turns to screams that rattle the restaurant.

“Your own show!” Jace covers his mouth. “Babe! That’s amazing!”

A smile breaks through as Derek nods. He speaks the words again in confirmation, slowly getting a handle on the weight of what’s happening. “I’m gonna have my own show. A cooking show. Just me. Taping’s in LA – they want me to fly out for a meeting with the producers...” He starts to spitball bits and pieces from the call, in no particular order. “They wanna do this ‘soulful classics’ angle. They don’t have a name yet, they’re gonna test some names. Oh! And, get this, they’re phasing out ‘À La Carte’ after this next season.”

“So, how did this new show come about?” Angel asks.

“Jody – she’s the executive producer – she, um, apparently loved my screen test so much she thought it’d be ‘a waste’ to keep me on ‘À La Carte’ if they’re phasing it out, right? So, there was a pitch to the network for a new cooking show – nothing reality-TV, competition-based – there’s this push for more instructional programming, things people can actually follow along with at home...” He catches himself derailing.

“Anyway! They got the green light for a new pilot and she thinks I’m a perfect fit.”

“Of course you’re a perfect fit!” Jace takes Derek’s face in his hands and kisses him hard on the lips. “I’m so proud of you, babe. You’ve worked so hard for this.”

“Umm!” Syd shoots up a hand. “We wanna be in the audience at your first show! Front row! VIP!”

He laughs. “I’ll keep you updated. They want to shoot the pilot next month. My first meeting with them is next week.”

“Next week? That’s fast,” Jace blinks.

Derek nods and squeezes his hand. “This is all happenin’ fast, babe, but that’s how these things go, I guess!” He laughs and shrugs as if to say, “That’s show business for ya!”

“Derek, this is amazing.” Korey throws up her hands. “Oh-my-God! We need more champagne!” She darts off.

Angel pours the last of the mimosas for everyone as the conversation continues. There’s a question about how much creative direction Derek will have on the show, and Angel and Syd are already predicting Emmys.

Meanwhile, Jace’s mind runs wild and untamed. He wonders if Derek truly grasps how monumental the news is and how much their lives are about to change.

An engagement and a new TV show for his new fiancé, all in less than twenty-four hours. It’s more than Jace could have imagined once.

There was a time when he was sure he’d never find his person and build a life with someone special, who loved him for him. There was a time when he was on his own, without people in his life who loved him... like those seated around the table now... Syd, Angel, and Derek... laughing and clinking their glasses together in celebration.

There was a time when Jace had nothing to lose.

But that time is over now.

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13 / DON'T GO IN

Derek can't stop smiling. Even with orders backing up and two plates sent back for overcooked ribeyes, he's all smiles as he surveys the plates on the line being garnished. The champagne from brunch may be playing a part in this, but moreover, it's the train of excitement barreling through him. Steam and smoky daydreams of floating around set; becoming the first Black, queer chef with a Michelin Star to have their own day-time television show.

As a child, Derek watched TV's culinary titans wow audiences with recipe after recipe – always ready just in time with an extra pre-made dish in the oven and enough TV magic to make every plate look enticing. But even with all that TV magic, there was never anyone who looked like him on camera.

Now, he's venturing to the other side of the TV screen and hopes to inspire other queer, Brown, and Black boys and girls who might be watching.

How could he not smile at that?

Once Syd and Angel said their tearful goodbyes at the airport, after they'd all assured Angel the weather was clear for them to fly in with no storms rolling through, Jace rode with Derek to help with dinner service. Along the way, Derek buzzed with ideas for the show. From his first dish on national television to his theme music, he was all teeth and bright eyes and ideas. Giddy like a schoolgirl on prom night, sneaking away to meet her date under the bleachers, nothing could bring Derek down. Jace said yes to his marriage proposal, and now he's about to sign a deal for his first live cooking show. There's just one thing gnawing at him...

“Where the fuck is Ezra?”

Feeling his absence in the kitchen, this is the second time he's asked this, mostly to himself as the tickets and careless mistakes pile up during dinner. But no one has an answer for him. None of the line cooks or servers have seen or heard from

Ezra, and his phone goes straight to voicemail when Derek dials it.

“Must be dead,” he says after hanging up.

Of course, he means Ezra’s phone and not Ezra, but Jace frowns, grabs a handful of fresh basil, and starts to chop. He hates watching Derek agonize over this, but he knows better than to call his father’s bluff.

And if Derek knew, he would call the police. Instantly.

He’ll insist nothing will happen to him – that Sam won’t come for him, and if he does, he’s big enough and strong enough to fend for himself – but Derek doesn’t know Sam the way Jace does. He only knows Sam through old, sensationalized news segments, unauthorized documentaries, and horror stories whispered by locals who would love nothing more than to see the deli fold again. Derek doesn’t know Sam as the father and husband who lived a double life. He’d sweetly kiss Jace goodnight on the forehead, then steal out into the night, peel off his mask, and feed his lust for carnage.

The greatest trick the devil ever pulled off was convincing the world he didn’t exist. Sam took a page from that book and ran with it. He hid his monstrous horns and scales, only baring his sharp teeth a second before it was too late for his victims.

Jace finds his mind oddly snaking back to how Sam could have gotten Ezra’s body out of the deli undetected. It’s been bothering him all morning.

He must have dismembered him.

Seems his style.

Plus, Sam doesn’t have his old buddy, Davie Myer, to help dispose of the body this time. Davie’s at the head-end of a life sentence for his complicity in Sam’s crimes. For smuggling out the remains of the victims in his delivery truck in exchange for a front-row seat to their deaths, watching Sam fillet and skin them alive. Davie’s locked away at Green Haven, confined to his cell without yard privileges or hope of ever feeling a glimmer of sunlight on his skin again.

So, how did Sam do it?

Jace lets a strange half-smile slip through. He has to admit it's mildly impressive. Getting in and out of places is easy enough when no one's looking for you, but with a body?

Unless he tied a scarf around Ezra's neck and Weekend-at-Bernie'd him, Sam must have found another way to break down or disguise the body to get it out and go any real distance with it undetected...

And as easily as that, Jace's mind turns from the heat and fury of the kitchen to how he would have done it if he were his father. How would he have gotten rid of Ezra Weyl, once and for all?

"Think I should report him missing?" Derek interrupts. He wipes the sweat off his forehead with the back of his wrist and huffs.

"It hasn't been 48 hours. To file a report," Jace says. "Well, really, it hasn't even been 24 hours. You don't really know he's missing."

Or dead.

Yet.

He folds his broad arms against his chef's coat. "I still hate that he sent you here by yourself last night." His voice spikes, his expression angry for the first time all day. "He could have at least texted that he was goin' home and you were on the way... Ruined the whole surprise."

"It wasn't ruined. I was plenty surprised. Trust me." He looks down at the cutting board so Derek can't see the irony on his face.

"I mean, if he's sick and has a sore throat, fine. Just tell me!" Derek steps back as one of the cooks rushes by with a hot skillet. "Just don't fuckin' leave me hangin' on dinner service, you know?" He waltzes closer to lean on the counter, next to Jace. "It's just not like him to not say anything – to not just tell me he's sick, you know?"

Jace says nothing. He's already said too much by lying.

“Unless it’s not just a ‘sore throat’.” He makes a face and turns up his lip. “They’re talking about another variant on the news. Some people are still gettin’ sick. Maybe he didn’t wanna come back and contaminate everyone.”

So, this is Derek’s best guess. He also seems to think you have to wait 48 hours until you can file a missing person report – like in the movies – so Jace doesn’t correct him.

“Think that’s it? And maybe he doesn’t know how to tell me, or he thinks I’ll let him go?” The lines and anger on his face soften. “I mean, he can’t be up in here, but I’d never fire him over somethin’ like that,” he insists.

Jace squeezes his eyes shut and sighs. “I know, babe.” He grips the handle of the knife in his hand. He’s on the verge of dropping it and shoving the cutting board away to confess when Derek grunts and starts pacing again.

“I’m not even sure who to call to check on him. He’s not close with anyone here, and he doesn’t talk about friends outside of work, so…” He crosses his arms behind his head and stares at the ceiling, weary in thought. “I remember he left the, um…” His arms drop and he snaps his fingers. “Emergency contact info, on his application. He left it blank. I thought it was odd at the time, but I didn’t wanna question it, you know? Like, what if he just doesn’t have anyone, or family, and his parents are dead or somethin’?”

As soon as Derek says this, he crumbles.

“It’s fine,” Jace shakes his head.

“I’m sorry, babe.” Derek zig-zags his fingers down Jace’s back before pulling him close. “Sorry. I’m just all over the place.”

Jace grinds his teeth. He thinks about telling him Sam is alive and responsible for all this, but the words shrivel and die on his lips.

“You know what? Will you do me a favor?” He faces Jace with fresh resolve. “I think this’ll make me feel better.”

“What’s that?”

“Will you just swing by his place and check on him? Just to see what’s goin’ on – and tell him to call me?”

A fool’s errand. But Jace agrees, jumping at the chance to leave. Staying any longer means having to lie longer, for as long as Derek’s fixated on the topic.

“And if he answers, DON’T GO IN. Don’t get close to him, in case he’s really, you know. Contagious.” He makes that face again, and Jace can only nod in compliance.

• • •

Jace is about to knock on a dead man’s door.

The address Derek texted has led him to Bushwick, a working-class area in North Brooklyn once known for being the home of Brewers Row. Once the last of the 14 breweries closed in the ‘70s, riots and looting tore through the neighborhood like wildfire. Now it’s a mixed bag of public housing projects, apartment buildings, and crime. But the rent is cheap. Which attracts a slew of young pros who are willing to take their chances.

Ezra’s apartment sits within a row of gray, historic, brick buildings on the sixth floor – a few blocks from the colorful, modern, glass giants that were a part of the “Bushwick Initiative” to revitalize housing and the economy. As Jace walks through the doors of Ezra’s building, the warm stench of time, mildew, and moisture in the walls assaults him. Walking the hall’s dingy green carpet, he passes under an old chandelier on his way to the elevator. Missing a few bulbs, it flickers with a strange energy as he glares up at it, trying to imagine a world where it was once a glamorous beacon that welcomed those who entered, instead of making the place look haunted.

He knows he shouldn’t be here. He knows he’s only doing this to appease Derek – to be able to look him in the face and tell him he went to check on Ezra, like he said he would.

It also beats driving around to pass the time and lying to him later. Jace has already allowed too many lies to bloom from his

lips. So, here he is. Going through the motions and allowing his curiosity to guide him.

On the drive over, he listened to Denise's voicemail, essentially asking him to call her back.

It sparked an idea.

He could call in an anonymous tip on the Crime Stoppers Hotline. He could disguise his voice and leave just enough breadcrumbs for someone to follow up on.

But then, he remembered his father's text. He can't underestimate Sam finding out he made the call, and if Sam killed Aaron Gilbert and Ezra – people he didn't even know, what might he do to Derek if Jace purposely disobeys him?

So, Jace lets the idea float away as he walks down the hall and presses a button to call the elevator.

He's sometimes wondered what Ezra came home to when he left Zora's, but he never imagined this.

The elevator doors screech open slowly; Jace sighs at the death trap before stepping inside. Two rows of plastic, numbered buttons greet him – daring him to choose his own adventure. They glow dimly, except the fifth-floor button for some reason. And the numbers on three and six are almost completely scratched off, but the graffiti (mostly dicks) scratched into the lower half of the metal panel draws Jace's attention.

“Huh.”

He angles his head to peer at one that's coming next to the intercom button, which surely no longer works. If he gets stuck inside, he'll be stuck with only cartoon dicks to keep him company until help arrives. But he pushes the button for the sixth floor anyway and says a quick prayer as the doors slide shut.

On the way up, he distracts himself; mulling over how he might begin to tell Derek about Sam when the time is right. Anyone hearing the story would assume Jace has lost it; that everything Jace saw last night was a cruel trick of his mind

and that there is no Sam Mader. Only his imagination or blood on his own hands.

Dr. Kessler would label this a side effect of his backsliding off his medication. She'd patronize him with false smiles and monotone questions, all the while scribbling down notes that pointed to Jace as the killer.

"Do you think it's possible that you manifested your father's image?" She'd ask from her comfortable chair. "Could you have been the one holding the knife instead?"

Jace can hear her voice, clear and unrelenting in his head...

"You did want Ezra gone," she'd remind him before tucking her Revlon-red hair behind an ear. "You said it yourself. You said you'd be glad when he's gone, and now he is."

She wouldn't be wrong about that. Jace has wished Ezra away more than once and now he's gotten his wish.

But who was holding the knife?

He's seen bad B-movies like this, with wild delusional protagonists spiraling out of control. Spinning and whipping up their own version of reality. Moments that feel real to them. Conversations they remember but which ultimately never happened.

"The human brain is a powerful thing," Dr. Kessler purrs in his ear as the rickety elevator climbs its way to the sixth floor. "It has a funny way of protecting us from trauma."

It's a compelling theory that would account for there being no trace of blood or foul play in the basement this morning.

If this were one of those low-budget flicks, a flashback would reveal Jace removing Ezra's body and cleaning up the blood himself... Deleting the CCTV footage and then locking up on his way out.

Maybe it wasn't the frantic dash from the basement he believes it was.

Maybe he's edited out the worst parts of the evening, crossed them out in red ink, like on the ads he used to proof at Moxy.

Maybe his brain has edited out the parts too horrific to handle – and he was the one holding the knife.

You could even explain away the threatening text message by suggesting Jace sent it to himself through a burner phone – that there's been a break and split in his personality. That he's impersonating his father without knowing it.

And the blood on his wedding ring?

Could have come from work. Easily.

But there's one thing he remembers clearly that doesn't fit neatly into this theory, something that calls the movie's plot twist into question...

Right before Ezra died, he said something that didn't make sense at the time. He shouted, "I knew it!" But he wasn't speaking to Jace. He was reacting to something – or rather someone – that he'd seen.

Jace and Ezra weren't alone in the basement last night, and Jace wasn't the only person who saw Sam.

Ezra saw Sam too.

The elevator comes to a bouncing stop and Jace swiftly steps out before the cable has a chance to snap and send the metal box plummeting. He feels like he's cheated death as the doors slide closed, waiting for him to try his luck again on the way down.

He searches for apartment 613, the sharp cries of a baby piercing his ears as he passes a door on the left of the narrow hall. Passing another, he smells curry – someone's dinner filling the hall with a smoky sweetness that turns his stomach. He counts, past loud TVs and music behind the next few doors, until he locates Ezra's apartment and glowers at the bronze numbers nailed to the black door.

For reasons unknown, he reaches for the knob and turns it.

It rattles, but it doesn't open.

He presses an ear to the door, hoping there isn't a dog or a cat inside that Ezra failed to ever mention. This is another reason he's stopped by. But the more he thinks on it, Ezra having a

pet seems unlikely. He would have sprung unsolicited pet photos on Jace at some point. But Jace taps on the door anyway, straining to hear signs of movement or life. The sound of nails clamoring across hardwood floors or barking...

If there's a cat inside, he may never know it. It's on its own if it doesn't make some sort of noise or come to the door.

Then again, it might be happy to have the respite. It might be thrilled to have the apartment to itself until it runs out of food and realizes its loud-mouth owner isn't coming back.

Jace raps on the door again with the back of his knuckles and counts to five before leaving. He thanks God there's no noise on the other side. If a dog had raced to the door barking, he wouldn't have known what to do. The thought of Stella abandoned without food or water sickens him. So, at least he's been able to rule out any more potential casualties today.

He's almost to the stairwell when the door creaks open behind him.

He turns, half-expecting to see Ezra standing there with a cat in his arms. Instead, he's greeted by another familiar face.

Green eyes, the color of absinthe.

A rail-thin frame.

Dark, tussled hair and pale skin.

Jace recognizes him as one of the groupies from the deli. He's fallen into the habit of remembering faces that pass through his door, and the tattoo on the man's forearm, a mishmash of black lines and symbols, confirms it.

The familiar stranger rakes his eyes over Jace, equally staggered. He's in a loose black tank top and tan trousers; barefoot, he balances a bowl of strawberry ice cream between his long fingers. He leans against the doorway and clears his throat before his deep voice fills the hall. "It's you."

Jace cautiously drifts forward. "I was, uhm, just here to check on Ezra," he says with an attempt to conceal the tremor in his voice. "He didn't show up to work today. I was sent to check on him." He tries to reconcile how much he might have just

incriminated himself. Once Ezra is declared missing, whoever the hell this is might recall this encounter and take it to the police. He needs to tread lightly.

“You’re Jason Mader.” His thin lips curl into a smile. “I’ve seen you at Cassex Deli. I’d know you anywhere.”

“Right.” Jace is slightly unnerved anytime someone calls him by his real name, but he matches the thin smile and points.

“Turkey and pastrami. I remember.” He’d remember this haunting face anywhere. The deep, baritone voice.

His smile spreads, and he shifts the cold bowl of melting ice cream to his other hand. “You were real busy that day. Too busy to talk – but I totally get it!” He says this as though Jace has offered an apology. “By the way, what you’ve done with that place – restorin’ it – is fucking amazing, man.” He blinks, shining two jade lights that break through the dark shadows around his eyes. “It almost looks the same as it did back in the ‘80s. But not like back in the ‘50s or ‘40s, ‘course. Back then, it wasn’t even what it is today.” He laughs and shifts his weight onto his other foot. “Back then it was a soda shop, right? Charman’s – owned by Henry Charman! Mean old son-of-a-bitch peddlin’ ice cream sodas and pills from the li’l pharmacy in the back. You needed to be of the ‘Caucasian persuasion’ to sit at the counter though.” He flashes the back of his hand and pouts his lips on one side. “But all that didn’t last long. He disappeared...” His voice turns airy, like a heavy merlot that’s had time to breathe. “Some folks say he went bankrupt, left a trail of debt and the buildin’ behind.” He stops here and downs a spoonful of the pink, soupy mixture from his bowl. “But you of all people know the story, right?”

A line cracks across Jace’s forehead.

He’s come across a decent share of Cassex Deli history buffs, but there’s something in the man’s tone that hits a vein.

Seeing Jace isn’t impressed, he goes on with a flair to his voice. “The buildin’ went up for auction. There was a whole lotta hoopla, and when the dust cleared there were two new owners. Alonzo Ray Lewis and Joe Cassex Mader, two Black delivery drivers who had Charman’s malt shop on their route.

They used to deliver crates of bottled sodas through the back of the shop every week. No one ever figured out how they came up with money like that, just like no one ever figured out what happened to ol' Henry Charman.”

So, this is what he wanted to say so badly that day at the deli? To show off his creepy knowledge of the shop and Jace's family tree?

He must have dug deep for this, though. Few can recite the tale of how Jace's distant relative came to own the shop – and very few know that he bought it with his best friend, Alonzo, who died soon after in what the police deemed a “mugging”, despite the mangled state his body was found in.

Jace nips at his bottom lip. “I didn't catch your name.”

“I'm Ted.” He lunges forward with an icy handshake.

“You're Ezra's roommate?” It's a good guess; unless a stranger's broken in, kicked off his shoes, and helped himself to the fridge.

Ted gives a curt nod and his tone flatlines. “Ezra's not here. He had an event for work last night and didn't come home.” His eyes fall to Jace's ring finger. “We've been trying to get ahold of him all day. Phone goes straight to voicemail.”

Jace resists the urge to ask who “we” is. Instead, he just says, “Same here.”

Ted angles his head and a smirk tugs at his lips. “Strange thing. You don't think somethin' could have happened to him?”

Someone passes behind Ted, a portly-looking man in glasses with a scruffy beard and thinning, brown hair. He's in black shorts and a Metallica t-shirt that fits snug over his beer belly. He looks slightly younger than Ted but not by much. Jace guesses early thirties but could be wrong.

His brown eyes go wide at the sight of Jace, and he scurries out of view.

“That's Bobby,” Ted says with a slow glance over his shoulder. “He don't say much.”

Clearly.

It's now that Jace gets a view of the inside of the apartment.

Bare, hardwood floors. Piss-yellow walls and furniture that looks pieced together from different, past apartments. A brown leather sofa, a black recliner, and two pale green armchairs; all forced to live together now. Empty beer bottles, a bong, and stacks of paper litter the coffee table. There's an ashtray full of cigarette butts, where one is still dying out; a faint stream of smoke spirals upward into the universe as its final cry.

"Guess you get all kinds of folks askin' questions about what happened there. In the basement?"

Jace musters up a small, polite smile. "I've lost count."

He gives a tight smile. "Yeah, I bet. Bet they all have the same question too. 'Why'd he do it?' ... Right? What inspired him to do what he did...?" His eyes go distant and dark before snapping back into focus. Back to Jace.

Jace shrugs. "Wish I knew."

"Do you?" He challenges. "Do you know?" He gives Jace a long, unblinking stare as the air turns thick around them. "I mean, if anyone has the answer, it's gotta be his son, right?"

What's left of the polite smile on Jace's face drains entirely.

"I should go—"

Ted drops the spoon against his bowl with a clank. "I have a theory," he offers.

This should be good.

Jace sighs and waves a hand, giving him the stage.

Ted pushes off the doorframe. His face seems to transform as he seethes, "See, people have it all wrong! The Butcher's not some crazy maniac 'killer' stalkin' the streets with his cleaver, right? He's not a serial killer. He never was!"

"He confessed!" Jace catches himself arguing and stops himself. You can't argue with crazy, and Ted's insane if he thinks Sam's innocent.

“‘The Butcher’ isn’t what the media wants us to believe,” he insists. “You can look back! It’s all there – in history! Your father’s special – chosen – just like Benedict the Moor.”

Jace is nearly too stunned to ask who the hell Benedict the Moor is but, somehow, he finds the words. “Who the hell’s Benedict the Moor?”

A wild grin cuts across Ted’s face and Jace realizes he’s wandered down the rabbit hole without realizing it.

“Benedict-the-Moor!” Ted enunciated each syllable with a crazed gleam. “He was a friar in the 1500s... A Black friar – who was venerated as a saint in the Catholic Church. A saint!”

Jace can’t fathom where this is going but his feet won’t move. And, apparently, he’s the perfect audience for Ted’s theory on his father.

“So, get this... Benedict’s parents were both slaves, right? But once they’re freed, he goes on to give up all his worldly possessions and join a friary in Palermo, where he became known as a guardian of the community. A guardian.” He raises a finger. “He was also a cook, he helped keep everyone fed, and he had a reputation for healing the sick. HEALING THE SICK!” He grins. “See? He was a healer.”

He can’t mean Sam. Not the Sam who just sliced someone’s throat less than twenty-four hours ago.

“And he had these visions! He died when he was sixty-five on the very day and hour he predicted.”

Jace blinks, suddenly remembering to breathe again.

“Jason, how old would Sam be today?” Ted gives a crooked little smile, knowing the answer. “Still not convinced? Benedict was canonized in 1807 by Pope Pius VII, and his body was found ‘incorrupt’ when they exhumed it a few years later. Incorrupt. Hardly any decomposition after death, which the Catholics believe is a sign of holiness.” He does an imaginary mic drop and says, “Jason, your father’s not dead. He can be brought back.”

Jace’s heart plummets.

“I know this is a lot to take in,” he says softly, almost sadly. “But with your help, I can prove it! Your father had a reason, and I think you know more than you think you do, Jason.”

Jace is miles away, spiraling, trying to climb his way back up the rabbit hole. He stares past Ted, into the apartment, trying to ground himself back in reality.

There’s a painting of white lilies on the living room wall he focuses on. It looks like it might have come with the place. Next, he sees a round mirror hanging on the wall adjacent to a small dining room table.

The state of the apartment confounds Jace. There’s trash and empty take-out boxes on the floor. There’s water damage on the ceiling and a crack that stretches from the dining room into what Jace can only surmise is the kitchen from his angled view, past the doorway.

Ted goes on ranting, returning to old stories about the deli and history long forgotten. But Jace is too absorbed in the slice of Ezra’s life he’s being fed past the open door to listen to more of Ted’s madness.

Derek paid Ezra a good wage; more than enough to not have to live in squander with two burnouts – one of which clearly doesn’t have his head screwed on tight. And this is far from the over-the-top abode Jace has pictured Ezra returning to after a long shift.

It doesn’t make sense.

But neither does the sight he sees reflected in the dining room mirror.

There’s another wall, off what must be near the kitchen, that the mirror catches part of. There, Jace catches a glimpse of a cluster of papers pinned to the wall.

Articles.

A clumsy patchwork of photos and news articles...

It’s too far a distance for Jace to read any of the headlines, but one piece of the puzzle doesn’t require squinting or questioning. He recognizes it instantly.

It's a photo of Jace.

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14 / SOMETHING THAT'S LIKELY NOTHING

“Roommates?” Derek looks dubious as he rocks back on the sofa, removing his shoes with a grunt. “Didn’t know he had any.”

“Or a weird shrine in his apartment? No shit. Somethin’s not right about that place.”

“And still no Ezra.”

Jace wants to scream, “There is no more Ezra! My father slit his throat and put him through the meat grinder, for all I know. He’s gone!” But of course, he doesn’t say this. He watches Derek undress and unravel his knots and tension after what turned out to be a trying dinner service.

He must be grateful Marcella Hall wasn’t there to witness it.

“Did they say where he might have gone?”

“I didn’t exactly stay and kiki with his sketchy roommates,” Jace says. “I saw that wall, made up an excuse, and got the hell outta there.” He leaves out Ted’s crackpot narrative about Sam being... what exactly? He’s still not sure what to make of it.

“So, wait. This wall.” Derek unbuttons the neck of his chef’s jacket and releases a breath. “I mean, this is Ezra we’re talkin’ about. Could it have been like a mood board?” He makes a flourish with his hands. “A vision board!” He corrects himself.

“No. This wasn’t that. There were no shirtless men, or cars, or fancy houses...”

No rainbows or cheesy, inspirational quotes.

Jace stops pacing and bends to scratch the gray on Stella’s head. She’s awoken from a deep nap and wandered over to see what all the hubbub is about.

“It looked like he was doin’ some sort of investigation. It was like, crazy conspiracy theory vibes.”

“Investigating what?”

“Me?” Jace shrugs, but it’s the obvious conclusion.

Derek peels off his shirt and exhales, happy to feel the air on his bare skin. “I don’t think I follow, babe. He was helpin’ me plan your surprise party for a while – maybe that’s what you saw. Maybe he had party stuff pinned to the wall.” He offers this as his best guess to ease Jace’s worries. The last thing he needs after a long day on his feet is Jace spiraling out over something that’s likely nothing.

“No, these were newspaper clippings.” Jace should have said this before, but his findings at Ezra’s apartment came out in one long, tangled string of thoughts when he reported back. “Not seating charts or... color swatches. Oh! And I didn’t tell you this, but I’ve caught him going through my desk before!”

Exasperation colors Derek’s face. He’s in no mood for this tonight. All he wants to do is shower off the day and crawl into bed with “The Golden Girls”.

“I asked him to check your calendar. Just to check what time your last delivery was on the day of the party. That’s probably what that was, babe.”

Jace feels his eyes roll on their own.

Derek responds with a huff as he pushes off the sofa to stand. “So, what are you sayin’? You seem convinced he’s, like, after you or somethin’.” He tosses up his hands. “He’s the one missing.”

Jace senses he isn’t going to win this argument. He should have just kept what he saw to himself. Telling Derek has served him no good, and he can’t imagine how Derek would react if he knew the whole truth.

The air in the room has shifted now, sucked out by Derek’s sudden damning expression. “This whole thing just doesn’t make sense. I mean, is there somethin’ you’re not telling me?” He adds a chuckle to this, to make light of the accusation.

Jace feels his face flush. Heat creeps up the back of his neck and ignites his eyes. Derek isn’t saying it, but Jace can read the look on his face.

He knows Jace has never liked Ezra to begin with; barely tolerating him in small doses when the occasion called for it, so Jace can't be that broken up now that Ezra appears to be missing. Jace hasn't even bothered to pretend to share his same level of concern, and when Derek suggested calling the police, Jace shot the idea down with an excuse at the ready.

"It's too early to file a police report."

"We don't even know for sure he's missing."

"This is Ezra we're talkin' about. Word could come any minute now on where he's been."

For the most part, Jace's words have done a satisfactory job of easing the worry in Derek's eyes, but there's one fact that Derek hasn't lost sight of...

Jace is the last known person to have seen Ezra alive.

Although he hasn't said it, Jace can sense the words perched on his lips, ready to take flight.

"Are you suggesting I have something to do with this – with him missing? You think I did something to him?" Jace asks.

He grunts and rubs a hand down his face. "No. I'm not saying that."

Not out loud.

"I don't know where he is," Jace says.

Which is true...

"I'm not saying you do." Derek shifts into autopilot now; his tone is bittersweet as a yawn escapes his full lips. "Okay, look. Babe, it's been a long day. For both of us. Let's put a pin in this. Sleep on it and, who knows, by morning, maybe he'll have at least texted back or somethin'." He hunches his shoulders decisively. He has nothing left to give this day. He'll need his energy for tomorrow, in case he winds up running dinner service alone again.

He sighs next, realizing he'll need to consider replacing Ezra, even if it's just for the interim or while he's in LA. Yuri can deliver the orders Ezra would normally pick up for dinner

service, but Derek will need a real sous-chef to run the kitchen.

Should he hire from within, Blanca Jiménez seems the obvious choice. Derek hired her as a line cook three months ago, not due to her resume but because she's been cooking for her mother and four siblings since she was eight. Her mother has chronic MS and her father left when she was seven to play house with his mistress and a child birthed in the shadows of their indiscretions. At twenty-three now, Blanca's young and hungry for success and wouldn't likely shy away from the longer hours. She has no children of her own. Just an on-again-off-again girlfriend named Kerri who stops in from time to time always ordering the same thing. The blackened salmon pasta, locally sourced salmon on a bed of fresh fettuccine drowning in a rich sauce of brown butter, lemon, capers, and rosemary.

It's one of Jace's favorites on the menu.

Kerri sometimes dines alone at the bar, chatting with Charlie, until it's time for Blanca to clock out. Then, she gives Blanca a ride home in her purple Mustang.

There are no red flags when it comes to Blanca. She gets along with everyone and takes critiques well, an area where Ezra has occasionally fallen short.

Unlike Blanca, Ezra shines on paper with a resume and experience that boasts his classical training. When Ezra applied for the job, Derek couldn't help but notice he did a stint at Bouchon, one of Fabrice Lenôtre's restaurants – one of four that Fabrice owns. There's Bouchon, a brasserie in Manhattan. He owns L'Assiette, a chain restaurant with locations in LA and Lyon, where he grew up. Then there's Avriel, his latest Michelin Star restaurant on the Las Vegas Strip, named after his mother.

Derek doesn't know Fabrice well, not well enough to claim him as an industry friend. They've served as judges on season four of "Kitchen Wars" and Fabrice proved to be just as sour and aloof as his reputation suggests. His snide comments and gratuitous appetite for ripping young chefs apart before eating

them alive isn't just for TV ratings. Off-camera, he was just as awful, bringing one of the PAs on set to tears after they asked for an autograph.

Seeing Fabrice's name as a reference on Ezra's resume told Derek all he needed to know. If Ezra could survive a year and a half under Fabrice's iron command, he could work well with anyone. So, Derek never got around to calling Fabrice to check the reference. He told himself he would but continued to put off what he knew would be an unpleasant conversation. Surely, there'd be sour grapes now that Ezra works for Derek. He can't imagine Fabrice dishing out compliments to anyone, let alone a past employee, so what good would calling him do?

Now Derek's back to square one, interviewing for a sous-chef again. Just in case his worst fears come to fruition.

"I'm gonna stay up and catch up on emails," Jace says with a ghost of a smile. He couldn't sleep right now if he wanted to. His mind is stuck on repeat, refusing to let the day's events go. All he sees is melted, strawberry ice cream and black and white newsprint when he closes his eyelids.

If Ted sensed Jace saw the wall of curiosities in the mirror's reflection, he hadn't let on. Nor did he seem overly worried about Ezra not coming home.

"I'm sure he'll turn up," he said at the end, slowly stirring the spoon in his bowl.

The entire encounter felt off, now that Jace is replaying it. It was as though Ted had been happier to see Jace when he opened the door than his missing roommate.

"Okay. Goodnight." Derek manages a meek smile. "I think I'm gonna call Blanca in the mornin'. See about her covering while I'm gone."

Jace nods.

It's a good idea.

In the grand scheme of things, notwithstanding his obvious concern, Ezra being MIA for twenty-four hours should be the least of Derek's concerns. He and Ezra might have had a

friendship, but at the end of the day, he has a business to run, and Ezra is replaceable.

Blanca can do what Derek needs her to do with a little guidance. She knows the menu inside out. She knows Derek's style of cooking and how he likes things to be plated and presented.

She would do him proud.

Keeping with the theme of good ideas, Jace has decided to wait until Derek flies out to LA before telling anyone about his father's return and Ezra's grisly death.

After leaving Ezra's apartment more perplexed than when he arrived, he made the executive decision to wait until Derek's on the other side of the country – far from Sam's reach – before going to Denise and the FBI with what he knows.

Sam won't be able to hurt Derek in LA, and if anyone will face the consequences of disobeying Sam's orders, it will be Jace alone.

The more Jace thinks about it as he takes a seat at the kitchen island, the more appealing the plan becomes. Derek will be away, focusing on his TV project, giving Jace a chance to deal with Sam on his own, head-on. With any luck, Sam will be behind bars again, where he belongs, by the time Derek returns.

Then they'll be able to move on with their lives and the wedding as planned.

Then the past will be put to bed, once and for all. And Jace will have finally delivered justice for his father's victims – something he never thought he'd have the chance to do.

Derek walks over to give Jace a peck on the lips and Stella follows, tail wagging.

“Night, babe. I'll be in, in a bit.” Jace answers the kiss with one of his own, savoring how soft and natural Derek's lips feel against his own. Like they were carved and made to fit each other.

He watches Derek slump down the hall with Stella hot on his heels.

He waits until he hears the shower running before he pops off the bar stool and begins to check the air vents for hidden microphones or cameras. He checks under the lamps and behind the TV and art on the walls for any sign of Sam watching or listening.

Tomorrow, he'll comb through the shop, but this is the best he can do tonight to ensure their home is secure.

Jace works fast, moving throughout their loft, with a careful ear listening for the water in the bathroom to stop.

He shakes his head in lament, aware of how insane he must look as he checks the last of the smoke detectors in their bedroom. Even Stella has her head cocked to one side as she watches, wondering what her crazy stepdad is up to now.

But Jace ignores her and presses on. He can't put anything past Sam. He's nowhere and everywhere all at once. He's a phantom. A ghost passing through walls.

Jace only has to hold on for a few more days, he reminds himself. Then, with Derek at a safe distance, he can strike back and finally put an end to Sam's red streak of death.

He just has to bite his tongue and keep it together for four more days, without Derek putting himself in the crosshairs of his plan.

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15 / MISSION

“I called the police,” Derek says the next morning.

Jace stares at him in disbelief, quietly filing this under the last thing he fucking needs right now.

Derek gives a satisfied half-smile from the kitchen. He has his hands full with blueberry pancakes in the works. Tiny beads of sweat rest on his smooth, bald head, and his muscles flex under his shirt as he lifts a cast-iron skillet to start plating.

“I told ‘em about Ezra. Everything! And I asked ‘em to go by to do a wellness check at his apartment.”

“Okay,” Jace says, his mouth gone dry. He licks his lips.

He shouldn’t be surprised by any of this though.

Leave it to Derek to do things by the book.

He’s had a chance to sleep on what Jace has told him. He’s rested now and has fully digested what Jace claims to have seen at Ezra’s apartment.

“I figure, legally, it’s my due diligence as his employer, you know? If Yuri or Caitlin were MIA or had some weird shit goin’ on, you’d do the same, right?”

“Right.” Jace parks himself at the kitchen island, inhaling the sweetness of the fresh blueberries and maple syrup Derek picked up from the farmers market last week. It’s hard to be upset with him when he’s cooked one of his favorite breakfasts. The gray sweatpants sagging off his hips also soften the blow of what he’s just done. “So, the police, they’ll just, what?” Jace shrugs. “Knock on the door, make sure everything is good inside the apartment?”

“Run a background check. Probably question the roommates.” Derek stops to top Jace’s plate with a handful of blueberries. “But who the hell knows if they’ll even go by? They probably won’t.”

He's right. They probably won't. And if they do, it'll be days from now. Derek will be in LA by the time they get around to dispatching someone. Likely a young beat cop who'll knock and barely poke his head inside. He'll be in and out and onto the next call in no time.

Unless Ted puts them on Jace's trail. He'd only have to mention that Ezra didn't come home after a work function. Then, a formal report would be filed and it's just a matter of time before the breadcrumbs trace back to Jace.

He cuts into his pancakes and takes a heaping bite, chewing thoughtfully as Derek continues to fill him in on his morning.

He's been busy.

"I did some callin' around this mornin' – trying to think who else might have heard from him or have another way to reach him." His expression darkens as he leans across the island, hovering over his plate. "You're not gonna believe what I found out," he glowers.

Derek's psyched himself up enough to call Fabrice, thinking he might have an emergency contact on file from when Ezra worked under him.

"Tell me why this man said he had no idea who I was talkin' about?" Derek spews.

Fabrice not only confirmed Ezra never worked as a sous-chef under him – at any of his restaurants – but he also doesn't know anyone by the name Ezra Weyl.

Derek gave Fabrice a firm description of Ezra over the phone and even tracked down a photocopy of Ezra's driver's license, taken when he was hired at Zora's. He texted the grainy photo in hopes of jogging Fabrice's memory.

The photocopy is all Derek has since he's been unsuccessful at finding Ezra on social media.

"Wait. It is weird he's not on social media, right?" Derek checks in. "I mean, even I'm on social media, and I fuckin' hate social media. Oh! And when he wasn't on the line, he was always on his phone. Doing what then, right?"

“Right. No, that’s fuckin’ weird,” Jace concurs. Ezra seemed the type to document everything on his timeline, or else it didn’t happen in real life.

“Right. So, anyway, Fabrice – who’s still an asshole, by the way – tells me it’s a photo of someone named Eddie – a busboy he had for two months, who he fired! ‘Cause he caught him stealing a case of wine from the bar.”

“Wait. What?”

“Yes. The whole thing was so fucking embarrassing.”

“Wait, wait. Hold up.” Jace holds a hand to his head to stop it from spinning. “You think Ezra lied on his resume? Or, maybe Ezra isn’t his real name at all?” He pulls his lips to one side, in a deep frown. “Babe! This is crazy. Why didn’t you lead with this?”

Derek matches his frown, looking equally off balance. “Sorry. I’m just all over the place this mornin’, tryna figure out what to do next. And I still need to call Blanca. Especially, I mean...” He shrugs. “Until I can sort out if he gave me a fake ID.”

Good luck with that. And just wait until Derek finds out he’s dead...

Jace sits in stunned silence as his pancakes go cold.

Derek glances at the time on the oven display. He stuffs his face with a thick forkful and asks through a mouthful, “You goin’ into work? Don’t be late.”

“Yeah. Caitlin has the day off. I do need to go in early.”

He nods slowly. “I’m gonna do some prep work for next week, and I have a few more calls to make. I’m gonna ask the staff tonight if they’ve heard anything too. Maybe Charlie knows somethin’ ‘bout these roommates. She’s always got the tea.”

“You mean booze,” Jace jokes, but Derek doesn’t crack a smile.

“There’s another reference he wrote down that’s probably bullshit. Some steakhouse in Philly with this God-awful logo.

You'd hate it. I'm waiting for them to call me back. And maybe I'll get a call back if the police swing by Ezra's today."

He's on a mission.

Jace is guessing Derek called the police after talking to Fabrice, which only fanned the flames that are spreading, making their way back to Jace.

Now, as far as Derek's concerned, it's no longer a matter of a missing sous-chef. It's a matter of the missing sous-chef's true identity.

And as far as Jace is concerned, this "missing" sous-chef may have just added jet fuel to the fire.

What explosive secrets has he been harboring, pinned to the wall of his apartment?

Could Ezra Weyl not be the person everyone thought he was?

And, if that's true... then who the hell did Sam Mader kill in the basement that night?

• • •

Jace narrows an eye at the digital scale, after piling on another handful of smoked pancetta.

There are dozens of things he'd rather be doing right now, like taking a deep dive into Ezra's past, but business has been steady and it's just himself and Yuri in the shop today.

Jace smiles at everyone he encounters, going about the day as if nothing is out of sorts. Wild thoughts pulse through his head with reckless abandon.

Ezra's social media void bothers him, most of all.

How did he miss that?

It's a red flag on fire! These days, anyone not on social media is either hiding something or hiding from someone. Jace could be the poster boy for this theory. Outside of once managing social media campaigns for his clients at Moxy, he has no

personal use for any of the platforms. The last thing he needs is deranged fans of his father's work trolling him online and liking what he has for breakfast.

Why didn't Jace ever try looking Ezra up?

Then again, if Ezra (or whoever he was) had friended Jace, Jace would have muted or unfollowed him instantly. Outside of work, Jace would have had no real interest in anything Ezra might have posted. And who wants to see Ezra's face every time they scroll?

Jace got enough of that from Ezra coming in daily to go over Zora's orders and talking him to death.

"Thanks so much for coming in! And, remember, pair that pancetta and Robiola with a nice fruity red. It's crazy good together. You'll love it."

The tall, lanky woman at his counter – a pretty, fashionably-dressed brunette he hasn't seen in the shop before – thanks him and smiles on her way out. It's the kind of fast smile you give the bellman who holds the door open for you.

Yuri gives an airy sigh from the other end of the counter as the door swings shut. His stare follows her through the storefront window as he inhales the last of her designer perfume.

"No ring." Jace raises an eyebrow. "And she's tall, like you. That could be cute."

"Legs for days." Yuri whistles and rolls his gloves from his hands. "She's gotta be from NoHo. She's got that vibe."

"I can see you with an uptown girl. She also bought the Wagyu. Girl's got expensive taste," Jace warns. "And maybe a boyfriend? She's cookin' all that for someone. Might have some competition, Ri Ri."

"Man, pssch." He waves a hand and pops his imaginary collar. "One taste of my homemade sukiyaki. One taste! I'll make her my wife."

"Your sukiyaki is suki-yummy," Jace admits.

Yuri made the hearty, Nabemono-style dish for Jace when he invited him over for dinner a few months ago.

“Who knows?” Jace teases. “Maybe if you’d popped the question over your famous sukiyaki, I might be engaged to you instead of Derek.”

“Ha! Yeah, Derek beat me to it.” He gives a droll smile. “So, still no Ezra, huh?”

Jace holds in a breath. “Still no Ezra.”

“Hundred bucks says that fool skipped town.”

“Really?” Jace looks up from the register. “You think?”

He hasn’t heard this theory yet. Even Derek hasn’t voiced this suspicion, despite Ezra’s identity crisis surfacing this morning.

“Oh, hell yeah.” He snorts and reaches behind his head to retie his ponytail. “Prob’ly in some kinda trouble, left when he had a chance. I’ve seen it before. Drugs. Gambling debt.” He reaches into the cold display with a pair of tongs to rearrange a tray of flank steaks. “Organizing the party was probably his partin’ gift cuz he knew he was about to leave Derek high and dry. Did he take anything? From Zora’s or from here?”

“Steal anything? No.”

Ezra was a lot of things, but not a thief.

Actually, strike that.

It’s progressively looking like none of them knew the real Ezra. And according to Fabrice, this Eddie person did steal from the bar.

Yuri raises one of his thick brows. “I thought that’s what that cop came in about the other day. Caitlin tell you about that?”

“No. No, what cop?”

“Ahh, shit.... I forget her name!” He squints and snaps his fingers. “She said she left you a message though.”

Jace barely contains a sigh. “Was it Bradshaw? Denise?”

“Denise! Agh!” He points and tosses his head back in relief. “I should’ve remembered that. I dated a Denise in high school. Fuckin’ nut-job. She slit the tires on my dirt bike.”

Jace blinks.

“Long story.”

“Well, what did she say?”

“She denied the whole thing! But my neighbor’s grandma saw her do it. Broad daylight!”

“Not that Denise. Cop-Denise!”

“Ohhh. I thought...” He laughs, but his face turns serious when Jace doesn’t join in. “Sorry, I – I overheard her talkin’ to Caitlin. Just bits and pieces. She told Caitlin to have you call her.” He watches Jace’s expression dim, then waits a beat before asking, “She seem a little off to you lately? Caitlin?”

It takes a moment for Jace to zero in on Yuri’s question. He’s too busy imagining Denise swaying her way back into the shop. It’s miraculous he missed her and has been able to dodge her. But he knows his luck won’t last forever.

“Caitlin?” He finally shrugs. “She’s always a little off, that’s what we love about her, right?”

Yuri passes a hand over his scruffy chin. “Right. It’s probably nothing,” he says. “Just like our boy, Ezra. He’s prob’ly in Mexico drinkin’ piña coladas by now.”

Jace is about to tell Yuri Derek’s discovery when his phone rings. His eyes go large at the number lighting up his screen.

“I got this.” Yuri tilts his head toward the empty shop.

“Thanks. Should just be a sec.” He retreats to his office and closes the door before answering. “Banks... hi.”

“You sound out of breath.”

Banks has always had this effect on him. He’s tall and Hispanic with fiery, bronze skin, full lips, and eyes like sunlight shining through whiskey. The last time he saw Banks, his jawline was peppered with more age, matching his graying temples that came before a wave of glossy, black hair. He looked like a handsome telenovela star who’s made a deal with the devil to age gracefully.

Jace breathes out through his nose. “I just ran to my office.”

Why is he calling?

“I hear congratulations are in order.” His accent is thick and melodic, sounding slightly out of tune. It brings back memories of their rapid-fire romance – ended in long-distance, late-night calls that became daily chores and grew fewer and fewer.

“Congratulations for what?”

There’s a pause on the line. “I hear you’re engaged.” The words sound strained, like a guitar string strung too tight and about to break. “Syd told me.”

Of course.

Classic Syd.

“Guess he wants me to know how bad I fucked up.” He attempts a chuckle, but it gets caught in his throat.

Jace can’t help the little smile that takes over, imagining what Syd must have told him. He definitely mentioned how much Derek spent on the ring.

“This a bad time?” Banks clears his throat roughly, away from the phone.

The good times are over. Replaced with nothing but death and one twisted revelation after another, it seems.

“Uhm, yeah. I mean, no. This is fine. It’s fine.”

It would be a good time to tell him about the recent happenings. Banks has no jurisdiction in New York, so he could be a neutral ally.

Then again, he is a hardened detective, down to the marrow in his bones. He’d ring the alarm out of a keen sense of duty. Because everything he does on the force is to honor his father, a fallen hero killed on patrol during a botched robbery.

He can’t tell Banks, he quickly realizes. He can’t tell Banks for the same reason he can’t tell Quinn, who’s dating a cop. Or Denise, who might hold him under investigation and in handcuffs. Then what good would he be if Sam decides to come after Derek to tie up loose ends?

“Where are you? What’s all that noise?”

“I’m just leaving Pat’s.” The sound of Portland traffic and the city bleeds through the airwaves.

Jace sits on the edge of his desk and swoons. “Pat’s! Ugh! I miss Pat’s. Do they still have those crème brulée scones I like?”

“Ohh, yes.” There’s a smile in his voice. “And their caramel brulée latte’s back. Your favorite.”

“Hmph. You remember.”

“Of course! This was our spot.” There’s a warmth in his voice. It reaches through the invisible phone line between them and caresses Jace’s cheek. “I can’t come here and not think of you,” he adds slowly. Painfully. “I should stop coming, but they’re the only goddamn place in town that makes a decent café de olla. It’s—”

“It’s the piloncillo. I know,” Jace cuts in with a smirk. “You always say that.”

“It’s so hard to find here in the states.”

“I know.” Jace laughs, imagining Banks shaking his head for the thousandth time, always in awe of how hard authentic Mexican spices are to find in Portland, despite the budding food scene.

He suddenly misses their morning coffee dates.

“You at the shop?” Banks asks. “You’re probably at work, aren’t you? I won’t keep you.”

“I mean, I am, but it’s fine—”

“No, it’s fine. I just called to do what I guess I’m supposed to do now,” he says, sounding cross suddenly. A car horn blares in the background. “This is the part where I say, ‘I’m happy for you and wish you guys all the best.’ Right?”

“Banks...”

There’s a pause. Only the sound of his breath courses through the line as he makes quick paces to cross the street.

“I guess I’m supposed to just forget everything we’ve been through and buy you something expensive off your registry –

after a wedding you won't invite me to – to show you I've moved on and there are no hard feelings.”

Jace is silent. He knew this was coming.

His breathing picks up again, as though he's jogging to cross the street in time before the light turns. His next words come in sharp, brassy notes, blurted without regard to sheet music or what he's supposed to say under the circumstances.

“I wish I could do that, Jace. But I don't wish you and Derek the best,” he says daringly. “I hope he fucks up and makes the biggest mistake of his life by losing you. Then he'll know what it feels like,” he adds. “And then, maybe, just maybe... I'll have a chance to win back the man I still love. The man I was stupid enough to let go in the first place.”

Jace sighs into his phone.

“How's that for honesty and 'being transparent with one another?’”

It's the sweetest and most horrible thing Banks has ever said to him.

“I bought a plane ticket!” He laughs. “I was gonna fly out next month. Try to surprise you. Take you out to—” The line cuts out. “—like how we used to, you know? And, I thought, who knows...we...” His voice fades. “—should have been there for you. I know—”

“Wait. Banks! You're cutting out.”

A moment passes before he returns, oblivious to the gaps in his reckless serenade. “So, what do you think?”

Jace clutches the phone and flails his free arm by his side.

“About what? I couldn't—”

“The plane ticket,” he repeats, loudly. “What if I don't tear it up? What if I...?” The rest hangs in the air between them, too audacious to take shape and become real.

Jace steels himself to tell Banks all the reasons he should tear up the plane ticket and find a new coffee shop when a text message rings through.

“Banks, hang on a second. Don’t hang up.” He turns his phone over to discover a new message from the unknown number that warned him not to go to the police.

He instantly dreads another threat or worse but instead finds an invitation of sorts.

Shangri-La

Come alone

6am tomorrow

It’s the come alone part that’s most troubling, that makes him bite his lower lip hard enough to draw blood. Whenever people say this in movies, it never ends well for someone.

He just hopes he won’t be that someone.

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16 / IT'S THE COLORS

Shangri-La is black brick and muscle, squeezed between a corner law office and an empty brownstone once home to a start-up design agency. Marked only by a small, bronze plaque on its shadowy exterior, tarnished in seafoam-green patina, Jace might have walked past it had he not known where to look. But he's heard the stories about the infamous black building on 4th Street and knows what lies behind its looming, ominous door.

A bathhouse.

Not like the neon bathhouses that line Manhattan's underbelly with their sticky floors and cabins to rent by the hour. Shangri-La is modeled after Europe's sprawling, ornate bathhouses with its Roman columns, soaring glass ceilings, and Venetian tile walls that have started to crack. In the seventies, it was a celebrity hot spot where the wealthy flocked to detox in one of the saunas or be seen soaking in its massive pool under a glossy blue sky.

These days, the clientele is anything but posh, blue-blooded New Yorkers and celebutants. It's now a private men's club, rumored to be run by the Volkov Clan. Old World Russian mafia.

As far back as when Jace was in middle school, there were stories whispered about people entering and never coming out. "So, if you dare pass by Shangri-La – especially at night – you'd better run before the building snatches you up and swallows you whole, bones and all!"

As Jace treks up the wet, brick stairs, huddled under his umbrella, he hopes the schoolyard tales aren't true.

It's been raining all morning, which has only added to his agitation. He lied as he loosed himself from Derek's arms and slinked out of the warm covers, telling Derek he was going to the gym and then work. He hated himself for lying but forged ahead, reminding himself that the truth might only put Derek

in more danger. Now, as he shakes his umbrella and braces himself to walk inside, he notices an emblem etched into the plaque by the door.

He'd never gotten close enough on his walks home from school to chance a close look, but now he takes his time observing the logo.

It's a wolf. Its silhouetted stance suggests it's about to pounce and Jace is suddenly reminded that Volkov means "wolf" in Russian – something he looked up out of curiosity back in school.

Not seeing a doorbell, he pushes past the heavy door, enters the wolves' den, and is greeted by an attendant.

It's actually less of a greeting and more of a glare laced with scrutiny. And the bald, burly man in his late fifties behind the counter is less of an attendant and more of a pack leader. There's no nametag or false smiles. No spa-white uniform or pleasantries. He's in black pants and a tight, black tee covering his hairy physique that was ostensibly once muscular and solid but has begun to collapse in on itself.

He asks for Jace's name before checking it off a black, bound registry. Next, Jace's phone is confiscated, zipped up and stowed away in a leather pouch with a lock. The type banks use.

Jace quickly realizes the rumors are true.

No phones allowed inside Shrangri-La.

He signs what he can only surmise is an NDA of sorts – far too long to read through as the old Russian rushes him along. With a quick scribble of his signature, he soon finds himself wandering the wet, tiled halls in a small towel and flip-flops a size too large.

He still can't believe his phone was seized. Which makes it apparent why Sam wants to meet here, of all places. Anyone who gets past the front desk is stripped down to their skin, putting everyone on equal footing. There's a lower chance of weapons entering the building. (Where the hell would you hide them?) These waist towels leave nothing to the

imagination, and the few club members Jace passes on his way to find the steam rooms have unabashedly left theirs in the locker room.

With everyone nude or in thin, flimsy towels, there's also no way for anyone to wear a wire, take photos, or secretly record conversations with their phones. So, there will be no gathering proof of Sam's resurgence at this meeting, it seems. Sam's immune, safe here. Perhaps safer than he is anywhere else.

The same can likely be said for the men wandering the misty rooms like ghosts. Judges. Lawyers. Professional criminals... They're all rotten in one form or another, whether it's organized crime or crooked politics.

In the corporate world, deals are sealed on the golf course. In the underworld, deals are struck in private boys' clubs like Shangri-La. What looks like casual conversation in the jacuzzi could be talk of a plea bargain or a hit being ordered.

Jace releases the breath he's been holding once he finds the steam rooms the attendant loosely directed him to. There are six altogether that seem to follow some sort of color code, noted by the color of the lightbulb in each room.

Red. Pink. Dark purple.

The view through each of the rooms' glass doors provides a glimpse of shadowy figures sitting inside colorful, swirling steam. Technicolor monsters sweating and plotting.

Jace was told to find the blue room, which is a mindfuck. The porcelain tile walls with their facing benches look ice-cold in the blue glow, but it's hard to breathe and his skin perspires in the 110-degree heat.

He's alone and the first to arrive – or so it seems until the bellowing mist clears and, as if Jace has conjured him up, Sam slowly takes shape on the bench opposite him.

It doesn't feel real. Even now, Jace questions if Sam is actually there until he speaks.

“You're late.”

“And you’re supposed to be dead,” Jace grunts. “But here we both are.”

“I know you have questions,” he says.

“Just one.” Jace leans forward and wipes the sweat beading on his forehead. “Why. I just wanna know why. What the fuck would make you kill those people? Nineteen people. How?”

Sam flinches and something that looks like shame bubbles to the surface. But Jace knows better. Sociopaths like Sam know how to turn it on and off. It’s how they blend into a world they don’t understand undetected.

“Gordon Garvey. Bryan Felder! Margorie Peters...” Jace can recite Sam’s victims by name and in order of their death.

“They all had families. Real people, left behind. Who you fucked over twice when you ‘hung yourself’ in prison. Nice trick, by the way.”

There’s that faux remorse again, working its way through the muscles in Sam’s face and jaw. He’s in a towel, same as Jace, so there’s no dark clothing or disguise to hide behind now. There’s no baseball cap either, which reveals his shiny bald head in the blue light – a glimpse into Jace’s future.

“All that anger. All that loss!” Jace glares through the thick, hissing steam. “What made you do it?”

He throws his shoulders back and his face softens. “It’s the colors,” he says, his voice hollow and even-keeled. “They all had ‘em, Jasey. I had to do it, I had to stop ‘em. Even if no one else understood.”

Jace wearily shakes his head. “What colors? What the fuck are you talking about? You murdered nineteen people! You admitted it. I was there!”

He shifts uneasily on the wet, tile bench and swipes a hand against the shine and sweat on his forehead.

“It was Louann Meltzer. It started with that old bitch,” he says in a raw voice. “She worked with your mother, at the hospital.”

He pauses, but Jace doesn't know the name. She isn't one of the nineteen.

“Your mother and her were close. She was the head nurse, took to Lorna in a real bad way. They'd carry on and go out for drinks over at The Mill some nights after work.”

Jace remembers this! Not Louann, but he remembers his mother coming home on occasion, smelling of gin. Still in her scrubs from work.

“Kenny, over there, let 'em drink for free sometimes. Cuz his mother was a nurse.”

The name Louann Meltzer still doesn't resonate, but Jace remembers his mother having a friend. A friend she and Sam would argue over sometimes.

“Your mother thought Louann was a saint. Should have been a nun,” Sam sneers. “Thought the woman walked on water, the way she ran their department – even though patients were dyin' left and right!”

“What are you saying?” Jace shrugs. “What does this have to do with anything?”

“She was killin' em off!” Sam barks. “She was keepin' em sick, on her shift. Makin' em suffer. And no one knew. Not even your mother. Then – out the blue – once the families started gettin' more involved, they'd take a turn for the worse. Die overnight, right in the hospital bed they were in... And the doctor,” he scoffs, “They were thinkin' it was some kinda virus or infection or some shit.”

Jace leans back, feeling the warm, slick tile on his back. He notes that, for the first time, Sam looks genuinely troubled. Something about this campfire tale has found its way under his skin.

“Your mother told me about it. Folks that went in for simple stuff. Shoulda been in and out!” His gray eyes bulge. “And never came out. I mean, shit, I didn't think much of it at first. I had enough goin' on at the shop, but then I met Louann for myself.” His face tightens. “I'll never forget it. You got a

nosebleed at school. It wouldn't stop, so I picked up you and brought you to the hospital, 'member that?"

Jace gives a slow nod. He does. It happened during gym, and he'd been grateful for the excuse to get out of playing basketball – a skill he's never been good at and thankfully hasn't needed out in the real world.

"Lorna was busy, so Louann helped admit you and as soon as that bitch walked in, I saw it!" He moves his hands around his head wildly to illustrate. "The colors! I'd never seen anything like it; this purple and blue glow!" He recoils. "But it wasn't bright. It was dark. So... dark, like a... like a cloud! Hazy. Around her head and her shoulders... around her mouth and on her hands... Every word that came out of her – everything she touched! She was marked by somethin' evil, Jasey. And only I could see it!"

He's insane.

Jace's mouth falls open, but he listens on intently.

"It followed her around the room, everywhere she went, and that's when I knew it was her! She was the one killin' patients."

"You mean like Munchausen syndrome by proxy," Jace breathes. "Well, not exactly."

"Call it whatever you want. All I know is she had to be stopped. Cold! I told your mother about it. We figured she'd lose her right to practice medicine, prob'ly go to jail, but then what? She'd get out and find somebody else to prey on."

Jace's throat tightens. "So, you killed her."

He glances up at the ceiling. "Your mother invited her over one night, after they went to The Mill. Louann was tipsy but that old bitch could hold her liquor." He smirks in near admiration. "Your mother finally agreed to do it peacefully, so there wouldn't be a struggle or fightin'. We knew we'd need a way to calm her. To keep her still, so I could put her down."

The Midazolam and Halothane.

“Your mother didn’t watch,” Sam says, as if this makes any difference. His eyes look glassy in the sapphire light of the room. “She didn’t want to watch or have any of it in the house, so on their way back from The Mill, they passed by the shop —”

“And you did it in the basement.” A mixture of sweat and tears rolls down Jace’s cheek.

“Your mother went home.” He hangs his head and laces his fingers on his lap. “I told her I’d take care of everything and it’d be quick, but once I got her on the table somethin’ just snapped.” His hands break apart. His fingers dig into the thin towel on his lap. “She was sick! And I wanted her to suffer. The way she made all those people suffer. And that glow – I just—” A tortured laugh escapes his throat. “I wanted to cut out all the color. All of it. ‘Til there was nothing left. It all had to go, son,” he says firmly and shakes his head in a frenzy. “It was in her hair, on her hands...”

“That’s why you shaved them,” Jace realizes. “And their fingernails... And pulling out their teeth... All this time, I always wondered.”

“They all had it, Jasey,” he swears. “The same dark colors on their mouths, all over their hands...” He leans in with a mad grin on his face. His eyes wild and frightening. “So, you see? They were all marked! And Gordon Garvey?” He turns up his nose. “That fuck raped two girls in college and bragged about it to his coworkers over at Macky’s, at the bar! Heard it for myself.”

Alex’s father was a rapist?

“Bryan Felder?” He throws up his hands. “Pedophile. Volunteered at this summer camp down at the Pinelands Reserve. Only tent he ever pitched was in his pants. Sick fuck. And, uh, what’s-her-name you said, Margorie?” His laugh deepens. “Black widow. Killed off two husbands for the insurance money. Husband number three filed a restraining order after he figured out she was poisonin’ him. Told me this himself in the shop.” He clears his throat and points a finger.

“Greg Peters. Now, there was a nice guy. Good, regular customer too. He still come around?”

“I, I don’t think so.” Jace blinks. He’s busy reconciling what Sam has told him.

Sam’s victims hadn’t been random.

He’d come into contact with them one way or another and learned of their indiscretions. Or, more precisely, according to Sam, he’d seen that they’d been ‘marked’ through some sixth sense and put a stop to them.

“So, you’re tellin’ me they all had it comin’. Ezra and Aaron Gilbert too.”

“I told you that courthouse shit wasn’t me.” Sam bares his teeth. “It’s someone pretendin’ to be me.” There’s that troubled look again.

They say imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, but Sam doesn’t look pleased or flattered. He looks worried by it.

“And your friend, Ezra, left me no choice. Sounded like I did you a favor though.” He must have heard them arguing in the basement that night. Perhaps, he’d even been watching Jace the days leading up to it.

“So, did Ezra have... the colors?”

He tilts his head. “You tell me. Did he?”

Jace shakes his head, at a loss. Sam pushes out a breath.

“Like I said, he left me no choice. As for the others? Yeah. The others all had it comin’ and I gave it to ‘em.” He nods dutifully. “Got to be so good at it, I didn’t need the backstory. Saw the colors comin’ off ‘em blocks away.”

So, he hadn’t known all of his victims personally, which had been the presumption all along. In court, he’d confessed to roaming the streets in his prop wheelchair but never mentioned any sort of system for choosing his victims – and certainly nothing about colors. The methods serial killers use to choose their victims are wide-ranging. Something about a person in passing can strike a chord leading back to a childhood trauma. Maybe it’s the color of their hair or a reminder of someone

who hurt them in the past. It can be the tiniest of details that set them off or purely an itch, a thirst to kill they can never satisfy.

“Your mother didn’t know,” he adds in a thin voice. “She thought it was just Louann, which was hard enough. She was so tore up when she realized it’d been her all along, behind the deaths in their unit.” His gaze drifts off, no doubt picturing his late wife. Standing over the stove in her pale blue scrubs, fussing at him with a spatula in her hand and sponge curlers rolled into her dark brown hair. “She didn’t know about the others, after Louann.”

No one had. Until the city bought the building next door and found his kill room by mistake during renovations. The contractors thought it was just another of the deli’s prep rooms until they found the rolling file cabinet full of hair, fingernails, and teeth, all drained of their ‘color’.

“Your mother didn’t do what they said she did. After Louann, once I knew the right dosage, I found this junkie doctor motherfucker at the hospital. He didn’t give two shits about sellin’ me what I needed. Small potatoes compared to all the oxy and other shit he stole off his shift.”

Jace’s shoulders sink. “But she still felt responsible. That’s why she did what she did.” His voice breaks and he fights back a fresh wave of tears, wiping angrily at his face.

Sam peers down at his hands again. A heavy sigh rattles in his chest. “She, um...” He can’t finish the thought. Won’t finish it. “She’d be proud of you, know that? Hell, I know I am. It must have been somethin’ else renovatin’ and reopenin’ the shop?”

There’s a lot Jace wants to tell him. Like how hard it’s been keeping the shop afloat and all the late nights he spent patching holes from the past, cursing Sam’s name and all the while wishing he were alive to see him bring old bricks and concrete back to life. He wants to tell Sam what his life was like growing up. Everything he missed. The things he’s accomplished on his own and the places he’s lived along the way. He wants to tell him how he saved the building, hoping

to scrub the blood and tarnish off their family name and return its former honor.

“There’s a lot you’ve missed.”

Absentee Father of the Year doesn’t seem to cover it.

“I know.” He wets his lips and swallows. “You’re all grown up, runnin’ the shop.” He beams with pride and leans back, partially disappearing into the mist. “Got yourself employees. Engaged.” He chuckles, glancing at Jace’s ring finger. “And Lord knows you look just like me when I was your age.”

The sweat on Jace’s arms turns to ice. Morphing into his father is what he’s feared most and here they are, staring into their past and future selves.

“Why did you come back?” Jace shakes his head.

“For the same reason you did.”

The building.

Did it call out to him?

“I saw an article online about the grand reopening,” he says. “Then I saw this copycat courthouse bullshit,” he sneers. “I knew it was time to come back.”

“And do what? Make up for lost time? Go throw the football back and forth? All that shit you never wanted to do with me before ‘cause you were too busy killing people?!” Jace fixes Sam with a hard stare. “Let’s cut the bullshit, Dad. Just tell me what you want.”

“In time,” Sam says calmly. He leans back into the light, his face blue and discerning. “For now, all you have to do is do what I say. Follow my lead and I’ll tell you whatever you wanna know. About before.”

“And you’ll leave Derek out of this? He has nothing to do with this. Derek stays out of this.”

“Have you left the police out of this?” His top lip twitches, hinting at a smirk. “I cleaned up your little loud-mouth friend – you’re welcome by the way – but I could just as easily give him back to you. Put him somewhere a little more public this

time since you wanna pin this courthouse bullshit on me. See how you like it.”

Jace ventures a guess that Sam doesn't know for certain that he dialed Denise or that Derek called the police, but if he finds out there'll be hell to pay.

Punishment.

Jace's mouth is a grim line as he thinks back to the worst punishment his father ever dealt. A beating with a plastic wand from the blinds that broke over Jace's backside – which, in hindsight was a cakewalk compared to what Sam was doing to his victims in the basement of the deli.

“Just follow my instructions and everything will make sense.” Sam nods, firm. “Then, you and Derek can go on and get married, have a normal life. Wouldn't that be nice?” He produces a smile he's rehearsed dozens of times before.

“Instructions.” Jace narrows his eyes, trying to imagine a life that's normal. Something he's craved that has always been just out of reach. “If I do what you want, you'll leave Derek alone?”

“I don't want to hurt Derek,” he says lightly. “He's a good guy. I can see that.” He must mean he doesn't see any colors on Derek. “But if I have to – if you make me – I will.”

It's not a bluff. It's the one thing Sam can use to control him, and the only way to truly punish Jace if he decides to disobey.

Jace nods dimly to show he understands, and Sam's smile widens. He looks young and spry suddenly, happy Jace is willing to listen.

“There's someone I want you to meet.”

“Don't tell me. A long-lost, homicidal half-brother I never knew about?”

“No.”

“The plot thins.”

“But, you're gonna wanna meet this fuck.” Sam stands to his feet and his eyes go wild again. “Trust me.”

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17 / EQUALS

“Sean Pratt.” Sam points to a small group lingering by the spa’s lockers. “Light blue.” He points again from where he and Jace stand, tucked in a corner adjacent to the showers.

“Light blue?”

If this is a test, Jace is failing. He sees no swirls or auras of color. There are no colors attached to the men in towels before them. Only wiry chest and back hair and the occasional tattoo covering slick bodies.

Jace squints and looks back to Sam with a shrug.

“Nothing.” The lines around Sam’s mouth and forehead deepen. “You don’t see anything?” He says this as though he doesn’t believe Jace.

“All I see is white people,” Jace says. “No colors or whatever. No light blue, Dad. Just people.”

There’s that word again.

Dad.

It doesn’t slip past Sam unnoticed.

His face softens. “That’s alright.” He gives an encouraging smile. “There’s a lot of static – brightness in here,” he mumbles. “This whole place is lit up with colors. That don’t help – but it’ll come to you! It just hasn’t come yet. But you’ll see, one day,” he promises. He points to the man farthest left now and sneers. “Look, there. It’s all over his hands.”

Sean Pratt, the man farthest left, is taller than the rest with dirty-blond hair that’s starting to thin on the crown of his head. He’s brawny, like he might have played football once. Now he just watches, yelling at the television from the couch as his fantasy football team loses. He’s handsome in a conventional sense with wear and tear along the edges, but there’s nothing menacing on the surface. The way he smiles, flashing surprisingly perfect teeth, and laughs with the other

men is almost contagious. They lean in to catch and hang onto his every word, blind to anyone walking by.

Sean looks used to the attention. Comfortable with it.

Sam lowers his voice. “He works on Wall Street. Some kind of political commentator on the side – has this stupid podcast. Family man. Goes to church with his two daughters and wife every Sunday... Loves to strangle transvestites on the weekend.”

Jace balks, then thinks over what Sam has said. He must be wrong. “Do you mean transgender?”

Sam blinks.

“Not a ‘cross-dresser’...” Jace gives a deprecating frown and rolls his eyes, heading off his father’s antiquated thinking. “It’s like this... Someone who’s transgender has a gender identity or expression that’s different from cultural expectations, based on the sex they were assigned at birth.” It’s Syd’s stringent definition Jace has recited. It’s how Syd explained it when he came out to Jace years ago, over burgers and vegan pizza at a small diner in Portland; moments after they first met, after leaving a protest that had turned violent.

Sam sighs wearily. “Fine. Yeah. That one, I guess. All I know is they’re part of the LGBT community,” he sputters, “And he’s only got a thing for the Black ones, the ‘transgenders’ or whatever. They look like women.”

“It’s LGBTQ+, and they are women,” Jace corrects him. “Transgender women are women.” Jace watches Sam’s face scrunch with muddled confusion as he attempts to compute this. Coming from a time when transgender people were enigmas, misunderstood and mislabeled with even fewer human rights, it’s a lot for him to take in and too much for Jace to unpack for him now. So, Jace puts a pin in the topic and focuses on what Sam’s trying to tell him instead. “So, he’s strangling Black, transgender women?”

This is why, out of a room of monsters, Sam has singled out Sean Pratt. It’s a crime that hits close to home. Close to the “LGBT community.”

“He goes on these camping trips,” Sam says in a hushed voice. “That’s what he tells his idiot wife. Son-of-a-bitch comes home completely clean, showered. No dirt on his boots. Maybe a few scratches on his arms, but that’s easy to explain after a few days ‘in the woods’.”

Sam’s been watching him. Knows where he lives.

“So, she has no idea. She probably thinks he’s having an affair,” Jace mutters as Sean sits on one of the wooden benches in front of the lockers. Muscles spread across his back like wrought iron wings under thin skin. “He knows it though. He lets her think that.”

“Easier than the truth,” Sam grunts. “Better a cheater than a murderer.”

“He strangles them?” Jace chews on this with disgust. “Why haven’t I seen anything on the news about this? Missing trans women or bodies turning up.”

He lets a sharp laugh slip out. “You think you would? Maybe if they were pretty, blonde, blue-eyed white girls bein’ strangled, sure! News would be all over that!”

He’s right. For years, the media has disproportionately reported missing person cases when it comes to white people versus people of color. Tens of thousands of Black girls and women go missing each year, yet their cases rarely grab national headlines. Trans women of color fall even further below their radar, despite violence against transgender and gender non-conforming people rising each year.

“He picks ‘em up outside nightclubs or hires ‘em off this app. Dumps the bodies in the woods. Doesn’t even bother to bury ‘em. Doesn’t like getting his hands dirty,” Sam snarls.

Jace’s face falls flat. They’re in a room full of monsters, cut from the same cloth, yet Sam dares to turn up his nose at Sean’s methods.

“He was on the wire last week, braggin’ about his latest kill.”

Jace grimaces. “Those fucking chat boards...”

It's chilling to imagine a network of killers and their fans, hovering over their computers – all connected, exchanging stories of torture like recipes on the dark web.

“Natureboy75.” Sam rolls his eyes. “He's gonna do it again. Soon. He—” Sam lowers his head as someone passes. He takes a cautious step behind Jace and waits until they're alone before finishing his thought. “He needs to kill again. He's got the itch. I can see it all over his hands and his fingers.”

And Jace can see he's misjudged his father's position here. Apparently, Sam can be “out” at Shangri-La, but only to a point. He might be the nastiest monster here with the sharpest teeth, but there's still the danger of being recognized if time and how he's aged fall short of a disguise.

Most of his victim's families offered reward money at one point for information on their missing loved one's whereabouts. It'd be an easy con should someone at Shangri-La decide to turn Sam in with news of him being alive.

It also isn't lost on Jace that he and Sam are the only men of color here. Even in hiding, they stand out in the misty shadows of the locker room. And Sam must feel it. Ostracized. Even among men who share a history of blood on their hands, there's no one with hands that look like Sam's.

Except for Jace, who Sam has convinced himself is capable of seeing what he sees with time and a little grooming.

For a moment, Jace feels sorry for him. He knows what it's like to be the darkest thing in the room. To feel alone, even in a room of people who claim to be your peers, your friends, and equals.

Sam clears his throat roughly and insists, “He's gonna do it again soon.”

“Let's say I believe you,” Jace takes his lower lip between his teeth. “I could just call it in. An anonymous tip. A surprise visit from the police should do it.”

“You don't think he'd be ready for that?”

“You weren't.”

He frowns. “Very funny, smartass. You know, I found where that son-of-a-bitch Bernie Helman lives.”

Jace knows the name. He was the lead on the city’s “rejuvenation” project that gentrified their neighborhood and led to the accidental discovery of Sam’s kill room when the city bought the property next door.

Sam licks his lips. “It’s too bad he’s clean.” He must mean no colors. “Otherwise, I’d pay that short little fuck a visit.”

“So, what, he doesn’t meet your ‘code of ethics’? No bad auras?” Jace rolls his eyes. “This whole thing is fucked. What am I even doing here?”

“You wanted answers. This is how you get them.” Sam points to Sean. “And if you don’t believe me, just find his keepsakes. Find what he takes from them. Hair. Jewelry. Panties. Could be anything, but it’s somethin’.”

“If he’s responsible—” Jace catches the spike in his voice and lowers it. “If he’s responsible for what you’re saying, I could just call the police. Let them search his home. With a warrant.”

“You’re missing the point.” He bares his crooked teeth. “If he gets caught, it’d be a slap on the wrist for someone like him.” He shoots Sean a look of disdain mixed with jealousy. “He plays racquetball with the Assistant DA. His brother’s a lawyer. He’d get off on some technicality or be back on the streets in a few years. If he serves time! The worst you’d do is spook him. He’ll change up his routine, maybe even jet in the middle of the night, and then he might never be found again.”

Jace wonders if the same could be true of Sam if he turned him in to Denise. He tightens the towel at his waist, eyebrows furrowed.

Would Sam run, vanishing from his life for good this time?

“There’s only one way to stop a killer,” Sam says with an airy sigh.

Jace watches Sean bend and unlock the metal locker in front of him, preparing to dress and leave. Then, with a surge of shock, Jace blinks a few times rapidly, feeling the weight of Sam’s words.

There's only one way to stop a killer...

He looks over his shoulder at Sam and gawks. "What are you saying?"

A cruel smile spreads across Sam's lips. "You're my son." He nearly laughs and his gray eyes shimmer. "You know what I'm saying."

• • •

Stella pounces on Jace as soon as he walks in, a decision her old joints will pay for later.

He bends to nuzzle her and scratch between her ears. "Hey, girl! What's gotten into you?"

She jumps again, then spins in a circle, stopping to look between Jace and Derek with a whine.

Derek barely glances up from the kitchen island. He's scribbling in his notebook with his chef's jacket half-buttoned. His shoes sit on the stool next to him.

"On your way out?"

Derek mumbles a reply and a string of ingredients to himself as he writes. His pen flutters across the page, capturing an idea for a new entree before it has a chance to fly out of his head.

The loft is quiet, void of music and rumbling pots on the stove. For the first time in days, the house smells of nothing. Only a hint of dander and cleaning spray in the air.

"Did you eat?" Jace shivers and drops his wet umbrella at the door. "I could have brought us something from the shop."

Derek drops his pen, pushes off the counter, and meets his eyes. "I'm good," he says. "How was your day? How was the gym this morning?"

Jace holds his breath.

Derek never asks about his workouts.

Except for the time he found Hayden's phone number in Jace's gym shorts and Jace had to explain the dumpster fire that's Hayden and that he meant to throw his number away but forgot. For about a week after that, Derek would ask offhandedly, "How was the gym?" before his suspicions eventually wilted and died down.

"I didn't go to the gym," Jace says, although Derek must already know this. He peels out of his jacket and walks into the kitchen. "I ended up running some errands instead."

A twinge of disappointment flashes in Derek's tawny-brown eyes, the wind knocked out of his sails temporarily before he fires back, "Errands at a bathhouse?"

Jace's skin glows warm. "You followed me?"

"You hate bathhouses. So, what were you doing there?"

He knows Jace would never go to one for sex. If Jace felt the urge to cheat, he'd do it discreetly instead of parading around a building full of witnesses. He's too smart to be that careless. Smart to a degree that Derek fears should Jace ever decide to sleep with someone else; he'd never suspect anything.

It's one of the things that scares him about Jace. Little by little, more and more, he's becoming harder to read.

Jace leans against the counter, hunches his shoulders, and smirks. "You got me. I was number nine in a 30-man gangbang this morning." He grips his chest, twisting the fabric of his shirt between his fingers. "That poor twink may never walk again."

Derek levels his head.

"Fine. I was canvassing the neighborhood for catering jobs. I didn't know it was a bathhouse."

"Try again."

"Book club?"

"Jace, just fuckin' tell me what's goin' on." The bass in his voice drops. He's in no mood for Jace's games. "You've been a million miles away, ever since I proposed. I see it... all over

you. Are you havin' second thoughts? Cuz if that's it, just say so!"

"No! Of course not."

"Then why are you hiding shit from me? What's with all this sneakin' around?"

"Why are you following me like a character in an Agatha Christie novel?"

Jace thinks back to this morning. He hadn't sensed anyone following him or watching him go into Shangri-La, but he'd also been focused on getting out of the rain.

The fact that Derek hasn't mentioned Shangri-La's reputation for seedy clientele gives the situation some reprieve. He must have been thrown off by the cryptic plaque at the door and Googled it. Shangri-La's poorly designed website does a decent job of passing it off as a typical day spa. Nothing to raise red flags. You'd have to be a true local to know what goes on behind its doors.

It's lucky he didn't follow Jace inside. Then again, he wouldn't have made it far since his name wasn't in the registry at the door.

Jace left Shangri-La well after his father, which Sam had insisted on, so Derek couldn't have seen Jace leave with anyone if he stuck around. And he must not have seen Sam leave the building.

Jace isn't sure Derek would even recognize Sam if he saw him. He's only seen old photos of Sam and actors portraying him on true-crime series. Time hasn't been kind to Sam, so it's unlikely he'd recognize him right off. It's also not natural to recognize someone who's supposed to be dead. It'd sooner come across as his mind playing tricks, an unfortunate resemblance that can't possibly hold any weight. Which is worrying because if Sam were to approach Derek, he'd be none the wiser he's in danger until it's too late.

Derek runs a hand down his beard. "It just feels like..."

Portland all over again.

But he doesn't say this. He doesn't need to.

"I can't tell you what I was doing there," Jace says, defeated. "I just can't." He watches Jace's face crumble and anger seize the muscles in his jaw. "And I don't like lying to you. Believe me, I don't."

"I thought we tell each other everything. What happened to 'total transparency'?"

He wants to tell Derek everything, starting with Sam slitting Ezra's throat in front of him. He wants to tell Derek why he was at Shangri-La and all about his father's deranged claims and plan to stop Sean Pratt – who he isn't sure what to make of yet.

He did a deep dive into Sean as soon as he got to work. His podcast was the first thing to pop up, full of red, right-wing rhetoric and election conspiracy theories. He found a photo of Sean and his family on their church Facebook page, something from last year's Easter pageant. He also found Sean's headshot and bio on his firm's website and his personal Facebook and Twitter accounts, both linked back to his idiotic podcast.

A few hunting photos sprinkled throughout his Twitter feed and a photo of him alone by a lake caught Jace's attention.

Camping photos?

Still, nothing sinister jumped out during his search, but Jace expected as much. Either Sean's very good at hiding in plain sight or he's just not the predator Sam is making him out to be. If there's any evidence or "keepsakes" he's taken from his victims, he's sure to have hidden them well.

But where?

"Babe, it's just something I have to deal with on my own, okay? It's nothing I can't handle. And I know it's a lot to ask, but you just have to trust me on this. It's for your own good."

He scoffs at this. "You know what?" He swallows and stands, fastening the last of the black buttons on his chef's jacket.

"Maybe it's good I'm leavin' for a few days. Maybe we need some time apart."

“Derek—”

“No, really!” He holds up a hand. “I don’t know why I thought we were ready for this. We don’t even talk about what happened in Portland,” he bites. “You thought it was me!” Sadness takes over the anger on his face. “You’ve never said it, but it’s true. You thought I was behind what happened to Graham. You thought I was that jealous I could be capable of...”

Jace feels himself shatter.

Derek isn’t wrong. However fleeting the thought, it had crossed his mind. They weren’t in a good place back then, and Derek’s mounting jealousy and erratic behavior landed him on Jace’s shortlist of suspects. But all along, it had been Liam Garvey, the son of Sam’s first victim, responsible for Graham’s murder.

“Derek, I was wrong. I know that, and I’m sorry. For everything,” Jace pleads. “I know I can never go back and undo what’s done, but I’m trying to set things right again.”

“With more secrets. Right. Makes perfect sense.” He grabs his shoes and backs away. “Look, I know you keep sayin’ you’re fine off your medicine and this and that, but maybe you’re not, Jace. Maybe it’s time to go back on, talk to someone.”

Before Jace can respond the doorbell buzzes, sending Stella into a barking fit.

They take the cue to go to their separate corners. Jace sits at the kitchen island, nursing the sting of Derek’s words, watching Stella follow him to the door.

Neither of them is expecting anyone this time of evening, so they’re equally surprised as Derek slides the door open to reveal Denise, brandishing a badge on her hip.

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18 / BOXES

“Good evening. I’m Special Agent Denise Bradshaw.” She squares her shoulders before reaching for her badge, flashing it at Derek. “I’m following up on a call—”

Her gaze lands on Jace.

He’s frozen, except for a free hand that finds the kitchen island for support.

Her sharp brows rise and fall with quiet relief while Stella moves in to sniff her pants legs. “You’re a hard man to pin down, Mr. Lannister.”

Derek moves aside at this, allowing her a few steps in. “Stella, stop – Go to your bed. Sorry.” He moves Stella back by the collar. “Sorry, you said ‘agent’, as in... FBI agent?”

She looks the part today, with a gun on her hip. Her locks are gathered and pulled back into a low ponytail, and her tangerine sundress has been replaced with a dull uniform comprising of a navy blazer over a white blouse and dark pants hugging her small, curvy frame. Gone is the glow she carried in the deli. Even her raspberry nail polish is chipped from this woman’s work.

She looks back to Derek with a nod before cheating a few more steps inside.

“I’m so sorry!” Jace blurts out. “Uhm, please, Agent Bradshaw, come in. This is Derek, my fiancé.” He joins them by the door with a weak smile, sweeping a hand in Derek’s direction. “He’s a chef. A Michelin Star chef.” He points to his chef’s jacket, as if to explain why he’s wearing a chef’s jacket. “You might have seen him on The Food Network? ‘Kitchen Wars’?”

Denise angles her head and Derek dishes up a small, awkward smile.

“Did you win?” She asks.

“He was a guest judge.”

“Mmm.” She looks less impressed. “Must have missed that episode.”

“Anyway, this is my fault. He’s had an employee go missing at the restaurant he owns. That’s why I called.” Jace hopes his face matches the urgency in his voice. “I totally spaced and forgot to call you back to let you know he filed a report! With the police, you see. So, I’m sure the police are handling it now.”

“But there’s been no update.” Derek folds his arms. “I doubt they even went by his place! He’s been missing for days now, not answering his phone. This isn’t like him.”

“Okay, wait.” She raises a hand. “First of all, who’s ‘he’? Who are we talkin’ about?”

“It’s my sous-chef. Ezra Weyl. W-E-Y-L. Although that might not be his real name.” He sucks his teeth. “It’s turning into a long story. I filed the report two days ago. I own Zora’s over on Franklin. We had an event. That evening was the last time anyone saw him.” He shoots Jace a quick look then returns his gaze to Denise. “Can you maybe look into it? Or get us some answers from the police?”

“First, I’ll need some more information.” She says plainly, obviously. She pulls a small notepad and pen from the inside pocket of her blazer and shakes her head to herself.

This isn’t what she came for. After tracking Jace down, she likely rang the bell in hopes he might have something to share with her about the courthouse killing. That perhaps her instincts had been right to drop in on him at the deli that day, and his voicemail was a cry for help or a sign that he’s ready to tell her what he knows.

Sometimes, you have to shake a lot of trees for a solid lead to fall into your lap. But the long shadow Cassex Deli casts in a forest of mom-and-pop shops makes Jace a prime lead for questioning in Aaron Gilbert’s murder.

Jace knows this.

The butcher paper. The deli's dismal history. And, surely, she's canvassed the area and spoken with his neighbors by now, who vilified him. Suspicious of his intentions with reopening the shop.

He can tell she's thrown off by this news of Ezra though. A missing sous-chef is the last thing she probably needs on her plate. Especially if it distracts her from the courthouse investigation. But leading her down the bloody path that leads to Ezra's disappearance also doesn't sit well with Jace.

Sam flashes in the back of his mind. A slow, monstrous grin spreading across his face, showing every jagged tooth.

"Some people think Ezra might have skipped town. Could be gambling debts or something," Jace offers, mumbling at the end.

"Who said that?" Derek scrunches his face.

"You know how people talk."

"Did Charlie say that?"

"No. Not Charlie. The point is, I'm just saying we don't know for sure that he's 'missing.'" He shrugs at Denise. "We're probably worrying over nothing, and I'm sure the police are looking into it. So, again, I'm sorry I called and troubled you with this."

The lines in Derek's forehead deepen. "Jace, she's here. She could help!" He shakes his head incredulously at Jace and turns to Denise, offering an apologetic smile. "I'm glad you stopped by. I'm happy to fill you in, Officer – Agent! Sorry." He smiles again on one side of his mouth and gives her a second, longer look. It's hard for him to contain his sense of wonder. He's only seen Black, female FBI agents on TV, and even then, they're few and rare. Seldom showing much depth, just there to check boxes for the network. "I'm actually on my way to work. If you wanna walk and talk. It's not far. And if you're hungry, you're welcome to order somethin' from the kitchen. Shifts are starting soon. So, if you wanna talk to any of the line cooks or servers..." He shrugs.

“That, um... actually sounds good. I am hungry,” she says, as if just realizing it. She shoots Jace a look. “Was there anything else? Your message sounded urgent. I thought it might have to do with that nasty business at the courthouse I’d asked you about.”

“That? No. Nothing to do with that.” Jace blinks, ignoring the odd look Derek shoots him. “Oh! Since you’re here though, I should ask. How was your party? Did that platter work out?”

Denise rakes her eyes over him, pressing her lips into a tight smile. “It was a hit. I’ll have to stop in again to see what else you have.”

Perhaps with a search warrant next time.

“I’ll have to set aside something special for you.” Jace winks.

Perhaps Sam’s head on a platter when the time is right.

She taps her notepad in the palm of her hand, then aims it at Derek. “You wanna fill me in on the report you filed?”

“Yes. Yes, ma’am.” He turns to find his shoes, forgetting they’ve been in his hand this whole time. “Just give me one... sec...” He drops his shoes to the floor, steps into them, and races past Jace for his keys on the counter. He passes Jace on his way back with them. No kiss goodbye. Just a quick “I’ll see you later,” as he follows Denise out.

She tosses Jace a final look over her shoulder, as if to say thanks for nothing, before the front door slides shut.

Jace crosses his arms and pulls them tight into his stomach, trying to imagine the conversation the two will have on the elevator ride down.

“Fuck, Stella.” he groans. “This can’t be good.”

Stella looks up at him from her bed beside the sofa and whines in return.

• • •

“For you.” Caitlin hands Jace a stack of envelopes with a dull smile.

He mumbles a thank you, frowning at a gas bill as he shuffles through the pile. “You can prob’ly get outta here early if you want. It’s slow.”

She leans in the doorway to his office, wraps her arms around herself in a hug, and shrugs. “I’m good. Bradley’s working late tonight. Again.”

Jace looks up from the glare of his laptop. “That’s the third time this week, right?” He doesn’t say what they’re both thinking; better to change the subject instead. “You look nice today. You’re glowing!”

It’s true. There’s something different about her he can’t put his finger on.

The corners of her matte, red lipstick dip into a frown. She fidgets with the sleeves of her magenta sweater before running a hand over her stomach, smoothing out the thin, cashmere fabric.

Could she be sulking for two?

“That a new sweater?”

She brightens. “Got it on sale at Bergdorf’s.”

“You always look good in that color.” He does a double take and aims a finger at her. “No necklace today?”

Her face instantly crumbles as her fingers rake down the slope of her neck. “I can’t find it! It’s not at home. I thought maybe I lost it here, but I’ve looked everywhere.” She shakes her head. Her strawberry-blond bob sways and settles back by her ears.

“That belonged to your bestie back in college, right?”

A small laugh escapes. “We didn’t start off that way. Felt more like we were frenemies sometimes.”

“Oh. That so?”

She waves a hand. “Just your typical mean-girl, sorority drama. Shannon was a year ahead of me. She kinda ran the

house by the time I moved in and she hated us new pledges, so the hazing got pretty gross.”

Jace’s curiosity easily gets the best of him. He loves hazing stories. Mostly because the cute, preppy frat boys at Penn State with their muscles and backward baseball caps scoffed at him for being queer – and would never have let him become a brother. So, hearing quasi-homoerotic, alcohol-induced “incidents” that land in the news and get their type expelled somehow always feels like the universe balancing the scales.

“What kind of hazing...?”

“She made us eat cat food. Out of a cat bowl,” she says quietly. “Her favorite thing though was this ‘game’ she called ‘Sit ‘n Spin’. We’d have to strip naked and sit on top of the washing machine. When the spin cycle kicked in, the other girls would circle any jiggy spots with a marker.” Her eyes go distant, channeling toxic marker perfume and the dusty memories of her old sorority house. “I let ‘em mark me up, but I told her I wouldn’t do that to another girl.”

“Bold. I’m sure she loved that.”

“She made me eat more cat food, to make an example out of me. Later that night, she told me she respected me for standing up to her. That no one else ever did.” She rolls her eyes. “So, anyway, yeah, it was mostly just house stuff like that. She never really did anything to me out of spite. Except for Bradley.”

“How do you mean?”

She shifts her weight from one foot to the other. “She had a thing for him. I mean, it was obvious to everyone, even though they both denied it. That was her thing though. She was gorgeous.” Her eyes bulge. “She had this gorgeous, long red hair. Big breasts. Tiny waist. She always said no guy could resist her.”

“So...” He’s afraid to ask.

“Yeah. She got Bradley drunk one night in his dorm room. I was back home, in Richmond. My grandfather passed. I was at

my grandfather's funeral." She blinks hard. "He still doesn't know I know. His roommate, Aadesh, told me."

"Wait. Bradley doesn't know you know about...?"

She shakes her head.

"Caitlin. That's crazy." He knows he could never have this much restraint. Derek would not only know that he knows, but heads would roll.

"I figured what's the point? Bradley and I were always gonna get married. He knew it and so did she. What good would blowing up, fighting with him about it do? That's what she wanted."

Probably.

"You're probably right."

But what a way to look at it. And what a secret to harbor, to have bubbling up to the surface anytime Bradley pisses her off.

She crosses her arms and shrugs. "It all worked out in the end."

"Not for Shannon," he reminds her.

Dying in a fire is the worst death he can imagine, outside of being butchered alive.

"I still blame Maddy."

"Who's Maddy?"

"Shannon's gross fucking roommate who never shaved her armpits – this Wiccan!" She makes air quotes. "She was always leaving candles on, forgetting to blow them out before she left – and her stupid fucking cat knocked one over one day. They found Shannon in her bed. She must have been sleeping."

"The carbon monoxide probably got her first," Jace offers.

"But to be fair, this whole thing screams evil black cat."

Before Caitlin can agree, the front door chimes. "I'll get it. You keep working."

He smiles appreciatively. “Okay. Call me if you need me to cut something, but you’ve got this.”

“Yeah... I do.” Her smile returns and she bounces off.

Jace waits to hear her greet their new customer before pulling his laptop closer, returning his attention to what Caitlin interrupted.

Once more, he’s found his way back to the chat forums; back to the underbelly of the dark web, looking for answers.

There’s no sign of “Natureboy75” and no one seems to know anything about missing, Black, trans women. No one takes credit or seems to know anything about the courthouse copycat killing either.

But look who he’s talking to.

They’re not exactly model citizens, and they’re likely leery of chat handles they don’t recognize. Jace could be anyone, including the police.

But he has to wonder what kind of response he’d get if he revealed himself as the Brooklyn Butcher’s son. He wonders how much honey he could charm from their tongues. How much information he could get in exchange for details about Sam?

It’s a dangerous game, but one he might have to play if he wants answers.

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19 / BLACK SEA

Zora's is quiet as Jace uses his key to enter. The house lights are low and moody as he passes under the canopy of chandeliers.

Faded crystals hover above him like stars in a dying sky.

He finds Derek in the break room behind a small stack of paperwork and a bowl of dirty rice.

He spins the bowl until the fork's handle reaches Jace. "Want some?"

"You know I do," Jace says, even though he just ate an entire turkey and provolone sub at the shop before closing up. With salt and vinegar chips. And a small scoop of macaroni salad – just to make sure the bin is still good.

He sits, opposite Derek, at one of four round tables without tablecloths. There's a TV in one corner, secured to the wall, and a row of lockers on the adjacent wall where the staff stows their purses and coats and belongings. The TV is muted, but an oblivious Hannah McAvoy reports from behind black and white captions.

Derek glances up at her, reading between bites and scribbling his signature on orders.

"You didn't text me back earlier," Jace says. His voice is small, testing the waters as he tries to meet Derek's eyes. "You always text me back."

"I'm flying out in the morning. Early," he says, his face drawn tight.

"In the morning? I thought—"

"The network wants to do some test shots for some promo stuff," he mumbles, looking down. "Promo shots for the network with wardrobe, makeup, all that."

"Oh. Okay."

It sounds made-up. Like an excuse to fly out early and avoid finishing their conversation from the night before.

Jace stuffs his hands in the pockets of his hoodie and leans back in his chair. A wave of emotions color his face. “I’m gonna miss you, Mr. Brooks.”

Which is true.

But it’s also true he’s eager for Derek to leave. Just not like this. Not with this rift between them. Not with Derek angry and questioning everything that’s happened since the engagement.

Derek frowns at an invoice and strokes his beard with a low growl. “I’ll miss you too, Mr. Brooks,” he says finally.

A light breaks through the clouds hanging between them, and Jace feels a smile warm his face.

“You getting everything in order for Blanca?”

Derek nods.

“Everything get wrapped up with the detective?”

He looks up, annoyed, and just that fast, the light is snuffed out.

“Are you asking what questions she had?”

“Well, since you brought it up...” Jace gives a playful smile but it’s a swing and a miss.

Derek drops his pen and pushes back from the table. He looks tired, worn from the past twenty-four hours and having to pull everything together before he flies out, leaving Zora’s in someone else’s hands.

“Typical questions, I guess. When was the last time I saw him... What was his behavior like... Do I know anyone who has some beef with him...”

Jace holds his breath.

“We talked about the party. She got to talk to a few people here. Janie. Charlie. None of the servers were in yet. I showed

her Ezra's schedule and his books. Showed her around the kitchen... Want to know what she ordered?"

"Seems like a short ribs kind of girl," Jace chirps, but Derek isn't amused. "Babe, come on. I'm just curious what she had to say about it all."

"She's looking into it."

"Well, that's good." Jace chews his bottom lip. "That's what you wanted."

"She said she might be in touch with you. For some follow-up questions."

Jace nods, not surprised by this. If they talked about the party, then surely it didn't get past her that Jace is the last known person to see Ezra. Even if Derek refuses to acknowledge this himself. Even if he second-guesses Jace's story about Ezra not feeling well and going home that night, he doesn't dare question Jace on it; afraid of the unthinkable – that all the theories about "murder genes" and the deli being cursed might have truth to them.

"I'll plan to pop in here when I can," Jace says.

It'll be good for the staff to see Jace's face, to know he'll report back any shenanigans.

"Thanks. I talked to Blanca. I just wanna sign off on all this before I go, so she can focus on service." He looks back down at the stack of order forms and paystubs.

"I'm just a phone call away if she needs anything, or if someone calls out. I can wait tables or hop on the line. I'll try not to eat more than I plate."

Derek cracks a smile at this.

"No promises though."

He shakes his head, looking up at Jace through his long lashes. Finally, with a huff, he drops his pen and reaches across the table for Jace's hands.

"I'll be back before you know it," he promises. "I just need to do this."

Jace can tell he isn't just talking about the cooking show. He squeezes Derek's hands and gives a slow nod. "When you get back, things are gonna be different," he promises. "No more secrets. And all this business with Ezra will be behind us. No more detectives knocking on our door... Things are gonna be perfect."

Derek chews on the word.

Perfect.

It's a tall order, but he squeezes Jace's hands anyway and clears his throat before settling back into his chair.

"I don't know about perfect," he says. "But I do know one thing."

"What's that?"

"You were right about Denise. She ordered the short ribs."

• • •

Jace can barely remember the touch of Derek's lips on his forehead, waking him. It was still dark outside, and Stella was half-asleep in her usual spot at the foot of the bed as Derek whispered goodbye.

He was there, leaning over the bed with his black, leather duffel bag slung over one shoulder, and then he was gone before the moment stretched into a long goodbye.

Now, as Jace drifts about the kitchen, nursing his coffee, it almost feels like a dream.

He hasn't gathered the will to get dressed for the day, so he circles the kitchen island in his boxer briefs and one of Derek's t-shirts that smell of his cologne and sweat. He's texted Yuri to say he'll be a few minutes late coming in, but those few minutes have already surpassed half an hour.

He can't turn his mind off. Now that Derek's gone, there's just a small window of time to clean up the mess Sam has made

and put him behind bars, where he belongs. But the idea of doing what the legal system couldn't still feels overwhelming.

If Sam escaped prison once, what's to stop him from doing it again?

And how do you even begin to stop a monster the world doesn't know exists?

As he paces, he catches sight of his umbrella by the door and scowls, thinking back to something he realized the night before. Lying in bed with his eyes fixed on the empty vastness of the ceiling, he recalled how it'd been raining the day he met Sam at Shangri-La... and realized that had all been by design.

Sam could have chosen any day to meet, but he chose the one day in the week the forecast called for rain. Consequently, any CCTV surrounding the sauna would only show a constant parade of umbrellas in the area, a black sea with faces hidden under the current who could have been anyone.

There's no way to pick Sam out of the crowd.

And even if another camera caught him a few blocks off, it could easily be explained away as another doctored sighting, just like the bogus fan video of Sam in the hardware store a few years ago.

Sam has been a step ahead this entire time.

It's all Jace can think about as Stella watches him pace from her bed, no doubt missing Derek just as much as he does.

Jace plucks his phone off the marble island to glance at the time – just as it lights up and rings in his hand. He jolts and curses, nearly dropping the phone along with his coffee. It's a quick save to juggle both, but his mug tilts to one side and hot coffee stings his leg on the way down.

He can't hide his annoyance as he answers, but the edge in his voice quickly dissolves as Charlie's voice tears through the line.

“Jace! Oh, good. Is Derek there? He's not answering his phone or texting me back.”

“That’s cuz he’s in the air right now. He’s on his way to LA.” He sets his mug down to wipe at his legs. “Why? What’s wrong?”

“It’s Ezra!” She sniffs loudly. “It’s him. They found him—”

“Alive?” Jace presses his eyes shut and shudders. He doesn’t know why this idea came flying out of his mouth.

“No, dead!”

Of course, Ezra’s dead. But even after everything, Jace half-expects Ezra to come walking back into his life.

“Someone murdered him! Like a fucking block from Zora’s — they cut him up! Like, in pieces! Pieces!”

Jace snaps out of his haze. “Cut him up...?”

“It’s just like what happened at the courthouse! Remember that body that was all cut up, wrapped in brown paper and shit and they threw the body parts all over the damn place? It’s the same thing!”

He can picture Charlie reeling with a hand on her hip.

“It’s him? It’s Ezra? How do we know it’s Ezra?”

“Dante saw the head!” She screams.

“Wait. Wait. Slow down. Who’s Dante?”

“One of the busboys! You’ve seen him. Short, really slow. Kinda looks like ReRun from What’s Happening!!...? He lives around the block from Zora’s. He called Janie. Janie called me and told me the whole thing. He was outside, walkin’, letting his dog out to pee, right? So, as he’s walkin’, he sees the whole scene closed off with police tape. Cops everywhere... all this shit... so, he’s like, what the hell’s goin’ on, right?”

“Right.”

“They were tryna move people back when Dante got there, but he got close enough to see the body. They’d unwrapped the head to identify who it was, I guess,” she pauses and takes a shaky breath. “That’s when Dante recognized him. It’s Ezra.”

Jace runs for the TV remote. The only thing he can think to say is, “Oh, my God...”

“Right? It’s like somethin’ out of a movie! I can’t believe this shit is happenin’.” Charlie sniffs and blows her nose into the phone. “I mean, I had a feeling he was in some kind of trouble – I thought, worst-case, maybe it was drugs, you know? Like, maybe he OD’d somewhere... or was in a hospital somewhere and no one knew, right? But this...”

It isn’t on the news. None of the major outlets are reporting it, but it will be all anyone wants to talk about in a few hours. And Derek will find out once his phone is off airplane mode. Once Charlie’s texts pop up.

She mutters, “This is the second murder like this.”

But she doesn’t speak what everyone will be thinking; it’s now the second link in a chain of serial killings.

Jace hears the click of Charlie’s lighter and Janelle talking in the background. He pictures them at home, huddled on the sofa with a freshly rolled joint. Charlie with a silk-lined headwrap protecting her locks and Janelle in a black tank top and basketball shorts, eyes glued to the TV.

The media will lose their minds over this. It’ll be a feeding frenzy and a race to declare confirmation of the city’s most recent, active serial killer in decades.

But Jace knows better.

He hasn’t wanted to admit it, but he believed Sam that day in the sauna when he denied any involvement in the courthouse killing. So, he’s fairly sure that this discovery of Ezra’s body isn’t the work of Aaron Gilbert’s killer.

This is Sam playing copycat.

This is Sam disposing of Ezra’s body in plain sight; dumping his kill on someone else’s plate... and sending a clear message.

This is Sam being a step ahead again.

It’s a smart move. It’s what Jace would do if he were Sam...

Dr. Kessler's voice suddenly creeps into Jace's head, purring, "What if you are Sam, Jace? What then?"

If she were sitting here, long legs crossed on his leather sofa, she'd casually point out that no one else has been around to see Sam Mader in the flesh – except for Ezra, according to Jace. And his mutilated body has just been found a block away from Zora's.

"Does Blanca know?" he thinks to ask.

Charlie exhales away from the phone and says, "Prob'ly. From somebody. Not from me, though. I called Derek – and you – first."

"I'll call her," he volunteers. She'll need a crash course in media training if the press connects Ezra back to Zora's.

"Day one on the job and all this, first thing in the mornin'." Charlie sucks her teeth. "Lord help her. Lord help us all. Your boo chose a fine time to fly the coop."

Which is what Denise will also think.

But that's another phone call Jace isn't looking forward to.

"You think he'll fly back now?" Charlie asks. Her voice sings with hope.

Jace draws a breath and tilts his eyes to the ceiling. "Maybe," he sighs raggedly. "Anything can happen."

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20 / THE FLASH

Junior closes the door to Jace's office behind him. He peels back the hood under his maroon track jacket with a cocky smile.

"Got it. Easy." He tosses the duffel bag in his hand onto Jace's desk with a thud.

"Careful with that." Jace stands and takes the camouflage duffel bag by its handles. "You good?" His eyes graze Junior. He's slightly winded. His eyes buzz with excitement. "Did he follow you?"

Junior drops his shoulders. The smile on his angular, brown face turns into a sneer. "Come on, man, can't nobody catch me! Forty-five-point-nineteen seconds in the four-hundred-meter, baby!" He spreads his arms as if to take flight. "I'm a state champ. They don't call your boy 'The Flash' for nuthin'!"

Jace has been counting on this.

Junior smooths a hand over his wavy hair and dusts his shoulders off. He's handsome with a swagger and self-assured confidence Jace never came close to having in high school. It's no wonder he constantly finds himself in trouble.

"I caught him leavin' the spot, just like you said. Recognized him from the photo, grabbed the bag, and took off like peew! He ain't even know that jawn was gone 'til I was down the block!"

Jace sits back down, pulling the bag into his lap. "Did you look inside?"

"Why?" His smile widens. "Is it money?"

The smirk on his face is all the confirmation Jace needs that he didn't peek.

"Hell, I want my cut then." He cocks his head, pulls out a chair, and plops down. "We split it fifty-fifty." He kicks up his

feet, onto Jace's desk. "Like partners."

"We're not partners." Jace uses the back of his hand to knock Junior's feet off his desk. "And remember, not a word about this to your grandmother." Miss Hattie would have Jace's head if she knew about this. "I'd hate to tell her about your little trip to Planned Parenthood with Becky Newman. You know she don't like white people to begin with. And you out here fuckin' the vice principal's daughter..."

"Man, how you even know 'bout that?"

Becky's big-mouth aunt is one of Jace's regulars. She used to work at the clinic, and one of her old girlfriends who still works there told her she saw Junior and Becky come in.

"I know everything," Jace declares. "Now, get out of here. Go make good choices."

"You literally just asked me to steal somethin' for you."

"That was a test." Jace stands to walk him out. "And you failed. Do better next time."

Junior rolls his eyes before he springs to his feet. "You really not gonna tell me what's in the bag?"

"Good luck at your meet next week, Junior."

He throws his head back and groans, "Man, fine! Be like that."

Jace opens the door and ushers him out. "Grab that bag from Caitlin on your way out. Got some chops to take to your grandmother, alright?"

He mumbles a reply, then perks up as he nears the register.

"Sup, Caitlin? Damn. You lookin' good today, girl..."

Jace shakes his head and returns to his office, locking the door behind him.

He takes a breath before unzipping the bag, slowly spreading it apart by the zipper to reveal its insides.

The smell hits him first. A musty combination of sweat and body odor trapped in the first layer of gym clothes and used underwear he peels back. Beneath, he finds an old iPod,

tangled headphones, and a plastic bottle blender that hasn't been washed in God only knows how long. Dried protein powder sticks to the mouth of the lid, adding to the stink Jace fights his way through.

He rummages through the bottom layer of the bag to find a combination lock, a phone charger, loose wrappers, sticks of old chewing gum, a lighter, socks, and a small plastic baggie of white powder.

His best guess is cocaine, but again, God only knows.

There's no wallet, but he's surprised to find a few condoms, still in their wrappers.

There's an old pocket brochure for Sandy Hook. The inside unfolds into a map where campsites have been circled. There's another book with its cover bent – *The Patriot, Keeping America Great* by Brian Molstad – Jace scoffs, tossing it aside.

“Christ. What a tool,” he mumbles.

He sighs and continues to dig, convinced this has all been a waste until he finds a loose card in one corner of the bag.

Not a credit card – but what turns out to be a student ID.

“Jamal Gregory.”

Jace stares at the face on the plastic laminated card. Jamal can't be more than nineteen with large, dark brown eyes, skin the color of burnt clay, and a small afro with a reddish hue to it. Noticeably, there's no smile on Jamal's face. He looks miserable in the photo, which makes Jace wonder...

“This isn't you, Jamal, is it?”

Jace starts fresh and dumps everything out of the bag. After emptying it with a few shakes, he's surprised by the disproportionate weight of the vinyl bag in his hands.

“There must be...”

And he's right. There's a small, zipped pocket he missed before, sewn into one end of the bag.

With one swipe, he finds what he didn't know he was looking for inside.

More faces.

Faces printed in pixelated ink, on driver's licenses and ID cards... hidden away.

Some of the faces look like Jamal's, but most of the IDs belong to women who, upon closer inspection, must have transitioned before the photo was taken. Some dared to dress as their true selves despite knowing their male, government name would be printed alongside their picture.

"Lamar Fisher..."

"Brandon Cureau."

"Orlando Palmer."

Some apparently made more progress than others with navigating the legalities...

"Tatiana Stone."

"Draya Hall."

"Angel Johnson."

Jace makes it a point to say their names aloud. To try to commit them to memory.

They're all beautiful Black and Brown faces and names, one after another. Missing but now found.

How did they find their way into Sean Pratt's disgusting gym bag?

The answer stings. It burns in the back of Jace's throat as he swallows hard, pushing down tears. He didn't want to believe Sam's claims or that anyone could be so evil when he asked Junior to wait outside Shangri-La.

It was meant to be a Hail Mary. Until now, he'd found nothing on Sean to implicate him in any crimes, not even a speeding ticket. He didn't want to believe Sean could be so predictable, to hide his "keepsakes" at Shangri-La, of all places, but now...

Jace glances up at his door to ensure it's still closed and locked. With the air knocked out of him, he staggers back into his chair and buries his face in his hands as his cell rings.

He almost doesn't answer it, but then he realizes it might be Derek calling. Standing at baggage claim distraught and beside himself, having just learned about Ezra.

He gathers the will to glance at his phone and lets out a long breath.

A handsome photo of Banks smiles back at him, taken during one of their earlier dates in Portland's Japanese Garden. It had been Banks' idea to go there. It was one of the first times they held hands in public.

Jace squints, looking between his phone and the pile on his desk. Jamal's red and gold student ID lies closest to him.

"Hey," Jace answers slowly. "Impeccable timing as always."

"Hey!" It's noisy behind Banks. He must be outside again, on a break or a coffee run again. "This not a good time?"

"I'm sort of in the middle of something."

"You're always in the middle of something," he cracks.

By something, he means trouble. The thing that brought them together in the first place. The reason he first came to Jace's office at Moxy, years ago, on official police business.

"Well," is all Jace can say. "Never a dull moment around here."

Banks breathes over the line. Jace can almost smell his cologne... feel the silver scruff on his face as he holds the phone to his ear.

"I'll be quick. I was just calling to uh..." He pushes out a hard breath through his nose. "Apologize, I guess. I know the last time we talked I came off a little strong."

It was more like guns blazing, but Jace doesn't say this. He doesn't mention or joke about guns with Banks, not since the day Banks shot and killed Alex to save his life.

"It's okay," Jace says. "You're allowed to feel the way you feel." He grabs a pen off his desk and starts to scribble on the back of his receipt book.

Clouds.

Stars.

Spirals and tiny crosses.

“Well, don’t worry. I canceled the plane ticket,” he says. “You can tell Derek he has nothing to worry about.”

The thought of Derek “worrying” about Banks is almost comical. Derek may stress over a lot of things. Missing sous-chefs, Zora’s, and more recently Jace’s mental fitness, but ex-boyfriends aren’t on the list.

“I’m sure he’ll appreciate that,” Jace says plainly. He scans the pile of IDs on his desk and feels his chest tighten.

“I do want you to be happy, Jace. Even if it’s not with me. I’m not a complete asshole, you know. I want you to be happy.”

“I know that.” Jace draws his attention back to Banks’ voice. Back to the man he once thought he could spend forever with.

Even though it ended less than sweet, Banks had been the one to pull Jace out of his own darkness at one point. It’s because of Banks that he’s grown and come to a place where he can love and trust someone again. Someone like Derek, who was always his person from the start.

“Of course, if you get cold feet and wanna bolt at the alter, you know where to find me,” Banks laughs. “Kidding, not kidding.”

“Mmm-hmm.” Jace laughs lightly at this, then chews thoughtfully on the tip of his pen. “Hey, do you remember that case you had in Nob Hill? The one with the wife they found stabbed in her front yard? The schoolteacher.”

“That’s one way to change the subject. Yes. I remember.” His tone turns bleak. “The Podlecki case. She was stabbed eight times. Why?”

“What was it about the husband and the knife? He got off, right? Because of something with the knife?”

“Ugh. Where to even start?” He blows a raspberry with his lips. “Well. So, this rookie, Krisely, barely two months out of the academy, arrived on the scene first, right? He said it started to rain, he was trying to preserve evidence. Anyway, somehow

this kid forgets about the knife and ends up riding around with the murder weapon under his front passenger seat for about a week! So, it was in his car, which meant it went to his house. Right? A mess... They tried to introduce it later in court and couldn't."

"Why not?"

He laughs. "Uhh, contamination of evidence, inconclusive DNA... Trying to trace the knife back to the house at that point. Take your pick! He just massively mishandled the evidence. That simple. It got thrown out. Husband ending up walking."

Jace grasps most of this, enough to know that the duffel bag of evidence on his desk may present a problem now.

"So..." Jace shifts in his seat. "Not to put too fine a point on this, but let's say someone else found the knife. Right? Someone walks by, minding their own business, and they see the bloody knife and they take it to the police. Or – stay with me – What if they just mailed the evidence to the police with a note, like, 'Hey, police. Found this knife... I think this is connected to that crime with what's-her-name.'"

"Anne Podlecki."

"Right. Anne Podlecki," Jace nods. "So, they send in the evidence to help with the case," he shrugs. "That would be better than what Krisely did, right?"

"Mailing the police the murder weapon?" He snorts. "Is it wrapped in a confession letter?"

"Stop. I'm being serious. It would be to help the investigation, wouldn't it?"

"It's still tampering with evidence! Not admissible," he groans. "And any half-decent defense attorney's gonna call the source into question and have them found and brought in. Then, all the unknowns. Like, was the evidence really found or did they have it the whole time? See what I mean?"

Jace squeezes his eyes tight.

“It would probably do more harm than good in the end. It’s the technicalities, the way people mishandle evidence and fuck up crime scenes as soon as they arrive – that’s how people get off, you know? It’s uhh, what do you call it? The devil and the details.”

“The devil’s in the details,” Jace corrects him.

Fresh tears prick the back of his eyes as he glares at Sean Pratt’s duffel bag, full of evidence and DNA.

“So, where’s this coming from?” Banks’ voice is soft. Intimate. “Why are you asking?”

“I’m just asking for a friend.”

“Come on,” he scoffs, despite his best effort not to. “Other than Syd, you don’t have friends. You generally hate people, as I recall.”

“Fine. It’s me. The friend is me,” Jace caves.

He hears Banks slurp and take a sip of something. Must be coffee from Pat’s.

“So, what are you not telling me? Seriously, Jace.” He slips on his detective’s voice now, his accent thickening. “What the hell’s going on? And don’t lie to me.”

“When have I ever lied to you?” Jace counters.

He doesn’t need to say it, but Banks knows precisely what he’s referring to. A time when he questioned Jace enough to arrest him under suspicion for Graham Tate’s murder. A move he later regretted when Alex Cruise was revealed to be the killer. It feels like forever ago and just yesterday at the same time.

“Just tell me if you’re in danger,” he bargains. “Will you do that? Please?”

Jace can picture him, pacing with his fingers twisting and grasping tight to his thick hair.

“I’m not in danger.”

Unless Sean comes for his duffel bag, of course. Then the Ruger may need to make a guest appearance.

“Fine,” Banks sighs. It’s hard to tell if it’s a sigh of relief or a sigh of defeat, but Jace’s answer seems to pacify him for the moment. “I believe you. And I’d like to think you’d still tell me if you were.”

There’s that edge in his voice again. Warm and familiar like one of his old Trail Blazers sweatshirts Jace used to wear on rainy days.

They talk for a few minutes more, mostly about new restaurants sprouting in Portland and Banks’ new affinity for vintage cars. He begrudgingly admits he may be having a mid-life crisis and they laugh about it.

Pleasantries.

When Jace hangs up, he knows it will be a while before they speak again. Banks knows it too, even though he promises to call next week and give Jace the scoop on a new coffeehouse he’s found near his condo.

Jace sits in silence for a moment, ignoring the chimes and muffled voices of new customers coming in.

He thinks about what Banks has told him.

He thinks about Jamal Gregory and wonders what she was going to school for, what she wanted to do with her life before it was taken.

He thinks about Anne Podlecki and how her own husband walked free after stabbing her eight times one random night.

He bites his lip until he winces, tasting blood, then reaches for his phone.

With a long sigh, he types...

You were right

There’s only one way to stop a killer

Let’s meet

OceanofPDF.com

21 / ONE LINE

“You were right,” Derek balks. “Someone’s doing this, someone’s—” He’s still too stunned to speak but manages to sputter, “Copying him! Killing! Butchering people, after all this time!”

Jace can hear the despair in Derek’s voice, even from his junior suite twenty-seven-hundred miles away.

The network has him camped out on the nineteenth floor of a Chandler Hotel in walking distance of the studio’s sound stage. He walked in to find a gourmet gift basket on the porcelain kitchen island and a stunning view of the ocean, something he didn’t realize he’s been missing until now. He opened the bottle of Bollinger on ice and thumbed through his phone while his stomach sank deeper with every voicemail.

“You were right,” he says again. “All this can’t be a fucking coincidence – but why Ezra? Why not me?”

The question causes a muscle to jump in Jace’s jaw, and any temptation to tell Derek about Sam drains out of him.

“Whoever it is must have seen him with you that night leaving the deli,” he guesses. “They must have followed him once you two split up!” His voice ramps up and Jace can picture him pacing. “This is all hittin’ too close to home now. What if they target you next? I should come home.”

Jace clears his throat. “No, babe. Really. I want you to focus on what you came to LA to do. You have to. This is your dream! And everything here’s fine.” He swallows and sweeps his gaze across Zora’s dining room where he’s been stationed for most of the evening. “There’s been no press. No cops. It’s a normal service – Janie just sat a bunch of walk-ins. You’re almost full! And Blanca’s doin’ great. And she’s not taking any shit from Demont tonight. Nothing’s gone back to the galley.”

“But how is everyone? What’s the morale like? It happened so close to work, they’ve gotta be shaken up,” he reasons. “How many people called out?”

“Just Dante – who probably won’t be coming back,” he says in one breath. “And Renee. She said her sitter had to cancel and she can’t find another one.”

“I think that translates to she’s getting her braids redone and going to the Lil Mane concert tonight.” Derek sucks his teeth and barks, “Living room lights on!”

Jace pulls the phone from his ear and slouches back in the booth he’s commandeered; close enough to the kitchen to jump in if Blanca needs more hands.

“TURN ON LIVING ROOM LIGHTS!”

“Babe. What are you doing? What’s happening?”

“It’s this damn hotel room. It’s all voice-activated.” Derek pauses, then yawns off to the side. “The oven talks to you, but there are no light switches. Why are there no light switches?”

Jace smirks and eyes Charlie at the bar. He’d love a Klonopin, chased down with a stiff drink, but knows he can’t. Stopping in for a cocktail and shooting the shit with Charlie and Janelle is one thing, but he’s working tonight.

“Damn it. The fireplace just came on, but I can’t get the living room on. Just the kitchen. This place is hell. I’m literally in hell right now.”

“Babe, calm down. Just call the concierge.” Jace can picture him unraveling. Derek is miles more patient than he is, except for when it comes to tech he can’t work out intuitively. “You go, handle all that, get settled in. Okay? Things are under control here. Really.”

“Make sure people get home safe?” He pleads. “Tell them to leave in pairs or get rides. No one walks home tonight.”

“I’m on it.”

“And the iced tea maker needs to be cleaned tonight.”

“Got it. And I’ll make sure the menus and checkbooks get wiped down. I know you hate when they forget,” Jace says. “Go get some rest, babe, okay? I’ve got this.”

“Kay.” He yawns again, working in an “I love you” at the end that’s barely audible.

“I love you too.” Jace gives a weak smile into the line and hangs up.

It hits him how much he misses Derek. It’s odd being at Zora’s without him. Derek should be behind the line sweating and cursing at Demont to watch his temperatures, but he’s miles away fighting to turn the lights on.

Jace pushes past the feeling and wills himself to go see if Blanca needs help.

This is best, he decides. For now, he’ll keep himself busy and count his blessings.

Derek arrived safely in LA.

He isn’t threatening to drop everything and fly home in light of Ezra’s body being found.

And, notably, he didn’t mention a call from Denise, even if it’s inevitable.

So, for tonight, Jace will focus on making Derek proud. He’ll help with plating, answering the phones, and cleaning the grill’s grease trap at the end of the night if that’s what needs to be done.

But tomorrow all his attention will be aimed at the monster whose gym bag is hidden in his office.

Sean Pratt might be a big fish swimming the slick halls of Shangri-La, but if Jace’s worst fears are valid – if Jace truly is the mirror image of his father, then Sean may be no match for the son of the Brooklyn Butcher.

• • •

Caitlin emerges from the bathroom with a look that's unreadable.

She squints at the test in her hand and grimaces. "One line."

Yuri leans against the counter and turns the pink box over in his large hands, scanning the directions again. "One line?"

"One line. It's faint though, and it's pink. Looks like 'cake by the ocean.'" The same milky pink-nude color as her nails.

Jace looks between the two of them. "How long has it been? Maybe it needs to marinate more."

"It's been at least five minutes." She waves the test loosely and joins them behind the counter.

"Soo... no baby on board?"

"Hold on." Yuri reads the box and shakes the hair out of his face. "One line means... not pregnant."

They breathe collectively.

"Wait!" He pushes off the counter, eyes bright.

Caitlin's free hand flutters up to her bare throat. "What? No...!" Her hand moves to her beating heart and presses into her chest. As if to keep herself on the ground and from floating away.

"Wait, wait." He glances between her and the box. "Nope, that's right. I was right. One line's not pregnant."

Her shoulders drop under her red, floral blouse. She grimaces, chucks the test into the trashcan under the utility sink, and washes her hands, scrubbing hard enough to make the rose gold bangles on her wrist sing.

"Well, that was certainly harder than expected," Jace laments. "How many people does it take to read a damn pregnancy test...?"

Yuri tucks his unruly hair behind his ears and tosses her a sad look. "Sorry, C-money."

"Only if you want to get pregnant," Jace counters. "I still don't get what the rush is. So what if Bradley wants a baby? Last

week, you said he wanted a snow cone machine in the kitchen and to quit his job and go to law school.”

She scoffs and scrubs harder.

“And you’re the one who has to grow it and birth it out of you,” he reminds her.

She’s also the one who will ultimately raise it.

If she thinks Bradley will quit his late nights to rush home and help with a screaming, fire-breathing baby, she’s delusional. But Jace doesn’t tread far enough to say this. Instead, he tries to imagine himself and Derek attempting to coax a ticking time-bomb baby to sleep at three in the morning.

They’ve casually discussed children a handful of times. Derek wants two – one adopted and one through surrogacy – while Jace is perfectly content with being a stepdad to Stella. The thought of bringing a child into the world terrifies him, although he’ll never admit it to Derek. He knows Derek would be an amazing father, and it’d be unfair to rob him of that. Derek would take after his father, Nolan, a retired Army vet who did everything in his power to give his only son a storybook childhood. Derek would be everything a strong, Black father and husband should be. Which is why Jace will do anything for Derek – to keep him safe and happy.

So, the next time the subject arises, he’ll say yes to midnight diaper duty and daddy daycare. He’ll agree to sit through countless awful school plays, if he must, and endure parent-teacher night alone if Derek can’t get away from Zora’s. He’ll promise to protect their children from the made-up monsters under their beds and the real monsters of the world.

He’ll be the father he never had and the husband Derek deserves.

“It’s just a lot,” Caitlin says on an exhale. “Everyone keeps asking, ‘When? What are you two waiting for? You’re not getting any younger! And your eggs! Your poor eggs! Time’s gonna run out!’ Even my tennis coach asked me about kids the other day. Which Bradley probably put him up to,” she realizes now. “I don’t know how I feel about the whole thing.

Or how I'm supposed to feel. Like, sure, it's one of the few things I can give him, that maybe I'm expected to give him..."

Jace shrugs from his spot at the register and peeks down at his laptop, balancing on his lap. "I don't get it." He clicks and zooms in on a photo of Sean with his wife at a charity ball. "Why is it this big thing society expects of women? And can we just normalize not asking women when they'll have kids?"

She nods in agreement and dries her hands with a wad of rough paper towels.

Footsteps suddenly barrel up the old wooden stairs and Yuri brings a fist to his chest. "Shit. I forgot he was down there!" He takes a breath and laughs.

Bill Graber appears, turning the corner in his dusty overalls and work boots. The light on his headband remains on, forgotten in the shop's daylight. It shines a dim spotlight in search of Jace.

"Hey, Bill!" Jace snaps his laptop shut and slinks from behind the counter to meet him halfway.

Bill marches forward in wide strides and presses his lips into a tight line. He's all gray hair and whiskers at a staggering six-five in stature. Bulky with a small beer gut that rounds the front of his gray, paint and plaster-splattered overalls.

Caitlin stares at his bump before tearing her eyes away with a sour frown.

"How's it lookin'?" Jace asks.

"It's like a damn time capsule down there," he huffs with a slight Queens drawl to his words. An eerie half-smile takes over his red face, flushed from climbing the stairs. "You got some kinda medical table back there, a stool... The wirin' for the electric oughta be checked out. You got a lamp hangin' center of the room—"

"What about the wall?" Jace asks.

"Aw, man." He chuckles and hits the switch to his headlamp. "Whoever sealed up that room did a piss-poor job." He pulls

off his headlamp and ruffles what's left of his hair. "Shouldn't be no prob'lem knockin' that out all the way."

Caitlin reels her head, giving Bill a longer look, laced with worry. The start of an objection, words that hang heavy, sticky, and thick on her apricot-stained lips dangle in the balance.

Jace asks, "Can you start today?"

"I can get two of my guys in here tomorrow mornin'. Open it up, frame it out. At the price we talked about."

"Sorry. Hi." Caitlin raises a hand. She rocks forward on her feet and blinks, "What wall is this? You don't mean you're reopening your father's..." She dares not finish the thought. She tosses Yuri a look, seeking backup, but he just stares down at his feet. Knowing there's no stopping Jace once he's set his mind on something.

"It's unused space just sitting there," Jace shrugs. "We can use the storage space."

It's not a suggestion. It's an assertion.

She frowns and Bill strains his beady eyes that match the grime under his fingernails.

But no one argues Jace's point, least of all Bill, who will be paid handsomely for the rush job. He's expensive and not Jace's first choice, but he's the only contractor Jace could find to even agree to the job – and for a quick turnaround, which will cost Jace an extra two hundred dollars, slipped into Bill's front overall pocket.

"It's time," Jace chirps. "The past is the past. And Bill's not afraid of ghosts. Are you, Bill?" He swats Bill's arm with a smile.

Yuri stifles a laugh as the color leaves Bill's face.

Before Bill can reply, the front door chimes and one of Jace's regulars enters, hauling a stroller. He can't remember her name, but he remembers her red hair and that she's always in leggings for her afternoon walk, stopping in on her way home with the baby fast asleep in what must be a thousand-dollar jogging stroller.

Jace returns her quick wave and catches sight of someone standing just behind her, looking in through the storefront window.

He instantly remembers the portly-looking man in glasses.

He remembers his scruffy beard and thinning, brown hair.

He remembers he was wearing a Metallica t-shirt the last time he saw him; the thin black fabric starting to rise over his bulbous stomach as he passed behind Ted in the doorway of Ezra's apartment.

He also remembers his name.

"Bobby!" He shouts and waves for him to come inside, but Bobby backs away with wide, wild eyes and races off. Barreling down the sidewalk.

Yuri makes a face. "Who the hell was that?"

"Be right back!" Jace grunts. He maneuvers his way around the bulky stroller at the door and rushes outside. Sunlight stings his eyes before he shades them and spots Bobby almost a block away. "Hey, stop! Bobby!"

He looks back and knocks straight into a short, middle-aged woman and her Yorkie. He almost gets tangled in the leash but pushes her down. Hard.

There's a cloud of outrage and barking but Bobby escapes the glares and curses of those who rush to the woman's aid. He looks over his shoulder with a maniacal laugh. Amused at the chaos trailing behind him.

Jace takes off after Bobby. His feet beat the concrete, cutting through the slow stream of sidewalk traffic. He swerves by a small crowd who's stopped to help the woman nursing a scraped elbow. He's back on his high school track, feeling the treads of his sneakers bite into the synthetic rubber course beneath him. He's back in the gym, on the treadmill, with sweat in his eyes as his legs pump faster.

Bobby may have had a head start, but after another block, he grows winded and Jace easily closes the distance between them.

Latching onto his shoulder, Jace draws him to a stop and pulls him aside, into the entrance of a deserted alleyway.

Bobby loses his footing, spins, and hits the side brick wall of the bodega they've come to. He slumps to the ground, curls his knees into his chest, and lets out a yelp.

"The fuck is wrong with you? Why the fuck did you run?" Jace huffs.

Bobby curls into a ball beneath Jace, like a frightened animal. Despite the age and patchy beard on his face, he suddenly looks childlike. His hands and fingers work and bend frantically by his side as he wheezes and struggles to catch his breath, working up a frenzy.

"I just need to talk to you," Jace says. His palms face outward in a fruitless attempt to calm the involuntary murmurs and grunts Bobby hurls at him. "I need to know – why was my picture on your wall? In your apartment." He watches for a reaction. "What the fuck was that about?"

His questions have no effect on Bobby, who draws his hands up under his chin, wringing them nervously. His dull, brown eyes dart around in his head, taking in sky, the burnt-red slants and angles of brick rooflines, and Jace's glare that's sharp like sunlight piercing through glass.

"Why's there a picture of – Bobby, listen to me. Listen." He motions with two fingers for Bobby to meet his eyes. "Why is there a picture of me on your wall?"

He blinks rapidly. Then his eyes flicker to someone jogging by.

"Bobby? Hi! Can you tell me about the photos and the articles on your wall? Hmm? From the newspaper?" Jace is using his most patient voice, suitable for addressing mischievous kindergartners. He imagines he'll use this same voice one day when trying to root out which of his children drew on the walls with magic marker.

"It's you..." Bobby's voice tumbles out of his mouth with a low rattle. It's the voice of an eight-year-old, trapped in the

body of a thirty-something man. “I know who you are. I know what you are.” It trembles.

“Why did you come to my shop? Is there something you want to tell me? Something about my—”

“It was you!” He yells, drawing the attention of a couple passing. His lips take the shape of an O as he points. “Eddie’s gone. Eddie’s gone.” He grabs at his hair and releases a sob. “Eddie’s gone. You killed him—”

“What? No. Bobby, no. Listen, I did not kill Ezra – Eddie. I didn’t kill Eddie. That wasn’t me, okay?” Jace gives him a slow encouraging nod. “That wasn’t me, okay?”

The lightning and storm clouds in Bobby’s expression slip away. For the first time, he quiets to a calm and meets Jace’s eyes dead-on. He stares back, light and pensive. Jace can nearly see the wheels clicking and turning in his mind, but the silence between them somehow confirms the question lingering in the air.

Something ignites in Bobby’s eyes as a twisted smile seizes his lips.

“It... was him, wasn’t it?” He stutters. “He’s back!” He chokes out a sharp laugh and stretches his smile wider. “He’s back! It worked!”

“Who’s back?”

From his seat on the ground, he throws his head back, accidentally smacking it against the brick wall. But the pain doesn’t seem to register. He pounds his fists on the ground and laughs with a crazed glee that makes Jace inch back.

“It worked,” he sings. Beads of spit sit on his bottom lip as he tilts his head back and sings, “He’s baaack. Back to finish what he started.”

His words sting and swarm about Jace’s thoughts.

Back to finish what he started...

Does Bobby know about Sam?

He couldn’t.

He reaches for Jace, but Jace takes another quick step back. He swallows the panic rising in his throat and tells himself this is just the ravings of a lunatic. Bobby's clearly unhinged. And Jace hasn't seen or heard anything from Sam since asking him to meet. Sam's likely laying low until the buzz over Ezra being found dies down.

It's unlikely Bobby knows Sam is alive and responsible for killing Ezra. How could he?

Bobby's face falls but just as quickly lights up again. He rocks back and forth from his spot on the dirty ground and smiles up at Jace with pure adulation. Then, as if triggered by something only he can sense, he starts to hum to himself. A low, scattered melody that throws a chill over Jace's arms.

Jace looks back to the sidewalk that's deserted now. Only cars and a city bus pass by, blowing trash, debris, and an empty Big Daddy's BBQ container along the gutter. He crouches down, a few feet from Bobby, and asks, "How do you know he's back, Bobby? Hmm? Who told you that?"

Bobby stops humming, cracks another smile, and leans in to whisper, "We brought The Butcher back..." He giggles and leans back against the brick wall, pleased with himself. Pleased at the shocked look on Jace's face. "Other people tried, but... It was us. It worked!"

"How did you bring him back?" Jace asks.

He hunches his shoulders by his ears and gives Jace a sly smile before leaning in to whisper, "We killed the angel." He blinks and says in a hurried voice, "We – we cut off its wings... It was the angel," he laughs as a small tear rolls down his sweaty face. "It was the angel!"

"Bobby—"

"It was the angel!" He screams and beats his fists into the ground. "IT WAS THE ANGEL! IT WAS THE ANGEL!"

His screams draw people walking by to a stop, but Bobby either doesn't notice or care. He screams the words, again and again, looking past Jace now... at something – or perhaps someone – only he can see.

Jace slowly backs away, melting into the crowd taking shape.

Someone whips out their cell phone to record the crazy man screaming on the ground, and Jace removes himself from the frame. Away from the crowd. As far away from Bobby as possible.

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22 / SHAKEDOWN

The heat is stifling behind the line, but Jace is used to it by now as he calls out a new order.

“Short ribs and collards! Two salmon, one special! Extra side of mac!”

Blanca nods and shouts to the line cooks, “Let’s go, pick it up! I want perfect plates, every plate!”

Like a well-oiled battalion, they shout, “Yes, Chef!” – eyes never looking up from hot stoves and green garnishing stations sprouting fresh basil and parsley.

It’s another night at Zora’s and, more and more, Jace can see why Derek chose Blanca to run the team.

“So, I said...” She leans in Jace’s direction to finish her story from earlier. “Pierre Guérard stole that paella recipe from me, so suck on that!”

He laughs and wipes sweat off his brow with his sleeve.

“He never ordered it again,” she snickers, her eyes squeezed tight. Small beads of sweat mix with the freckles on her rosy cheeks. Reddish-brown spots dot across her cheeks and the bridge of her nose like points on a map trailing back to her childhood in Mexico City. She has her mother’s dark midnight hair, strong and woven into a braid that travels to the midpoint of her back. Her nose is undeniably her father’s Anglo-nose. Aquiline, sharp, and acute. When she laughs, she looks like neither one nor the other parent, but her own person.

Their laughter wilts though as Denise walks through the door, flashing her badge.

She’s in her work drag – the same navy blazer Jace saw her in last time, a lifeless blouse and dark pants. She’s brought company. A tall, slightly overweight oaf of a man who must shop in the men’s department of whatever drab department store Denise buys her work clothes from.

Blanca and Jace exchange looks, but Blanca moves first.

“I’ll go see what’s up.”

Jace nods weakly, already knowing why Denise is here. He accepts a ticket from one of the servers through the hot plate station and watches the front door as he calls out the next order.

Blanca soon returns, confirming Denise is here with an “Agent Farrow” to interview staff who worked with Ezra. Perhaps someone knows something about his murder or saw something suspicious the night he went missing.

“They’re pulling everybody, one at a time,” she says, pissed off. “Right in the middle of service when we’re slammed.”

“I can float around and fill in,” Jace says, so she won’t panic. She’s been focused and collected thus far, not nearly as manic as he expected her to be on what’s turning into their busiest night since she stepped into Derek’s shoes.

She mumbles a reply, then yells something at Demont that sounds fuzzy and far away to Jace’s ear. He’s watching Denise and her cohort from across the dining room. They’re starting with Janie, who looks more confused than surprised from her post at the hostess stand. But this doesn’t stop them from questioning her between walk-ups.

The fact that Denise has returned to formally interview more of the staff and has brought a partner this time can’t be good.

This goes on all night. The agents make their rounds and Jace watches it play out from afar without sound. Thankfully, diners with their hearty mouthfuls mostly seem blind to the murder investigation circling them.

Denise and Agent Farrow’s time with Charlie seems to take the longest. Charlie can’t help but regurgitate everything she knows, going over everything she told Denise initially, for her partner’s benefit.

They show her what looks like a pair of photos, laying them out on the bar, but Jace is too far to get a good look. He imagines they’re looking to ID someone.

But who?

As they move on, Charlie shoots Jace a look that says, “What the fuck?”

He returns the look and watches as they move onto La’Quan Gray, who was only hired a few weeks ago. He’s normally quiet, with a babyface and a buzzcut that changes colors like the wind changes course. It’s unlikely he has anything substantial to offer on Ezra since he’s only part-time, but the longer Denise and her partner have La’Quan cornered at the far end of the bar, the more sweat gathers in the small of Jace’s back.

Jace tells himself it’s nothing to be alarmed about, until the three turn to look at him.

Then again.

Then, once more, with La’Quan’s hand gestures growing bigger. Wilder.

Why do they keep looking at him?

And what the hell does La’Quan think he knows about Ezra’s murder?

Maybe he’s recounting an exchange he’s witnessed between Jace and Ezra. It’s no secret among the staff that Jace wasn’t a fan of Ezra. If they squinted hard enough, even the most aloof of them could see through Jace’s faux smiles when the two crossed paths and collided.

Then again, La’Quan could simply be painting a picture for them of what Ezra was like in the kitchen, before he went missing and turned up dead.

Ezra was a lot, so it’s possible La’Quan wasn’t a fan either.

Jace decides to busy himself until it’s his turn to be questioned, which doesn’t come until the last few tables are receiving their checks and half the staff has clocked out and left in groups.

“Save the best for last?”

Denise doesn't crack a smile at this. Instead, she introduces the hard-featured man with her as Special Agent Jack Farrow and beckons Jace to follow them to the break room, which they only learned of after questioning La'Quan. Blanca had been glad to have them take their business off the floor, but Jace hated missing the chance to eavesdrop.

"So, your fiancé's missing sous-chef has been found," Denise says with a bit of irony. It's one thing off her plate since she last surprised them at their loft.

"It's really awful," Jace says truthfully. "It just doesn't feel real." He loosens the buttons at the neck of the chef's coat he's been borrowing; he'd found it balled up in one of the break room lockers. It dawns on him now that it may have been Ezra's locker.

"You all may have known the deceased as Ezra Weyl." She takes a beat before explaining, "He's actually been identified as Eddie Neuman. Prints at the scene match up with a prior, an Eddie Neuman arrested four years ago during a protest in New Mexico."

"What was the protest about? What were the charges?" Jace realizes too late that he should have made a bigger to-do about this Eddie Neuman business, to push the muscles in his face to feign shock, but he's less surprised about the identity reveal. Fabrice indicated just as much when Derek called to follow up on his references. But, if everyone else they've spoken to tonight was shocked to learn that Ezra is Eddie, it may look odd that he didn't react to this.

"From what we know, it had to do with a member of this commune he lived on at the time being shot by the police. He was unarmed but pretended to have a gun during a gas station robbery." Denise rolls her hazel eyes. "Things went left, and this group Eddie lived with organized a march. Things escalated quickly."

Now, this is more like it. Here's something Jace didn't know.

"And the charges?"

"Violation of curfew and aggravated assault."

“He threw a Molotov cocktail at close range at an officer on duty,” Agent Farrow adds in a gruff voice, his left eyebrow cocked. “Hit her in the face. She lost an eye.”

Jace balks, “Jesus. This doesn’t sound like our Ezra at all.”

“And on that note...” Denise perks up in her chair. “Why don’t we start with you telling us about the night of the engagement party,” she says evenly. She has that damn notepad of hers out, pen poised to record each word.

Agent Farrow blinks and leans back in his chair, straightening the dark blue paisley tie that drapes over his stomach. He chews incessantly on a wad of seafoam-green gum that reveals itself past thin lips and a reddish-blond mustache he’s brought with him from the 70s. He reminds Jace of cops he’s only seen in movies. The kind who can’t tell good coffee from bad coffee, with fast-food wrappers and empty donut boxes lining the floor of their squad car. A walking cliché with a firm handshake and an accent as thick as a slice of New York-style cheesecake.

Jace tells them his version of what happened, that Ezra came to find him because he was late to what turned out to be his own surprise party. He explains he’d lost track of time and his phone died, so after failed attempts to reach him, Ezra came to light a fire under him.

“I left in a rush,” he says. “I was in the middle of inventory. Ezra offered to lock up after he looked through an order I set aside for the next night’s dinner service.” He briefly explains Ezra’s role in picking up orders for Zora’s and how he’d regularly set aside special cuts for Ezra to choose from on Derek’s behalf for the restaurant. “He told me he’d lock up and to just go,” Jace says, hating how the lie tastes in his mouth. “I knew I was late – for what I thought was a tasting Derek put together for one of the editors at Bon Appétit. In my mind, it was a really important night for Derek and here I am late, you know? But little did I know, it was all a setup. A surprise party.” He flashes the ring on his finger like he’s seen so many brides-to-be do with a blush.

Denise looks up from her notepad, smiles politely at the ring, and continues. “What time was this?”

“A little after seven-thirty, I think.” He’s sure someone on staff who was at the party can corroborate this. “Rather than deal with parking, I just ran over here. I had to book it though. And then it started raining! I was soaked when I got here.” He’s sure there’s CCTV of him from somewhere, running through the streets like a maniac.

“Was this the last time you saw Ezra that evening?”

“Yes.”

“And did he do what you asked? Lock up the deli?”

“The next morning, when I came into work, it was all locked up.”

“With the alarm armed.”

“Yes.”

“So, Ezra knew the code to your alarm system.”

“No. There’s just an ‘arm’ button. Anyone can arm it on their way out, but only my employees have the code to disarm it.”

“We’ll need your security records and footage from that night,” she says plainly.

It’s a test to see if he’ll blindly offer it up, but he knows she’ll need a search warrant for such things. Either way, the footage won’t do them any good. Sam has seen to that by erasing the chunk containing his visit. Also, the system’s archaic and original to the building. It doesn’t save anything past three days of footage on its memory card and doesn’t upload anything to the cloud.

“When you saw Eddie, what was his behavior like?” She leans in over the table. “Did he seem like himself? Did he seem off or scared or... Anything strike you as off?”

“Uhm, no. No, I mean, he mentioned he hadn’t been feeling great. He mentioned a sore throat, so that made me think he might leave work a little early – after the tasting was done. I

didn't think he wouldn't come back though. I thought he'd be right behind me."

She gives him a look that's hard to decipher and Agent Farrow isn't saying much; mostly just staring at Jace with dull, blue eyes as he chomps on gum that must be flavorless by now. It's as if Denise brought him along to quietly assess Jace. To see what his years of investigative experience might pick up on.

"Did the two of you ever argue? Have disagreements?"

He gives a dry laugh. "Sure. Sometimes over extra cuts of Wagyu he'd try to sneak into an order for himself. But nothing dire enough to make me saw him into pieces, if that's what you mean." He tilts his head and gives her a dull look. "You know who my father was, right? And, trust me, I get it. People think the bad apple doesn't fall far from the tree. People automatically think the worst of me. They hate that I've reopened the deli. They hate that I kept the name. They just want to forget the past ever happened and... I guess I just remind them of that." There. He's said it, although his family tree can't be a newsflash at this juncture. "All the loss... All the people he murdered – just like how Ezra was killed. I know how it looks." He takes a breath and looks between the two of them. "But I didn't kill Ezra – or Eddie," he corrects himself. "Besides, that'd be a little too on-the-nose, don't you think?"

Denise cracks a small smile at this and taps the tip of her nose with her pen.

Agent Farrow rocks uncomfortably in his chair as a thick silence envelops the room.

If this was meant to be a shakedown, it isn't going how they planned. Surely, some of the staff, including La'Quan, has mentioned Jace's connection to the Brooklyn Butcher but they looked surprised when Jace brought it up himself.

Could Jace be the bad apple they're looking for?

After a moment, Denise puts down her pen and crosses her arms. "Why do I get the feeling you're trying to protect someone?"

“Like your fiancé,” Agent Farrow adds. “Who conveniently left for LA on the morning Eddie’s body was found.”

“Derek has nothing to do with this,” Jace fires back. “He’d never hurt another living thing. He’s not wired that way.”

He isn’t wired to hunt and kill like Sam, who Jace still hasn’t heard from.

He can’t help but feel puzzled by this, along with the strange, new feelings that swarm within his belly. Is it possible he’s missing Sam? That now that his father is back in his life, some small part of him doesn’t want Sam to disappear again?

“Derek said you went to Eddie’s apartment looking for him at one point?” Denise shifts gears and shoots her partner a look. “There was some sort of encounter with one of Eddie’s roommates? Tell us about that.”

Jace gives a soft sigh of relief. Derek must have mentioned this to her after they left the loft together.

He tells her about his run-in with Ted at the apartment and the strange wall containing his photo at the center.

“I wonder now if they were planning some sort of robbery?” The thought hadn’t occurred to Jace until now. Until hearing about Eddie’s criminal past, which reminded him of how Fabrice fired Eddie for stealing a case of expensive wine. The wine had seemed like such a small thing at the time, but what if it was just a symptom of something larger? “Maybe they were planning to rob the deli. A big hit. For money or ‘murder memorabilia’ bullshit.”

They give him an odd look and Jace explains the fascination people have with the building’s dark past. That there’s an entire underground industry of traders and collectors who buy items that once belonged to famous serial killers. Personal items of “monster celebrities” like Sam, left and forgotten at crime scenes.

A comb.

An old ashtray that might sell for thousands of dollars with a twisted buyer.

Sam's office would be a treasure trove and there are plenty of buyers who don't care how items come to be listed for auction. For every buyer, there's a Ted or a Bobby or an Eddie willing to steal something rare and valuable for a quick payday.

"Eddie was in and out of the deli a lot, making it further than the average 'fan' of my father," Jace says dryly. "He got to know the floor plan, including the basement, where maybe he thought he'd find something rare. Something buyers would pay big money for."

Denise scribbles in her notepad. "Has this happened before? Anything ever stolen?"

"No, but it's been a fear of mine."

"You've seen both these men before?" Denise slides a photo of Ted onto the table. Then, a photo of Bobby beside him.

Jace gives a dull nod to the familiar faces.

"Ted Shultz and Robert Hayes." Agent Farrow's face sours at the photos. "Pretty motley crew."

The photo of Ted looks like a DMV photo. He's smirking in it.

The photo of Bobby is a mugshot. He's shirtless and looks drunk, with one eye nearly swollen shut.

"We went to speak with them, but the apartment was empty," Denise says. "The landlord said they must have left in the middle of the night."

"It was empty? So, nothing left on the walls then?"

She shakes her head.

"Any idea where they might have gone?"

"We were hoping you could tell us," Farrow says, arms folded.

Jace shrugs and looks back at the photos.

Ted and Bobby both have the same darkness scorched across their faces. Even though Ted's beaming in his photo there's nothing in his eyes, just two black holes staring back.

"This one came by the shop the other day." Jace points to Bobby. "It was weird, he was just peering in through the

window..." He holds his gaze on Bobby's mugshot and squints.

There's something he didn't notice before.

"This." He points to a tattoo, etched into the left side of Bobby's chest under his collarbone. "I've seen this before!" He moves his finger over to Ted's photo. "He has the same tattoo. On his arm."

Something sparks in Denise's eyes. "You're sure?" There's a firmness to her words as she gives her partner a side glance.

"I've seen it. He's been in the shop before. Maybe he was casing the place," Jace realizes now. "I'm sure though. I saw it again, on his arm, when I was at their apartment."

She sits back in her chair and starts to say something but stops herself.

"What?" Jace blinks. "What is this? Does this mean something?"

She looks at Farrow before letting her shoulders fall and clearing her throat. "Eddie has the same tattoo. On one of his legs they recovered from the scene. On his right back calf."

"Could be gang-affiliated," Farrow says curtly.

But Denise doesn't look convinced.

"You don't think so, do you?" Jace challenges her. "And you didn't know Ted has the same tattoo, did you?"

Her face draws tight.

"Does it mean something?"

Farrow cuts in, "Just looks like some kinda... shit. What do you call that? Tribal?" He waves a hand and straightens his tie. "Like tribal symbols or somethin'. My kid's got a similar one he got in Long Island on Spring Break."

"It's not uncommon for people to have the same tattoo," Denise acknowledges.

For all they know, it could be some kind of stupid, toxic masculinity blood brother thing; something they all decided to

do after getting drunk one night.

But something feels off about it. And despite Denise's best attempts, Jace can tell she feels it too.

"You said he came to the shop. When was this?" She steers them back to Bobby and his visit to the deli.

He gives her a high-level rundown of what happened, excluding Bobby's crazed meltdown on the street. "The whole thing was weird. He came by, peering in the front window. I remembered him from the apartment. So, I ran out to talk to him, but he ran." Jace shrugs. "Maybe they're still targeting the deli for some reason."

"This deli of yours keeps coming up, doesn't it?" Farrow can't seem to help the sneer that finds its way to his thin lips.

"What do you mean by that?"

"It's just odd, don't you think?" Denise asks this plainly, as if daring him to protest the logic she's about to lay out. "First, Aaron Gilbert vanishes. Doesn't show up for his usual bed at St. Mary of the Angels... Then Eddie Neuman disappears the night of your party. Both wind up butchered, both severed at their limbs, and wrapped in the same brand of butcher paper your shop uses – the only shop in an eighty-mile radius that uses Grady's wax paper, by the way."

"Very retro," Agent Farrow croons. "Grady's! Manufactured out of a plant in Chicago... Popular in the 80s – with that TV commercial with the dad and son grillin' in the backyard and that catchy little jingle..." He hums part of it and adds, "That stuff's hard to come by unless by special order."

This must be what they've been waiting to drop on him. But Jace doesn't respond to this, to any of it. He doesn't attempt to derail Denise's train of logic or point out that anyone can order a roll of Grady's wax paper in this day and age through the magic of the internet.

He's too distracted to argue with them as he dwells on what Denise has just said.

Aaron Gilbert vanished from St. Mary of the Angels.

Angels...

Aaron had been one of their angels.

Bobby's twisted rantings ring in his ears, screaming how he and – Jace can only assume with the help of Ted and Eddie – killed an angel by cutting off its wings as a means to bring back Sam.

Maybe this wasn't just the rantings of a madman on the sidewalk that day. Maybe this wasn't just Bobby losing his shit in a sea of drool and tears.

Maybe it was his confession.

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Jace draws a sip from his lukewarm coffee, staring at the clock in his office – Sam’s old office – which still smells the same despite how many new lives the walls of the deli have taken on. Beneath the skin, plaster, and wallpaper of doomed ice cream parlors and too many failed businesses to count, the building’s remained the same at its bones.

The office is trapped in time with its checkered parquet flooring and wall panels. He’s surprised no one has thought to paint a fresh coat of white over the knotted wood paneling to brighten the space and drag it kicking and screaming out of the late seventies. A task he might ask Bill to tackle once his team finishes painting what was once his father’s old kill room in the basement.

Bill’s promised they should be done with the renovation by tomorrow morning, which can’t come soon enough.

Jace will need it for what’s to come.

He’s counting on Bill to keep his word, although it hasn’t been a good day up to now, and he isn’t feeling especially hopeful. Derek called him in the middle of the lunch rush to tell him Denise phoned him. It was nothing Jace hadn’t heard from her and Farrow last night regarding the investigation, but the disbelief in Derek’s voice annoyed Jace more than anything. Somehow, he was still surprised to learn Ezra had been identified as Eddie Neuman, a drifter with a murky, violent past able to finagle his way into some of the best kitchens in the country.

But Jace allowed Derek to vent and toss out his own wild theories as to why someone would want Eddie dead. None of which comes close to touching the truth.

Jace pushes out a breath now, pinches the bridge of his nose, and eyes the phone on his desk. Almost resentful.

He's been putting off calling for much longer than he should have, but the clock on the wall with its long, slender fingers tells him it's now or never. It points to a quarter past four, reminding him as he dials that Steinman's Wall Street office will close soon, along with his window to catch—

“Hello. This is Sean.”

Fuck.

Jace hadn't expected Sean to answer on the first ring. He's also surprised an admin or assistant-type didn't answer to field and transfer the call, but here he is on the line. His voice thin and fraying from the weight of the day.

Jace holds his breath and sits upright in his chair, trying to remember what he's practiced. Words he's been tumbling around behind tight lips all morning have left his mouth dry now as his fingers twist and coil around the black, plastic phone cord.

“Hello?” He sounds annoyed.

Jace can picture the scowl on his face, picture him and his linebacker shoulders hunched over his desk.

“Yes! Mr. Pratt. Hi!” Jace clears the swell in his throat and forces a smile. He's heard somewhere that if you smile into the phone people can feel it. A hack for making your voice sound pleasant and disarming – even when you just want to curse and throw lightning bolts into the phone. Even when you just want to reach through the line and strangle the life out of the serial killer on the other end. “This is Jace Lannister, from Cassex Deli. I'm following up on a premium surf and turf package we have on order for you. Looks like this was an auction item we donated that hasn't been redeemed.”

There's a pause.

“It's from...” Jace ruffles some papers loudly on his desk.

“Looks like a ‘Fire and Ice Charity Ball’, back in December. With The Littmann Foundation?” He throws a question mark at the end, as if he's just found proof of this claim, reading from an old, fictitious, crumpled order form.

“Oh. Right.” He answers slowly, as if his voice is stretching, trying to reach for the memory of that night.

Sean must remember being at the ball though, if only vaguely. And Jace knows he was there, thanks to photos he unearthed on his wife Amber’s Facebook timeline.

It took some digging, but there they were, posing on the red carpet, in front of a large, vinyl step-and-repeat with The Littmann Foundation’s ill-designed logo behind them.

It’s a good thing Amber likes to document everything on Facebook. Especially any excuse to leave their kids with a sitter, squeeze into a ballgown that shows off “the girls”, and drag her husband to some highbrow charity event he’d rather not go to. At least according to the dreary look on Sean’s face in her photos.

Add in Amber’s hashtags #powercouple and #givebackNYC, and you’d almost swear they’re regular socialites, raising money for underserved youth with diseases neither of them can likely pronounce.

So, Sean may not remember entering a silent auction that particular night, but it’s feasible Amber might have. This must be what Sean’s thinking as he makes a clicking sound with his tongue, allowing the silence to stretch on his end of the line.

“That was a while ago,” he finally says.

“Which is why I’m calling. Your gift certificate’s about to expire. This is really just a final courtesy call,” Jace says, losing the smile on his face. As if he can care less if Sean is interested in this mysterious surf and turf package that’s materialized from thin air. “You should’ve received an email...” More paper shuffling. “Looks like we have a nycpatriot614@gmail.com?”

It’s the email from his podcast website, with one digit off.

“It’s nycpatriot617@gmail,” Sean corrects him.

“Ahhh. That’s a seven.” Jace huffs into the line. “That explains it. Sorry about that, Mr. Pratt.” He shakes his head, in character, even though Sean isn’t in the room to see it. “They just hand us a stack of forms and tell us to pick a winner after

these things. I'm not the best at reading handwriting either. You should see mine! My doctor has better handwriting." Jace chuckles, enough for Sean to join in lightly. "But, yeah! Good thing I called and you picked up. I was 'bout to go onto the next person." Jace gives a heartier laugh this time. The type of good-old-boy, locker-room laugh Sean would share with his buddies at Shangri-La.

Once the laughter fades, there's another pause, but only a small one. Just long enough for Sean to decide whether to hang up or not.

"So, this is what now? A dinner we won? Some steaks?" His voice perks up at the end. Less thin as he starts to salivate over the prize dangling on the line.

What red-white-and-blue-blooded patriot wouldn't bite at free steak and lobster?

"It's one of our Butcher's Packages. You've heard of Omaha Steaks?"

Of course, he has.

"We do somethin' similar. Our Deluxe Butcher Box is the most popular – but for this event, looks like we agreed to donate four 6 oz. butcher's cut filet mignons, two ribeyes, six split lobster tails, and two deli sides of your choice. I recommend the macaroni salad."

"Dang. That all sounds good to me!" He lets out a short laugh and Jace is forced to join in. He must be thinking that something good has finally come from all the dinners Amber's dragged him to, hoping their picture might make it onto Page Six. "Feel free to send it on, then," he croons. "Guess I know what I'm grillin' up this weekend!" Another good-old-boy laugh that lights a fire in Jace's chest.

"We do ask that you come in with photo ID to redeem it," Jace says, treading lightly. "We don't deliver."

A lie. But one Sean isn't likely to look into. And if he does, it's no bother since Jace has temporarily removed any mention of delivery fees from the website.

There's dead air. It pulls and stretches too long for Jace's liking.

Panicked he might slip off the line, Jace quickly adds, "We could freeze-pack everything, put it in the mail for you, but we'd have to charge you for postage and insurance. None of that's covered. And I can't guarantee when you'd receive it with the post office bein' the way it is these days..." Jace shakes his head. "I don't think you want four, five-day-old lobster in the mail..."

Of course he doesn't.

"Oh," is all Sean says.

But he doesn't hang up.

"Sorry, man." Jace's voice slips into something more comfortable. "I know it's a pain, and you really shoulda had your order by now. So, I'll tell you what," he lowers his voice, conspiringly. "I can throw in another ribeye when you come in – as long as you don't tell Erma we're just now gettin' around to your prize. Last thing I need is her fired up over somethin' else. That lady's a real piece of work!" Jace chuckles to himself. He has no idea where the name Erma came from, but it sounds like a real person – a real type-A, ball-busting, fundraising maven he may be connected with from the venue – or someone at The Littmann Foundation who organized the auction to begin with.

Again, Sean won't check for an Erma. All he cares about is free red meat he can throw on the grill and devour. A welcome departure from the near-inedible kitchen slop Jace has seen Amber post, audaciously proclaiming #foodie and #bettywho under photos of undercooked chicken and overcooked rice.

Sean does that thing again into the phone, that irksome clicking sound with his tongue sticking and slapping off the roof of his mouth.

Jace wonders if he makes the same noise around his victims. Once he's finished strangling them and the blood has returned to his hands. Or perhaps as he's searching their pockets for their ID to hang onto as a memento, before dragging their

bodies deeper into the tangled, green, and brown shambles of the woods.

“Yeah, I, uhh...” He sucks his teeth. “I can stop in after work, I guess. In about an hour. What’s the address?”

Jace gives it to him but says, “We can have everything pulled and packaged up for you by Friday. I’ll have some beautiful Maine lobsters comin’ in that morning too! Any chance you can swing by then, say around 5:30? We close at 6.”

Surprisingly, thankfully, he agrees to come in Friday, just before closing, and Jace breathes easier.

At 6 p.m. Friday, the shop will be empty and the dust will have settled on Sam’s old kill room in the basement, revived and renovated. The wall that once separated tortured ghosts of the past from the world above, torn down. The room will smell of fresh paint, bare with the exception of a cold, metal prep table under a single light.

By Friday at 6 p.m., Jace will have Sean Pratt all to himself.

The phone call quickly comes to a close; so fast Jace can barely remember saying goodbye once he’s returned the phone to its cradle on his desk.

All in all, the call went much easier than Jace had expected. But that’s just it. Luring Sean to the deli is the easy part. What comes next will be far more difficult.

Jace reaches for his cell phone, nips at his lower lip with his teeth, and sends a text to Sam.

Doing some renovations at work

Grand re-opening of your favorite spot Friday night

With a very special guest

It’s the one thing that can bring Sam out of hiding.

What killer can resist returning to the scene of their crimes?

It's been years since Sam has stepped foot in his kill room that was raided and sealed off with all his keepsakes inside. All taken away from him by the FBI.

Jace types... I'm putting an end to this Friday night ... and prepares to wait.

Almost immediately, a stream of dots flashes across his screen, and Jace reads Sam's reply aloud, under his breath.

I'll bring pliers.

Pliers.

It takes Jace a beat to realize he means pliers for Sean's fingernails.

And his teeth.

• • •

Jace gives the ice in his glass a swirl before returning it to the bar with a thud loud enough to startle Charlie.

He glances up at her with heavy eyes, full of apologies and something dark she can't place.

She eventually turns her attention to a fresh face at the bar, while Jace fidgets and starts to doodle on his bar napkin...

Clouds.

Stars.

Something that looks like a dog. Or a raccoon.

A poor rendering of the outside of Cassex Deli.

More stars.

Lightning.

Swirls.

Spirals!

Dark eyes that remind him of Ted.

A tiny bowl of ice cream.

A cherry.

The tattoo on Ted's arm...

Jace hasn't been able to stop thinking about it, ever since the discovery he made with Denise.

Denise hadn't said it – not in front of her partner – but she slid him the same conspiring look she gave him at the loft as they connected the identical, jagged symbols to the ones etched into Bobby's chest. The same symbols on Eddie's severed leg found at the crime scene.

Her bright, hazel eyes narrowed at him and faded dark, as if to say, "I know there's something larger happening here. Something big you're not telling me – but you can trust me!"

But Jace can't help but cling to Quinn's warning about her.

He'd love to trust her – to tell her everything – but the best he can hope for now is for Denise to be where he needs her to be when the time is right. He has to trust that she's a creature of habit and will look up in time to see the flare he's about to send up.

And as for the tattoo...

He drops his pen on the bar and massages a migraine he feels nearing.

It has to mean something.

But what?

Jace sighs loudly and finishes his drink, dropping his shoulders in mild defeat.

He hadn't meant to down two drinks in the span of an hour, especially in plain sight of the staff. But his nerves are shredded, thinking back to his earlier phone call with Sean, back to Sam's daunting text message. Back to his urgent phone

call with the art department of the Daily News to place a last-minute coupon in Friday's paper. He'd missed the art deadline by an hour, but after five minutes of begging and after dropping Quinn's name, the nasal voice on the phone line agreed to place Jace's sales ad.

"I doubt it's 'a matter of life and death,'" they retorted. "But, we'll allow it this once."

Jace forced a smile into the line to enforce his appreciation, but the tremor in his voice teetered between relief and horror – shocked at himself for what he's just set into motion. A flare bright enough to tear through the night sky and set it aflame.

He knows he looks a mess now, hunched over the bar at Zora's...

Instead of drinking and doodling, he should be behind the line, helping prep for the dinner wave on its way. But Blanca, seemingly in a better mood than usual, indicated she could brave the monsoon alone tonight, and that he should have the evening off.

She's showing off now. She wants to drive home how she can handle the kitchen on her own, hoping Jace will plant roses and sweet sentiments in Derek's ear about her performance.

Which, of course, Jace will when they speak tonight. Once Derek calls him after his last taping.

Jace would love nothing more than to go home, hop into his sweatpants, and wait for Derek's call. But even with the evening off, he can't leave.

Not until he's gotten what he's come for.

He savors the last of the gin and tonic on his tongue, and guilt puts an odd taste in his mouth as he watches Janelle walk in.

"Babe!" Charlie's face ignites into a smile, a strong mixture of delight and relief. She hasn't known how to shake the clouds hanging over Jace. Nothing she says seems to lift him out of the shadows, but maybe Janelle can lighten the mood. Maybe one of her stories about her patients at Hawkins Psychiatric Center will drag a laugh out of him.

“What a fuck-ing day!” Janelle swears and sets her motorcycle helmet on the bar. “I’m ready to be committed. Lock me up next to Miss Pearl, babe, cuz them folks are drivin’ me crazy. I’m this close to the edge.”

Charlie kisses her, then reaches to take her backpack.

“I’ve got it.” Jace swiftly intercepts her bag before either can object. “I’m headed to the break room,” he shrugs. “I’ll toss it in a locker for you. And your helmet.”

Janelle gives him a deflated smile. “Thanks, boo. You’re not headin’ out, are you? Have a drink with me.”

Jace looks to Charlie, who begrudgingly nods. “Just one more G&T. I’ll be right back!”

He snatches the helmet by its mouth and makes his way to the break room, thankful to find it empty. A muted Hannah McAvoy watches him from her spot on the wall, peering over his shoulder as he sets Janelle’s helmet on the nearest table and unzips her backpack.

Until now, he’s only held guesses as to what’s inside, but under a pair of extra scrubs, tampons, and a change of clothes, he finds what he’s looking for.

Janelle’s medical pack.

He unzips the small black case, quickly inspects the inventory, and takes only what he needs. Carefully slipping it into the front pocket of his jeans.

He doesn’t suspect Janelle will miss it. Not until she needs it. And by then he won’t care if she accuses him of stealing it. Friday will have come and gone, and this entire nightmare will be behind him. A fever dream that came and went in the night and eventually released its hold on him.

If all goes as planned – if he can pull this off – he’ll have a chance at a normal life again.

Running his business.

Sampling wedding cakes with Derek.

He's too close to fall apart now. And it's too late to undo what's in motion. He has to keep moving.

He zips Janelle's bag, stuffs it into a locker, and returns to the bar. Back to the familiar noise of the dining room and Janelle and Charlie unpacking their days.

Janelle says something about the new intern on her shift and sips from a glass the color of Maraschino cherries.

Jace does his best to listen and laugh on cue as he nurses his drink. All he wants to do is leave, but a voice warns him not yet... not enough time has passed for his exit to look inconspicuous. So, he sits and suffers through small talk and Janelle's work stories he would ordinarily find hilarious any other day but today.

It isn't until the last of the line cooks on the night shift stride in that he gets the nerve to carefully stand and announce he has to go home and walk Stella.

Janelle gives him a hard time, of course, but caves and gives him a half-hug from her bar stool.

"Let's do dinner when Derek gets back!"

Jace nods and waves goodbye to Charlie.

She tosses him a look that says, "Stay out of trouble," then snags his empty glass and wipes his empty spot at the bar with a rag. "Wait! You don't want your 'work of art' here?" She teases, holding up the napkin he's left behind with a damp hand.

"Keep it. Frame it!" He smirks. "Maybe one day it'll be worth somethin'..."

But the smirk on his face dissipates as he looks past Charlie, catching sight of the napkin covered in ink and his mindless doodling in the mirror behind her.

Beneath a rough cluster of stars and spirals, the rudimentary sketch of Ted's tattoo draws his eye. And there on a napkin clutched between Charlie's fingers and Sheer Peach nail polish, it suddenly looks entirely different. As if a veil has

been lifted from his eyes and the design's optical illusion has been shattered.

It isn't a mishmash of symbols or some ambiguous, tribal design, as Denise's partner suggested.

It's made up of letters.

Initials.

Distorted. Elongated... but initials all the same.

He sees it clearly now, angled, upside-down in the reflection of the mirror...

SM

And although these letters could stand for anything, there's only one person who instantly springs to mind. Someone Bobby let slip during the middle of his public meltdown on the sidewalk that day.

The Butcher.

Sam. Mader.

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24 / VEGAS

“I don’t get it.” Derek yawns into the phone. “You’d think craft services would be better on a cooking show.”

“Spoken like a true diva. LA’s ruining you already.”

“You can only have turkey wraps and hummus so many days in a row, you know?”

“You miss your kitchen.” Jace can hear it in his voice. He can’t wait to get back to Zora’s. Back to his range and his knives he wasn’t able to fly with.

“I miss you,” he says softly.

It’s just what Jace needs to hear as he collapses into bed and pulls the cover over his head. Gladys Bentley sings her worried blues in the background and Jace instantly finds himself back in his parents’ living room. Watching Sam drag his mother into a slow dance. Drifting across the dark green shag carpet.

It was the first time he ever heard the blues and someone use their voice as an instrument, a brassy trumpet firing between notes and nonsense syllables. A random song plucked from Sam’s vinyl collection.

He tries to picture Derek in his trailer, bathed in sunlight streaming through a small window by the kitchenette. He imagines him half-sprawled across a small built-in sofa bench with a beer and the phone to his head. Derek’s yet to wash off the stage make-up he barked at some unlucky makeup artist to go easy on.

“I miss you too.” Jace gives a happy sigh and rolls onto his side. He feels Stella jump onto the bed, make a circle, and plop down, resting her head on his feet.

He has everything he needs in this moment. Derek’s sweet words in his ear and the unconditional warmth of Stella’s weight on him; a gentle reminder that she’s a part of his pack,

and that he isn't alone. It's almost enough to make him put aside the disquieting thoughts about the tattoo Ted, Bobby, and Eddie all share. It's almost enough to drown out the memory of Eddie getting his throat slashed. The eerie smile on his face and the glee in his voice as he shouted, "I knew it!" Just before Sam's knife sliced through his windpipe.

"I've been thinking." Derek draws a breath. "You know, with all this stuff with Ezra..."

Jace feels his face flush. It irritates him that Derek still calls him – still thinks of him – as the annoying but lovable Ezra who worked beside him at Zora's, when he was this Eddie Neuman character all along.

Denise's last visit confirmed he was a charade of a man who slithered his way into their lives – and all for what? To position himself closer to Jace and the deli? To come and go as he pleased, riffling through Sam's old office and the basement?

That fucking basement.

Jace has seen his share of fanatics, fake customers who waltz in and offer cold cash just to see where the murders took place.

Before hiring Caitlin and Yuri, he made the mistake of indulging someone who offered him \$300 for five minutes in the basement at night, after the shop closed. Jace needed the money for new equipment and thought, "Shit. \$300 is \$300! What harm could come of it?" But less than a minute in, he got his answer.

To this day, Jace doesn't know where his late-night visitor was hiding the knife he brandished, using it to cut the palm of his own hand split down the middle. What happened next is still a blur of blood – smeared on the floor of the basement – and loud chanting. Boisterous chanting and singing, sharp syllables in another language that shook the walls of the basement and bounced up the wooden stairs. This was all some sick parlor trick to raise The Butcher from the dead, Jace was later informed by the policeman who came to remove his late-night visitor. He was told it was a "ritual" of sorts.

“These guys, they just get obsessed with this place.” The officer offered, glancing back at the building as Jace followed them out. “They say it’s got bad juju.” He removed his hat to reveal a head full of twists and knotted curls and gave Jace a mystified look before turning to go.

Since that night, Jace doesn’t allow anyone from the public to get as far as the basement. No matter how tempting the offer. Little did he know, someone devoted enough to tattoo Sam’s initials on his leg was already inside. Poised as Derek’s sous-chef.

And then there’s Aaron Gilbert, who was somehow a pawn in all this – in their plan to “bring back” Sam. But without proof, it does him little good to bring the accusation to Denise. He knows this. Which is why he bit his tongue the last time he saw her. To bring it to her now would only entangle himself more in the web of calamity surrounding the deli.

He’ll need to reach her another way, once he has proof.

“What if we just got married when I get back?” Derek finishes his initial thought. “What if we just said ‘fuck it’ and eloped?”

Jace comes back to earth and needs a minute to absorb Derek’s question. “Elope, like... run-off-to-Vegas elope? Get married by Elvis in a little white chapel?” He laughs, but for one of Derek’s more ostentatious ideas, it isn’t entirely insane.

“Life’s short, you know?” Derek sips his beer. “I don’t know about you, but I don’t need a big wedding just to say two words. Know what I mean? I. Do. That’s it,” he chuckles to himself. “People go crazy, stress themselves out. Spend thousands of dollars, all for a day that goes by sooo fast. And two little words.”

He sounds faded. Jace wonders how many beers he’s had on top of that but doesn’t ask.

“Let’s talk about this more when you get home. You’re not gonna convince me you don’t want Claire Moreau to do our wedding cake.”

Derek belts out a laugh.

“Right? You’ve prob’ly already called her to make some kinda fancy, passion fruit, white-chocolate mousse, five-tier monstrosity we’ll have to fly in from Paris...”

“I’ll never tell,” he laughs. “You know she’s my favorite pastry chef, like ever. There aren’t many I fuck with, they’re crazy – but I fucks with some Claire Moreau. She’s cool people.”

“Mmm-hmm.” Jace glances at his watch and pulls the covers from over his head with a groan. His buzz has started to slip away, and sleep is taking over. “It’s late here, babe...”

“I know. I just wanted to hear your voice. I’m glad we got to chat.”

Chat.

Suddenly, a wild thought crosses Jace’s mind.

A way to prove Bobby and Ted were behind Aaron Gilbert’s death. A way to bring Bobby and Ted to Denise.

A dangerous smile seizes his lips. He can’t believe the idea didn’t come to him sooner.

“I’m glad you called,” Jace says. His voice is distant as he thinks through the nuts and bolts of the idea.

Derek’s quiet for a moment. Too quiet.

“You okay, Chef?”

Derek smiles into the line. “Yeah. Just ready to get back to you. Back to life. I know things won’t be the same at work – it’ll take some time for people to adjust without seein’ Ezra around. Or Eddie,” he says, finally acknowledging the truth. “Whoever he was.”

“Time heals all wounds,” Jace says, regretting it immediately. He worries it may have come across flippant, like a crude sentiment he might have read in a fortune cookie once and regurgitated back in the moment while sidetracked.

But Derek doesn’t seem to notice.

“I want us to get back to us,” he says, in a tone that’s warm and familiar in Jace’s ear. “Clean slate. Put all this craziness

behind us – maybe even take some time away from work? You're always at the deli, babe. Always. You could use a break from that place.”

More than he knows.

Jace closes his eyes and draws a breath. He wants to unravel and scream, to fall apart and tell Derek everything he's been juggling and dealing with... The trauma of witnessing Eddie's death... Sam's return... His brush with Sean Pratt – a new kind of evil he intends to stop – and his plan to do so. But the danger of involving Derek quickly pulls Jace back together tight.

Everything he's done has been to protect Derek, to give him the kind of life he deserves, free of his darkness and skeletons that won't remain at rest.

He can't bend now. To reach the light at the other end, he'll have to travel and push through the darkness first. And that will require him to be cold and callous. Cruel and unforgiving. He'll need to do what he's feared most, the one thing he swore to himself he would never do...

Become his father.

“Oh, shit. Hang on, babe.”

Jace hears Derek pull his phone from his ear, talking to someone in the background.

“That's the PA, babe. Break's over. I gotta run.”

“Okay, babe. Break a leg!”

Another bad idiom not worth repeating.

They say goodbye and Jace watches his phone go dark as Derek hangs up.

Stella jerks her head up, following Jace with tired eyes as he throws off the covers and heads to the living room to find his laptop. With a whimper, she stands on the edge of the bed, gives herself a good shake, and hops off to follow.

With his last bit of strength remaining in the day, Jace plops onto the sofa and cracks open his laptop.

He doesn't know why it hadn't occurred to him, but finding Bobby and Ted has always been just a few keystrokes away.

It's a wild idea, and maybe even a shot in the dark, but if he's right... if his idea works, this could be the Hail Mary he needs.

Fingers hovering over his keyboard, he hesitates for only a moment before logging onto Dread, a dark web forum with a chat room and following for every twisted, uncensored appetite fathomable. From snuff film aficionados to weapons dealers and darknet terrorist markets, there's something for everyone, but Jace is only interested in one room. The room where people go to trade homemade pics of murder scenes like baseball cards and jerk off to true-crime stories. The room where serial killers are rockstars and his father is a fucking god among demons.

Opening the door, Jace takes a breath, logs on as CassexSon19, and sends a group message.

• • •

Bill Graber stands in the entrance to Jace's office, nearly filling the doorway in his paint-spattered overalls. He's all gray whiskers and tobacco-stained teeth as he gives a forced smile.

"All done!"

"And on time." Jace nods behind his desk, impressed he's achieved the feat on time without demanding more money or threatening to quit. "Good to see the ghosts didn't chase you away."

His smile wanes and the glistening of his eyes goes cold.

"The new wiring's all done, and that light works," he says, matter-of-factly. "Paint should be dry in about an hour."

Bill had made a big deal over the paint, suggesting Jace may want to brighten the space with something like a "Pale Daffodil" or "Lemon Sorbet" by Benjamin Moore, but Jace couldn't care less about the color of the room. Nor did he have

time to muddle over paint swatches. He only plans to use the room once and for one purpose only.

And blood's gonna get on them anyway.

He convinced Bill to go with an understated "Gray Owl" color, a shade off from the original wall color. A compromise of sorts, since Bill argued he shouldn't choose the same dull, off-gray color that's likely out of production anyway. Fine by Jace. It's really the furniture in the room he wants to recreate more than anything.

A single stainless-steel rolling cabinet, same as the old model, and a matching steel table in the middle of the room.

Just as Sam kept it.

Bill traces Jace with his beady eyes. "What're you plannin' to do down there?" He asks, trying to sound casual, even upbeat, but he can't help his left eye from wincing. He might not have thought much of the file cabinet, but the cold, metal table under the pendant lamp surely has him curious.

Jace tilts his head and chirps. "Craft room." But Bill doesn't look amused, so Jace softens and gives him a grateful smile. "Thanks for a job well done, Bill. Really. I'll be sure to give you five stars on Yelp."

He presses his lips together, shakes his head lightly before muttering something, and throws up a hand before leaving.

As if she's been waiting for him to leave, Caitlin pops her head around the corner.

"Is he gone? He's finished?"

Jace reclines back in his desk chair. "Done and done."

She makes the same face Bill just made.

"Hey. It'll be another prep area we can use!" He tries to assure her. "We can store more catering supplies and boxes in there, out the way."

"Are you gonna put an office down there?" A curious question. "Yuri said you had him look for a file cabinet."

She apparently hasn't looked inside the room. She hasn't seen the set-up with the table center stage. She hasn't peeked inside the file cabinet to find the small army of blades and boning knives inside.

And she won't.

Caitlin rarely goes in the basement for anything and wants nothing to do with the "bad juju" of Sam's old kill room.

"It's just for extra storage," he says, giving his laptop's screen a glance, then a frown.

"Hmm. 'Kay. Well, I came to ask if I can have next Thursday off. Bradley and I have an IVF appointment. It's the same place his coworker used for her twins. Supposed to be the best." She smiles through the sour-tart look on her face.

"Sure. Of course," is all Jace says. With any luck, their fancy lab tests will reveal Bradley's shooting blanks, but he doesn't say what she's probably thinking. She looks rattled enough.

"Thanks. I figure at least we'll know what we might be up against, right?"

"Right on," he quips. "Ohhh!" His tone changes as he looks up, taking her in fully now. "Your necklace! You found it."

It peeks from beneath her pale yellow cardigan. Gold script gleams under stale fluorescent light.

She beams, brighter than he's seen her shine in days, with a glow about her.

"Aliana found it when she was doing the laundry! I couldn't believe it!" She grins, clasping the pendant, and strokes it with her thumb.

"You're lucky. When I lose shit, it's just gone. Like it just got up and walked out—"

The landline rings.

Jace holds up a finger and swiftly answers the phone. He's been commandeering the deli's landline all day, making sure no one beats him to it; all with one eye on his cell phone and the other on his open laptop. Nothing's come through the deli's

email. No encrypted messages. No coded threats or responses to the loaded message he sent over the chat forum late last night. Even more remarkable, no private messages have come through the chat room in response. But, after four misfire calls for catering and a wrong number, this may be the call he's been waiting for.

He mutters his standard Cassex Deli greeting, only to be met with silence. A thick silence that somehow feels drenched in innuendo.

"Gotta take this," he mouths to Caitlin and watches her close the door behind her.

"Cassex Deli," Jace repeats. "Jason Mader speaking."

A sign of sorts, something to reveal himself to his caller.

"Jason Mader..."

Jace recognizes the deep, baritone voice instantly, summoning Ted to mind in his black t-shirt, one size too large, and his dark, tussled hair and melted ice cream.

It's who he hoped would respond to his darknet message.

"We got your message."

"Bobby's with you?"

There's a pause before Bobby's voice booms over the line.

"Hi, Jason! Hi! It's Bobby! It's Bobby – remember me?"

Before Jace can answer, Ted is back on the line, having snatched the phone back.

"Pretty bold claim you put out there... Knowing where 'Benedict the Moor' is..." He gives what sounds like a chuckle on the line. "I knew you knew more than you let on that day."

"I also know why he did it," Jace says. "I know why he killed all nineteen."

The line goes quiet. Jace guesses he's conveying all this to Bobby now. Sharp notes in the background like ghouls whispering.

When Ted returns, his tone verges on euphoria. “He was healing them, wasn’t he? He was curing them!”

“First, tell me about Aaron Gilbert,” Jace says. “Why’d you cut off his wings?”

Bobby giggles in the background and Ted scoffs.

“He was a prop,” he says impatiently. “A shitty addict who took money people gave him for food and shot it up his fucking veins! He was a tool. A means to get your father’s attention – and to honor and give him praise and worship.” His voice abruptly softens at the end, as if finishing a prayer.

“Is that why you boys got matching tattoos of my father’s initials?” Jace jeers. “That’s real fuckin’ cute. But killing someone doesn’t make you ‘down for the cause’. You sacrificed an innocent man. That’s murder.”

Ted balks at the word and sputters, “The whole thing was Eddie’s idea, alright? A way to draw your father out and prove he’s alive. That he faked his death.”

Jace rocks back in his chair.

He’d been right. It was no coincidence Aaron’s body turned up on the anniversary of Sam’s “death.” It had been designed as a sign, a signal to Sam. And it worked.

“Eddie was determined. He was gonna apply there, at the deli, but you’d hired someone. Some chick. But then he saw your boyfriend or whatever leavin’ the deli one day. Saw you guys kiss, so he followed him to his job. Did a little research on you guys...”

The wall in their apartment with Jace’s photo leaps to the front of Jace’s mind.

“Eddie ended up workin’ at Zora’s as the next best thing,” Ted explains. “He charmed his way in with Derek and got hired, so he could still be close to the deli. Be on the inside, to look around.”

“And he found exactly what he was looking for,” Jace says. “He wanted Sam, and that’s just what his ass got.”

Careful what you ask for.

“Eddie was weak,” Ted seethes. “Your father must’ve sensed something rotten inside him, that’s why he took him. He had no choice. And to return him to us the way he did!” He swoons. “That’s when I knew he’d heard us. It was our answer that he’s still with us!”

Jace doesn’t know who’s crazier.

If it’s a contest between Ted’s “Black patron saint” and Sam’s “visions of color”, it might be a draw.

“He came back because of us – not because of you,” Ted bites. “You ran off ‘cross the damn country while we stayed – while we still believed!”

Jace pictures the smug look on his face and Bobby sweating and breathing heavily in the background.

“Tell me what he said to you,” Ted heaves. “Why’d he kill the nineteen? Did God speak to him? Was it... a vision?”

“You can ask him your damn self,” Jace says. “There’s gonna be another ‘sacrifice’ tomorrow. Midnight at the deli. Come alone.” He sneers into the phone and hangs up.

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25 / FACE-FIRST

The first sign of dusk settles over the deli as stars peek through a milky-rose sky that will soon turn black.

Jace has dismissed Yuri and Caitlin, insisting they start their weekends early. Insisting they've earned it, that he can cover the last two hours of the day, which, however valiant, may have been a mistake in hindsight. The Friday rush has hit with customers popping in after work for steaks and party platters to celebrate the weekend.

There's a line, three-deep, when Sean strides through the door, narrowing his eyes as he looks about the shop. He looks reassured to have found what looks like a legitimate deli; that he may not have answered a scam after all. He quickly frowns at the line ahead of him.

Seeing that Sean has actually shown up fills Jace with relief, but it soon curdles into dread, knowing what must come next.

"You mind flipping that sign for me?" Jace barely looks up at Sean, just enough to watch him oblige by flipping the sign on the front door to "closed" before falling in line.

"Closing shop early." Jace gives his customer a wink. "I'm going to a wedding!" He says with a smile and in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Ohh, fun! I love weddings." The silver-haired boomer with red cat eyeglasses matches his smile. "One of my grandsons – the youngest – just got married last month in Naples. You should go if you haven't been. It was gorgeous! Right on this vineyard they found. There's nothing like an outdoor wedding."

"Yeah! Just hope the groom doesn't get cold feet!" He laughs with a glance at Sean.

"And I hope the happy day isn't outside!" She blinks with fraught concern and looks out the two, large storefront windows. "I hope it doesn't rain."

That makes two of them. Rain could ruin everything.

Jace says a silent prayer and works through the last of his customers until Sean's facing him across the counter.

"I got a call," he says impatiently. "About an auction prize I won. Sean Pratt." He holds up the ID he's been fidgeting with in line.

"Ah! Yes." Jace meets his hollow brown eyes. "Mr. Pratt. Good timing. I have everything wrapped up for you."

Sean smiles and the darkness leaves his eyes. The creases on his forehead and frown lines even out and he looks pleasant suddenly. Like a switch that's been tripped.

He gives Jace an easy smile. The same easy, unassuming smile he likely gives his victims when they first meet – smeared across his handsome face like sunscreen on angry, red skin. Something he'll rub off with the back of his hand once he's satisfied his appetite.

Jace returns the smile, reminding himself that this handsome face is the last thing Sean's victims see before his fingers lace across their necks and squeeze.

Jace plucks the ID from his hand.

"I'm gonna borrow this and go grab your box and a receipt to sign off on," Jace says with honey on his tongue. "Should just be a sec!"

He leaves the counter and heads back to his office. He doesn't look back, in case Sean thinks to ask where he's taking his ID.

Jace retrieves Sean's gym bag from the bottom drawer of his desk, setting it atop his desk and unzipping it. Solemn faces from Sean's past stare back through the musky darkness; driver's licenses and IDs line the bottom of the bag like a crude, makeshift graveyard.

Jace glares at Sean's license photo and the dumb smile on his face.

"Welcome to the party, motherfucker," he sneers.

He drops Sean's ID in the bag and zips it closed.

Back in the front of the shop, Sean clicks his tongue anxiously and bends to look at the rows of meats and cheeses in Jace's cold case. Large blocks of ham... thin slices of some sort of cheese he can't make out... And a cold metal dish filled to the brim with macaroni salad.

He hardly makes a noise as Jace plunges the syringe into his neck.

There's just a loud swat of his hand and stunned fury in his eyes as he spins to face Jace.

"Fuck was that?" He holds a hand to his neck and takes a shaky step forward. "What the FUCK was that?! What did you do?" He panics. "What did you do?"

Jace clutches the empty syringe in his fist. The needle tip is bent and drained dry.

Sean's gaze blurs and shifts to the front door.

"Don't do it..." Jace warns.

He blinks and grunts as he staggers forward, shifting on the balls of his feet for balance.

Jace reaches behind his back for the Ruger, tucked in the waistband of his boxers. "I said, don't do it!"

Flashing the gun's enough to make Sean forget about making a run for it, but he doesn't go down.

Outside on the sidewalk, life continues as the sun starts to descend and melt into clouds of purple and red. A group of teenagers passes by without a glance, laughing and talking shit to one another while Jace quietly wonders what the hell was in the syringe he stole from Janelle.

Sean shouldn't still be standing.

"You just made a BIG fucking mistake, bud." He seethes and raises a damning finger. "I hope you're prepared to use that thing."

Jace tightens his hold on the gun, feeling the patterned stippling on the grip cut into his palm. He fights the urge to raise it and take aim. He keeps the pistol tight by his side,

pressed against his leg and out of street view, where only Sean can see it. Where it won't raise alarm from passersby thinking the shop is being robbed.

Sean somehow stands taller, chest proud as he slurs, "You're dead..."

"What're you gonna do?" Jace cocks an eyebrow. "Strangle me? Or am I not your type?"

Jace winks and Sean's eyes go wide before they roll back into his head. His knees buckle and he hits the floor.

Face-first.

• • •

The shop is a ghost land, void of light and sound.

The only signs of life lie beyond the "closed" sign that dangles on the door, down hardwood steps that sigh and creak under stress, and through a narrow door tucked in the back of the walk-in freezer.

Jace sighs at his watch, then latches his attention back onto the gentle rise and fall of Sean's chest.

The room, no larger than thirteen feet long in both directions, still smells of paint and sawdust. It's a warm tomb without windows or circulation. Without God or mercy.

Inside, time works differently, like in a vacuum, ripped from the rest of the world with its own set of laws and consequences. The room spins through space and time, a black hole of its own making that ensures those who enter won't leave the same as they walked in.

Watching Sean sleep and dream marks the longest stretch of time Jace has spent here, even as the room's owner. But then again, it's never truly felt like a part of the deli. It's more of a grim heirloom he's inherited. One he knows will change him at his core before the night is through.

Finally, after what feels like forever, Jace hears the familiar screech of the freezer door open, followed by Sam stepping into the room. He's in his usual nightwear: dark, indistinct clothes and a black baseball cap. His black Members Only jacket is dry, which Jace counts as a small victory. Either the rain is holding off, or it's already passed over the shop.

Sam walks past Jace with wide-eyed wonderment and steps back in time. Back to when The Butcher was slowly eating him alive from the inside out, and Jace was a child who didn't know any better. He gives Jace a slow nod that lacks any sense of fatherly pride. It feels like mere acknowledgement. A nod to Jace doing what he said he was going to do by getting Sean onto his table, and nothing more.

Sam holds his breath, looks about the room, and then breathes it in again, filling his lungs with screams and remembrances of the past. Then, his eyes land on Sean with a scrutinizing tilt of his head.

Sean's nude and duct-taped to the table at his feet, arms, chest, and neck. It looks sloppy; a hack job for sure, but a fail-safe nonetheless since Jace doubts it was Halothane he stuck Sean with. At best, Janelle keeps a small stock of Haloperidol or Midazolam in her medical pack to sedate aggressive patients. Neither of those will keep Sean incapacitated if he wakes early. The duct tape's a crude solution, but a must.

Then there's the cherry-red ball gag in Sean's mouth Jace bought from the "Romantic Depot" on Fulton Street.

"What?" Jace shrugs. "I had to improvise."

Sam's mouth dips into a frown.

Jace had to rummage through aisles of double-ended dildos and butt plugs to find a gag that might fit a man of Sean's size.

And who knew ball gags come in so many different sizes?

Sam's frown slowly diminishes as he circles Sean like a vulture. He's all black, greasy feathers and razor-sharp talons. "A for effort, Jasey," he mumbles with amusement dancing in his gray eyes. "I didn't know what the hell I was doin' the first time either."

He chuckles, but Jace can't help but feel stung. Sean wasn't on his table by accident. It took careful plotting and a gaggle of lies by omission to get him here. And physically getting Sean onto the table by himself was no easy achievement. Sean's size alone made it awkward and cumbersome, so the whole thing felt reminiscent of Jace trying to put IKEA furniture together by himself. He did it, but it wasn't easy. Jace didn't have a Davie Myer of his own to assist. Which also would have been nice as he finagled a way to get Sean downstairs. He had a mind to push him down the thirteen wooden steps, but with his luck, Sean's neck would break on the way down and this would have all been for nothing.

Sam watches Sean's shallow breathing as he finishes his lap around the table. "How long's he been out?"

"For a while."

A few hours. But Jace has no idea how much longer he'll remain under. He's bigger than Jace remembers. Not as tall as Derek, but certainly bigger and stronger than Jace – even when combined with Sam, who's not as spry as he once was.

Sam produces a pair of rusty pliers, a straight razor, and barber-style clippers from his jacket pocket. More macabre heirlooms.

"Wanna do the honors?"

Jace swallows hard and chooses the clippers before his nerves fail him.

"Here we go..." He sighs and his stomach does an odd little flip feeling the weight of the clippers in his hand.

He's almost sure the vibration and pressure of the clippers plowing through Sean's hair will awaken him, but it doesn't. Sam stands behind him, micromanaging the process, as Jace works his way down Sean's clammy body with the clippers. One limb at a time.

It's a bizarre exercise in tradition, but the first step in Sam's old ritual. All part of the "cleansing", Sam said once. The first step of many that broke his victims down until they were no more than slabs of meat on his table. But, for as many pigs as

Jace has broken down with his cleaver and for as many chickens he's plucked and cleaned, shaving a grown man bare while he's unconscious feels miles from either of those things.

"You wanna get everything." Sam points to a missed patch of copper-blond hair near Sam's inner thigh. "Use the straight razor if you need to."

This is also far more tedious than Jace could have predicted, particularly since Sean's furrier than you'd think under his Lacoste polos and Wall Street suits. But he takes his time doing as Sam instructs, prolonging the use of the pliers, which sit on the rolling file cabinet, waiting to be tagged in.

The trimming and extraction of Sean's fingernails come next, and Jace can feel the anxiety rising in his throat as he begins.

"Why am I trimming them, if I'm just gonna yank them out next?" he asks, entirely serious.

This detail in Sam's ritual has always bothered him. He also never realized Sam used a small pair of manicure scissors for the task, which proves to be an exercise in patience.

"There's an order to things," Sam says. "You'll see."

Jace replies with a tattered sigh. He's underestimated how much pageantry goes into Sam's twisted process. Hearing about it in a crowded courtroom and seeing carefully cropped reenactments in true-crime docs is one thing. Going through the steps with the Brooklyn Butcher over your shoulder is entirely different. And Jace just wants this to be over and done with. Sean's a piece of shit who deserves what he has coming, but that doesn't make this any easier.

Once Jace is done with the scissors, he collects and deposits Sean's finger and toenail trimmings into the second drawer of the cabinet.

First drawer's for hair, second for nails, third for teeth, he reminds himself.

Sam's quiet at this point, watching with folded arms like a father in the passenger seat with his son at the wheel for the first time.

Will Jace remember to use his turn signal? Will he remember what to do next?

But Sam wasn't around to teach Jace how to drive. That, he had to learn from Coach Swinney in high school, who all the kids hated because of his hyperhidrosis. His shirt would be soaked through by lunch, so Drivers Ed in a stuffy car was a real treat.

Following protocol, Jace takes the pliers in hand and steals a look at his watch. It's getting dangerously close to midnight.

He takes Sean's hand into his own and starts with his thumb, gently lifting the nail with the rough edge of the pliers... clamping down... and then a quick tug.

Sam chuckles to himself when the pliers slip and fail.

"Use the tip of the scissors," he instructs. "Slide in under the nail and lift, back and forth. Then the pliers."

"Right. What was I thinking?" Jace scowls.

He obeys, pushing the sharp end of the scissors under Sean's thumbnail with enough force to draw blood.

Sean's stomach rises, filling with air, before his shoulders and back arch off the table. His head falls to one side and his eyes flutter open, only to meet Jace's tense stare.

The energy in the room shifts as Sean's confusion gradually morphs into terror. He's caught sight of the knives and tools on the rolling cabinet behind Jace and quickly figures out he can't move. He gives a tumultuous cry and tries to sit up, fighting against his restraints.

He mummurs through his gag and shakes on the table, but to no avail.

Shout-out to duct tape.

Sam rushes forward, hissing in Jace's ear, "You need to work fast."

Sean's rattled him by waking up sooner than expected. Sam's not used to this sort of disorder, to having his ritual interrupted. He's also not used to people fighting back on his

table. His nineteen had all been drugged and subdued to the point of not needing restraints.

This is chaos.

Sean tries to yell through the shiny red gag in his mouth. Hands, now fists, flail at his sides as he fights, attempting to wriggle his arms free from under the tape holding them in place. He starts to rock his shoulders back and forth, and with any more force, he may succeed at flipping over the table.

Flustered, Sam decides, “Do it. You can finish the cleanse after. Just finish it!” He hands Jace the largest of the knives and works his jaw angrily.

This isn't how it was supposed to be. This isn't what Sam came back for.

“Just fuckin' ruined...” He mutters under his breath and shakes his head.

Jace holds the knife, looking between Sam and Sean, whose cries have grown even more panicked. His high-pitched, desperate pleas fill the room and ricochet off the walls. Tears spill down his face and into his ears and he shakes his head, as if to say, “No! No! Please! Not like this!”

Jace imagines his victims making the same plea before Sean tightened his grip and bore his weight down on their throats. Crushing their windpipes.

Jace stands over Sean, both hands gripping the handle of the knife that hovers over his heaving chest. His breath pushes past the gag in rapid-fire pants, trying to anticipate the sharp end of the knife tearing into his soft flesh.

Sam shoots Jace a stern look that says, “Don't you fuckin' pussy out now, boy...”

Jace huffs and squeezes his eyes shut, tightening his grip on the knife.

“Remember what this mutha-fuckah did, Jason!”

Sean shakes his head frantically. Slobber and spit bubbles spew past his gag as he sobs, “Pleeeeeease! No! Oh, God, no! Please, NOOOO!”

Jace presses his eyes tight, holds his breath, and swiftly lowers the knife.

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The knife lowers, dangling by Jace's side before it slips from his fingers to the floor.

"I can't," he says in a hollow voice. His eyes fill with tears that threaten to spill over. "I thought I could, but I can't."

Sam nods slowly in stunned disbelief. Arms crossed tight, he paces away from Jace as Sean gives a grateful cry. A cry loud enough to reach God, if he's listening.

"Mmm-hmm..." Sam clenches his jaw and nods his head faster. "Mmm-hmm. Got it." He grabs another knife from the cabinet and plunges it deep into Sean's chest.

Sean's muscles tense and spasm on the table as his eyes go wide in surprise. He gasps, but there's hardly any sound. Just a choking, gurgling murmur behind the gag.

Jace staggers back, clutching a hand over his mouth to keep from screaming. He watches Sam lean over the table, watching the light leave Sean's eyes.

"This is all wrong." He gives a grievous sigh over Sean's body, like a doctor who's just lost a patient. "That's okay." He rolls his shoulders back and forces himself to shake off his disappointment. "It's okay!" He turns and gives Jace a faint but reassuring smile. "The first time's the hardest. I didn't know it'd be so hard the first time, either."

"You don't get it! I'm nothing like you!" Jace shouts.

"Nothing!" His eyes dart to Sean's lifeless shape, to the blood spatter dotting his face and open eyes. "Everything you touch dies. I look at you, and all I see is death."

"You're still my blood, boy," Sam beats his chest. "Don't you forget it – and you wanna talk about death?" He cracks a laugh. "You surround yourself with death! You don't even realize it."

“I don’t—”

“LOOK AT WHERE YOU ARE!” He spits. “You could be anywhere in the goddamn world, and you work here.” He points to the concrete floor and his face pulls a grin. “You were clear ‘cross the country and YOU... CAME... BACK. You just couldn’t stay away,” he laughs wildly. “You wanna talk to me about death?” His laugh deepens. “Look who you keep around you! That Korean you got workin’ here? Red on his hands. Bright red. Like Red Hots. How many people you think he killed before he got discharged?”

Jace blinks back hot tears.

“How many?” Sam insists. “More than me,” he sings and points a finger gun. “And you not gonna tell me he didn’t enjoy it. More than he lets on.”

“He’s not Korean,” Jace mutters.

“Oh! And that Caitlin?” His eyes go wide and a wry smile crosses his lips. “Wheeeew! That’s a real piece of work there.”

Jace lets the tears fall.

“All this talk ‘bout fathers and sons... You know who her daddy is?” He reels where he stands. “Geoffrey-Ray Price! The guy’s doin’ a nickel-and-dime at Rikers for arson. I met him when he got transferred. A fuckin’ firebug! Burnt down old folks’ homes for shits and giggles. That’s how he got off.”

Arson?

Caitlin’s sorority sister, Shannon, springs to mind; the way she died in a house fire when they were at Dartmouth. Caitlin blamed it on Shannon’s roommate and neglected candles; an accident waiting to happen, she’d said. But now, Jace is remembering the engraved cigarette lighter he found at the register... and the necklace. Shannon’s necklace.

He never questioned how Caitlin came to have Shannon’s necklace, but now it makes sense.

Caitlin doesn’t wear Shannon’s necklace in remembrance of her friend.

It’s a trophy.

Jace opens his mouth to speak, but his words dry up.

“You know, maybe you are nothin’ like me,” Sam says with what looks like sadness in the corners of his eyes. “Cuz if you were, you’d see ‘em for what they are. They’re sick! And it’s up to us to stop ‘em.”

“And who’s gonna stop you?” Jace wipes at his face and tightens his jaw. “You ever take a good look in the mirror, Dad? What color are you, huh? What color do you see on your hands before you go to sleep at night? Red? Orange? What?”

Sam bites his lip and looks away, shaking his head.

“What color? What fucking color?!” Jace screams. Spit runs down his chin as he marches forward. “Better yet, what color am I, Dad? Since we’re so much alike? What color do you see when you look at me?”

Sam gives Jace a long, hardened look.

Jace holds his breath, half fearful of what his answer might be. The dubious possibility that Sam sees anything when he looks at him hadn’t struck Jace until now. But what if there is something, however faint? What if he’s marked somehow and no different than Sam?

As Sean’s body temperature starts to drop, time stands still in the room and it grows harder to breathe.

Finally, Sam shuts his eyes tight and sighs, “You’re no son of mine,” he says.

When his eyes reopen, they’re a gray sky filled with thunder and sadness.

He reaches for the knife in Sean’s chest and pulls, releasing a strong flood of blood. Instead of leaving Sean’s body in time with a beating heart, it gushes in a constant, thick flow that seems to have no end.

Sam tucks the blood-stained knife into his jacket and leaves the room without another word.

Jace watches the blood collect and pool, outlining Sean on the cold, metal table as Sam’s words replay in his head.

You're no son of mine.

The words should cut deep, but instead, all Jace feels is staggering relief.

No longer will he live in Sam's shadow. No longer will he question the man with gray eyes in the mirror, afraid of what's on the other side.

He's finally free.

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26 / MIDNIGHT MADNESS

There's a surge of noise outside the door.

Voices.

Too many of them that shouldn't be there, including one Jace recognizes right off.

He opens the door, stunned to find Ted and Bobby buzzing and swarming around Sam.

Jace has been expecting them – he expressly told them to come – but not here. Not now!

They must have come early, he realizes. Picked the lock and made their way downstairs, which can only mean...

“We saw!” Ted gushes, tears glistening in his eyes. “We saw how you healed that sick soul! But I knew! We knew you never left us! We never stopped believing!”

Bobby floats after Ted, an anxious bundle of nerves wrapped too tight. His eyes are wild as his mouth works in circles, mostly repeating what Ted says.

“WE NEVER STOPPED BELIEVING!”

Sam pushes past them with a scowl.

“That man – tell us what you saw!” Ted pleads. “Your visions, I know! They're real! You've been blessed!”

Sam flees up the stairs, like a rockstar leaving a concert with crazed groupies nipping at his heels. He ignores their cries and allegiances of love. There will be no autographs tonight. Sam's only ambition is to retreat into the night. To disappear back into the ether, where the Brooklyn Butcher's nothing more than a folktale. A ghost story freckle-faced teenagers tell themselves in the woods over fire and empty cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon.

But Ted won't let Sam slip away so easily. Not after everything they've done to “bring him back”.

“The man at the courthouse – we did that for you!” Ted cries.

Clearing the top of the stairs, Sam huffs and whirls around to face them.

“Forget what you saw here. This doesn’t involve you.”

It may be his only warning. A kindness not bestowed on Eddie, who likely would’ve given anything to see what Ted and Bobby have witnessed here tonight. Not only is The Butcher alive, but he’s carrying on his work. And now they’re in a rare position to snatch the thing they’ve come for... The one thing missing from their blind religion. The thing scholars of Sam’s legacy would lose their minds over. The thing papers around the world would pay top dollar for.

“The world thinks you’re dead,” Ted says, inching forward. “But here you are!” His hand reaches for his back pocket. His fingers fumble and find the edge of his phone case.

Jace watches Sam back his way into the front of the shop as Ted and Bobby close in, pressing him into the center of the room.

“Why him?” Ted tosses a glance at the floor, down to the basement. “You saw something, didn’t you? In all of them?”

Even with his back to the front door, Sam must sense how close he is to the doorknob – to freedom – as he tries to ward them off. He’s mere feet from escaping into the balmy night air. He could turn and run, faster than Ted can capture his image on his cracked phone screen. A photo of Sam’s back won’t do them any good.

He shoots Jace an icy half-smile. “More friends of yours?”

“Party crashers,” Jace muses. He leans against the back wall, near the hallway. Watching Sam sweat.

“You boys enjoy the show? Watchin’ Jasey here choke down there?”

“Oh, I never intended to do it myself,” Jace says. He gives a demure shrug of his shoulders. “I could never bring myself to do that. No. Not me,” he explains. “But you...?” A cruel smile plays on his lips. “I knew you wouldn’t be able to resist. Being

in that room again... seeing him on that table... I knew you'd gladly take out the trash."

Sam gives a slow nod, and his right hand becomes a fist. "So, this whole time..." He nods, almost appreciatively. It's the first time all night he's looked remotely proud of Jace.

"You even used your own knife!" Jace laughs. "So, now it's just your prints on the murder weapon. How perfect is that?"

"You mean this knife?"

Before Jace can stop him... before Ted can take aim with his phone, Sam reaches into his jacket and swings.

There's a flash of light – so quick Jace thinks he might have imagined it... or that Ted's phone managed to get off a shot of Sam in the dark.

But then, Ted gasps and drops onto his knees.

Bobby makes a noise and scurries into a corner. He unravels into nervous laughter and grunts, face buried between his knees as he rocks back and forth.

Ted's eyes go wide and scared as blood spills down his throat. But even with wide, frightened eyes, something comes alive in them as he looks past Sam, trying to speak. The sickening metallic taste of his own blood filling his mouth silences him as he reaches for Sam, who knocks his hand away. Knocking him down to the floor.

"Two for one tonight, huh?" His upper lip sneers as he grips the knife tighter, feeling a rush of adrenaline fill his chest. With a gleam, he eyes Bobby in the corner and winks. "How 'bout we make it three?"

"I've got a better idea," Jace stops him.

"Oh, yeah?"

Sam can't wait to hear this. What could Jace possibly suggest now to repair how dismal the evening has gone? To make up for forcing him to do all the dirty work.

"I'm calling it..." Jace puffs out his chest and makes jazz hands as he announces, "A Midnight Madness Sale!" He

smirks and flips the light switch next to him, illuminating the shop.

One by one, rows of fluorescent lights crackle and blink on, making their way to Sam, stripping away the darkness wrapped around him.

He squints in the bright artificial light, bringing his hand with the blade up to shield his eyes. Stunned by the brightness, he blinks until the burn behind his eyes subsides. Until Jace fades into focus, arms folded with a muddled look on his face.

Staring into eyes that look so much like his own, Sam sees anger mixed with fury. Pain and vengeance fused by heartbreak. But there's something else. Something unexpected in Jace's silver-gray gleam.

Sadness.

And it's now that Sam realizes what Jace has done.

Slowly, Sam turns to face the front of the shop.

He looks past his old cold case and cash register, past Ted crawling and clutching at his throat, making a bloody trail for the door, and finds the two storefront windows filled with shocked faces.

A small crowd assembled on the sidewalk glare back at him. In their hands, they hold what looks like a coupon.

Sam recognizes the Cassex Deli logo instantly and manages to make out...

MIDNIGHT MADNESS SALE!

½ OFF select items with this coupon!

Jace had barely managed to make the print deadline. It had taken a nice-nasty phone call with the art department of the Daily News to place the last-minute coupon in today's paper. And now it's in the hands of fifty or more thrifty shoppers who have stayed up late and come out for marked-down prices off chuck roast.

But this is far more than what they expected to find. Hand-covered mouths gawk at Sam and the bloody scene before them. Someone yells, “It’s The Butcher! It’s him!” and Sam recoils. He takes a weak step back, perhaps with a mind to run, but it’s too late.

He’s no longer invisible. The veil’s been lifted, and people can see for themselves that the monster in front of them is real.

There’s more clamoring and shouting outside, and the scene turns into commotion as people take to their phones. Someone beats on the glass and spits. Another just looks on in shock, shaking his head in wild wonder as Ted finally stops moving. As he bleeds out on the floor.

Jace shakes off his shock, spies Jeremy Catlett in the back of the crowd, and registers three more familiar faces from the neighborhood. The crowd parts as someone pushes their way to the front.

Denise.

She’s seen the flare he sent up.

In her work attire, the self-proclaimed “coupon queen” crumples Jace’s coupon and takes in the scene...

Bobby crying and laughing in a corner.

Ted’s limp body.

Sam breathing heavy in the middle of everything, still gripping the knife.

She yells something amidst the chaos and beats on the glass, pressing her badge up to the window.

Sam staggers back, nearly slipping in a streak of blood before regaining his balance.

He looks back at Jace over one shoulder, mirroring the look in his son’s eyes.

Then, he grips the knife tight, smiles dimly, and pushes the sharp edge into his throat.

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It's half past two when Jace makes his way home. Covered in blood.

Stella greets him at the door, whining and spinning in circles.

"I know, girl. I know. Daddy's late." He gives a weary sigh and slides the door closed behind him. "Let's take you out. Just give me a sec."

He needs to peel out of his bloody jeans and deli t-shirt. Scrape the dried blood out from under his fingernails before he can walk Stella around the block like a normal person.

Stella barks and follows him into the kitchen, sniffing loudly at his shoes.

He must smell like the police precinct, where he's been for the past four hours. Where he was taken after police backup arrived at the shop.

Once Sam shanked himself, Jace dove in, doing his best to slow the bleeding. But the gash in Sam's neck went deep, like a ravine flooding and filling with blood faster than Jace could keep up. He only knew to apply pressure until an ambulance arrived, and even when it did, the look on the EMTs' faces was strained and less than heartening.

Denise secured the scene and had Bobby escorted into a squad car. He was inconsolable by then. The half-dozen police cars and ambulance swooping in with their sirens and red and blue lights coloring the walls only added to his mania.

It was a circus, with Sam "the Brooklyn Butcher" Mader as the main attraction and a basement of curiosities waiting to be discovered.

Sam left on a gurney, handcuffed, with three EMTs attending to him, and a squad car trailing them to the hospital. Jace wasn't allowed to ride along or follow. He was detained for questioning, along with a handful of distraught eyewitnesses still holding onto their crumpled coupons as they watched Sam get wheeled out.

Once Sam was taken off the scene, once the block was shut down and bystanders were wrangled behind police tape, Jace led Denise and a sleepy-eyed Agent Farrow to the basement to give them a grim account of how the cold, shaved body on the table came to be.

“Two serial killers for the price of one, tonight,” Jace offered. But Denise and Farrow just frowned back, not finding the cleverness in it.

Sam’s knife was bagged for evidence, along with Sean’s gym bag.

Earlier in the day, Jace had made sure to wipe the IDs clean of his fingerprints. So, while it may not be a direct DNA link to Sean, at least his victims would now be known and part of the investigation. At least their names wouldn’t be forgotten, and their families might find some peace in knowing what’s happened to them.

Jace also surrendered his surveillance tapes from the shop, which will do Denise and Farrow little good. He turned the cameras off this morning, anticipating there might be a tussle while trying to subdue Sean.

Don’t need that on tape.

“It’s an old, hardwired system. It’s been here forever,” Jace said, cursing and shaking his head at the bulky Magnaplex recorder in his office. “I’ve been meaning to replace it with one of those new apps.”

“Probably a good idea,” Denise said, but not without giving him a long look.

She seems to know she can only complain so much though. She’s redeeming a coupon for the arrest of one of the nation’s most prolific killers, who was long assumed dead. And then there’s Sean Pratt, a seemingly normal family man, who was on his way to beating Sam’s high score.

Perhaps as a courtesy or a show of diplomacy, she decided not to cuff Jace as they escorted him out of the deli and into a squad car.

It’s a lucky break.

News vans on the scene won't have footage of him in cuffs to spin with their headlines. If anything, they'll zoom in on the fact that he wasn't cuffed, despite his father and a body bag being wheeled out. And Sam will be the real story, how he's managed to fake his own death and escape capture. And what his return might mean.

MIDNIGHT MADNESS MASSACRE, the morning papers might read.

Sam was also Denise and Farrow's focus when they arrived at the station. More pressing than the blood trail that includes Aaron Gilbert, Eddie "Ezra" Neuman, and Ted Shultz, the higher-ups who go far above their paygrade wanted answers on Sam. The one person in the equation that should be dead but isn't.

They innately looked to Jace for answers.

Of course, they also had more questions about Jace's role in everything, exactly how Sean ended up captured and murdered.

The law frowns upon "vigilante justice", but thankfully, Jace was ready for this. Thankfully, after wiping the IDs in Sean's gym bag clean, he took a longer look at the weathered map of Sandy Hook in the bag and realized the number of circled campsites matched the number of IDs.

These weren't campsites circled on the map, threatening to break apart at its folds.

These were gravesites.

So, at the station, Jace offered Denise something he knows she can't resist.

A deal.

Between providing insight and interviews on his interactions with Sam – something both corrections and abnormal psychology fields will deem invaluable – and his assistance with locating Sean's victims, Jace will most likely avoid jail-time, as long as he can continue to prove himself useful to the investigation.

With this understanding, Jace suddenly found himself receiving the star witness treatment.

They offered him coffee – fresh coffee – and asked him how he takes it. He could have asked for a Venti Iced Skinny Hazelnut Macchiato with sugar-free syrup, an extra shot, light ice, and no whip, and someone would have run out to retrieve it.

They made sure he was comfortable and kept him for as long as they could legally hold him without charges. They're too smart to go back on their deal and charge and arrest Jace tonight. Not after he delivered Sam to them and has produced key evidence.

Someone very high up has decided that the spoils outweigh the method. This is a long game. An ongoing investigation that they'll need his continued cooperation on. And the last thing they want is for him to lawyer-up on day one.

They eventually released Jace, telling him they'll be in touch. Which was the last thing he wanted to hear after sitting for hours in a cold room, being questioned. Strangely, they shook his hand at the end, without saying exactly what they were thanking him for, then arranged for a car to take him home.

On his way out, Jace pulled Denise aside to ask, "Any word from the hospital? Is he..." Even still, he couldn't say the word.

Alive.

"Haven't heard an update." She blinked her tired, hazel eyes. Holding them closed for a second too long, seeking relief from the fatigue burning behind them.

"You think he'll pull through?" Jace caught a glimpse of his reflection in the interrogation room's two-way mirror. The blood on his jeans and Cassex Deli t-shirt had dried into a deep rust color.

She yawned and made a face. "Assuming he made it to the hospital?"

Jace realized she meant if he made it as far as the hospital alive. Sam's a high-profile patient for all the wrong reasons.

So, who's to say they didn't let him bleed out in the ambulance once they realized who he was?

"I don't think it looks too good," she eventually said, letting him down easy. "It's been a long night." A small smile found its way to her face then. Warm and almost motherly. "You should get out of here and rest up."

She intends to do the same. For Jace, the ordeal may be over, but her work is just starting. Tomorrow will be another day, full of paperwork and paper cups of mediocre coffee to keep her going. As one case closes, another investigation will open into Sean Pratt and his duffel bag of missing persons.

"There's nothing else we can do for your father at this point," she said, dismissing Jace. Giving him a small pat on his arm before he left.

Now, as Jace makes his way to the bedroom, he can't help but recall the cryptic look she gave when he asked about Sam.

Whether by Sam's own hand or simple negligence, he likely won't survive the night.

Then again, Sam's full of surprises. If this were a horror movie, he might have somehow summoned the supernatural strength to overpower all three EMTs and commandeer the ambulance by now. A flashy escape in neck bandages before making his way back to Jace. Back for vengeance.

Stella whines in the doorway, as if to hurry Jace along.

"Ma'am! Just a minute," he sighs. "What's gotten into you? Let me just..." He stops short, just shy of the closet, where a clean sweatshirt awaits.

The closet door is slightly ajar, which he finds strange since he never leaves it open.

He slowly reaches for the knob, but a strong set of arms suddenly seizes him from behind, sending Stella into a barking fit! Loud, anxious barks that end with a whimper.

Jace feels himself being pulled back into the darkness of the bedroom, and his mind races with white-hot panic.

If Bobby's being held at the station... If Ted and Sean are both in body bags... And if Sam's in custody, cuffed to a hospital bed...

Then who the fuck's broken into his home?

Jace bucks against the intruder, eyes searching the room for a weapon. Anything to throw or strike out with.

He instantly blames himself. It has to be someone he overlooked throughout this nightmare. Some other accomplice who's uncovered where he lives.

And then, a terrifying thought paralyzes him.

Of course.

A third roommate.

Someone he didn't meet the day he went to Ezra's apartment!

“Jace!”

The sound of his own name is startling, but then the voice registers. Clicks into place.

“Hey, hey! It's me. It's just me,” the familiar voice says, followed by laughter.

Jace wrangles himself free and turns to find Derek leering back at him.

He looks comfortable in a pair of black basketball shorts and a gray tank top.

“I came home early to...” His smile falls away as he takes Jace in. “What is that? What's – what the fuck happened? Is that blood?!” He latches onto Jace's arm.

“Jesus...” Jace doubles over. “You scared me. It's not mine,” he says. “It's not mine. It's...” His voice suddenly splinters and shatters into pieces, unable to bear the weight of the past few days any longer.

“Whose blood is that? Are you hurt?”

Jace shakes his head no as the tears come fast, blurring and smearing the frightened look on Derek's face. Jace is on the

verge of collapsing as it slowly sinks in. The nightmare is over. He's stopped Sam once and for all.

Derek weighs Jace's heavy expression and pulls him close, tight to his chest, without another word. And for the first time in weeks, Jace feels the fear leave his body, as he falls apart in Derek's arms and sobs.

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27 / SUNSET

The balmy mid-afternoon air is thick with salt. The briny aroma serves as a gentle reminder that home is miles and memories away as Jace and Derek watch the sun melt into the Banderas Bay.

Yesterday, the bay was laid flat, a perfect day for sailing and watching whales break through the big bold blue like giants. Today, the waves are choppy, the surface like a mirror turned half liquid, breaking and pouring all at once in a steady rhythm that takes them to the edge of sleep and back.

Derek yawns from his lounge, stretched out with long legs that have turned a beautiful shade darker over the past four days. He's all rich, golden blackness and lavender palm trees that checker his swim trunks.

"I can't believe we did it," he says in a dreamy voice.

"Which part?" Jace asks. "Running away to Mexico to get married? Or not bringing our laptops on vacation?"

"All of it." He gives Jace a sweet smile, spinning the thick titanium band around his finger.

Jace anchors himself, feet buried in the sand as he sits up, reaching for his near-empty mojito glass. Three umbrellas down, he catches sight of their beach server, Emilio. Trekking through the soft sand while balancing a tray of martinis on his shoulder.

The resort's everything the website and TripAdvisor reviews promised... A beautiful private beach with admittedly sluggish service at times. But Emilio's gracious smile and strongly crafted premium drinks make the wait worth it. The rooftop infinity pool comes with stunning views, including the Olas Altas area, south of El Centro with its charming cobblestone streets and Saturday farmer's market. Derek insisted they go for fresh fruit and Mexican pastries, even though they paid for the all-inclusive meal plan, giving them access to five

restaurants on the property. Seven if you count the lobby café and “Sand Bar” that offers snacks and burgers and hotdogs for the kids.

Derek’s been less than impressed with most of the meals but hasn’t complained. The pork belly and green tomatillo stew and the octopus ceviche are the only dishes he’s found remotely inspiring, so far. But still not as good as their menu for the wedding.

They found a small island cove that was once home to Hollywood film director John Huston to say their vows, backlit by sunset and followed by dinner under the stars. Derek flew in a small team, led by Blanca, who took over the kitchen and prepared a menu he painstakingly curated.

“I don’t care ‘bout wedding colors, or what kind of flowers we have and all that...” he told Jace. “We can do whatever you want, babe, but this I have to have a say in!”

Jace lost count of the courses after the “champagne and black truffle, lemon risotto with lobster” was served. He doesn’t mind the food at the resort though. He’s happy with room-service French fries and champagne, as long as Derek’s snuggled close to him under the covers.

“Want something else?” Jace raises a hand to flag down Emilio, noting Derek’s margarita has gone warm and watery.

He fights another yawn. “I’m good. We should prob’ly get ready to go.”

“Where’s Syd and Angel?”

“I think they went into town with my mom. Dad’s up in their room, taking a nap.”

“I’m glad they could come on short notice.”

“You know, they wouldn’t miss it.” He gives a small smile and reaches to squeeze Jace’s hand. “I’m proud of you.” He raises a sharp eyebrow. “For not checking on this trip...”

Another reason their laptops remained at home and their phones mostly stay locked in the safe in their suite.

“Yeah. I know I’m just driving myself crazy, checking every day.” Jace gives up on Emilio and sighs. “Besides, I’d know,” he says. “They promised I’d be the first to know if he escapes.”

“He can’t escape,” Derek says. “He’s in a maximum-security prison with, like, rotating guards around the clock, babe.”

A “supermax” prison, to be exact. Denise described it to Jace as a “control-unit” prison within a prison; with segregated housing for inmates classified as the highest security risks in the prison system. A special place in hell for those who pose a serious threat to both national and global security.

Sam’s graduated to global notoriety.

“He’ll never get out,” Derek insists, softly rubbing his thumb over Jace’s knuckles. “And he’s under surveillance, right? He can’t hurt himself again. Or get out.”

“Right.” Jace nods and forces a smile. He reminds himself that at least some form of justice, if you can call it that, has finally been served. The families of Sam’s victims – those left behind who make one less plate setting at the dinner table each night – can have a moment to celebrate Sam’s capture. Knowing he’ll serve life and won’t be able to hurt anyone else.

Then there are the families of Sean’s victims...

As the bodies were recovered, Jace sent flower arrangements to each of the funerals. He also attended the funeral for “Jamal Gregory” – who he learned went by Jamila, according to her friends and chosen family at the tiny white brick church on Bergen Street.

She was the first ID he found in Sean’s musty gym bag, but he could tell she was loved by those who gathered to celebrate her life.

Jace breathes in the smells and sounds of the beach – salt, fish, and seaweed in the water... suntan lotion... And of course, the mischievous Mexican grackles, squawking before swooping down to steal chips from a plate of guacamole someone’s left behind. He exhales and reminds himself of where he is in time.

It's been two months since Sam's arrest. Two months since his life changed again forever.

"I don't want you worrying," Derek says. "And, I said it before, and I'll say it again. I absolutely think you did the right thing by selling the deli. It was just... time, babe. Some things just aren't meant to last forever."

The building's a coffee shop now. A joke.

Jace knows it's not built for millennials and obnoxiously long coffee orders. It wasn't made for pumpkin spice lattes and cutesy chalkboard signs. It needs blood, not lattes and frothy macchiatos. It's a living, breathing beast with teeth that will eat the new owners alive soon enough.

They'll be in the pit of its belly before they even realize it.

Jace pushes out a breath and shakes the darkness from his eyes. "Yeah. Hard call, but I'm excited about putting the money into Ethel's. It's a win-win!" He smiles, feeling the muscles in his face cooperate, acting on cue. "I get to help keep it running as a silent partner—"

"Fifty-one percent of the business," Derek reminds him.

"Right. And I get to see Syd and hang out whenever I'm in Portland." He smiles, high beams on now. It's a smile too bright for even Derek to question. Too bright for him to see through.

If he could, he'd see that Jace's mind is still stuck on Sam.

"And Yuri and Caitlin will land on their feet," Jace says with confidence, although his smile wavers slightly.

"The severance package you gave them was very generous," Derek grunts as he sits up, dusting sand off his ankles and feet. "Too generous. It's not like Caitlin even needs it. I never understood why she wanted to work there in the first place..."

But Jace understands. It was the building she was drawn to. It was a beacon that called out to her. A siren in the quiet of the night that only she heard while Bradley smiled in his sleep, dreaming of a perfect life she never wanted.

She was crushed when Jace told them he was closing the deli. Crushed to know Bradley will seize the chance to make her a housewife once again. Imprisoned and trapped inside their neatly decorated brownstone with a baby on one hip and another destined to be on the way.

Jace may never be able to prove she lit the match that killed Shannon, but this will have to do.

For now.

“You excited about venturing out on your own? Starting your own marketing firm?”

Jace nods and slurps down the last of his mojito. “Excited’s one word for it.” He chews on a piece of mint. “There’s so much to do still. I must be crazy.”

But it was either this or taking Hayden up on his offer, a mid-level marketing position at ThinkTank. It’d be an easy in, back into the industry, and it would help his resume. But with it came too many red strings to get tangled up in.

“Babe, you can do anything you want in this world,” Derek says matter-of-factly. He tosses his book into their beach bag and stretches. “I believe in you, Mr. Brooks.”

Jace melts and leans in for a kiss.

“We should prob’ly get ready for dinner.” Derek scratches his belly and tosses a look back at the resort. The main pool is crowded with another wedding party getting hammered. “Italian tonight?”

“We just need to watch your dad. Let ‘em know he can’t have pesto because of his nut allergy. And I’m still not convinced there weren’t nuts or something in the bread last night.” Jace scowls. “We gotta be careful. They could have used almond flour or something...”

Derek smiles with amusement as he stands, then drops a kiss on Jace’s forehead. “That’s why I love you.”

Jace laughs. “Because of my crippling anxiety?”

“Nooo...” He grins and pulls at the waistband of his swim trunks. “Because you’re you.”

Jace smiles back. A real smile this time.

“I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life with you, Mr. Brooks,” Jace says.

Derek winks and signals to Emilio for the check, scribbling in the air with an imaginary pen. “I can’t wait either,” he sighs happily. “You, me, and our 2.5 kids drivin’ cross-country in our food truck!”

“I’m already regretting this,” Jace laments with a shake of his head.

He caved and bought Natty’s food truck from him as a wedding gift to Derek. A push gift of sorts for having weathered the past few months. For loving Jace despite the black mark on his name and everything that has come with it.

“You still have to help me with a name. And a logo.”

Jace waves a hand and crosses his legs on his lounge, crisscross applesauce. “When we get back. No work, remember?” He rolls his shoulders back, watching the sun color the water deep hues of violet and sherbet on its way down. “You really want 2.5 kids?” He asks.

It’s a topic they haven’t broached in a while. He isn’t even sure how that would work with Derek’s filming schedule and his own new career path.

But Derek folds his arms thoughtfully and says, “I do!”

Perhaps on cue, a child nearby wails, screaming out in tears.

As shrill as the sound is, it sounds like a lion’s roar against the serene ballad of the tide. Tears roll down his sun-kissed cheeks as he runs to his mother, two umbrellas down.

Jace sees now that there’s more than one child. Twin boys in matching red swimsuits. No more than six in age, if he had to guess.

Then again, what would he know? He has no preconceived understanding of child development; around what age children should be able to do things, like reading or riding bikes without training wheels. Truthfully, he hasn’t had many dealings with them. No one he knows even has any... He’s

mostly just seen them on television and had forgotten the resort is family-friendly until now.

“What happened?” Derek asks following the boy’s screams.

The boy’s mother makes a weak attempt to comfort him as Jace points to a crumpled mound of sand and blue and yellow bent plastic shapes lying on the beach.

“You missed it. His brother came over and pushed him into the sandcastle he just made. That little shit pushed him hard.”

“Damn.”

Jace and Derek share a look as the boy’s cries grow louder.

“So, yeah. Kids.” Jace makes a face. “Let’s file that under maybe.”

Derek laughs and grabs their beach bag. “I’m gonna head up and shower. You ready?”

“In a bit. You go ‘head,” Jace says, rocking side to side on his haunches. “I just wanna sit here for a bit. I’ll sign for the check.”

Derek follows Jace’s gaze out to the tumbling waves of the bay and shields his eyes from the sun. “Kay. See you in the room,” he says softly. He slings their beach bag over one shoulder before taking leave, looking back only once at Jace.

Once alone, Jace breathes in the moment and the last remnants of daylight.

A hush has spread through the locals and vacationers on the beach as they stop and stand still to watch the remaining sunset – likely wondering if they’ll see a green flash.

Jace has heard of the rare phenomenon, a beam of green light that shoots from the horizon immediately after the sun sets. But it’s rare and only seen with the right conditions.

Emilio makes his way over with the check to sign as the sky fills with a hazy dusk.

Behind him, there’s music and laughter at the swim-up bar. An older, gray couple holds hands as they walk the shore, ankle-deep in suds and seaweed rushing in. Meanwhile, one of the

twins has reduced his crying to a small, wounded whimper as his mother strokes his tousled blonde curls with his head in her lap.

Jace watches as the other twin bounces and runs along the water's edge, making wide strides and jumps. A game. Dancing and leaping out of the tide's reach as it rolls toward him. Leaping away just in time.

Away from sea monsters and danger of being pulled in and under.

The sun behind him finally surrenders to the sea, fizzling out just as the boy turns and locks eyes with Jace.

The sky darkens, and just for a moment, just as the skyline burns green, Jace catches an ominous glow around the boy.

Not green, but a fiery red shine and glimmer around his small knuckles and fingertips. A pulsing red glow that makes Jace's heart stop.

Then, just as quickly as the horizon fades to darkness, the color's gone in a flash.

As if it never was.

FOR SAM.

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Christopher Murphy is an activist, artist and author of the breakout thriller, *Where The Boys Are*, and *The Other Side of the Mirror*. Christopher is a graduate of Virginia Commonwealth University and the Hurston/Wright Foundation. As a graphic designer/copywriter/marketer by day and author by night, Christopher can usually be found creating and designing behind the bright neon glow of his laptop. When he's not writing, he enjoys traveling to new destinations and spending time with family. He is a shameless thrill-seeker, lover of roller coasters and all

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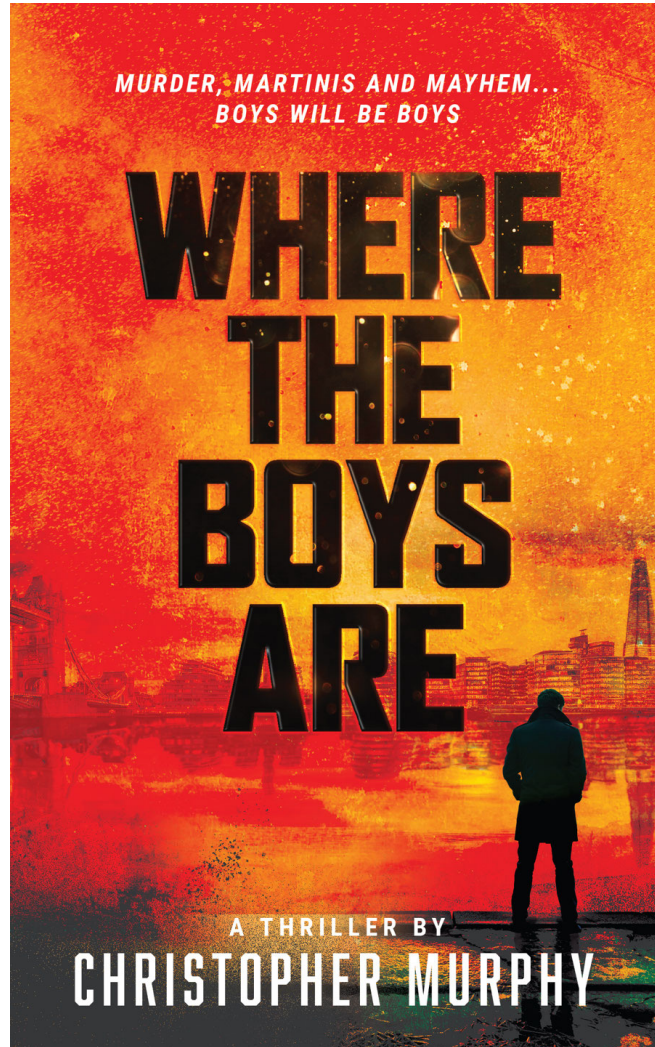
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Where The Boys Are

Love-cursed journalist, Quinn Harris, has a terrible talent for being at the wrong place at the right time. When a chance reunion brings him face to face with a flame from his past the sparks quickly turn to ice as evidence of foul play arises. He soon learns that it's no coincidence his high school crush

disappeared years ago, without a trace. It's also no coincidence that his victims look exactly like Quinn...

The body count and the stakes are high as Quinn works to unravel the truth behind a string of unanswered murders that hit dangerously close to home.

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The Other Side of the Mirror - Book 1 in the Jace Lannister Series

For Jace Lannister, it's not always easy being black and gay in the weird world of Portland. It doesn't help that he's the son of the Brooklyn Butcher, the notorious serial killer who claimed nineteen lives in the early '90s before escaping justice. With buried secrets and a new identity, Jace has created a new life for himself far from his blood-stained roots. But all is shattered when a gruesome murder surfaces echoing the past, fueled by his father's dark legacy. Has the Brooklyn Butcher returned? Is history destined to repeat itself in the image of his son? Or is something far more sinister emerging from the other side of the mirror?

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