

*WHAT IF YOUR REFLECTION WAS  
NOT YOUR OWN?*

THE  
OTHER  
SIDE  
OF  
THE  
MIRROR

A THRILLER BY  
CHRISTOPHER  
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**Christopher Murphy**

**The Other Side of the Mirror**

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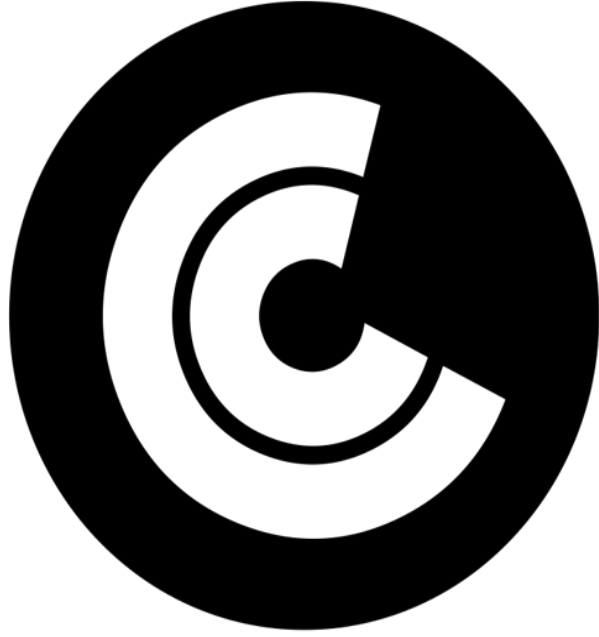
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**CHRISTOPHER  
MURPHY**

*FOR ALL THE FATHERS AND SONS.*



“The sins of the father are to be laid upon the children.”

— William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

*Praise for*

**THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MIRROR**

“Shatters expectations... Murphy delivers a pulse-pounding novel full of suspense and sharp wit. A roller-coaster pace barrels dynamic characters across the page with unwavering finesse. It’s the sexiest thriller of the year, with a dynamite final act that stays with you long after the last page.”

– *Sam Smith*

“Can you escape the past, or will it always be staring at you through the mirror? Christopher Murphy takes us on a haunting journey as Jace Lannister struggles to put the past behind him and embrace the new life he has built, all the while hiding from what’s lurking on the other side of the mirror.”

– *Truniece White*

# **SEX, MURDER AND ALL THAT JAZZ**



**THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MIRROR**

CHRISTOPHER MURPHY

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

## 1 / THE CUT

Jace Lannister is not himself.

Between the buzz of the office and the migraine piercing his thoughts like a hot needle, he can barely focus on the design proofs cluttering his desk.

It'd been another sweat-soaked night, laced with night terrors and memories he wishes he could forget. What's worse, he awoke face down on his kitchen floor, unsure how he got there.

He hasn't sleepwalked in years, not since he was a child, so his stomach instantly flooded with acid and alarm as he peeled himself off the cold tiles, realizing the old habit had returned.

He blames the new medication Dr. Gretchen Kessler prescribed; the pale, blue pills that remind him of cotton candy – sugary and sticky – but taste pungent on his tongue like bitter, black licorice.

“Let's see how you do on this,” she said, not bothering to make eye contact as she slid the prescription across her desk. She tucked her Revlon-red hair behind an ear and leaned back in her chair afterwards; her face full of exhaustion, as if scribbling her name on the prescription pad locked in her desk had taken her last bit of strength.

Jace can't wait to give her an earful at their next session. Better yet, he'll threaten to stop coming altogether. One less check to cash will get her attention, he thinks with a scowl smeared across his handsome face.

He rubs the scruff on his jaw, sensing he forgot to shave before running out. Despite this, he's managed to make himself presentable in tailored gray trousers, a fitted, white polo, and a navy blazer that now hangs on the back of his chair. His skin is sun-kissed bronze that consequently casts him as one of two people of color in the entire office. (There were three, but Lana, the thick-boned sister with goddess braids in accounting

recently left to start a dessert bar in Portland's Hawthorne district.) He misses her, but if he's honest, he mostly misses the pastel, frosted treats she brought on Fridays.

Like a hawk with talons at the ready, he'd learned to keep an eye out for Lana's arrival and intercept her in the hall on her way to the kitchen, well before the art directors struck like cobras, unlatching their jaws and devouring the sugary cakes and fancy confections for themselves.

He smooths a hand over his hair, a soft crown of thick curls the color of starless nights; the sides tapered, leading to a brawny neck and square shoulders. His eyes are an unusual, stormy gray people routinely find captivating, like staring into the eye of a tornado ripping down from the sky.

Beautiful and frightening.

He has his father to thank for this genetic anomaly... among other things.

Jace draws a breath and attempts to focus again on the design proofs littering his desk. By day, he's a senior account executive at Moxy, a fast-rising ad agency at the center of downtown Portland.

His days are spent juggling a portfolio of sizable marketing accounts, reviewing work from his team of graphic designers and keeping everyone happy in the process; most of all, his clients, who rarely have a clear vision of what they want but always have strong opinions on everything.

He hovers over the drafts on his desk... Ads for a new microbrewery being erected in Nob Hill – as if Portland doesn't have enough places already drowning in overpriced craft beer.

He gives the glossy designs a once-over and bites his lower lip. The photos from the shoot turned out better than expected. The copy is concise and on target, and his graphic designer chose the perfect font to use throughout the design.

The proofs are exactly what the client requested at their last meeting. Still, he can't help but suck in air between his teeth and sigh heavily, knowing...



“They’re gonna rip these apart.” He frowns and crosses his arms.

For the second time this morning, he reaches into his top desk drawer for a small mirror – a compact his predecessor left behind among pink Post-its and paperclips. He cracks it open and takes a sharp breath, as his reflection glares back.

He peers closer at the shiny surface covered in greasy fingerprints.

His eyes roam critically from one feature to another.

A small cleft under the bridge of his nose.

Small flecks of silver in his eyes.

Angular cheekbones under youthful skin.

He moves his tight jaw in a circle and squints closer to confirm that the face staring back is his own.

There’s a soft knock at his door, and Jace quickly snaps the mirror shut.

His assistant, Alex Cruise, pokes his head in.

“Morning!” His tone tests the waters to see what kind of mood Jace is in. He holds up a Stumptown latte, presenting it like a sacrificial offering. In his other hand, he holds a coffee for himself with a tablet tucked in the fold of his arm.

“Perfect timing,” Jace waves him in and eyes the second coffee, guessing it’s Alex’s usual. Black, no sugar, with a small splash of half-and-half.

“You get a haircut?” Alex tilts his head, giving him an odd look.

“No...” Jace stares back, frozen. If anything, he’s slightly overdue for a visit to his barber.

*What could Alex be picking up on? What does he see?*

“Oh. You just... Something looks different, that’s all.” Alex shrugs off the feeling and hands Jace the cup warming the pads of his fingers.

Jace swallows hard but wills himself to move on. “Thanks for the coffee. Have a seat.” He gives Alex a warm smile.

Alex does as he’s told, and a wave of relief crashes and slips from his eyes.

Jace’s smile seems to have defused the tension in the air. He isn’t a naturally smiley person – never has been – so it’s something he must constantly work at by practicing in his bathroom mirror, training the muscles in his jaw and the curve of his lips to take on the memory so he might smile on-demand as he’s just done. He envies his coworkers, who have no trouble floating around the office like grinning idiots all day. Even if they’re all truly miserable inside, you’d never know it.

Meanwhile, Jace struggles to match their level of blinding nirvana.

Alex gives a slight smile, but Jace can still see his mind at work, trying to solve what’s different about him.

It’s going to eat at him all day.

Alex is tall and lanky with skin like fine porcelain. His eyes are a bottomless shade of brown with freckles sprinkled beneath that stretch from one end of his face to the other like an unnamed galaxy, riddled with hidden constellations. His hair is dark, glossy waves of chestnut tresses he’s tamed and combed into a slick pompadour of sorts. He looks part hipster, part professional with chunky, black glasses and skinny slacks.

Alex smiles with ease, like the morning person he is from one of two leather club chairs facing Jace’s desk.

Behind Jace is a row of tall windows with an impressive view of the city. The walls of his office are a calm, soft gray, colored with framed art prints and posters from past advertising campaigns. There’s a large dry-erase board full of notes, a mid-century modern sofa where Jace does his best thinking, and a shelving unit filling one wall, full of oddities and knick-knacks he’s collected over time.

Framed vintage postcards.

An autographed copy of *Invisible Life*, by E. Lynn Harris.

An old typewriter. A record player.

A collection of vinyl that includes a copy of Ella in Berlin: Mack the Knife – which would be the first thing he grabs in case of a fire.

A few Christmas cards from clients and some of the staff he's forgotten to take down.

His framed diploma on the wall...

The only thing you won't find is family photos or some hint of his family tree.

Of course, there's good reason for this, but he largely refuses to acknowledge or speak on his dark, troubled roots outside of Dr. Kessler's office. That's what he pays her for; to provide a safe space to air these grievances – or at least until he fires her and finds a new therapist.

He leans back in his chair and wonders if his best friend, Syd, could refer him to someone.

Syd knows everyone.

“Want a run-through?” Alex perks his eyebrows, quietly noting the distant look in Jace's eyes.

“Uhm, yes.” Jace blinks and produces a small smile. “What's on deck today?”

Alex scrolls on his tablet. “Edits are back from the Spelman project. Lydia says it's just a few tweaks.”

“Thank God.” Jace sips his coffee and rolls his eyes with pleasure. The only thing that can make this better is a donut from Blue Star.

“Staff meeting at ten...” Alex squints into the brightness of the screen. “Then you have that marketer's lunch at The Kimble and a two o'clock with the Outpost guys.”

He means the new microbrewery.

Jace glances at the proofs on his desk.

“Then, you have the team debrief at three. Also, Fareed Ahmed wants to know if you can do lunch on Monday.”

Ugh, Fareed. He's a sales rep for a new magazine, hounding Jace for weeks about buying ad space.

"Let's file that under no," Jace smirks.

Alex nods and swipes his screen. "There's a signup sheet for the kickball league going around. Deadline is Monday."

"File that under hell no."

"Weren't you MVP last year?"

"Who told you that?"

"Everyone," he shrugs. "They're already arguing over which team gets you. You're not gonna play this year?"

"It's kickball." Jace shrugs back. "They'll live. Besides, I already chair all of our community service initiatives, it was my idea to start a scholarship program, and I played black Santa at the Christmas party for the kids. I think I'll sit this one out."

Before Alex can weigh if this is a battle worth fighting, Derby Parker pops her head through the door.

"Hey, you!" She beams at Jace, her smile almost blinding.

"Lunch today?"

"He's booked," Alex says, on cue. "Networking thing at The Kimble."

"Well, that sounds painful." Her smile crumbles as she swipes her blonde bangs from her green eyes. Her crushed sequin sweater gives off flashes of pink and magenta under the florescent light, as if signaling her disappointment.

To see Derby, you'd never guess she sits at a desk all day editing copy. She never dresses the part, and today is no different as Jace takes in her glittering pink sweater, daringly short faux leather skirt, and ankle boots. She looks like she was on her way to a cocktail party and got lost. Now, here she is at his door, sober and asking if he'll accompany her for what would surely be a bland vegan lunch at her favorite food truck down the block.

“Trust me,” Jace frowns. “I wouldn’t be going if Foster didn’t mention it in last week’s meeting.”

“So, you’ve been volun-told.”

“Indeed.”

Her shoulders slump like a rag doll and she throws her head back with a grunt. “Fine. Guess I’ll just eat all by my lonesome today.” Her glossy bubblegum lips pout as she waves, “Bye, boys,” wiggling her nails on her way out.

“A few of the guys wanted to know if you were free for lunch too,” Alex says once she’s gone. His stare lingers at the empty doorway, occupied only by traces of her Chanel perfume.

“That was the perfect chance to have lunch with her,” Jace points out. “You should have spoken up, took my place.”

He blushes. “Derby’s nice, but...”

“Not your type?”

He fidgets in his seat. “I think she has a boyfriend.”

“She doesn’t,” Jace says. “You should ask her out!”

“You’ve obviously never seen me talk to women,” he cringes. “It’s a dumpster fire. I get all tongue-tied and never know what to say.”

“Alex Cruise, lady-killer!” Jace muses. “Who knew?”

“Right,” he forces a chuckle. “Really, though. Even back in high school, wasn’t great with girls. I had a face full of zits and this clunky metal knee brace – I had a crooked spine,” he explains. “Like Forrest Gump.” He swallows, gauging Jace’s reaction, then continues. “Anyway, all the kids called me tin man because of my brace. Total babe-magnet on the playground.”

Yeesh.

Jace can only imagine. He watches Alex’s cheeks burn red and says no more.

“Anyway, where were we?” Alex rolls his shoulders back and finds his place on the schedule. “Right. Like I was saying,

team debrief at three. Then you have a four-thirty with Karen and dinner at OX at seven.”

“Dinner?”

Alex gives him a pointed look. “With Graham.”

Jace plants his face in his hands. “Shit. That’s tonight?” He’s stunned it slipped his mind. Alex has been going on and on about his friend, Graham, for weeks, insisting the two meet for dinner, that they have so much in common and would make a perfect pair... though Jace has to wonder if this is purely a case of Alex matching him with the only other single gay man in Portland he knows. Alex doesn’t strike him as having many gay friends, but he likely touts the one he has as if it might earn him brownie points or affirm he’s secure enough in his sexuality to have a token gay friend.

The ladies probably eat it up when Alex mentions his good “bro”, Graham, who’s gay, but that’s not what matters! Love is love, you know?

“Graham can’t wait to meet you,” he says, “It’s all he’s been talking about.”

“Blind dates never work out,” Jace sighs. “You know this, right?”

“He’s a standup guy. Really! You’re gonna love him.”

“I just don’t think I’m up for it.”

“Please don’t make me cancel,” Alex pleads. “It took me two weeks to get that reservation. Plus, when’s the last time you went on a date?”

Jace’s mind flashes to the handsome stranger who buzzed him on an app after 1 a.m. two nights ago, but that doesn’t count as a date. Jace hadn’t been able to sleep and simply couldn’t think of a better way to pass the time.

It’d been dangerous to invite a complete stranger over to his loft in the Pearl District that time of night. He’s heard horror stories of men being robbed or worse, so he hid his finer jewelry in the freezer, quite pleased with himself for

outthinking any possible robbery scenario; but upon seeing Nick's smile at the door—

Wait...

No.

It was Neil. Not Nick. Even though he looked more like a Nick, the tall blonde introduced himself as Neil.

Yes. Jace is sure of it now.

Seeing Neil's smile at the door (and the bulge in his ripped jeans) put him at ease instantly, and, luckily, the sex had been worth the late-night gamble.

Still, it wasn't a date. There was nothing remotely romantic about it, even when Neil rested his head on Jace's chest afterward and the two talked about life and the best places to hike in Portland. For a split second, it might have felt intimate at best.

Jace can admit he conjured up a fantasy that stretched beyond a one-night-stand with Neil... Dinner dates and the symphony... Lunch at the Saturday Market and a stroll along Waterfront Park and the Willamette River... Perhaps even one day meeting Neil's parents, who'd welcome him into the family with open arms.

The idea of a relationship swirled in his mind, warm and comforting like the embrace of a smooth bourbon coaxing him into a sweet haze. His skin was still glowing from the endorphins coursing through his body after their lovemaking.

Actually, no, he wouldn't call it that.

It was much too rough and feverish to be called lovemaking. Neil had pounced on him as soon as the front door closed, and the rest was a primal symphony of grunts, swearing, and skin on skin. Jace was still drunk from the rush and might have dipped a toe in the pond of ambiguity collecting between them to ask if Neil might want to grab dinner sometime – but then his eyes started to fall heavy, and Neil politely saw his way out.

Hearing the door close, Jace was sure their paths would never cross again.

Alex peers at Jace. “You deserve some fun. You’ve been stretching yourself thin on the Outpost account.”

“It’s my most important account.”

“Trust me, I get it,” Alex swears. “Nail this campaign and Foster basically has no choice but to promote you to partner. It’s a big deal.”

“It’s a huge deal! It’s what I’ve been working toward ever since I signed on.” Jace leans forward in his chair and his brows draw tight. “You have no idea what I’ve been through just to make it this far. No one handed me anything, Alex. I got through high school on my own, worked three jobs to put myself through college, and I’ve had to work twice as hard to get where I am. Getting this promotion makes all the late nights and hoops I’ve had to jump through worth it. It’ll prove wrong everyone who said I’d never be anything.”

“Everyone on staff’s rooting for you!” Alex assures him.

“Everyone sees how hard you work, and Foster loves you.”

Jace feels a hint of a smile on his lips but quickly snuffs it out.

“I need to focus on my work. No distractions.”

“But a break could be just what you need!” Alex says.

“Research shows that ‘strategic renewal’ – like daytime workouts, short afternoon naps, longer sleep hours, and more time away from the office boosts productivity, job performance, and your health. What better break than dinner with a solid guy? Plus, I told Graham he’s paying tonight,” he throws in. “I don’t know how that usually works. You know, like, who pays when there’s two guys, but worst come to worst, it’s a free meal.”

Jace frowns, realizing he won’t win this argument.

*Just get it over with, he thinks. Then, he won’t have to keep hearing about how great this Graham guy is and Alex can focus on his work instead of playing Cupid.*

*Maybe it won’t be so bad.*



Besides, a free meal is a free meal, and OX's Argentine-inspired menu and James Beard Award-winning staff sound like excellent company.

"Fine, but don't get your hopes up," Jace says. "I don't have much luck at dating."

The word cursed comes to mind.

"Just be yourself. But if he asks about what you do, don't dwell on work and unload on him. Just talk about whatever guys talk about on dates," he shrugs. This is his best advice.

Jace inwardly rolls his eyes. It's lucky for Alex he doesn't know any desperately single women; otherwise, he'd surely arrange a blind date for his meddling assistant with the worst of the worst.

Of course, there's Derby... but that's too on-the-nose. Derby's a bit eccentric, but overall, she's a sweetheart. It's too safe of a gamble. If Jace is going to set Alex up, it has to be with a real wild card.

*Is she a keeper? Or will she spin into a jealous rage and key Alex's car the first time he doesn't text back?*

Why Alex is so keen on playing matchmaker is beyond him, but at least it's served as a bonding mechanism of sorts. Alex was a bit cold and aloof during his first few weeks on the job, only thawing upon overhearing Jace mention details of his life outside the office. His volunteer work. His love of all things jazz. His constant search for new art for his loft. Only then did he seem eager to befriend Jace in some small way.

"Don't overthink it," Alex says after a gulp of his coffee.

"Everything will be fine. At lunch, I'll grab your dry cleaning – maybe wear the new burgundy blazer tonight? Then I'll swing by the pharmacy for your prescription."

"Can you bring back some food? I probably won't eat at this thing at The Kimble."

Jace always picks over his plate at lunch meetings.

"Okay – but nothing too heavy, so you'll have an appetite tonight. How about a salad? Or a quinoa bowl from that new

food truck? I hear it's good."

"I'll eat whatever you bring back." Jace surrenders with a shrug. "While you're out though, can you get the car washed? Just drive it through a car wash somewhere, doesn't need to be detailed."

Washing Jace's Beemer isn't official agency business, nor is picking up his dry cleaning and prescriptions, but it's also not outside the norm for assistants to run these types of errands. Senior account executives keep long office hours, so this type of outside work doesn't go unnoticed come bonus time, as Alex quickly caught on.

He gives a firm nod. "You got it, boss."

"Here's some cash." Jace opens his wallet and his face instantly goes dark.

"What's wrong?"

Jace scowls, staring into the black, empty abyss of his faux leather wallet. "I could've sworn I had cash... I should have a fifty in here," he frowns. "I was gonna give that to you for the car."

"I'll just put it on your card."

Jace can't tear his stare from his empty wallet. He can't shake the feeling that his eyes are playing tricks on him. "This doesn't make any sense..."

"Are you sure you had cash?"

"What do you mean, 'Am I sure?'" Jace cuts his eyes, "What are you saying?"

"Nothing!" Alex stammers. "It's just that—"

"It's just that what?"

"It's just... You've been a little forgetful lately. You haven't really been yourself – which is understandable!" He nods adamantly. "You've got a lot on your plate."

There's a chime from Jace's computer, and he grimaces as an email from Ann in the production department comes through. She's amazing at creating more work for everyone. It's sort of

her thing, like a villainess superpower that throws wrenches in everyone's schedule.

He can't bring himself to open the email. It's too early for her bullshit, he decides.

Alex, grateful for the distraction, aims to make his escape. "Anything else before I go, boss?"

The anxious look on Alex's face is sobering. Jace hadn't meant to snap at him. Alex does so much to keep him on track, and he shouldn't be mad at him for telling the truth. He hasn't been himself lately. Sleepwalking and forgetting about the only date (albeit a blind one) he's had in six months isn't like him at all. Plus, there's that trouble with the mirror lately...

Jace draws a breath as Dr. Kessler's voice plays in his head, telling him to count backwards from ten.

"That'll be all," Jace says. "Thanks for getting me up to speed." His words are sincere, even if the smile on his face doesn't match.

Alex nods and turns, bumping right into Dominick Wissel on his way out.

There's a pause as they both register the coffee stain blooming on Dominick's shirt like a gunshot wound. It saturates the crisp white button-down in helpless slow motion.

"Dominick!" Alex winces at Dominick's intense, blue gaze. "Oh my God... I'm so sorry! I didn't see you there."

Dominick grits his teeth at the burn soaking through the fabric and gives a grand shrug of his shoulders. "Guess you'll just have to run out and buy me a new shirt now, won't you?"

There's something sharp just below the surface of Dominick's smile as he pats Alex hard on the shoulder. His hand lingers as if fighting the urge to squeeze; fighting the urge to grab Alex by his throat.

"Of course!" Alex mentally adds buying Dominick a new shirt to his list. He could do it before getting the car washed. What size is Dominick anyway? He quickly scans the bulky figure before him and guesses he's a large, but he'll be sure to

confirm with Dominick's assistant, Shelby. "New shirt. I'm right on top of that!"

"I need it before lunch." Dominick's smile vanishes as he gestures toward the stain. "I can't walk around like this all fuckin' day."

"Right. Before lunch! Promise." Alex frowns for the first time this morning. His chest swells with a sigh he manages to contain. "Again, so sorry, Dominick. Totally my fault."

"Stop apologizing," Jace crosses his arms. "From where I'm sitting, looks like he bumped into you."

Dominick turns his gaze. His mouth twists into a distorted funhouse smile. "From where I'm standing, I could have third-degree burns!"

"This isn't 'Days of Our Lives'. He apologized. Now stop crying and let him go buy you a new shirt. Jesus. Put it on my card, Alex."

Alex shoots Jace a grateful half-smile and slinks past Dominick.

"You should learn to control your help," Dominick says in an insolent tone, loud enough for Alex to hear.

"And you should learn to stop sleeping with yours," Jace fires back. "You two aren't fooling anyone, by the way." He rolls his eyes, thinking back to the office Christmas party and how the two had skirted around each other all night, barely speaking. He doesn't blame Shelby though. She's far younger than Dominick, and he can see how she'd be taken by him. Dominick's a special kind of asshole, but he's devastatingly handsome.

If the devil could take human form, he might look like Dominick Wissel.

It kills Jace to admit it, but he's always been a sucker for redheads. Add in Dominick's crystal-blue eyes and beefy physique, and it's pure torture to look at him for long.

How can anything so beautiful be so vile?

Every time Dominick passes his office, Jace scowls... then checks out his ass.

Jace hates himself every time, but he can't help it. He's even fantasized about the sex; sure to be a potent mixture of hate and passion. He imagines Dominick storming into his office, slamming him against the wall as their limbs and tongues entwine. Jace would tug and wrap Dominick's tie around his knuckles, half playfully, half wanting to truly strangle the life from him. They'd fight for dominance over the other, wrestling out of their suits, on the verge of ripping each other apart.

It sounds like a bad porno brought to life but, for Jace, the attraction makes their working relationship all the more complicated. Dominick's more than your typical case of office eye candy, innocuous and without consequence. Jace might sneak glances and fantasize, but he knows it's useless. Desiring Dominick is like salivating over a decadent dessert, sprinkled with arsenic.

No good can come of it.

If Shelby can stomach Dominick's behavior, then good for her, he thinks.

"Shelby?" Dominick laughs. "That's just a rumor."

"Is it though?"

"The chick's like half my age!"

"You're not helping your case," Jace smirks. He's been counting the days until HR addresses it and assigns Dominick a new assistant – although he'd hate for them to switch Shelby for Alex. Losing Alex would be a blow, and Dominick doesn't deserve someone as good and talented as Alex.

"Speaking of rumors," Dominick smiles sharply and crosses his arms, arms like forged steel. "I hear you have a hot date at OX tonight."

Jace is careful not to react, even as his mind races to solve how Dominick knows this.

*How long was he standing outside his door?*

“Guess you can say that...”

“Good for you!” Dominick’s eyes twinkle as he lingers in the doorway. “Who’s the unlucky guy?”

“It’s a blind date, so I guess we’ll see who gets the short end of the stick,” Jace muses. “But I suppose you didn’t stop by to discuss my love life. Please tell me that’s not why you’re here.”

“Promise it’s not.” Dominick smiles with the charm of a snake oil salesman and leans against the doorframe.

Much like how you’d handle a blood-sucking vampire, Jace is mindful not to invite him in. Keeping your enemies at work close is one thing, but Dominick can be unpredictable. Plus, once inside, Jace may never get him to leave, and he still has a ton of shit to do before the 10 a.m. staff meeting.

Jace stares at Dominick, his face blank like a catalog model.

“Are you gonna make me guess why you’re here?”

“Oh, you’ll never guess.” Dominick’s smile spreads wider.

There’s something about Dominick’s smile that has always gotten under Jace’s skin. Aside from lacking sincerity, it somehow always seems to stretch a little too wide for his face, dancing on the line of grotesque. It looks almost digitally augmented; a smile fitting of a horror movie monster. There’s nothing there but teeth, special effects, and darkness.

Jace’s monitor chimes and another email from Ann pops up.

“This is the part when you get to the point, Dominick. I have work to do.”

“Oh, your big Outpost account, right?” He cranes his neck to peek at the proofs on Jace’s desk.

*Take a good look, Jace thinks. Even if the client has edits (which they will), he knows the design and creative direction are solid; more solid than anything Dominick’s produced at this point.*

“It’s going amazing, by the way. Clients couldn’t be happier,” he adds for good measure.

“That’s great!” Dominick’s smile thinly veils his agitation. “Pull this off and you’ve got the partner position all buttoned up, huh?”

“Yes, but don’t worry!” Jace plays along. “Once I’m partner, I’ll bequeath you my old office.” He matches Dominick’s patronizing smile. “See? All this will be yours one day!”

He laughs from his distance, annoyance flashing behind his eyes.

“So, you came to size up the competition?” Jace asks. “Is that what this is?”

Dominick uncrosses his arms and blows out a frustrated breath. “Like I said, looks like you’ve got the partner position in the bag.”

“I’m glad we agree.” Jace turns his attention back to his work.

“Foster’s always liked you. Everyone likes you, that’s no secret. And you’ve always done great work here – hell, even I’m a fan of your work, if I’m honest.” He runs a hand over the back of his neck and shrugs. “Why wouldn’t Foster pick you for the promotion...”

Jace looks up from his side of the desk. “I suppose I might be the frontrunner,” he admits, not without caution.

“There’s just one thing though...” Dominick points a finger. “See, I may not be Foster’s favorite or anyone’s favorite,” he shrugs. “I know most people here don’t take me seriously or think I’ll make the cut...”

Jace answers Dominick’s pause with wide eyes. “Was that... rhetorical?”

“Make jokes all you want. See, I may not have your track record or the biggest accounts, but there’s one advantage I have that you don’t.”

*This oughta be good, Jace thinks.*

Dominick’s handsome face twists into another gruesome smile as he announces, “I’m good at poker.”

Jace bends his lips to one side. “What does poker have to do with anything?”

His expression sours.

“My father was Wayne Wissel. The Wayne Wissel.”

He waits for Jace to react. Jace shrugs from his desk.

“You’re kidding. Wayne ‘The Flame’ Wissel,” he waves a hand as if to jog Jace’s memory, as if this is common knowledge. “Championship poker player during the ‘90s...?”

“Do I look like I follow championship poker?”

He huffs. “Valid. Fine, whatever. My point is this... my old man was a legend in the poker world. The best! He toured everywhere – undefeated! As a kid, he was into magic. He wanted to be a magician when he grew up, so he always had a deck of cards on him...”

Jace deflates in his chair, realizing he’s in for a long story.

“He could make cards disappear, reappear. He could guess what card you were thinking of; he could do anything, all at the age of seven. He was like a child prodigy.”

Cheap card tricks don’t make you a child prodigy, but Jace resists the urge to point this out.

“He slept with those cards, never left the house without ‘em. They were his best friends.”

The universe seems hell-bent on testing Jace’s patience this morning, but he sits quietly, counting back from ten.

“By the time he got to high school, he was into online poker, then he got into the underground shit. He was makin’ so much money he bought my grandparents a new house and convinced them to let him off the hook about college or enlisting. He was practically a millionaire at seventeen.”

Jace gives a slight nod from his chair. He has to admit, that’s impressive.

“He played for years, non-stop, night and day, almost never sleeping. He was on a roll! Then he moved to Vegas, where he met my mother.”



Jace guesses she was a waitress in a casino.

“She was a waitress in a casino.”

Jace frowns at the cliché, barely suppressing an eye roll.

“Outside of winning, he hated Vegas, but he always said she was his good luck charm. She’s what convinced him to stay for as long as he did.”

Jace can’t imagine living in Las Vegas – a neon desert where the dry heat alone makes you want to shoot yourself in the face.

“They got married after my mother told him she was pregnant, with me.”

*So much for good luck, Jace thinks.*

“He went on playing competitively, got wrapped up in some casino lawsuit. Something about countin’ cards... ended up drinkin’ himself to death.” Dominick quickly tiptoes through this part. “Long story short...”

*Thank God, Jace thinks.*

The air in the room turns thick as Dominick levels his eyes at Jace. There’s something dark and insinuating swimming under the blue current. “My old man could read cards like he could read people. He could see right through them – and before he died, he taught me how to do the same.”

“I don’t follow,” Jace says, ignoring the spike in his pulse.

With a flourish of his wrist, Dominick magically plucks a deck of playing cards from thin air. The edges of the box are worn and weathered, barely holding its contents – cards full of history and pain; full of casino smoke, memories, and stories of love at first sight over a tray of watered-down rum and cokes. Full of sticky, marked cards and tales from Dominick’s childhood.

Dominick steps forward into Jace’s office, breaking the invisible barrier that’s kept him at bay.

Jace leans back in his chair, startled and vulnerable to whatever evil power Dominick might reveal next. He’s always

kept Dominick at a careful distance, but now there stands little between them.

“Just like this deck of cards, I can see right through you, man. You might have everyone else fooled, but you don’t fool me.”

“Dominick...” Jace forces himself to laugh. He tries to calm the thunder filling in his belly. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“A good poker player recognizes a good poker face,” Dominick insists. “And yours?” He smirks with a nod of wry appreciation. “Yours is almost as good as his was. That’s why you remind me of him.”

Jace falls silent. His gaze skirts to his top desk drawer containing the mirror.

“Everyone thinks you’re this saint and that you’re hot shit, but I know you’re hiding something. I know you’re hiding something behind that fake smile of yours, and I’m gonna prove it!”

Before Jace can craft a droll reply or regain his bearings, Dominick turns on his heel and leaves.

Poof. Gone.

Jace sits in silence, the air knocked out of him.

To anyone walking by, it might have all sounded like office jealousy and the covetous rantings of his competition. Everyone knows Dominick has his heart set on the promotion to partner despite his less than stellar body of work. Anyone would dismiss this private deriding as sour grapes.

But Jace can’t dismiss it.

It’s not that simple.

Dominick’s words linger like smoke from a flame, blown out.

*I know you’re hiding something.*

Jace’s heart flies into a panic, fluttering about his ribcage like an injured bird.

The color drains from his face as the words sink in...

*I know you're hiding something.*

There's only one thing that can destroy the life Jace has worked so hard to create.

There's only one secret that can ruin his career and any semblance of a normal life – something he's fought hard to mold from the ashes of his dark past.

There's only one secret worth hiding that could change everything if revealed... but Dominick Wissel, of all people, couldn't possibly know.

Could he?

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## 2 / ETHEL'S

It's a balmy afternoon as Jace leaves the office. The city's sidewalks are alive with colorful, patterned sundresses and rompers over tan legs and sandals trotting toward happy hour in celebration of the weekend.

Skateboarders casually cut in and out of traffic full of discontented faces, while outdoor cafés buzz with riotous chatter.

Champagne bottles pop and fizzle like fireworks.

Cocktail glasses kiss and spill potent elixirs sparkling like rare rubies in the sunlight.

Jace sheds his blazer and puts on his shades as he walks among the bustle. The earthy, sweet smell of malt hangs in the air from breweries dotting the hilly, forest-like landscape enveloping downtown. Jace lets out a long breath and tilts his head toward a cloudless sky, drinking in the day.

Summers are magical in Portland, one of the reasons he relocated to the area three years ago. The days are warm for several months, with little rainfall. Even on the hottest days, there's little-to-no humidity and the nights are easy and comfortable with darkness delaying its ominous shadow until as late as ten o'clock some months.

The summers make it hard to imagine moving, despite the gray skies and dismal, wet climate that forces residents to buy sun lamps and take Vitamin D supplements throughout the year.

The fact that Oregon's suicide rate ranks more than three times the national average also did not go unnoted when Jace considered cities to flee to. He read somewhere that Portland sees an average of seven or eight suicides a month.

That's about one every four days.

He can't help but apply this statistic to the people he knows – mostly, the people who fill Moxy's cubicles and offices.

If he had to put money on someone likely to kill himself or herself, Ann in production comes to mind first. If she offed herself today, he wouldn't be surprised – although, he'd certainly have to act surprised to hear the news at next week's staff meeting. The rest of his coworkers would indubitably be shocked, though. He can imagine his boss, Foster, choking back tears as she delivers the news. He can imagine Derby's face, distraught and flushed with tears as Ann's death sinks in. He can imagine a shockwave of confusion seizing the office, but Jace would secretly take stock in knowing he called it.

Like the first signs of a thunderstorm after a day of dry summer heat, he knew it was coming. While some might believe the constant smile glazing Ann's face, Jace has always recognized something far darker at its depth. Something he battled and overcame once. Something that still haunts his thoughts whenever he allows himself to dwell on the past for too long...

A car honks nearby, slicing through Jace's thoughts, expelling the morose memory from his head.

He crosses the street and Ethel's pink awning comes into view, one block away.

There's a line to enter the popular neighborhood bar, but it moves quickly, and at its head sits Ethel herself, wearing her signature pink eyeglasses as she checks IDs.

Ethel's short with maple skin and iron-gray hair she keeps wrapped in colorful scarfs, taking on different styles throughout the week. She looks more like a HBCU professor in her later years than the owner of a rowdy gay bar.

The bar, a mere 2,000 square feet, once belonged to her son, Calvin, who bought the place in the early '90s before gentrification swept through most of Portland's historic black neighborhoods. Back then, it was called Nationz, with a Z because Calvin thought the Z made it sound edgy. Back then, they purely played house music and the clientele were mostly people of color. Back then, you could get chicken, waffles, and

a beer for five bucks on Sundays from noon until five because Calvin was famously known for his chicken and waffles – for which he flat-out refused to share the recipe, despite requests.

Today, the bar plays Top 40 club remixes and the clientele are mostly dirty-blond millennials. Chicken and waffles are still on the menu, but the kitchen uses Calvin's recipe he left on an index card for them, right before he passed of colon cancer.

As Jace nears the front of the line, Ethel is glancing at IDs but mostly dishing out hugs.

“Don't forget to tell your brother to come see me, you hear?” She gives the man in front of Jace a stern look and a squeeze. “Lamont can use some help in the kitchen anyway. We'll find a place for him.”

The man, whose burly, tattooed arms are three times the size of Ethel's, squeezes back, “Yes ma'am. I'll tell him,” and sashays inside where five-dollar-Jägerbombs await.

Jace steps forward and Ethel leans back on her stool with wide, almond-colored eyes and a broad smile. “Well?!”

“Nothing yet.”

She deflates but only for a moment. “It's gonna happen, baby. What God has for you, no one can take away, you hear?”

“Right,” he says a little grimly, hoping she's right.

“As soon as you get that promotion, you let me know! Drinks on me for you and your friends to celebrate. They're in there waitin' on ya.” She motions inside with a toss of her head, then gives Jace a warm hug; the kind of hug his mother would give him after a long day of school and torment.

Inside, Jace quickly finds his friends, Derek and Syd, at a table in the corner, people-watching with matching expressions toeing the line between amusement and horror.

Ethel's is packed with the usual, handsome faces. There's a long line at the bar, which Ethel had refinished as part of last year's renovations. She hired Danny Pierson, one of the bar's regulars, to give the bar a facelift. Danny works at some hoity-toity, overpriced interior design firm in the Pearl and did the

redesign for next-to-nothing and a free bar tab for himself and his husband for two months. Danny recruited five other regulars to help with the demo and paint the dark walls “champagne pink,” which Ethel was unsure about at first – even after Danny insisted it was a frontrunner for Pantone Color of the Year.

In the span of two months, the bar went from “meh” to “yaaas” with its sleek, modern lounge furniture and pops of pink, white, and mauve throughout. The ceiling now drips with clusters of crystal daggers and light, and the sticky, original wood floors have been replaced with polished concrete.

Jace cuts through the crowd to exchange hugs with Derek and Syd.

“I ordered shots!” Syd announces and does a little dance. His dark brown locks with their honey blonde tips are out of his face, swept into a messy bun bouncing and mirroring his excitement.

“I’ll do one shot with you,” Jace warns.

“That’s what you always say.”

“Right,” Jace glares. “Next thing I know, it’s 3 a.m. and we’re at Waffle House making bad life choices.”

“I vote we order a bottle of champagne,” Derek says smoothly while cutting his eyes at Syd. “Something nice. Ethel’s got Veuve Clicquot behind the bar.” He’s half-dressed for work in loose, black pants and a white tee he’ll eventually cover with his chef’s coat for his evening shift.

“Champagne?” Jace does a double-take.

Derek’s amber-brown eyes squint with sudden panic. “We’re celebrating, right?” The afternoon sun shines through the window behind him, illuminating the outline of his stocky physique.

“We got your text and figured you had some news to share?” Syd hints with a smile. “Why else would you call an emergency happy hour?”



“Oh. Sorry, y’all.” Jace winces, now noticing the gleam of hope in their eyes. “This isn’t about the promotion. Well, not exactly. I’m still waiting to see if I get it.”

“So, it’s a real emergency?” Syd balks. “Shit. Good thing I ordered shots.”

Derek leans across the table. Worry clouds his face as he presses his full lips together. “What’s goin’ on?”

Jace sighs. Although he’s practiced in his head what must come next, the thought of forming his fears into syllables makes the situation terrifyingly real.

“Are you okay? You know you can tell us anything,” Syd insists.

Derek strokes his beard and passes Syd a quick look. His voice drops to a gentle lull. “Do we need to call Dr. Kessler?”

“No!” Anger spills from Jace’s lips. “No, it’s nothing like that.” He takes a quick breath and does his best to not take offense.

*Derek and Syd mean well, he tells himself.*

If anything, these are the only people he can trust with what he has to say. Who else can he trust, if he can’t trust Derek and Syd?

He met Derek Brooks two years ago at a speed-dating event. Jace convinced himself to go at the last minute, thinking if nothing else, it’ll be incredibly efficient. He has little time for venturing out on dates so the concept of meeting thirty eligible men, in one place, in the span of one evening sounded almost too good to be true. He didn’t even have to get up from his chair! They just kept coming, rotating, one after the other, plopping themselves in front of him to be assessed for their potential as a mate.

What a clever, clever concept, he had to admit.

The catch, of course, was that there wasn’t much time allotted to conduct his evaluation and form opinions. He only had eight minutes to decide if he’d like to see each bachelor again by

making a tick by their name on the sheet the organizers handed out.

The event was held at Bartini, a cozy cocktail bar in the Nob Hill neighborhood, known for their menu of over 100 martinis – two of which he tried that night.

A Tuscan Rosemary Lemon Drop and a Red Velvet Manhattan.

It felt fitting to have alcohol involved. Nerves seemed high for most of the bachelors, who shuffled around with wide eyes as they guzzled their cocktails.

*Were they about to meet their future husbands? Wasn't it at least possible?*

Jace didn't have any expectations when Derek sat across from him... yet, he couldn't help but be taken by Derek's tall, solid physique and the bass rumbling past his lips as he introduced himself. His smooth, dark skin and bald head made Jace weak like a late-night sweet-tooth craving, demanding chocolate and anything sweet within reach. Derek's dangerous dimples and meticulously groomed beard framing his full lips earned him a tick mark well within the first two minutes.

The conversation was easy and natural – as if they'd met somewhere before. Perhaps in some distant, parallel universe.

Four minutes in, Jace found himself entranced by the sexy tones in Derek's voice; a voice much sexier than the other nine who sat in the chair before him. Jace fought the urge to close his eyes and concentrate on the brassy jazz notes in Derek's tone that crooned and sang to him over their small, candlelit table.

Six minutes in, Jace knew enough about Derek to start hoping for a tick mark in return.

Turns out... Derek's a transplant from Sacramento in his late-twenties, speaks near-fluent Italian, and loves to travel. He loves dogs and has a pit bull he rescued, Stella, who treats his shoes like chew toys. He's an unabashed momma's boy who likes to bike on the weekends, shop at the Saturday Market, and create new recipes in his shoebox-of-a-kitchen.

He's a chef – which explains the tattoo sleeve and ink on each of his knuckles...

A butcher's knife.

A fork.

A flame.

An anchor.

A whisk.

A cherry.

A fish – the head intact and the body stripped to bone.

A saltshaker.

A boning knife.

A cleaver.

Before they knew it, the buzzer sounded, and Derek was bidding Jace adieu.

It was difficult and laboring to pay much attention to anyone after Derek. Jace found himself more interested in his martini, trying to put a name to the flavors spinning and dancing along the coarse texture of his tongue. Was that raspberry purée? Sweet vermouth?

He tried to catch Derek's eye a few times but wasn't successful at sneaking looks without his new date noticing.

Jace didn't care.

What he did care about was how well Derek and his new date looked to be getting along. Watching some random jock smile and laugh at everything Derek said made Jace's skin glow hot.

*Why couldn't he catch a break?*

He suddenly couldn't wait for the night to be over, and by the end of it, he'd spoiled so many chances that Derek stood as the only connection he hoped would pan out.

Luckily, the gay speed-dating gods took mercy and shone down on Jace that evening, with favor. The organizers tallied

everyone's sheets, and it was revealed that Derek gave Jace a tick mark on his sheet as well.

*It was a match!*

Now, they would be given each other's phone numbers and could arrange a real date. One without pesky buzzers and time limitations. One without syrupy cocktails by the hundreds and twenty-eight other men between them.

Derek called Jace the next day and invited him to his apartment in Chinatown for a homemade dinner.

They feasted on lobster sweet potato mash and steaks as thick as bibles. For dessert, Derek made a masterful meringue with coconut cake, coconut ice cream, and a passionfruit caramel drizzle – although he swore he's not much of a pastry chef, insisting the recipe was “a lil' somethin'” he picked up in Florence while interning as a sous-chef for one of his celebrity chef idols.

The meal was as succulent as the sex.

Back then, Jace almost never slept with someone on a first date. It was a rule he clung to proudly, as if it made up for all the heavy debauchery to eventually follow. But once he'd helped Derek wash dishes and downed the last of his wine, Jace couldn't help but give in to Derek's charm and satisfy his curiosity – dousing out the current of sexual tension buzzing between them, blue and electric.

When the steam settled, Jace was left pleasantly surprised, and the walk-of-shame home was all the more sweet after Derek cooked him a full breakfast of Eggs Benedict, blueberry waffles, and maple bacon.

The weeks of dating soon turned to months.

All was well, perhaps even perfect, until what Jace calls, “the incident” transpired. An incident so shattering it drove Jace to seek help from Dr. Kessler in the first place.

He broke it off with Derek in a storm of tears and regret, telling himself it was for the best. Telling Derek it was for the best...

Now, as he peers at Derek's concerned face in the afternoon glow amidst the noise booming from the bar at Ethel's, it's hard to fathom they've remained friends all this time.

Jace isn't friends with any of his other exes, for good reason, but there's something about Derek that he's never been able to let go of.

Derek tosses Jace a look he knows only too well. It says, "Come over later. I'll open a nice Cabernet I've stolen from the restaurant's cellar, put on some Tom Misch, and you can cry on my shoulder."

Sounds nice in theory, but the last time Jace cried on Derek's shoulder, he woke up tangled in Derek's sheets with sex on his breath, hating himself for being so weak.

"So, what's the emergency?" Syd asks, playing with the black jelly bracelets on his wrist.

Jace takes a breath. "There's someone at my job..." Flashes of Dominick Wissel's shit-eating grin color his thoughts in angry, red crayon. "I think they know... who I am."

The table goes silent for a moment, before Syd waves a finger.

"No. You're just being paranoid, babe."

"It's not likely," Derek slowly agrees. "What makes you think they know?"

"Just a feeling." It feels like rusty nails churning in his stomach, ripping the lining into ribbons, unraveling the truth.

"Did they threaten you?" Syd asks.

Dominick's words replay in Jace's mind.

*I know you're hiding something behind that fake smile of yours, and I'm gonna prove it!*

"I think he knows more than he's letting on. He must have some reason or proof to come at me the way he did."

"Who's 'he'?" Derek ruffles his brow.

"Dominick. The redhead. The one I told you guys is sleeping with his assistant."

It rings a bell.

“But he didn’t try to blackmail you or anything?” Syd asks.

“No. He just sort of alluded to knowing something.”

Syd shakes his head firmly. “He’s bluffing. If he knows, he would have tried to blackmail you then and there. That’s what I would have done.”

Jace and Derek stare at him.

“I mean if I was Dominick!”

Jace frowns just as they’re interrupted by a set of strong hands descending on their table.

“Someone order shots?!” It’s Angel, shirtless and fresh from the bar with a tray of Silver Bullet shots, filled to the rim. He balances the tray and a sexy smile with ease, locking eyes with Syd.

“You, sir, are at the right table!” Syd smirks, melting at the sight of Angel’s biceps, shining with sweat under the club lights pulsing to match the start of the DJ’s set. Ethel’s making an early, dramatic shift from happy hour to full-blown club mode. Soon the place will be flooded with people determined to dance and drink the night away, even if it kills them.

“How ya been, Syd?” Angel dishes out shots for everyone but only has eyes for Syd. He’s been told he looks like a young Mario Lopez, perhaps minus the dimples and perfect skin.

“Doin’ better now,” Syd says in a tenor far smoother than the glass of gin and whiskey before him.

Jace’s stare washes over Angel.

Angel looks nothing like a young Mario Lopez, he decides, but says nothing.

Angel bites his lip and smiles, fighting to remain professional.

“You boys enjoy. Ethel says there’s another round for you after this.”

“And so it begins,” Jace mumbles.

Syd watches Angel walk away, his tight jeans plastered to rock-solid glutes. “Mmph! Now that’s a thing of booty – I mean, beauty!”

“Just sleep with him already,” Derek growls. “It’s just a matter of time.”

“Wait,” Jace deflates. “You’re not dating Gym Hottie anymore? I liked that one.”

“We called it off.”

“What about Doc Hottie?”

“Looks amazing out of scrubs, but we hardly saw each other!” Syd exclaims.

“Why can’t you just find a nice boy with a neck tattoo who bakes bread to settle down with?”

“Funny,” Syd muses. “But, really. Hear me out. Doc Hottie was always at work.”

“Saving lives?” Derek slow-blinks. “The audacity.”

“So, this means Bar Hottie is fair game then!” Jace shoots Syd an encouraging look.

Derek smirks, “I give it a week before they bang.”

“All in good time,” Syd calms them. “But for now,” he raises his shot glass, spilling some in the process, “Let’s shake off all the bad vibes and toast to the weekend!”

Jace forces a smile, realizing the discussion about Dominick must be closed now. “No more bad vibes,” he concedes.

“You’re right. I’m probably just being paranoid. Cheers to you and Angel!”

Derek gives Jace a quick glance before they clink glasses and toss the concoction down their throats. It settles and burns at the bottom of their empty stomachs.

Syd slams his empty glass on the table and tosses his head back to howl at the ceiling.

Jace met Syd Aldridge two summers ago at a Black Lives Matter protest downtown.

Jace had just found parking near Embers, Portland's oldest, largest gay bar at the time, when all hell broke loose among the crowd.

What started as a peaceful protest he came to join quickly escalated when a countering mob arrived, hoisting picket signs full of typos and shooting angry, hate-filled taunts into the crowd like bolts of lightning. The police arrived next in red and blue flashes, sending everything into a tailspin.

Syd took a hit from a rubber bullet and fell in the middle of the street.

Jace rushed in to pull Syd from the stampede, away from the haze of tear gas and rubber bullets filling the air.

He grabbed a bottle of water from a table set up by organizers of the protest to rinse Syd's eyes, wincing at how red and irritated they had quickly grown. He couldn't imagine the pain Syd was in.

It took nearly an hour for the effects of the tear gas to subside, before the pain in Syd's chest faded and his eyes stopped watering.

Syd insisted on treating Jace to burgers and beer at Darlene's. Well, a burger for Jace and vegan pizza for Syd...

They stayed until Darlene locked the doors, talking like lifelong friends, even though they'd been no more than strangers on the same side of history a few hours before.

Back then, Syd looked much different.

Back then, Syd's locks were shorter and he didn't sound like himself when he spoke.

Back then, Syd was still battling depression, and it showed.

Back then, Syd could barely stand the sight of his own reflection.

Back then, Syd's skin was soft and smooth and completely void of scruff.

Back then, Syd was still binding his chest with old, elastic bandages and sports bras.



Back then, Syd was still Sydney Aldridge, a skinny, mixed girl on the outside from South Carolina who moved to Portland to work at Hope House, a sanctuary for abandoned LGBTQ youth.

Three beers in, Sydney leaned forward in their booth and told Jace the entire saga of his pilgrimage to Portland.

It was a tale as old as time...

Daughter comes out to her horrible parents... horrible parents swiftly disown their only daughter, spouting fire and brimstone... said daughter is devastated – but only for a moment – before telling her horrible parents to go fuck themselves and then vanishing from their lives... hitchhiking cross-country on a treacherous but oddly poetic journey that would shape her into the man she is today.

Classic.

His father owns a megachurch in Charleston, which explains why Syd avoids churches these days like men with bad credit. Even the sight of a church, as few as there are in Portland, gives him hives.

The Portland metro area is the most religiously unaffiliated city in the United States, with 42 percent of residents identifying as atheist, agnostic, or having no religion. Jace has often wondered if that factored into Syd's reasoning for fleeing to Portland.

His thoughts are interrupted as Angel returns with another round of shots, only they're on fire this time.

"Flaming Dragons!" Angel winks at Syd. "I made them myself."

Syd twists his lips into a sexy smile, and fire dances in his eyes while Derek and Jace share cautious looks.

"Make a wish, kids!" Syd is the first to hold his shot glass high, feeling the heat from the flame caress his face.

The three shut their eyes and quietly make wishes.

Jace wishes for Dominick Wissel's head on a platter, then blows out the flame on his drink and swallows the potent

mixture that tastes like gasoline on his tongue.

“So, what’s everyone up to this weekend?” Syd asks.

“Gotta work tonight.” Derek rubs a hand over his scalp, letting it rest at the back of his neck. “We got word a Michelin inspector may have booked a table tonight.”

“This could be it!” Jace brightens up. “Your Michelin Star!”

“This is all coming from one of the new servers, so who knows? If it’s true, we can’t let on that we know. They’ll cancel the booking and we’d probably never be considered again.”

“Aren’t you nervous?” Syd scowls. “That’s gotta be a ton of pressure.”

“I just make every dish like I’m makin’ it for my ma,” Derek says. “If getting a Michelin Star’s meant to be, it’ll be.”

Derek isn’t fooling anyone, least of all Jace. Earning a Michelin Star is a career-altering attainment for any chef.

“I’ve got a knife skill workshop lined next week at one of the culinary schools,” he adds, rubbing the lines on his forehead. “So, I need to prep for that this weekend too.”

Boys and their knives...

Some chefs are famous for their pastry skills or ability to make perfect pasta out of eggs and flour. Derek’s locally known for his butchering skills; crafting elaborate gourmet dishes from the finest cuts of beef money can buy. He’s also known for being the first person of color to win “À La Carte” – a high-pressure reality TV show that earned him a large cash prize he plans to invest in his own restaurant one day.

“What happens in a knife skill workshop?” Syd dares.

“A lot of practice on carrots, and hopefully no one loses a finger,” Derek winks. “What about you, Syd? What’s new?”

He bites his pierced lip. “Let’s see... Oh! I started microdosing!”

“Hmph. How do you like it?”

“Too early to tell,” Syd chirps. “This is literally day one.”

“I don’t think that’d agree with me,” Jace glowers. “I couldn’t.”

He’s never been one for chemical voodoo or recreational drugs. He tried it once; just some cheap, bottom-shelf weed someone he was dating at the time rolled into a clumsy blunt and practically forced down his throat. It didn’t take long for their hearts to start racing or for the hallucinations to consume them.

Flashing a knife, Keith swore Jace was an imposter – a clone who had been sent to steal his fingerprints – as he barricaded himself in the bathroom, crying and screaming for hours.

Jace never figured out what the blunt was laced with. PCP? LSD? LMNOP?

He could only put together that Keith wasn’t the one for him after the episode, and the two went their separate ways.

Six months after Jace broke it off, he heard Keith overdosed and had been found in his car, parked behind a strip mall. He was there for three days before his body was found decomposing in the hot car that had reached 128 degrees. The stench alone made the paramedics weak with nausea and vomit as they peeled Keith off the leather seats of his Infiniti.

“None for me,” Jace doubles-down.

“One of my sous-chefs microdoses,” Derek mumbles. “She swears by it.”

“Well, we’ll see.” Syd shrugs. “What else? Oh! We’re planning for Pride at work.” He fights the urge to rip out a handful of his locks. “Hope House has a float again this year. Boss Lady chose ‘Somewhere over the Rainbow’ as the theme, so we’ve got the kids making a thousand tissue paper poppies for the float. The living room looks like a goddamn sweatshop.”

“Poppies?”

“In the movie, the wicked witch puts a spell on the poppies that put Dorothy to sleep,” Jace explains to Derek.

“She drugs her, then. Dorothy gets drugged,” he concludes.

“Technically, the witch poisons the poppies,” Syd chimes back in. “Have you not seen *The Wizard of Oz*? Anyway, so now imagine if you will, a bunch of kids on a float standing in a field of poisonous poppies! There’s gonna be a yellow brick road of course, but the poppies are so fucked, if you ask me. I can’t wait to open my own youth shelter so I can do things my way.”

“I’m sure it’ll turn out fine,” Jace says, trying to imagine the finished parade float.

The DJ fades in a new track that causes the table beside them to scream and trot to the dance floor.

“Oh, I meant to tell you,” Syd swats Derek’s arm. “The kids saw you on TV the other day and flipped out! It was an old episode of ‘Kitchen Wars’.”

“Oh, God,” Derek grimaces, “Was I mean?”

“You told one of the contestants their pasta puttanesca tasted like shit. They bleeped you, but you could totally make out what you said. The kids loved it.”

“Great.”

“Oh, please. Those kids live for you and Jace!” Syd says. “They love when you guys come to help out. Speaking of which, think you can drop off more of those mini burgers next time you bring food?”

“Those were Kobe beef burgers, Syd. You know how expensive Kobe beef is?”

He waves a hand. “All I know is, the kids won’t stop talkin’ about ‘em.”

“What about all the fruit I put in those bags?!” Derek laughs. “I pinch off what I can at the end of the night, but Ko-be beef...” he pronounces each syllable, “is harder to explain away if the owners notice. I manage the kitchen, but they manage the books.”

“I get it,” Syd sighs. “And really, you do so much to help me keep those kids fed. I love you for it. I do. Don’t worry! I’ll

think of something to tell little Joey... He was so excited when I told him I was gonna see you today.” He looks off and traces his finger along the rim of his glass.

Jace stifles a laugh.

“I guess he’ll just have to get by on... leftover risotto and foie gras.” Syd throws up his hands.

““Little Joey”? Is there even a Joey in the group?” Derek smirks.

Syd folds and the three laugh.

It isn’t lost on them that the kids at Hope House are eating far better than the parents who kicked them out onto the streets. Derek has been donating food to Hope House for over a year now, citing, “No child should go hungry.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” he murmurs and nods his head to the music, noting he’ll have to make off-the-menu Kobe burgers now. He changes the subject before Syd demands truffle fries to go with them, “J, what are you up to this weekend?”

“Oh!” Jace goes wide-eyed and glances at his watch. “I have a date.” He’d forgotten again. “Like... in about an hour!” He glares at the arms of his watch, whirling and ticking away the seconds.

“A date?” Derek’s expression dims, growing heavier as he furrows his brows. “With who?”

“Someone Alex set me up with.”

“Alex. Your assistant.” Derek shifts in his seat, gripping his empty shot glass.

“Yeah. It’s just some guy he knows. It’s a blind date. I don’t even know the guy,” Jace adds, trying to anticipate more questions.

Derek inhales and runs his thick tongue over his teeth. “I see.”

“Where are you guys going?” Syd asks.

“Uhm, OX,” Jace recalls, “That steakhouse on MLK.”

“Fancy!” Syd tosses his nose in the air. “One of our counselors went there for her anniversary. Her husband bitched about how expensive it was the whole ride home.”

“What’d she say about the food?” Jace wrings his hands.

“Loved it!” Syd shrugs. “She said they use popcorn with their ceviche, like instead of crackers, I guess?” He looks to Derek to confirm whether this is a thing.

Derek sits quietly.

“Who doesn’t love popcorn, right?” Jace half-smiles and Syd offers a wide smile back, silently wishing Angel would descend from the heavens with another round of shots.

“I’m only going to make Alex happy,” Jace explains. “And I’ve heard the food is amazing. But not as amazing as Barlo’s!” He adds quickly, giving Derek a nod. “I’m still dreaming about those spare ribs you made last time we came in.”

“Ugh. Amazing!” Syd melts. “That sauce was everything!”

Derek stands. “I’m gonna go in early and prep.” He looks for his jacket, forgetting he didn’t wear one in.

“Right now?” Jace shoots Syd a what-the-fuck look. “Okay...”

“Stay for another round. My treat,” Syd offers. “How ‘bout some bubbles?! We can get that fancy-ass champagne you like.”

“I really oughta go.” Derek stuffs his hands in his pockets while his eyes search the table to ensure he isn’t forgetting something. “If that Michelin inspector comes, I wanna make sure everything’s perfect.”

Syd and Jace mumble, they understand, standing to hug Derek goodbye.

Derek embraces Jace, avoiding the storm of questions brewing in Jace’s gray eyes. He tosses a wrinkled twenty-dollar bill on the table and goes, breezing past Ethel without hugging her like he usually does.

Ethel looks after him with a puzzled frown, watching him hurry down the sidewalk with his hands stuffed in his pockets, his broad shoulders hunched near his ears.

Syd turns to Jace, stunned into silence.

Jace blinks and shakes his head.

“What the hell was that about?”

“You’re kidding, right?”

Jace shrugs.

“You know he’s obsessed with you...” Syd insists. “He’s never really gotten over you.”

“No,” Jace nearly laughs. “No, that’s not true.”

“You’re all he talks about when you’re not around. I’m telling you, he’s in love with you and doesn’t wanna hear about some random schmoe you’re dating.”

“I’m not ‘dating’ anyone,” Jace objects. “It’s one blind date! Damn. Can a brotha live? But, you know what? Tell you what... if everyone’s gonna have a stroke over it, I’ll have Alex cancel the whole thing, and we can surprise Derek at his restaurant for dinner instead. How about that? You hungry?”

“You’re missing the point. He’s in love with you! This is just like episode twenty-two, season two, when Jake, the caterer, is crazy about Blanche, but she snubs him and goes to the banquet with Hunter instead. She let Jake go and realized her mistake too late!”

“This is not like that.”

“It is. It’s like I always say, everything in the universe connects back to ‘The Golden Girls’. That’s facts, babe.”

Jace flags down Angel from across the room. “Derek is not in love with me. I reject that, and I’m getting us another round.”

Syd shakes his locks and his eyes tilt to the ceiling.

“You know I’m right,” he sighs.

Angel appears and gawks playfully at Derek’s empty chair.

“Did we lose one?!”

Syd gives Jace a long look. “He had to go prep for dinner.”

Jace ignores Syd and leans over the table to be heard. “Can my friend and I get another round of shots?”

“What you have in mind?” Angel smiles, and for just a second Jace swears he spots a dimple.

“Something strong,” Jace says, ignoring the distress lurking in Syd’s eyes. “Whatever you think’s good. Gentleman’s choice!”

Angel’s smile turns devilish. He’s clearly no gentleman. He glances between them and gives a slow nod. “I know just the thing.”

They watch Angel scurry off and return with two new shots that glow iridescent.

Jace holds one glass up to the light with a critical eye, watching swirls of purple and pink tumble and dance at the bottom of the glass like a cotton candy vortex. He sniffs and instantly recoils. “What the hell did you put in this? And is that glitter?!”

Angel beams like a proud five-year-old. “I call it Unicorn Blood!”

“Is that grass-fed, cage-free unicorn?” Syd retorts.

“What’s in it?” Jace insists.

“It’s better you not know,” Angel says. He’s no longer smiling. “Just toss ‘em back and don’t think about it.”

Syd and Jace exchange looks before saluting one another.

“Nice knowin’ ya!”

“See you in the afterlife!”

They toss the shots back, hoping Angel isn’t poisoning them. It could be vodka and Drano, for all they know.

Jace hisses and coughs as he slams the empty glass on the table, trying to identify the flavors rolling around in his mouth. At first guess, he’d say Everclear was somewhere in the mix, but his college days remind him even Everclear isn’t this strong.



Syd coughs and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, regretting ever mentioning shots. They could be sipping on a nice, chilled champagne if he'd let Derek have his way... if he hadn't been so heavy-handed and insisted on ordering shots before Jace even arrived.

Jace chuckles and lifts an eyebrow in Syd's direction. "You alive over there?"

"I think so."

"What year is it?" Angel teases. "Who's the president?"

"Guh. Don't remind me!" Syd wipes at his mouth again. "Can we get some waters?"

"Sure thing, handsome." Angel winks and struts off, pleased with the damage he's done. He nearly killed them. He'll strike the last shots from the check and surely they'll leave a big tip, he concludes. Maybe Syd will even leave his phone number on the signed receipt this time.

Angel's had eyes for Syd ever since he started at Ethel's.

Syd reminds him of an ex-boyfriend with dreads and a slick mouth he dated in Seattle. It'd been a whirlwind romance where they fought as often as they reconciled with makeup sex. But with any luck, Syd will reveal himself to be as well-endowed as his ex, Angel thinks, giving a hopeful glance over his shoulder.

Meanwhile, Jace shoots Syd a forced, rehearsed smile, something to soften the mood hanging between them.

"So, are you off your meds again?" Syd asks.

Jace taps his fingers on the table and slumps back in his chair.

"I won't tell Derek. Just tell me the truth."

Jace stares back in disbelief.

"I mean, is that what all this shit at your job is about... this thing you say happened with Dominick?"

"It happened. I'm not imagining things," Jace says, much calmer than he'd thought himself capable. Dr. Kessler would

be proud. What's more, he's confident Dominick confronted him in his office this afternoon. He's certain of it!

He can still picture Dominick hovering over his desk... the coffee stain on his shirt... the weathered deck of cards clutched tightly in his hand... all details he couldn't possibly invent from false memories and thin air.

It was real.

It happened.

"I'm worried about you," Syd says with sad eyes. His lips form the shadow of a smile as he fidgets with the bracelets on his wrist. "You'd tell me if you needed help, right?"

There's hope in Syd's voice, wanting to believe the best in him. Wanting to believe history isn't about to repeat itself...

"I'm taking my medicine, and I'm fine," Jace says. "I'm good."

He reaches for Syd's hand across the table and gives it a reassuring squeeze.

"I promise. There's nothing to worry about."

*Nothing to worry about at all, he tells himself... and gives Syd a careful, crafted smile.*

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### 3 / LEGACY

“This is a bad idea,” Jace tells himself before entering OX.

But before he has a chance to talk himself into leaving, the smoky, sweet aroma of meat searing and caramelizing on a wood-fire grill lures him inside.

He’s starving.

A curvy hostess greets him at the door, making it impossible to turn back now.

“I’m meeting someone,” Jace explains, already flustered. “I don’t know his last name, but I think the reservation’s under mine though.”

“Are you Jace?” She points a sharp finger.

He nods, realizing this must be Alex’s handiwork. He’s probably sent the restaurant Jace’s photo and a barrage of special instructions under the reservation.

“Your date’s here. I’ll walk you over,” she says, beckoning him to follow her past the open kitchen.

It’s no surprise Graham is early. Alex likely insisted he be early and not do anything to embarrass him. Jace is still his boss, after all.

She gives Jace a wide smile before leading him into the warmth of the dining room. The air is thick with spices as they pass diners huddled over their meals.

She glances back, and there’s something under her pomegranate-red lipstick that hints at amusement. He hopes it means he’s about to be pleasantly surprised. Surely, she’d warn him somehow, perhaps with a quick raise of her eyebrows, if he should brace himself to be disappointed.

Jace watches her ponytail sway as he follows, wondering how many first dates she’s witnessed.

How many introductions has she made when one person arrived before the other that led to full-blown relationships? How many proposals has she witnessed during her time at OX? How many anniversaries has she seen celebrated with complimentary Raspberry Buckle from the chef? Candles blown between lips that once said, “I do”?

What if being around all that energy has manifested itself into a keen sixth sense where she can now predict whether couples will make it or not, just by first glance? Like an oracle.

He desperately wants to pull her aside and ask if he should run for the hills, but it’s too late for that. She stops in front of a table tucked away in the restaurant’s narrow back dining room, gesturing to a man sitting alone.

Graham’s nothing like what Jace imagined and yet, knowing Alex, his outward appearance makes perfect sense as he stands to shake Jace’s hand. He’s average height and tan but not an unnatural sunbed-tan. His rosy skin has a natural glow that could easily come from a few days of camping and hiking around Forest Park. He must love the outdoors or at least spend a lot of time there, Jace guesses. His dark hair is the color of scorched molasses, combed to one side with a deep part, and the shadow of scruff on his strong jawline is just enough to be sexy without losing his boy-next-door charm. He’s wearing a pale blue, short-sleeve button-down with jeans and leather boots. Jace can trace the width of his pecs to tell he works out. There’s the shadow of a small cleft in his chin, and his thin lips favor one side when he smiles, as if holding tight to a secret.

There’s a small, barely noticeable gap between his front teeth Jace finds endearing, and the cool and spicy notes of his cologne reach across the table, stroking the air like fingertips yearning for touch. He probably should have forgone the extra spray of cologne as he was getting dressed, but his nerves got the best of him and he lost count of how much he sprayed.

Jace notes a nervous sheen on Graham’s face but, thankfully, he’s much more handsome than what the depths of his murky imagination has conjured up.

Jace's eyes move to a small bouquet resting on his side of the table.

Graham reads Jace's horrified expression and quickly explains, "Those were Alex's idea..."

That sounds about right. Alex has no clue how any of this works between men.

"He's so fired on Monday," Jace teases. He then promptly hands the flowers to the hostess. "These won't last a day with me."

She makes a big show out of the flowers, as if no one's ever given her flowers, and she tells them to enjoy their meals before strutting off.

"Hope you don't mind. Don't really have a green thumb," Jace says.

"Just be sure to tell Alex I brought them." His voice has a rasp at the end of each note. "I think he went through a lot of trouble setting all this up."

"He's been after me for weeks about us meeting."

"I'm glad he finally persuaded you." A shy smile surfaces as Graham rakes his eyes over Jace.

Jace catches himself holding his breath and shakes the warmth creeping up the back of his neck.

"Have you gone on many blind dates?"

Graham fiddles with his menu.

"You're my first."

Jace nods as silence consumes the space between them, lingering on.

He instantly hopes this doesn't turn awkward. If he'd been thinking, he would have asked Syd to call him at a certain point with some sort of distraction, in case he wanted to jump ship and abandon the date.

Syd might have gone overboard though. Instead of calling with some flimsy excuse or fake emergency, Syd might have

organized a full extraction.

Jace imagines an entire task force rescuing him. He can picture smoke bombs going off in the restaurant, soldiers crashing through windows, being whisked away in a white unmarked van to the nearest safe house; leaving Graham coughing and confused in the aftermath.

Thankfully, someone stops by the table with water, and their server is close behind to cut through the silence by reciting the dinner specials.

Their server introduces himself, but Jace quickly forgets his name because he's too entranced by the thin whimsical bicycle mustache balancing on his lips.

Jace and Graham have taken Alex's advice and looked over the menu in advance, so they're ready to order.

Graham orders the salmon carpaccio and a beer to start.

Jace orders the empanadas and a Greyhound, which he instantly second guesses. The neon, electric buzz from the shots he had at Ethel's still traces his skin, and he's slowly fading without food in his stomach.

Jace's mind drifts to Derek for a moment, imagining him in his kitchen, handsome in his chef's coat and scowling as he chops onions.

"Have you been here before?" Graham asks.

Jace cringes inside. God, he hates small talk. "It's my first time here. You?"

"Same. I hear the lamb shoulder's amazing. I'll probably get that."

Jace supposes he should be happy Graham isn't vegan. When he moved to Portland, he was astonished by the number of vegans he encountered.

The thought of life without a good steak or burger on the grill makes his chest hurt.

"So, how do you know Alex?" Jace questions. It's something he's been pondering; something Alex wasn't forthcoming with

when he first mentioned Graham.

“Oh, from Delta Chi!” Graham grins. “We were fraternity brothers at UCLA.”

Now that Graham says this, something clicks. He reminds Jace of the cute, preppy (and completely unobtainable) frat boys he saw walking his college campus at Penn State. He’d drool and scurry on to class, knowing the only way he’d see any action from them was to pledge, and he knew being paddled and hazed wasn’t the kind of action he was after. He’d never have survived Hell Week.

Somehow the thought of Alex in a fraternity doesn’t add up, but there you have it.

“Were you guys close?”

“Not really. He was quiet... kinda weird. I mean, you know Alex,” he shrugs.

Jace nods slowly as their drinks arrive. “So, what is it you do for work?”

“Corporate training.” He makes a face after a quick sip of his beer. He goes on to explain that he helps develop curriculum for a lot of the large-tech companies within the Pacific Northwest, spending most of his time on planes and in training rooms under fluorescent lighting. “Not nearly as exciting as what you and Alex do. I’m not all that creative though.”

Jace fights the urge to discuss his work. Alex’s voice plays in his head, telling him not to unload on Graham.

“So, how much did Alex tell you about me? And don’t tell me you’re sworn to secrecy,” he smirks. “None of that ‘frat-brother-code’ bullshit. I want details.”

Graham’s face lights up with a laugh. He looks fully alive when he smiles, as if he’s just learned the most wonderful secret unlocking the mysteries of the universe. “Actually, Alex didn’t say much! Let’s see...”

He tilts his head back playfully before he addresses Jace head-on.

“He said you work a lot...”



“Check.”

“He said you like jazz – which I do too. Big fan of Melody Gardot!”

Jace nods, impressed. “Okay. Check.”

“He said you have great taste in food, like you’re a big foodie.”

“Check.”

“Do you like spicy food?”

“I love spicy food!”

“Me too!” His voice raises an octave. “Like, if it’s not nuclear, it’s not hot enough. There should be radiation coming off my hot wings.”

“I have my limits,” Jace laughs. “But yeah, phaal curry would probably be my last meal. I have a friend who makes the best curry...” he trails off as Derek flashes across his mind.

“Anyway, what else did Alex say?”

“He said you were handsome.”

Jace searches Graham’s face for a reaction.

“He didn’t say you were gorgeous though...”

Jace can’t help but laugh at this. He can’t help but melt a little.

“We can definitely put a check next to that.” Graham smiles flirtatiously from his side of the table.

“You’re not so bad yourself.”

“I clean up alright.” Graham puffs out his chest, but there’s a hint of relief. “Your eyes are incredible. You probably hear that all the time.”

“I do,” Jace swoons. “It’s exhausting!”

He laughs, “Alex said you have a great sense of humor.”

“That was on the list?” Jace is surprised. He and Alex don’t spend a lot of time joking around the office or any time outside of work, but he takes the compliment and runs with it.

“I get funnier the more you drink.”

“I’m not a big drinker,” Graham shakes his head. “My dad was a raging alcoholic who died in a brewery accident where he worked. He fell into one of the tanks and hit his head. No one knew he was in there, so they went on and started a new brew with his body inside.”

Jace’s face flatlines, at a loss for words.

“I’m joking!” Graham breaks into a grin.

Jace sighs with relief and buries his face in his hands, laughing.

“The part about my dad being an alcoholic is true, but he’s alive, back in Toronto where I grew up, probably having a beer right now,” he chuckles and takes another sip of his IPA.

Jace loves a sense of humor in a man, but a dark, dry sense of humor is irresistible. “You’re funny,” he nods in return, and the two share a quiet moment of eye contact.

The appetizers arrive and Jace seizes the moment to regroup. He wasn’t expecting Graham to be so charming – or good-looking. He’d initially planned to phone in the date, get through it with minimal effort, and walk out with leftovers.

Jace puts on his game face and leans in, putting his sultry gray eyes to work as they focused on Graham. “Tell me more about yourself...”

They sip their drinks and take small bites of their food as Graham tells Jace about his past. He was born in New York, raised in Toronto. Eventually, he moved back to the states to attend UCLA where he relied heavily on Greek life to form fast friendships and adjust to American life. His mother, who did die when he was thirteen from ovarian cancer, was originally from Toronto and his father hailed from Queens, which explains the faint accent registering more and more as his words reach Jace from across the table.

He’s an only child who grew up playing sports, always glad to be around other kids his age, never liking to feel lonely. He took a shine to skiing while in Toronto but traded in the blistering snow for perfect summers in Portland where he now hikes on the weekends with coworkers. He loves dogs, hates

cats, and has neither. He's never home long enough to take care of anything, not even plants – which he wishes he had the time and patience to tend to. His mother, blessed with a green thumb, always kept houseplants, and all of her plants died the week after she passed, despite Graham watering and singing to them, as he'd seen her do often.

He calls his father, an ex-New York prison guard, once a week out of obligation, only visiting during Christmas. His father has a new girlfriend named Charlene who's left to put up with his drunken antics these days, calling Graham only when she doesn't know what to do to calm his father. She's a beautician from Edmonton with a thick accent and a deep affinity for Boxing Day.

“Wait. What's Boxing Day?” Jace interrupts.

“Oh. That's like, I guess you call it ‘Black Friday’ here. It's the same thing,” he waves a hand.

Charlene likes to scour the papers weeks before Boxing Day, creating a route for all the best sales. Graham plays the role of her driver when he visits for the holidays, taking her from shop to shop and out to lunch. It's also the one day of the year when she can go insane with the credit cards, citing it's all in the name of spending time with Graham, who they see so little of.

Graham wants a big family one day. Three or four kids, he doesn't care how he comes by them.

“Adoption... Surrogacy... I'm open!” He smiles. “How about you? Want kids one day?”

The last thing Jace wants is kids one day, but he smiles and thinks fast.

“Children are a gift.” He nods diplomatically and buries his face in his icy cocktail.

The Greyhound he ordered is strong. He should have drunk much more water than the one glass he had before leaving Ethel's. It's also possible he's still suffering the aftermath of Angel's “unicorn shot.”

He imagines he'll be pissing purple glitter come morning.

He has a wild thought...

*Is his tongue purple?*

“Is my tongue purple?” He asks.

“Stick out your tongue.”

Jace does as he’s told and Graham makes a face back at him.

“Stop!” Jace laughs, “I’m serious.”

“Why would it be purple?” Graham teases back. “It’s not purple. Your tongue’s fine...” The words trail off into silence as Graham’s eyes move back to Jace’s lips.

Their server and his mustache return to take their entrée orders, clearly sensing he’s interrupting a moment.

Graham orders the lamb shoulder, as promised, and Jace changes his mind at the last second to order the ribeye.

“I feel like I’ve been doin’ all the talking,” Graham winces. “I have an idea! Let’s play a game.”

“Oh, boy,” Jace smirks. He hates games.

“This’ll be fun, promise. I do this when I visit a new site, when I have a new group of managers to train. It’s like an icebreaker.” He shoots Jace a playful grin. “It’s called ‘two truths and a lie.’ We each take a turn saying three statements, and the other person has to guess which one is the lie.”

“Like your charming brewery story,” Jace slow-nods.

“Right.” Graham shoots him the side-eye. “I see what you did there. I’ll go first. Ready?”

Jace perks up in his seat and rolls his shoulders.

“Ready!”

“Okay...” He tilts his head down for a moment to think, then smiles. “Okay... When I was seven, I ran away from home for two days... I’m deathly allergic to peanuts... and I once got in a bar fight with the ‘Indian’ from the Village People.”

“The bar fight.”

“That was fast! Final answer?”

“You strike me as a lover, not a fighter.”

“Normally, you’d be right but in this case, you’re wrong,” he smiles, triumphant. “It’s peanuts. I’m the furthest thing from allergic. I snack on ‘em all the time, in trail mix when I go hiking... they’re my weakness.”

“So, you got into a fight with the Village People?!”

“Just the ‘Indian’!” He points out. “And it wasn’t the actual Native American from the Village People. It was Halloween. Some jackass dressed up as him... I told him it was cultural appropriation... it was this whole thing. Next thing I know, we’re dukin’ it out.”

“Huh! Just when I thought I had you figured out,” Jace quips.

“In case you’re wondering, he completely kicked my ass!” Graham laughs. “Maybe I am a lover and not a fighter.”

Jace smiles internally and bites his bottom lip. Graham holds his stare. For a moment, everything else fades away.

“Okay,” Graham points two finger guns. “Your turn.”

“Right, uhm. Okay...” Jace thinks for a moment. His veins are flooded with adrenaline and the Greyhound he ordered has gone straight to his head.

“Let’s see... I’ve been arrested once... Ella Fitzgerald is my favorite jazz artist of all time... and... uhm...” he throws up his hands and blurts out, “My father was the Brooklyn Butcher.”

“Who’s the ‘Brooklyn Butcher’?”

Jace stares back, stunned. “You’ve never heard of the Brooklyn Butcher?” He waits to see if this is another joke, but Graham only stares back like a deer in headlights, seconds before being struck down. “How is that possible?”

“Is he famous? I grew up in Canada,” he offers. “There’s loads of American celebrities I missed out on. Mostly pop stars, bands...”

Jace is beside himself. Where does he go from here?

“Fill me in,” Graham suggests, “then I’ll make my guess.”

Jace swallows the lump in his throat. “Just take a guess.”

“Oh, no you don’t.” He cocks his head with a crooked smile. “I’m intrigued by this ‘Brooklyn Butcher’ of yours. Tell me more.” He folds his arms and leans back in his chair.

Jace takes a breath, trying to fathom where to start. He blames his half-empty cocktail for blurting out the Brooklyn Butcher’s name. It’s not great first-date conversation, nor is it a topic he thought he’d dive into tonight, but it’s clear Graham isn’t letting him off the hook...

“His name was Samuel Mader. He owned a small deli near Cobble Hill in Brooklyn. It was nothing fancy, but it had been in his family for five generations, making it somewhat of a landmark in the neighborhood. Everyone knew the black butcher who owned Cassex Deli.”

Graham listens politely and sips his beer.

“The kids in the neighborhood gave him the nickname ‘Mad Sam’ after he chased one of them four blocks for stealing a beer from one of the fridges. He was like this fixture in the neighborhood. This character everyone relied on for burgers and steaks to complete their Sunday cookouts. His wife, Lorna, was a nurse who was never around. She slept during the day and worked nights. Like a vampire. They had a son, just a normal kid... and they tried for another but never could have a second.

“The deli was Sam’s legacy that he planned to leave to his son. It was also one of many small, minority-owned businesses the city was looking to buy out as part of a ‘downtown rejuvenation’ project that had been in discussions for years. Blocks of mom-and-pop shops would be consumed. Black barbers and beauticians would be out of business – all for a new, shiny shopping pavilion full of expensive coffee shops and trendy boutiques. Sam fought against it and gave the city officials hell whenever they visited his deli, brandishing idle threats if he didn’t accept their offer to sell. ‘This is the best offer you’re gonna get for this dump,’ they’d say. ‘It’s just a matter of time before you have to sell.’”

Graham’s voice is a hush. “What did he do?”

“The shop was in trouble. Sales were down, and it was a struggle to stay afloat. Between Lorna’s salary and the shop losing money, they were barely living paycheck to paycheck, and when things began to break down at the deli, the repairs threatened to wipe out their savings. Times were hard, but the deli was all Sam had. He had to keep it in the family. So, whenever the city officials came around with their paperwork and checkbook, spouting how he wasn’t up to code – and really any reason for them to acquire the building – he’d turn them down and chase them out of his shop. Then, just when things seemed like they couldn’t get worse, the accident happened.”

Graham’s eyes go wide.

“One day, another kid from the neighborhood stole a beer and Sam went chasing after him. Two hours later, Sam woke up in the hospital. He never saw the car coming, didn’t even remember hitting the windshield or pavement...”

“How bad was he hurt?”

“He returned to the deli in a wheelchair,” Jace rolls his eyes, reeling. “Everyone, including his wife, thought it was the end of Cassex Deli. Instead, ‘Mad Sam’ returned to work madder than ever! He was paralyzed from the waist down. How was he gonna run his business? He couldn’t afford to keep full-time employees, and the repairs were piling up fast. While he was in the hospital, three stores on his block made deals to sell to the city and announced they were closing their doors. Sam reopened his shop, ready to do battle, and when the city officials and real estate developer came to harass him, he ran them out of the store in his wheelchair, wielding a broom! People stopped and crowded around to watch him swinging his broom, shooing them away. They laughed and cheered Sam on, and someone took a picture of it that made the paper. Next thing you know, Sam’s a local celebrity!”

“This is one hell of a story,” Graham crunches down on a piece of bread, his eyes fixed on Jace. “Good for Sam, though. Stickin’ it to the man!”

“The man’ wasn’t too thrilled when a reporter came the next day to do a story on the deli. It became this big human-interest piece. ‘Small business owner stands his ground in the face of gentrification!’ People sent donations, folks in the neighborhood started coming by to help Sam with repairs... Sam took the last of their savings and completely renovated the place to bring it to code, complete with a wheelchair ramp. He even spray-painted the infamous broom gold and hung it up in the shop like a trophy!”

“So, he won,” Graham smirks with his mouth full.

“The city backed off,” Jace says. “A year went by and the deli was busier than ever. People came from all over, just to take a photo in front of the ‘golden broom’ and Sam would insist they buy something for him to be in the photo with them. That was the deal. It was this whole thing. Things were finally looking up for Sam and the shop. He brought in his son to help after school... A lot of the supplies and the freezer were down in the basement where Sam of course couldn’t get to. Sam was the face of the deli, taking orders, working the register, and posing for photos. It was up to his son to manage the deliveries. Haul stuff up and down the stairs and do all the menial work Sam couldn’t do from his wheelchair. His son started working in the shop full-time during the summer, and Sam took the opportunity to prepare him to take over the shop one day. He showed his son the books and went over all the financials with him. He gave him a set of keys and, most importantly, he showed him how to butcher.”

Graham gulps and stiffens in his chair.

“At first, Sam had him practice on scraps leftover from the day... odd cuts of beef and chicken too old to sell. The son hated it. The smell and feel of raw meat on his fingers. The smell of blood that never seemed to go away. It all made his stomach turn. Worst of all, he hated hosing down the floor at the end of the night and disposing of the scraps and chunks of red meat and trimmings. Sometimes, he couldn’t even tell what he was cleaning up... It was all just organs, gore, and leftover carnage.”

Graham bares his teeth in disgust.



“It was brutal, but the shop was poised to live on for another generation.”

Graham winces, and his shoulders grow heavy. “Why do I feel like this doesn’t end happily ever after?”

For a moment, Jace considers ending the story here. Graham has never heard of the Brooklyn Butcher up to this point, so he’d be none the wiser if Jace left something out. Jace could leave things on a high note. He could leave Graham to picture Sam wheeling around his deli happily... living long enough to see the deli thrive and be passed onto his son, who would keep it afloat and pass it on to his son... but this isn’t that kind of story. This isn’t a fairytale made of sugar and spice and happily ever afters.

This is history.

“The developers moved on from Sam,” Jace continues, “but they never gave up on the renovation project. Finally, they bought out Mrs. Gye. She was an older Korean lady who owned the alteration shop next door to the deli. A little over a week later, they came in and started gutting the place, throwing out large spools of leftover fabric and trash she left behind. They made their way to the basement and that’s when they noticed something... odd. A wall that shouldn’t be there.

“They realized her basement didn’t match the floor plan the city had on file. The configuration was all wrong, and it seemed to stem from a section of the wall that cut into the room.” Jace does his best to illustrate the space with his hands. “Anyway, the contractors did what contractors do.” Jace swallows hard. “They tore into the wall.”

Graham releases the breath he’s been holding, as their server returns.

“Just checking on you gentlemen,” he grins like the Cheshire Cat. “Are we good on drinks?”

“Uh, yeah. Thanks.” Graham nods, dismissively. “What happened? Don’t tell me the place collapsed!”

“In light of what they found, that would have been a blessing.” Jace makes a steeple of his fingers, takes a ragged breath, and

continues. “They tore through the wall and realized it was another room, a hidden room. At first, they thought it might have been a cellar at one point, sealed off – maybe the alteration shop was a restaurant in a past life – but once they made their way in and found a light switch, they realized they’d walked right into a nightmare.

“The space was no more than thirteen feet long with a stainless-steel rolling cabinet and a matching steel table in the middle of the room. The dried splattering on the walls and the pool of blood congealing under the table told them the room was connected to the deli, not the alteration shop.

“They laughed at first, thinking they’d just barged into one of Sam’s rooms – a workspace out of sight from customers where his staff did the grisly work of breaking down and preparing meat to fill his display case for the day. He’d be pissed off by the intrusion and the inconvenience of having to repair the wall. But then they noticed something. Something that had rolled beneath the file cabinet, resting behind one of the wheels.”

“What was it?”

“A vial. A small, glass vial of Halothane, drained dry.”

Graham’s brows knot together in confusion.

“It’s an anesthetic. They use it in surgeries to maintain anesthesia.”

Graham looks even more confused.

“It paralyzes you,” Jace says briskly, “but you remain conscious. Hospitals use it, vets use it—”

“But what use would a butcher have for it?”

“Good question.” Jace’s gray eyes turn dark. “The contractors searched the cabinet drawers next and found their answer.” He draws a breath and slowly watches Graham’s face twist in horror at what he says next. “The first drawer had been filled to the brim with hair, the second drawer contained nails, and in the last drawer, they found teeth. Human hair... Human fingernails and toenails... and human teeth.”

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## 4 / SOMEONE NEW

Graham chokes out a laugh, but the grim look in Jace's eyes tells him this isn't a ghost story to be laughed off.

There's no happily ever after here.

"Human? What?!" He shifts in his seat, waiting for Jace to break character and tell him this is all a joke.

"The family was home watching 'Good Times' when the FBI kicked in the door and wheeled Sam out of the house in handcuffs. Everyone was in shock! How could Sam be capable of murdering nineteen people?"

"Wait. Wait," Graham waves a hand. "You're saying he was \_\_\_"

"A serial killer."

Graham leans back in his chair. He rakes a hand through his dark hair. "A serial killer in a wheelchair. And you said this room was in the basement, right? What about the stairs? How could he have gone up and down the stairs?"

"I'm getting there," Jace promises. He turns his head as their server approaches with a tray that could only be their entrees. "After dinner."

"Oh, come on!" Graham gives a wicked smile. "You have to explain this to me. He was framed or something, right? Or maybe it was all animal stuff they found in the drawers."

"There's a clear difference between human hair and animal hair," Jace says. His voice fades into a whisper as their food is delivered.

Their server's eyebrows arch, catching the tail end of their conversation. "Please enjoy, gentlemen." He motions for someone to top off their waters.

Jace smiles politely until he's gone and their waters are refilled. "Even if Sam was breaking down whole pigs in the room they found, there's no confusing pig teeth with human

teeth. And the drawer of fingernails? Come on. The FBI dusted for prints and tested everything – including the blood in the room. All human.”

“Well, what about the bodies? Where were the bodies?”

“They never found the bodies,” Jace drawls, picking up his knife and fork.

Graham has barely glanced at his food. “Without the bodies, I mean, isn’t that like circumstantial evidence or something?”

“They had a cabinet full of DNA, even without the bodies,” Jace says wryly. He gives Graham a long look and points his knife. “You’re really going to bat for Sam,” he observes playfully.

Graham shrugs. “I don’t know... Just kinda hard to believe he was capable of something like that.”

“Imagine how his son felt,” Jace’s voice nearly cracks. “He hated working at the deli, but he idolized his father. Seeing his father on the news fighting for what he believed in... Watching his father fight to save the deli...”

“Although, maybe he was fighting to save it for a different reason?”

Jace points his knife again. “Exactly.” He cuts into his ribeye. Blood seeps between his fork and steak knife. The steak is tender in his mouth, cooked to perfection. “The shop had been in the family for years, remember. There’s no telling how long that room had been there.”

“So, what happened?” Graham finally lifts his fork and picks at his plate. He looks exhausted, like he’s been running the entire length of their conversation.

“The next time Sam’s family saw him was in court for his arraignment. Rumors and whispers were swirling around the neighborhood, and news stations were camped out near the deli, eager to cover a story about a black serial killer. The press gave Sam all kinds of names... The Black Butcher... and of course, Mad Sam made a cameo in the headlines, but The Brooklyn Butcher was the name that stuck. The neighborhood kids and Sam’s regular customers spun wild

stories – claiming he must have butchered the bodies, put them through the meat grinder, and passed off the meat as hamburger.”

“Did he?!”

“Of course not!” Jace tilts his head and frowns. “Ever hear of health inspectors? They’re brutal – especially with delis – and they don’t drop in unannounced just to make sure you’re ‘handling your food safely’ and there are no mice droppings near the meat slicer. They have pH testing strips and all sorts of equipment to make sure your meat is safe with the proper records of how you acquired it – so they know you’re not peddling horsemeat, for example.”

Graham narrows his eyes. “You know a lot about this stuff.”

Jace drops his shoulders and glances down at his entree and the small pool of blood collecting on the plate. “Anyway... the court date came. It was a circus – a packed courtroom, full of TV cameras and people from the neighborhood and surrounding cities. By now, dental records had been pulled on the found remains, and the families had been notified – many of which were in the courtroom. Those that couldn’t get in were part of the mob outside, chanting for Sam to get the chair. Sam’s wife and son were in the second row, stunned at the turnout. Half the people there were expecting Sam to be wheeled in and for him to declare he was not guilty. There must be some sort of mistake, right? The other half just wanted an explanation for the findings at the deli, but no one was prepared for what happened next.”

“What happened next?” Graham’s food is quickly growing cold, but he doesn’t care.

“The doors in the courtroom opened, and Sam Mader walked in with his head held high.”

“...Walked?!”

“He walked in. No wheelchair... no crutches, no cane. No assistance from the bailiff. He walked in on two feet like the car accident never happened.”

“So, all this time—”

“For a year and a half, he had everyone fooled. Even his family.”

“Well, there goes his alibi,” Graham throws up his arms. “No one thought he was physically capable of killing anyone, but he was never really paralyzed, I guess.”

Jace nods grimly. “It turned out though, he didn’t need an alibi. He walked in and pled guilty. He stood there and confessed to killing nineteen people. He even told the judge how he did it.”

“You’re kidding!”

“It was the wheelchair,” Jace looks off distantly. “His wife worked nightshifts at the hospital, and their son was old enough to entertain himself at home on evenings when Sam said he had paperwork to do at the shop. Instead of doing paperwork, Sam would venture out in his chair at night, wandering the streets. He’d go a few blocks and stop someone to ask for help. He’d say he was trying to catch the deli before they closed so he could buy dinner for his family. Would they mind giving him a push? Who would say no to helping someone in a wheelchair? Who doesn’t like to feel like a hero, right?”

Graham nods slowly.

“Sam would wait a few blocks, until they got close to his deli, where the back door had been left unlocked. He’d time it just right, waiting until they were alone on a side street or a narrow alley. He orchestrated the whole thing, directing them where to go – insisting he knew a shortcut! Then, once they were alone, he’d throw on the wheelchair brake, stand, and spin around to overpower them. He used a syringe full of Midazolam. Just a small dose to subdue them; just enough to kill the fight in them. Then, he’d switch places with them.”

Graham’s mouth slowly drops open. His eyes shine with fascination and disbelief as Jace continues.

“He’d place their limp bodies in the wheelchair, put on a baseball cap to disguise himself, and wheel them the rest of the way to the deli. He’d roll them in through the back door

and use the chair to get them down to the basement, one step at a time. It would have been easier to tilt the chair and dump them down the steps like a sack of potatoes, but he wanted them alive. He made this clear to everyone listening in the courtroom that day.

“Once downstairs, he’d roll them into what he called the ‘delivery room’. You had to go through the freezer to get there, and no one stuck around in the freezer long enough to discover the hidden door in the back behind the shelves of plucked chickens and boxes. Once through, he’d pull them onto the steel table in the room and strip them of their clothing, cutting through the layers of fabric with scissors. The same scissors he used to cut through bone when he broke down whole chickens. He’d hose down the bodies next, washing them with soap and hot water, cleaning every inch of skin. He’d give them a dose of Halothane at this point, sometimes sooner if he thought they may start to stir too soon. The Halothane worked like venom. It was fast and drove away their senses, so even when they did finally wake, they were unable to move. Paralyzed. They’d wake up naked and terrified on his cold, metal table staring up at the man they’d offered to help just moments ago. Sam would have his black rubber apron and gloves on at this point. The cruel smile on his lips would hide behind the black rubber mask he wore across his jaw, like a surgeon about to operate.

“He’d start by shaving them. He used clippers to shave them bald, then switched to a straight razor to remove any remaining body hair and, finally, their eyebrows. Then he’d trim their fingernails and toenails. This part must have been the most maddening for his victims who only wanted to fight and scratch their way to freedom. Lying there lifeless, aware of everything happening and not able to scream for help, or fight, or move as your kidnapper calmly and carefully cuts your fingernails like you’re at a fucking day spa...” Jace’s tone spikes, and he takes a breath to calm himself. “Sam acted like he was giving them a manicure... then, lastly, he’d remove the nails entirely and yank out their teeth with pliers.”

Graham swallows hard.



“No hair. No nails. No teeth. He stripped them down until they were no more than slabs of meat on his table. Removing their teeth was often the toughest part of the job. Sam would grunt and really have to lean into it to remove the molars.

Sometimes a small cry would escape from his victims during this point, which often served as a litmus test. If they made a sound, he gave them more of the Halothane. He wanted to be sure they were fully awake to feel everything... but not able to move for what came next.”

Graham can't imagine what Jace will say next. He hasn't fully made up his mind on how much of this to believe.

*Is this payback for the brewery story he spun earlier?*

Either way, he can't tear his eyes from Jace. He's horrified and mesmerized all at once. His blood pumps with adrenaline, driving his heart to thud heavily in his chest as he wets his lips to ask the question he fears asking the most...

“What did Sam do to them?”

Jace can't bring himself to look at Graham. His eyes dart down to the table before hurriedly finishing his story. “Once he was done ‘preparing’ them... once he had stripped them of everything that made them unique... he'd start to butcher them... while they were still alive.”

Graham lets out a heavy sigh.

The thought of being filleted and butchered alive, watching your own skin and flesh being carved from your bones until you pass out from blood loss, makes Graham dizzy.

“Sam started out giving all these details to the judge that day but, by the time he finished, he had turned to face the courtroom and it seemed like he was looking directly at his son. Like he was speaking to his son alone.”

Graham shakes his head warily and finishes off his beer. Wiping his mouth, he asks, “How much time did he get? Life?”

“He was sentenced to life, but he killed himself in prison. Hung himself with a belt.” Jace goes for a sip of his cocktail and is stunned to find the glass empty.

“Damn. To think I was rooting for this guy at first.”

“You weren’t the only one.” Jace feels his throat tighten.

“Sam’s suicide was the worst thing that could have happened. When news got out, the city erupted with anger. People rioted and looted the deli, smashing its windows and spray-painting nearly everything in sight with obscenities. The prison went under investigation, but there was nothing that could be done to console the victims’ families. Sam had taken their loved ones... brothers, fathers, sisters, mothers... and then he robbed them of justice by killing himself mere days into his sentence. Sam’s wife and son had to leave their home and everything they knew in New York. They moved around constantly, but Sam seemed to follow them like a black cloud. Mader’s a pretty uncommon name, so anytime people caught wind of it they were instantly connected back to Sam and the strange case of the Brooklyn Butcher. There was no outrunning it.

“No hospital would hire Lorna; not after it’d been rumored that Sam had gotten the Midazolam and the Halothane from her. How else would a butcher have access to that sort of thing? She ended up waitressing and cleaning rooms in a rundown motel up until she went crazy and walked into traffic one day.”

“Jesus. What happened to the son?” Graham asks, dreading the answer.

Jace faces him as his eyes shine and swell like a storm at sea, threatening to spill down his face. “The son grew up... mostly thinking he’d never amount to much.” His jaw trembles as he fights to get the words out. “But through all the bullying, all the moving around, all the running... the shame and the heartbreak... the loss of his father... the loss of his mother... He changed his name and moved to a city where no one knew him. He started a new life. He worked hard and built a career for himself and found friends who don’t judge him for the sins of his father... He became someone new.”

Graham stares at Jace, completely gutted as a newfound realization washes over his face. “So... You are the son of the Brooklyn Butcher...”

“I’ve never been arrested,” Jace says in a small voice. “That was my lie.” He adds weakly, going back to their game of ‘two truths and a lie’ that seems so trivial now. Jace has no idea how he ended up here, confessing his truth and identity to a complete stranger.

Graham glances down at his plate, at a loss.

“I’m sure I’ve ruined your appetite.”

Graham waves a hand as if it’s nothing.

“I warned Alex I’m not good on dates,” Jace’s voice is a whisper. “Please don’t say anything to Alex. He doesn’t know. The people I work with don’t know.” Dominick flashes before Jace’s eyes, red and angry. “Only a few close friends know, and I’ve worked really hard to make a life for myself here. I don’t wanna run anymore.”

“Of course!” Graham leans in. His hand finds Jace’s from across the table, surprising them both. A blush creeps across his cheeks as he measures his next words carefully. “I can’t imagine what you’ve gone through.” He swallows and his gaze softens. “Don’t worry about Alex. We don’t really talk like that. I actually hadn’t heard from him in years, and then he hit me up about this date with you – and I’m glad he did.”

Jace laughs.

“No, really!” Graham insists. “I know you were kinda roped into this, but I’m glad you came. Alex can be intense but I’m glad he made this happen. And, look, we can’t choose our parents, right?” He lowers his tone. “What your father did is not your fault.”

How many times has Jace heard this from Dr. Kessler?

“I think telling me your story was actually kinda brave.”

Graham runs his thumb across Jace’s knuckles, then gives his hand a squeeze. “For a blind date, I feel like I know so much about you now. The real you, I mean. If anything, I feel like I’ve got some catching up to do,” he winks.

Jace gazes into Graham’s blue eyes, feeling the warmth of their interlaced fingers. How Graham has turned out to be such a gentleman is a wonder. The fact that he hasn’t requested the

check and run by now amazes him. The last time he “came out” to a guy he liked, it ended so fast it gave Jace whiplash.

“Can we just push reset?” Graham suggests. “I feel like this is all my fault anyway. If I hadn’t suggested that game... I think I was just nervous.” He gestures with both hands now and glances around the restaurant. “It’s been a while since I’ve done this whole dating thing, and I guess I just wasn’t expecting someone like you.”

“Someone like me?”

“That came out wrong.” He reaches for Jace’s hand again. “What I mean is...” He pauses to search for the words. “I was so nervous walking in here. All I had to go on was what Alex told me, and then you walked in and...” His eyes brighten. “It was like, everything just went out the window. I forgot all the advice and the tips Alex gave me... You know he actually gave me a list of your favorite things – like a cheat sheet!”

Jace laughs, not surprised.

“I wanted to get to know you for myself, and I could just tell there was something different about you when you walked in.”

Jace looks up, daring a smile. “So, you’re saying I haven’t scared you off yet?”

He laughs gently and shoots him a sexy wink. “I don’t scare so easily.”

A moment passes between them that’s warm and electric.

“I’ve got an idea.” Graham launches back in his seat. “Let’s get out of here!” He removes his napkin from his lap. “I’ll take care of the check. Let’s grab some dessert somewhere, and I’ll answer anything you wanna know! No matter how personal or embarrassing.”

It’s wildly romantic. Jace has no idea what romantic comedy Graham wandered out of, but he’s glad he stumbled his way into OX.

“Anything, huh? So, even awkward high school stories are on the table?”

“I guess that would qualify.” Graham laughs, already dreading what Jace might ask.

“I haven’t had Salt & Straw in a while,” Jace shrugs. “I hear there’s a new marionberry and cashew brittle flavor.”

“Marionberries and cashews? In ice cream?”

“I know. Sounds crazy. I have to try it now.”

Graham shrugs his shoulders wildly and gives off a dreamy sigh. “Why not? I think I’d follow you just about anywhere, Jace Mader.”

“Actually... It’s Jason.” Jace shrugs, almost apologetically.

“My real name’s Jason.”

Graham hesitates for only a moment, then nods with resolve and extends a hand. “It’s nice to meet the real you, Jason Mader.”

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## 5 / GONE

Mondays are murder.

Jace has barricaded himself in his office, working through emails and returning phone calls while Don Shirley coaxes piano keys into a distant melody spinning from Jace's record player like white noise.

On paper, it looks like an ordinary day full of the usual fires in need of extinguishing, but Jace can't ignore the weight in his stomach pulling and screaming that today will be anything but ordinary.

Things have changed.

He's not the same person he was when we left the office Friday.

One more person in the world knows his true identity, and yet it feels like everyone now knows.

He's gone straight into his office upon arriving, whizzing past Derby's desk without saying good morning or asking about her weekend. It was only once he closed his door that he breathed again and gathered his wits, reminding himself that no one at Moxy knows his secret.

It had been careless and stupid of him to confess his truth to Graham, someone he's only just met and, at the start, had no intention of seeing again.

Now, all he wants is to see Graham again; to see his eyes light up like cloudless blue skies and to see that crooked smile again.

There's a knock at his door that he recognizes as Alex. The door creaks open and Jace waves him in without looking up.

"I come bearing gifts." Alex beams and holds up a coffee.

Jace gives a weak smile.

"What's wrong?" He rushes forward, taking a seat.

“Nothing. Just... stuff.”

“Well? How did things go Friday?!” He can barely hold his excitement. It spills over into a slick grin and suddenly he’s a teenage girl bouncing in his chair, ready to gossip and talk about boys. “What’d you think of Graham?”

Jace studies him for a moment before treading lightly. “He was nice. He was everything you said he’d be. A perfect gentleman.”

Alex slumps. “That’s all I get?”

“What do you want me to say? You were right. He’s great.”

“Are you gonna see him again?”

A smile fades into view, and then it’s gone. “Probably not. I haven’t heard from him.”

“Since Friday?”

Jace nods.

He’s been trying not to feel anxious over the fact that Graham has not returned his text. It had taken him nearly an hour to land on the right wording and psych himself into hitting send.

Marionberries and cashews... who knew?! Thanks again for a nice time.

More than two days have passed without a reply. Jace has been trying not to dwell on it, but the anxiety is almost crippling.

*Why are guys so bad at texting?*

*It’s just as well, he thinks. He doubts his horror story at dinner did him any favors, despite Graham’s reaction. Graham probably played nice, not wanting to disappoint Jace, or Alex for that matter – who had hyped him up to be a perfect prince. Graham was likely revolted at the core and in disbelief that Jace could fall so far from the pristine portrait Alex painted of his boss.*

Who would want to be associated with someone like Jace?



Who could possibly love the flesh and blood of a monster?

“What was his take?” Jace asks. “What did he say about me?”

Here’s the true test. If Graham mentioned anything about the Brooklyn Butcher to Alex, it would surely show in Alex’s eyes.

The last thing Jace needs is Alex knowing the truth or having to explain himself this morning.

“He hasn’t called me back.” Alex frowns and pushes his glasses back onto his nose. “I left a message for him Friday night. Didn’t hear back all weekend.”

The two stare at each other, taking this in as the record comes to an end, dragging coarsely against the needle.

“I’ll get it.” Alex stands before Jace can pop up.

“Anything’s fine,” Jace mumbles and watches as Alex replaces the record.

He pulls a sleeve from the shelf, revealing an old Billy Strayhorn album cover.

*Something to Live For: The Music of Billy Strayhorn.*

It’s perfect.

Jace can’t help but give a comfortable sigh at the familiar sound of piano notes, tinkling and filling the air like stardust.

There’s a knock at his door and Foster pops her head in, her razor-sharp, blonde bob swaying in tow. “Got a sec?” She glances at the record player and twists her lips to one side.

“Herbie Hancock?”

“Billy Strayhorn. Close!” Jace smiles.

It isn’t close at all.

She frowns and squeezes a fist. “Thought I knew that one. So, hey, listen...”

Alex stands at attention like a soldier as Foster strides into the room.

She’s short but mighty in a navy pantsuit and matching heels that test the limits of her balance. Jace has never seen her in

flats but imagines she must be somewhere near 5'2" when she gets home and finally kicks off her heels, tossing them a cross glance.

"How's the Outpost account going?"

"Good!" Jace is quick to answer. "They love the new direction, and we should have the art nailed down by Wednesday."

He leaves out how difficult they've been. He doesn't mention how many times they've changed their minds or the number of times he's wanted to reach through the phone and strangle them.

"Sounds like it's going well," she says. "I was impressed with the last draft I saw. Are you doing any radio for them?"

"I had Stewart record a few spots for them, just in case. I'll present them this week."

"Oh, good. You used Stewart. His voice is a good fit for this." She nods for a long moment to herself, then glances around his office briefly. "Hope you're not too attached to this office. Something tells me, we might have to move you out soon." She winks, and Jace and Alex share a quick look.

Alex pumps a fist and does a little dance while Foster's not looking, oddly moving his hips to music only he can hear.

"Won't take me long to pack up," Jace beams, picturing the corner office next to Foster's.

"At the meeting today, I'm going to ask you to update everyone on your progress. This account's a real win for us, and you've handled it so beautifully. I want people to get a sense of what your process is like."

Jace nods firmly and gives himself a mental pat on the back.

"Oh! Also, week after next, I'm out of town, but I want you to take my place and lead the leadership meeting."

Before Jace can recover from the shock and utter a reply, she explains...

“I’ll be in Cancun,” she says with a sneer. “My younger sister’s getting married and has decided she wants a destination wedding.” She slumps her shoulders and makes jazz hands. “You’re lookin’ at the maid of honor. So now, Trevor and I have to take off work to help set up for the wedding at this God-forsaken villa with no goddamn AC she’s rented out – but, hey, she wants something ‘authentic.’” Foster’s voice goes shrill as she mimics her baby sister. “It’s her second marriage. She doesn’t even like Mexican food.” She throws up her hands.

“Uhm, at least, I hear, Cancun’s beautiful this time of year,” Jace offers, looking to Alex for help.

He shrugs uselessly in the background.

“It’ll be at least 90 degrees. I’ll be sweating like a pregnant nun at confession in this God-awful gown she’s picked out. You should see it! It’s chartreuse.” Her face goes limp.

“Family can be exhausting,” Jace says with as much empathy as he can muster. He’s never seen this stressed and frazzled side of Foster. “You focus on getting through the wedding, sneak some time in for you and Trevor, have some margaritas, and I’ll hold things down on this end.”

“Thank you,” she smiles gratefully. Her lipstick is the color of pink grapefruit. “I know this place will be in good hands.”

Jace shoots Alex a quick look and sits upright in his chair, measuring his next words carefully. “I’m sure, naturally, there’ll be some people wondering why you chose me to fill in. Dominick, being one of them.”

It’s a risky move to mention Dominick or any form of competition, but like a moth drawn to a crackling flame, he can’t resist getting closer to gauge her reaction.

*Has Dominick gone to her with any wild theories?*

*Has he told her Jace is hiding something?*

“Dominick has other things to be concerned about.” Her face tightens. It has HR written all over it.

Jace nods obediently, sensing the topic is closed.

“See you in a few minutes!” She smiles briefly, then struts out.

Jace and Alex watch, waiting for the door to close before reacting to the news.

“You did it!” Alex smiles. “She basically just said she’s promoting you!”

Jace signals for Alex to lower his voice. “It’s not a done deal yet. There’s still work to be done, I’ve still got their grand opening to nail, and if Outpost pulls out...”

“That’s not gonna happen. You’ve got this,” Alex says.

Jace takes in the moment and allows himself to smile. His heart hammers in his chest as he paces the floor of his office. He can’t sit still.

He can’t stop smiling.

• • •

Jace is halfway through his second cup of coffee. He licks his full lips, presses them together in silence, and listens with little heed to the discussion swirling within the boardroom.

The usual characters have assembled, sipping from steaming mugs of organic tea and swiveling in their chairs with restless energy.

The art directors.

The account managers.

The creative directors who look most of all bored.

The traffic manager, who always brings his breakfast of oatmeal with almond milk and half a banana to the Monday morning leadership meetings.

And, of course, the senior account executives are here, which regrettably includes Dominick who passes Jace the occasional glare from across the conference table.

Jace pays him little mind. Not even Dominick can damper his mood this morning.

He turns an eye to Foster, who sits at the head of the table looking distracted and weary, as Ann in the production department goes on and on about... something. Jace has stopped listening at this point. He watches her mouth move rapidly, firing syllables, vowels, and consonants like bullets.

Shell casings fall to the floor.

It dawns on him that he knows very little about Ann, outside of the things she insists everyone in the office knows.

Everyone knows she's divorced and remarried but remains friends with her ex-husband for the sake of the children; twin boys who recently got accepted to Stanford.

Ann popped into his office one day wearing a Stanford sweatshirt, waiting with fervent eyes for him to notice and make the connection.

He squinted back from his desk on the brink of exasperation until she finally pointed to her sweatshirt and announced the twins got accepted.

She keeps everyone up-to-date on her twins, Drew and Devin, even when no one asks.

Especially when no one asks.

In addition to the twins, she's inherited her now-husband's children; Annabella, Charlotte, and Edwin – all awful, ungrateful teenagers who are one year apart and refuse to give her the respect she's due as their father's new wife.

"I'm not trying to replace their mother," she insists. "They make it so hard to like them sometimes."

When she's not running the kids to piano lessons and soccer practice or making gluten-free cupcakes for bake sales, she's at the office, often working overtime to delay the inevitable return to a house of cards set to tumble down any day now.

Graham's words come full-circle, replaying in Jace's mind like a vintage record he's newly discovered.

*"How about you? Want kids one day?"*

Jace had never seriously considered the option or thought it could be an option for someone like him. Growing up, he didn't know any queer men or queer couples who managed to create a family. The idea of two men having a child that looked like them and shared their blood and eye color sounded like a folk tale someone made up to be cruel. The science behind this never dawned on him as a closeted preteen trying to simply survive high school, and if these men did indeed exist, if they were out there in the world, where the hell were they hiding? They certainly weren't on his television or in pop culture at the time, so how could they be real?

His imagination raced like a stampede of wild horses kicking up images of a queer suburban utopia. He imagined rows of perfect, pastel houses and technicolor-green plastic lawns. Inside, perfect families assembled around the glowing television set with TV dinners and serene smiles painted on their faces. The men, the fathers, would hold hands and shower adoring smiles upon their two children. Each child was a strange spitting image of the fathers. If one of the fathers was blonde with freckles on his nose, then one of the children was blonde with freckles on his nose. If the other father was black with cornrows and full lips, then the other child was black with cornrows and full lips.

It made perfect sense in his mind, which was sheltered and removed from the budding LGBTQ rights movement gaining momentum around him.

In high school, no one was really "out" so even if his young, developing gaydar did pick up any strange frequencies, he wouldn't have known what to make of it. No one spoke of gay things unless it was a derogatory dig or insult thrown at someone in the locker room amidst snapping towels and adolescent jeering.

In high school, Jace had heard of a pride parade. He'd heard on the news one was coming but couldn't make an educated guess of what actually happens at a pride parade, and he didn't dare walk the nine blocks to see for himself on the day of the event.

Looking back now, he can only recall one queer person within his bubble who he might have gone to for answers.

Jeremy Catlett.

Jeremy would frequent the deli, buying no more than two pounds of roast beef and pork chops for the occasional Sunday dinner. Since he was a customer, Jace politely called him Mr. Catlett and would shyly peer at him from behind the counter, stealing glances as he worked the meat slicer.

Mr. Catlett was tall and slender with russet, reddish-brown skin and long, elegant fingers. His nails were kept long, much too long for a man, in Jace's opinion. They reminded him of his mother's fingernails, which she did herself, not having money to get them professionally manicured and painted with Cosmo's latest trendy color. She kept them bare and filed to a rounded point, much like Mr. Catlett, who didn't wear a ring.

Mr. Catlett was well-dressed and handsome, undeniably so. Surely, women must have thought so as well, yet he always came into the shop alone and only ordered enough for one person at a time.

He'd always chat with Jace, asking about school or how he liked working at the shop during the summer months. He'd say, "Good for you, Jace! Let them other boys run 'round wild in the streets playin' ball. You help your daddy and learn somethin' 'bout business! You got a bright future ahead of ya." He'd smile and Jace would turn to mush, his knees barely holding him up behind the counter under the weight of Jeremy Catlett's dashing smile. "And good on you, Sam, for teachin' him!" He'd turn his attention to Jace's father, who would smile from behind the register and then scowl and swear under his breath as soon as Mr. Catlett left the shop.

Jace always piled on a few extra slices of roast beef when his father wasn't looking. Mr. Catlett would wink, Jace would blush, and it would remain a secret they shared. A secret that went much deeper than \$14.98 worth of roast beef, even if Jace didn't know it at the time.

He didn't understand why his father would smile and laugh with Mr. Catlett as he took his money, and then twist his face

in disgust as soon as he left.

*What could Mr. Catlett possibly have done to warrant that type of reaction?*

His father was sweet like brown sugar in the public eye, and bitter like burnt, black coffee behind closed doors.

It's memories like this that give Jace pause on becoming a father. Knowing the horrors his own father was capable of – all while appearing to be normal – is dizzying.

He can't help but wonder what parts of Sam he's inherited. He can't help but wonder what kind of father he'd turn out to be, given his upbringing. Given the tainted blood that moves through his veins like a poison.

Most fathers fill their children's heads with fairy tales at bedtime, but would Jace have the courage to tell his own son the nightmarish truth of their legacy? Will a day come when he has no choice but to tell his son their true last name and explain that, yes, they are those Maders?

“Jace?”

Jace blinks, and he's back in the boardroom. It slowly registers that everyone is staring at him, a slight shade of revulsion coloring their faces.

“Jace.”

He turns his head to meet Foster's stare.

She points to Alex, who must have just walked in, disrupting the meeting.

“You have a visitor,” he says.

“And your, um...” Foster points to her nose, making small circles. “Your nose is bleeding, Jace.”

He jolts and brings a hand to his face. His fingers come back into focus, smeared with blood.

Ann digs in her purse for a tissue as Dominick crinkles his nose in disgust.



Jace shoots Ann a grateful look and holds the tissue to his nose. It's instantly soaked in blood and rendered useless, causing her to dig through her purse again.

He turns his attention back to Alex, who's staring at the scene with wild wonder. "Can't you tell them I'm in a meeting?" Jace pinches his nose and throws Foster an apologetic look.

Ann reaches with another tissue and freezes along with everyone in the room at Alex's next words.

"It's a detective."

Alex hadn't bothered to lower his voice. He'd said the words as plainly as if it'd been a flower delivery.

Everyone's eyes are wide now and locked on Jace, looking for some form of an explanation.

"Go tend to that and take care of..." Foster winces and points to her nose again. "We'll catch up later."

Jace nods and accepts the second tissue from Ann. He slowly stands and makes his way out the room, feeling everyone's stare prickling the skin on his back like needles.

Face flushed and glowing warm, he turns back to gauge Foster's reaction to all of this, and for a moment, he swears he sees Dominick leering back.

Was that a devious smile tugging at the corner of his mouth?  
Or did Jace imagine it?

• • •

Jace waits until they're alone in the hall before shooting Alex an irritated glance. "Why didn't you just text me?"

He shrugs and lowers his voice now. "It seemed urgent."

"Well, what—" Jace stops pinching his nose to speak. "What does he want?"

Again, Alex shrugs and adjusts his glasses. "I dunno. I told him he could wait in your office."

Jace rolls his eyes, already agitated by whatever this is. It'd better be good, given the scene he's caused. He hasn't had a nosebleed this bad in years, and Foster will want answers later for the disruption.

Up for a promotion, and now a detective stops by his job to see him?

It's not a good look, and although Jace can appreciate a man in uniform, cops are his least favorite; ever since watching them drag his father out of their home.

He walks briskly toward his office with Alex close behind, then swings the door open to find the detective flipping through his vinyl collection.

He doesn't look like a detective. At least, not like any Jace has seen.

He's tall and Hispanic with fiery, bronze skin, full lips, and eyes like sunlight shining through whiskey. The whiskers on his square jaw are peppered with age, matching his graying temples that come before a wave of glossy black hair he's tamed into submission.

His broad shoulders and pecs threaten to compromise the elasticity of his shirt, a light gray button-down revealing a patch of hair growing from the clefts of his chest like wild tumbleweed. His dark trousers cling to bold thighs and an ass that, despite his age, looks bubblier than a bottle of champagne.

Save for the badge clipped to the hip of his pants, there's little pointing to him being a figure of the law, but here he is, riffling through Jace's personal effects.

He turns to face Jace and Alex, holding the cover of *Ella in Berlin: Mack the Knife*.

"Impressive collection you have here." His voice is thick like honey and sounds musical as it leaves his tongue.

"That's actually a pretty rare record..." Jace bites his lower lip.

The detective takes the hint and promptly puts it back in its place. “Sorry. My abuelo, my grandfather, was a big jazz fan. I grew up listening to a lot of this stuff!”

Jace stares back, unsure of where this is going and equally thrown off by the detective’s good looks.

“I’m Detective Mateo Hernández Grijalva, Portland PD.” He motions to his badge and extends a hand.

Jace shakes his large hand. “Jace Lannister. I’m sure you know that though,” he realizes.

“You have a little, um...” he swirls a finger in the direction of Jace’s nostrils.

“Nosebleed. Yes, I know.” Jace nods impatiently and dabs his nose with the bloodied tissue.

“I appreciate your time today. I’m sure you must be very busy.”

Jace sighs lightly, trying to calm his nerves. “How can I help you, officer – detective. How can I help you, detective, uhm...”

He gives a thin smile. “Most people just call me Banks.” His voice is soothing, like one of Jace’s jazz singers on the shelf. “I’m here to follow-up on a missing persons report.”

“Missing persons report?” Jace narrows his eyes. “Who’s missing?”

Banks scratches at his scruff and folds his arms. “Neil Winston. His roommate filed the report. Says he went out a few nights ago last week and never came home.”

The wheels in Jace’s head spin and scrap together.

Neil Winston.

It doesn’t ring any bells.

Neil...

Winston...

“Sorry,” he concludes, doing his best to sound empathetic and not show his relief. This must be some kind of mix-up, he

thinks. “I wish I could help, but I don’t know anyone by that name—” He stops short as Neil’s face flashes before his eyes.

Smiling in his doorway at 1 a.m. in ripped jeans.

Squirming and moaning beneath Jace with eyes rolled back into his head.

Talking about the best places to hike in Portland.

Not Nick...

But Neil.

He never did get Neil’s last name that night at his loft. Few people even ask for first names on apps these days, but here you have it.

Neil Winston.

Now missing.

Gone.

Jace wets his lips, tasting dried blood, as a sinking feeling grows in the pit of his stomach.

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## 6 / LOVER

Banks peers at Jace, his eyes heavy with curiosity.

Jace turns to Alex with a curt nod. "I've got it from here. Thank you."

His eyebrows draw tight as he leaves, a tentative glare on his face as he quietly closes the door behind him.

Jace takes a breath and composes himself. He swipes his nose a final time, hoping the blood has begun to clot. "I'm sorry," he corrects himself. "I believe I do know who you're looking for. Just not very well," he's quick to add.

"Well, any information is helpful. Mind if I ask a few questions?"

Jace dully nods and motions to the sofa.

As they sit, Jace's knee brushes Banks, causing them to draw back, eyes full of apologies. "Can I, uhm, offer you some water or something stronger?" His eyes float to his desk where he keeps a small bottle of gin for emergencies.

"It's 11 a.m.," Banks says, half-amused. His lips curve into a smile. "I'm also on duty."

"Right!" Jace sits upright and fumbles with his hands. "Of course."

"Why don't we start from the beginning?" Banks' tone is benign, but his eyes are intense. They scan over Jace, seeming to record every nervous tick. "How do you know Neil Winston?"

"Like I said, not very well." Jace shakes his head. "We just met last week."

As soon as he says this, the aberrant nature of Banks' visit dawns on him.

*Aren't friends, family, and co-workers interviewed when someone goes missing?*

Jace is none of these things to Neil.

“How did you meet?”

Jace thinks fast. “We met online.”

“Online.” Banks cuts his eyes.

“Just a... social networking site.” Jace thanks his stars he isn’t strapped to a lie detector. The machine would probably explode.

The coy look on Banks’ face, however, confirms he knows exactly what sort of networking site they met on. He talks with his hands, extending the fingers on his large palms; moving them rhythmically as he says, “I’m hoping you can tell me more about what happened after-the-fact, more about Neil.” He says this to put them both at ease, to take a stab at killing the elephant in the room. “According to Neil’s roommate, he does this now and then – goes missing for a few hours, but he always comes home or at least answers his texts eventually.”

Jace gives a subdued nod, wondering if by “roommate,” he means “lover.”

“A whole day goes by, and Neil doesn’t come home or text back, so his roommate tracks his phone, hops on a bus, and finds it in a dumpster with the screen cracked – like someone stomped on it, right?” He pauses. Not in search of an answer or reply, but to catch his breath and gauge Jace’s reaction.

“His phone was in the trash?”

“Someone tossed it in a dumpster.”

Another pause.

Jace says nothing.

“So, of course, his roommate is concerned,” he goes on, telling the story with an ill-matched lightness. He tells the story as if it might end with a funny conundrum, but Jace has seen enough crime TV to know how cops and investigators operate. Banks presses on calmly. His accent adds a charm to the tale, no doubt meant to cozen a reaction. “Neil’s missing... his roommate finds his phone smashed, so he calls 911 and files a report, right? Doesn’t look good.” He wets his lips, rolling

them together, and leans forward in his seat. “Luckily, the phone still worked once it got some juice. Wasn’t hard to get it unlocked at the station, once it was charged. Most people use 1-2-3-4-5-6 or their birthday as their code, right? So, we didn’t have to send the phone out to a separate lab.”

Jace makes a mental note to change his passcode.

“Once we’re in, we see a bunch of notifications pop up right away, his last text messages, all that. Then, we see the most recent messages were from a dating app...”

Jace holds his breath, realizing this is where he comes in.

Not only do they have Neil’s phone, but they have their messages.

His mind races, trying to recall their exchange.

They were likely short and to the point, nothing too salacious.

Jace has little patience for small talk. It probably went something like...

*Looking?*

*Into?*

*I can host.*

*What time can you get here?*

Then there was the pin drop. Jace had sent his location, inviting Neil over. That must be how they traced Neil’s location to his loft and why Banks is here questioning Jace.

Aside from the usual chat that happens on the app, nothing overly lurid comes to mind though. Except...

Oh, God.

The pics.

What Jace lacked in conversation and playful banter, he more than made up for with the photos of himself he sent Neil.

As if reading Jace’s mind, Banks’ eyes roam Jace’s physique, taking in his brown skin and wide biceps peeking beneath the sleeves of his black polo. His eyes linger at the bulge between Jace’s thighs for a second too long.



“I invited him over,” Jace fesses up. “That’s how we met. Like I said, it was just that once. I’d never met him before.”

“What was his mood like when he arrived?”

*A loaded question.*

Jace reels back in his seat, flustered. “How do you mean?”

A blush colors Banks’ face as he pivots. “What was his mental state? Was he calm? Did he appear disheveled or under the influence of any controlled substances?”

“No. Not that I recall. He just seemed...”

Horny.

Aroused.

Hard.

Ready to explode?

Jace lands on, “Eager to... get to know each other.”

A smirk reaches Banks’ lips before he shakes it away. He pulls a small notepad from his back pocket and launches into a long string of questioning.

“Do you remember what he was wearing?”

“Did he drive or was he dropped off?”

“Did he use his phone at any point?”

“Do you remember seeing his phone at any point?”

“Did he say what he did earlier that day?”

“Did he mention any plans he had for later that night?”

He asks all this in his detective’s voice with his accent growing thicker. He occasionally asks the same question a different way; sometimes asking Jace to repeat or “clarify” an earlier answer, like, “What time did he leave your place again?”

It quickly grows tiresome, and Jace finds his stare drifting to the clock on his wall. Surely, Banks has been in his office for at least an hour by now.

He can only imagine what everyone in the office must think.

He drifts, lost in thought until Banks mentions something about surveillance footage.

“Wait,” he blinks. “What footage?”

Banks looks up from his notepad with boyish surprise, looking younger and less imposing in the moment. “From your building. The lobby cameras show Neil being buzzed in and leaving later that night.”

*Leaving.*

A strange sense of relief washes over Jace.

He can't explain why he's breathing easier, but he releases a small sigh at the news. His eyes had grown heavy with sleep after he and Neil “enjoyed each other's company,” as he posed it to Banks, but, of course, Neil left. He'd heard the door close shut.

He came and he left.

Neil's disappearance couldn't have had anything to do with Jace.

*Right?*

“Neil was on his phone when he left your building, through the lobby. There's no sound on the CCTV, so I was hoping he might have mentioned a name or said if he was on his way somewhere before he left?” His dark, thick eyebrows shoot up keenly.

This is what he came for.

This is why he's here.

Jace shrugs lightly. “No. Sorry.” He remembers fragments of their pillow talk, but nothing important stands out. There was a moment when Jace flirted with the idea of asking Neil out to dinner sometime, but he doesn't dare mention this now. “I wish I could be more help.”

“I, uh, interviewed your doorman, but—”

“He was sleeping?” Jace cracks a smile. “That’s Frank. He’s a sweetheart. He’s great when he’s awake but he’s also closin’ in on 70, sooo...”

“Right.” Banks fully smiles for the first time. His teeth are perfect.

“He’s worked in the building forever. Did he tell you his Elizabeth Taylor story?”

“Every detail,” Banks winces with a chuckle. “Not too helpful with details of that night though.” His eyes dim then rise to meet Jace’s piercing stare. “With Frank out of commission that night, this means you’re officially the last known person to have seen Neil alive.”

Jace stops breathing at these words, and there’s a flicker of misgiving in his eyes that doesn’t go unnoticed by Banks.

More memories of Neil come flooding back.

The way he smiled in the doorway.

The way he tasted on Jace’s tongue.

The burn of his fingernails raking down Jace’s back, drawing blood...

“Wish I could be more help,” Jace says tersely. The words sound hollow, like an automated response as he stares past Banks’ wary expression.

Banks has hit a wall.

“Well, I appreciate your time.” He stands with a small grunt and quickly rocks his knees back and forth. “I’ll leave my card in case you remember anything.” He looks as though he wants to say more but doesn’t.

Jace walks Banks to the door, eager to be rid of him and take a healthy sip from the bottle in his desk. “I hope you find him,” he says. “You’ll let me know?”

Banks gives him a look that’s hard to decipher. He seems to get lost for a moment in the gray haze of Jace’s eyes, but he’s careful not to slip. He’s careful not to fall in. “I’ll be in touch.”

It sounds like a promise.

“Oh! I meant to ask,” Banks stops short as Jace reaches for the door handle. “Are you from the area, originally?” There’s an incisive shine to his eyes.

“Uhm, no,” Jace’s eyes go wide. “Portland’s definitely home though. Love it here.”

“Where are you from?” His tone slips into something more casual. He stuffs his notepad back in his pocket and moves closer.

“Oh, all over!” Jace produces the best smile he can fathom. “I was an army brat, so...”

It’s a lie he’s told before. It slides off his tongue with unbridled ease; smooth and comfortable like expensive, silk sheets.

“You’re lucky. Getting to see the world. Travel.”

Jace shifts his weight under the force of his gaze and opens the door. “Yeah. Real lucky.”

If only Banks knew how much “traveling” he’d done with his mother as a child... being evicted from apartment after apartment... driving from state to state... sleeping in their car at rest stops... always trying to outrun their past and the sins of Jace’s father.

Banks’ questions don’t sit well. Even as he hands Jace his card with his cell scribbled on the back, an anxious feeling rises in Jace’s throat that’s sharp and acidic, like bile.

Their fingers brush and they share a flustered glance before Banks makes his exit, giving a glance over his shoulder.

“Call if you think of anything.”

Jace nods a little too quickly before he produces a manufactured smile and waves the card in his hand.

The door closes and Banks is gone, leaving Jace with his demons and a fresh batch of nerves.

He suddenly hopes Neil is the only person Banks intends to look into.

• • •

It's almost seven when Jace staggers through the door of his empty loft, securing the lock and deadbolt behind him.

“Alexa, I'm home!”

On cue, the loft springs to life. The lights fade out of darkness into a warm glow illuminating the kitchen and living area, where an oversized, brown leather sofa, a modern gray armchair with steel legs, and a shag rug devour most of the open living space. A whiney trumpet and piano keys play over the ceiling's speakers, and tall blackout curtains roll away to reveal a dramatic view of Portland at dusk.

It feels good to be home.

The space is decorated in warm earth tones set against concrete and brick leading to a modern, black staircase where a second bathroom and the comfort of his bed overlook the world below.

Art covers the walls like a rich tapestry of canvas and vibrant, thick strokes of paint. The collection mostly includes works by artists of color, pieces he's fastidiously procured during his time in Oregon.

It felt momentous to hang them on his walls, to take a hammer to nails, and secure them in place. Each addition strengthening his commitment to staying in one place for longer than a few months this time.

There are hardly any photos here though; just one of himself and Syd stuck to the fridge. It's enough, at least for now, to remind him he isn't completely alone in the world.

Jace tosses his keys on the white marble counter and inhales the sweet, robust aroma of spicy marinara emanating from a takeout bag on his dining room table.

Alex has brought and left him dinner – lasagna from Cucina 804 – and has no doubt hung his dry cleaning upstairs. A bottle of Shiraz stands on the table with a note.

Thought you could use a drink. Cheers.

Jace smiles to himself and opens the bottle, thankful for an assistant who knows him so well.

At work, he managed to halfway explain why a detective came to question him, without baring too many details about his relationship to Neil.

*It's unnerving that something may have happened to him, Jace thinks.*

Sex aside, Neil seemed like he was a decent guy.

Wait.

Neil seemed like he is a decent guy.

Banks hadn't said anything about Neil being dead, just that he's missing – and a smashed phone, albeit suspiciously thrown in a dumpster, could mean anything, right?

Jace frowns at this, takes a gulp of wine, and kicks off his shoes before shuffling upstairs for a shower.

He needs to rinse the day away before he can even think about diving into a big plate of pasta.

Upstairs, he strips, and the lights in his bathroom ping on as he enters, humming a tune swirling down from the speakers like stardust.

The hot water rains down on his closed eyelids, sending the stress of the day spiraling down the drain.

He loses track of time, allowing his mind to wander and become entwined with thoughts of Neil and Banks.

The flecks of light in Banks' brown eyes framed in thick lashes...

The touch of Neil's soft lips, right before he slunk out of Jace's bed and dissipated into the night...

Jace feels his throat tighten as he kills the water and dries off, leaving the towel to hang loose at his waist. He wiggles his

toes as his feet sink into his plush bathmat, then leans over the sink to open the medicine cabinet.

A bottle of pale blue pills stare back, his name typed neatly across the label with Dr. Kessler's blessing.

His stomach instantly knots at the sight of them.

He knows he should swallow two, and only two.

He knows what might happen if he doesn't.

He closes the cabinet, and his reflection glares back.

The air in the room grows thick as he leans closer, taking in brown skin and cool gray eyes that look like his own.

At first glance, it looks like himself... the person he wakes up as, who everyone knows as Jace Lannister.

But, looking deeper, looking past the surface, he catches a glimpse of something awakening. Something dark and ominous glaring back.

Something from the other side of the mirror.

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## 7 / TRAPPED

Syd's mouth hangs open, his lip piercing gleaming in the sunlight as Jace recounts the last few days.

His date with Graham had taken a dismal turn, and now Neil's been reported missing.

"I'm cursed!"

"A real-life man-eater." Syd shakes his dreads with wonder. He's wearing black joggers and a teal Hope House t-shirt with the sleeves rolled up to show off biceps he's been building. Biceps that are starting to rival Jace's. "And so, now, you've told this guy, Graham, about your dad. Are you worried?"

"I mean, he's already ghosted me. Worst he can do now is go to the press."

It's happened before.

In New York, he confided in someone he was dating who, in turn, contacted the tabloids in an attempt to sell the story. Reporters showed up to the small ad agency Jace worked at, eager to get a photo and soundbite from the son of the infamous Brooklyn Butcher, all grown up.

"There's a chance Graham could tell Alex," he thinks out loud, then sighs with a newfound sense of doom. "That's the last thing I need at work after Detective Hottie showing up."

"Mmm! Think he's single?"

Jace shoots him a tired look.

"It's a legitimate question!" Syd laughs and takes a bite of falafel.

They've met at a food truck pod for lunch, both eager to get out of the office and soak in the afternoon sun. The corner block is full of parked food trucks and picnic tables. A lone musician picks his guitar and sings for spare change next to the entrance to the port-o-potties.

“I doubt he’s interested.”

Unless an interrogation is his idea of foreplay.

Jace is still unsure what to make of the encounter. Banks seemed fairly transparent about what he knows at this point in the investigation, but he also might have been phishing; purposely laying out information (true or false) to see what Jace would react to, or if he’d corroborate certain items in the timeline.

“Why else would he give you his cell?” Syd chews and rolls his eyes. “Oldest trick in the book.”

Jace isn’t altogether sure Banks is even gay. His gaydar isn’t what it used to be, especially since moving to Portland. Everywhere you go is so inclusive that it’s hard to weed out the straights from the gays at first scan unless there’s some limp-wristed, dead giveaway that’s hard to ignore. He assumed his gaydar was on the fritz or broken when he walked into his first gay bar in North Portland. More than half the bar was straight, and all the men were disconcertingly friendly and dressed the same – prepared to bike in the rain to work and then hoof it to a gallery opening in the same ensemble.

Thank God for the digital age of dating apps, void of the guesswork. Some may argue, however, that they’re slowly dismantling the need for gay bars and clubs that once served as the only refuge for queer people to make a match.

If you were a queer man before dating apps, you’d have to gather the nerve to venture out, wait until dark to get dressed in your finest, hike it to one of these rumored establishments (assuming you could find it without MapQuest, so if in doubt, you’d better call a cab, have them drop you off a block or two away from the entrance shrouded in darkness), then, pay to get in, and pay for coat check, and a watered-down rum and coke from the bartender who’s purely there for decoration – all with no guarantee of leaving with someone!

Now, with a few taps, you can summon a lover from the comfort of your loft, and they’ll show up hot and ready at your door like a pizza.

You don't even have to get dressed.

This had been the case with Neil. Jace was lounging in a pair of skin-tight boxer briefs, swirling a glass of merlot in his hand when the itch hit him. He was probably online for less than five minutes before he caught Neil's attention.

Look at how that worked out for him...

Jace decides he's swearing off men for a while. He'll delete his apps when he gets home; take a break, as they say.

A break would do him good. He's got more important matters on his plate, like sealing the promotion at work. There's no time for the spoils and snares of romance with his career on the line.

Still, his thoughts can't help but wander and get lost and tangled in the memory of Detective Mateo "Banks" Hernández Grijalva on occasion.

Banks has invaded his dreams, strong and virile, stroking the edges of Jace's imagination like a Spanish guitar; leaving him to awake sticky with sweat.

He's a handsome mystery as cryptic as Neil's disappearance. Even if he never sees Banks again, Jace would love to know the story behind the sexy detective he found thumbing through his vinyl collection.

*Where did he come from?*

*Is he from the area originally?*

*Which of Jace's records had he grown up listening to?*

*Does he know the words by heart?*

"Jace!"

Jace blinks and Syd snaps into focus. He finds himself back at the pod. The savory smells and smoke from the surrounding food trucks ground him back into reality.

Syd tilts his head sharply. "Did you hear anything I just said?"

"Sorry. I was just thinking about work."

"I was saying not to worry about Neil."

Jace grumbles, “How can I not?”

“He’ll show up,” Syd shrugs. “Maybe he’s having an affair and ran off in his shitty van to LA with some twink he met at the gym in his Body Pump class.”

“That’s awfully specific. Pretty sure he doesn’t drive a van.”

“But he could,” Syd raises a finger. “Don’t shit on my theory. I’m sure my version’s much more interesting than the truth anyway. He’ll turn up,” he says with a bored look smeared on his face.

Jace takes a bite of his tater tots covered in cilantro sauce.

“Why does this shit have to happen to me?” He asks with his mouth full. “Plenty of people hook up online and don’t have detectives showin’ up at their jobs because of it. The one guy I sleep with in months goes missing, and the one guy I find myself interested in won’t text me back. Why me?”

“To be fair, you’re not just anyone,” Syd says under his breath.

But Detective Banks doesn’t know this – and Jace hopes to keep it that way.

“It’s stupid, but I actually thought I had a chance with Graham. Things actually ended on a good note!” He shrugs. “It felt like he could handle all the awful shit I told him at dinner, you know? It felt like he wanted to get to know me for me,” Jace says. “I just wish he’d been man enough to tell me this was a one-and-done thing, you know?”

Syd chews and watches Jace’s conflicted expression. “Have you talked to Derek?”

What Derek has to do with any of this is beyond Jace, but he bites. “No. I’m sure he’s busy at the restaurant and with his knife workshop or whatever.”

“At some point, you two need to talk.”

“Why? Have you talked to him since Ethel’s?”

“I texted him but haven’t heard back. That’s not like him.”

Jace takes a quick sip of his kombucha. “He’s probably just busy.”

“Or still upset.”

“Then allow me to be the first to tell him my blind date bombed. That should make him happy.”

“What is it with you two?” Syd folds his arms. “You guys were so good together!”

“Yeah, until I had a nervous fucking breakdown,” Jace bites back. “I was still in such a dark place when we met... Trying to get my shit together.” He laughs bitterly. “If it hadn’t been for meeting Dr. Kessler after that, I’d probably be—”

He doesn’t finish.

He doesn’t have to.

Syd recognizes the darkness swirling at the depths of his eyes. It’s the same look smeared on the faces of the youth who walk through the doors of Hope House for the first time.

“I honestly thought I was going crazy, like my mother.”

“You’re nothing like your mother,” Syd says ardently, “or him.”

It’s little comfort.

There are days when Jace isn’t so sure.

There are days when Jace isn’t sure of anything... including Derek.

“Things have always been complicated with us.” Jace pokes his food with his fork. “Let’s talk about something else. What’s goin’ on with you? How’s that god-awful parade float coming along?”

“Almost done!” Syd throws up his hands. “I just ordered shirts for the kids to wear with our logo. Thanks for putting me in touch with your designer!”

“She didn’t charge you, did she?”

“No. I told her you referred me, and she said it was on the house.”

*Damn right, Jace thinks. The graphic designers at Moxy owe him more favors than drag queens have wigs.*

“We got a new kid last night. From Salem.” Syd’s face loses its usual glow and his eyes dim. “His dad did such a number on him I had to pick him up from the hospital.”

“Jesus.”

“It’s a wonder this kid’s alive,” Syd says. He shakes his head and his locks follow sway. “His eye’s swollen shut. He can’t hear out his left ear anymore! All this because he came out...”

Jace frowns to one side. “I’ll never understand how anyone can do that to their own flesh and blood.”

“You’d be surprised.” Syd gives him a doleful look that reaches back to his own struggles coming out.

Syd can still picture the look on his father’s face, riddled with horror and repulsion, as he tried to explain the feelings he’d battled most of his life – the sense of dysphoria and being trapped in a body that isn’t your own.

Syd had secretly joined an LGBTQ alliance at the time. He’d read pamphlets and talked to counselors and people who successfully transitioned to live happy lives. He’d prayed on it. He’d done his research and was armed with the knowledge to answer any and all of his parents’ questions upon coming out, but the chance never came.

Instead, they balked, insisting this isn’t God’s plan, and cursed the skies, vowing to drive the demons out of him.

Casting him out of their lives.

“This kid’s lucky you found him,” Jace says.

Syd gives a weak smile and brings his shoulders to his ears.

“Well. Anyway, wanna hear some crazy shit?”

“Please,” Jace groans.

Anything to keep his mind off Neil and the handsome detective looking into it.

“I went out with Angel the other night.”

Jace gives a wide-eyed grin. “Motherfucker, I can’t believe you’ve been sitting on this! Tell me everything.”

“Don’t get too excited,” Syd smirks. “He took me bowling. Like, you know, with the snack bar and the shoes they spray before they give them to you...”

“I think that’s cute!”

“You would.”

“No, I think this is good! He’s so into you.”

Syd squirms in his seat. “It just ended so weird!” He fumbles, reaching for the bracelets traveling up his forearm. He gathers them into a neat bunch. “We kissed and I could tell he wanted to go back to my place. I just froze.”

“Why?!”

“He doesn’t know.” Syd shrinks in his seat. “I mean, I thought he knew, but... once we kissed I just sort of felt it. I could tell.”

Jace slowly nods. “You’ll know the right time to tell him. And if he has a problem with it, it’s his fucking loss.”

“Right.” Syd conjures a smile. It’s not as bright or beautiful as the smile Jace is accustomed to seeing and is often jealous of, but it will have to do.

Jace’s phone rings in his pocket.

“That’s probably work.”

“Fuuuck. I’m not ready to go back,” Syd pouts. “It’s such a nice day.”

“Let’s do this again. Soon!” Jace glances at his screen and frowns.

It’s Ann.

“Of course,” Jace grumbles. “A brotha can’t even eat lunch in peace without this... let me go.” He stands to hug Syd. “I need to call this heffer back.”

“Don’t pop off.”

“No promises,” Jace winks.

“I’m gonna organize another happy hour – soon! With Derek there too. Okay?”

“Okay,” Jace concedes. “I’ll make myself available. Promise.” He waves and walks off to dial Ann. He looks over his shoulder as Syd gobbles down the last of his food and heads to the recycling bins.

He’s relieved Syd didn’t ask more questions about Neil and whether he’s been swallowing the pills that leave him numb and suspended in space and time. He’s relieved that Syd’s too occupied with new, broken arrivals and the trials of courting Angel to notice the edge in his voice... to see how he’s slowly unraveling at the seams.



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## 8 / RED

There's a strange chill in the air as Jace walks the halls of Moxy. All week, he's felt the icy stares of those around him.

Watching.

Speculating.

Rumors are starting to ignite about his possible promotion and take flight. It may finally be happening! And though his peers smile in his face and root him on, he knows a few would love nothing more than to drag him back to their level like crabs in a barrel.

By now, word has spread of an ominous visit from the authorities – a detective who spent more than an hour in Jace's office. But as the story is repeated in hushed whispers, the details blur and tangle into knots of half-truths.

"He was in there questioning Jace for a long time."

"Girl! He interrogated Jace for, like, two hours!"

"He might need a lawyer."

"Something about a missing person...? I dunno."

"I always thought there was something strange about him..."

"Something you just can't put your finger on, right?!"

He's retreated to his office, his safe space, surrounded by music and the things he loves.

At the moment, he's fighting a migraine and doing his best not to open his desk drawer containing half a bottle of gin. He's doing his best to put out the fires threatening to burn down everything he's worked for.

"Dan, of course!" Jace nods into the phone he's cradling.

"We'll make this right. Don't worry. I'll handle it, personally."

Dan speaks on his end of the line. There's food in his mouth; probably something off the brewery's menu... As in, the

Outpost brewery menus just delivered on the wrong stock paper!

“Dan, listen, everything will be perfect for your grand opening. That’s a guarantee!” Jace smiles into the phone. He’s heard somewhere that if you smile on the phone people can feel it. It somehow makes your voice sound more positive. More pleasant.

It’s a trick; a trick he hopes is working as his mind races to solve how the error slipped past him.

Dan chews angrily and says something like, “Yeah, it better be!”

Jace smiles on the line, allowing Dan to go on ranting.

*Could his printer have made a mistake?*

No.

In all the time Jace has known Rhonda at Prism Printing, she’s never botched a project and would never make a mistake this silly. If anyone knows the difference between 120# Brilliant White Uncoated Navajo Cover Stock and 65# Mohawk Natural White Coated Stock, it would be her.

The order must have been placed wrong.

“Of course! I’ll hand-deliver them tomorrow,” Jace says.

It must have been one of the interns.

Heads will roll.

“Definitely!” Jace smiles big. He can feel his blood pressure skyrocket. “Consider it handled, Dan. I’ll see you tomorrow. Okay... Yes. Alright. Yep! Goodbye.”

He slams down the phone and flies out of his chair.

He’s on the hunt for interns, stalking the hallways like a shark following the scent of blood in the water.

He passes by the art department.

He stalks by the break room in wide strides, trying to recall the names of the last batch of interns.

There’s a Bethany. A David. A Benji... or, is it Baxter?

No matter. If he finds one, they'll rat out whoever submitted the order.

He reaches Foster's office and stops mid-stride.

Inside, he catches a glimpse of Foster at her desk. Her face is serious; her lipstick twisted into a sour, pink scowl as Dominick paces her office, throwing his arms wildly as he speaks. His voice peaks as he turns to Foster, pointing an angry finger.

A building rage creeps up his neck, covering his face in crimson. His expression is red and on the brink of boiling over.

Jace can't make out the words spewing from his lips, but somehow, he knows he's on the tip of Dominick's tongue.

Before Jace can move on, Dominick's head snaps in his direction.

Foster's gaze follows, and the three look at each other in stunned silence.

• • •

It's after eight when Jace walks through the lobby of his building.

Frank jolts awake as the door slams shut.

"Just me, Frank!" Jace throws up a hand and strolls past the front desk, mentally exhausted.

Frank blinks the sleep from his eyes and waves back, rubbing a hand over his gray, bushy mustache as Jace heads for the elevator. "Night, Mr. Lannister."

Jace tosses him a wink as the front door opens, followed by two men in coveralls holding an armchair between them. A late-night delivery.

"I have that same chair," Jace quietly marvels as the elevator chimes, announcing its arrival. "Someone's got good taste," he mumbles to himself.

He steps inside, offering for the men to join him but they insist on taking the next one up.

He shrugs and is soon lifted to the top, ninth floor. Once he's home, he secures the lock and deadbolt behind him and leans against the door with a sigh.

“Alexa, I'm home!”

On cue, the loft springs to life. The lights and music turn on. Miles Davis plays from the speakers; his trumpet calling out to Jace like a pronouncement, welcoming him home and luring him farther inside.

Jace peels off his shoes with his feet and unbuttons his shirt. He drifts to the bar in his living room where delicate, colored bottles stretch for the ceiling; glistening under the lights, like sculptures.

He pours himself a quick gin and tonic and empties the glass in one gulp. Turning to face the city, he watches its lights glow and move with traffic as the gin burns down his throat. He pours himself another and allows his body to sway with the sweet jazz filling the air like dandelions.

His phone suddenly feels heavy in his pocket.

He pulls it out to text Derek but stops himself, knowing the conversation could go one of two ways, neither of which he's emotionally prepared for. Instead, he sulks off to his bedroom upstairs. The lights ping on, illuminating a queen bed, two nightstands, and the entrance to a walk-in closet. He sets his glass down to move the bed from the wall, revealing an AC vent large enough for him to crawl into. He opens the grate carefully and removes the filter to reveal a small metal tackle box tucked away within the dark reflective vent.

The sight of it brings a chill over the peaks of his shoulders, but he wills himself to remove the box from the air duct and carry it to the bathroom. Once there, he carefully sets the box on the corner of the cold porcelain sink and takes a step back.

It takes a moment for him to open it, to will himself to release the demons trapped within and reach a hand inside.

Among his old passport and driver's licenses with his birth name, he removes a single, faded photo. There, trapped in time, he finds a naïve and callow Jason Mader smiling brightly with his father's arm draped over his shoulders... behind the counter of Cassex Deli.

Seeing the deli again makes his heart sick with a strange mixture of longing and pain.

The Jason in this photo looks happy.

The smile on his face is pure.

Easy.

Jace brings the photo closer to peer at his father.

There, among the pixels of color, he visits with the man he once idolized. He peers at the frozen smile on his face, the age around his father's eyes. Eyes that look so much like his own now.

He holds the photo up to the mirror and leans into his reflection, comparing the two.

Comparing the lines and shape of his face with his father's.

Comparing the image with his reflection in the mirror.

For a moment, he swears he sees his father in the mirror... staring back...

The doorbell rings and Jace jumps at the chimes piercing the silence, echoing throughout the open loft.

He snaps the box shut and races to return it to its resting place. He can't imagine who could be at his door. Syd would have texted to make sure he was home, and it's not like Derek to just pop up. Could it be one of his neighbors? The few he knows in passing aren't likely candidates. He's heard someone move in next door a few weeks ago; he hopes they aren't choosing tonight to knock and introduce themselves. It's too late for that, but then again, people do strange things.

He pushes the bed frame back in place and scowls as he races down the stairs.

He reaches the peephole, already out of breath, when the sight on the other side renders him paralyzed.

It takes a minute for Jace to gather his wits and open to the door to Detective Banks on the other side.

He's still dressed for work in dark denim and a button-down with the sleeves rolled up. His tie – if there ever was one – is now lost and forgotten, leaving his top button undone. His face is fatigued from the day, and Jace senses more salt and pepper along the scruff on his jaw since they last met.

His lips part at the sight of Jace. "Oh! I caught you at a bad time..." His eyes graze Jace's chest peeking from beneath his unbuttoned shirt.

"Uhm, no!" Jace closes his shirt and crosses his arms. "I just got in."

"I realize it's late," Banks says. "If it's not a good time, we can schedule something at the station." His gaze slips past Jace, peering into the room beyond.

"No, it's just me," Jace mumbles wearily and waves him inside. It might look like he has company, but it's the furthest thing from the truth.

Well, until now.

Banks nods appraisingly as he walks in, gazing up at the high ceiling. "This is nice! I pass this building all the time on my way to the gym. Always wondered what they look like inside."

Jace quickly buttons his shirt as Banks inspects the art on his walls. His eyes dart to the staircase, thinking back to the box upstairs. "Can I offer you something to drink?"

Banks faces him with a lopsided smile.

"Oh, come on." Jace gives his glass a jiggle. The ice cubes play a slurry melody. "It's not 11 a.m. this time. Don't make me drink alone."

"I'm on duty," he says with a hint of regret. He scans Jace, taking in his full lips and the patch of skin showing just above Jace's belt buckle where he's buttoned his shirt wrong. "I wish I could."

Jace shrugs and leans against the kitchen island. “So, if you didn’t come for a drink or a tour of the building, I take it you have news about Neil? Did someone find him?”

Banks gives him a sharp look. “Interesting choice of words.”

“I’m sorry?”

“What do you mean by ‘find him’?” He narrows his hazel eyes.

“I meant has Neil popped back up somewhere?”

“That’s not what you said though.”

Jace gives a somnolent laugh, lowering his gaze to the drink in his hand. “It’s been a long day, detective. Work was a complete shit show, I’m on the verge of losing my most important client, and I hardly slept at all last night, so if we could skip to the part where you tell me what this is about, that’d be great.”

Banks swallows and straightens his posture, standing tall. “I’m not here about Neil Winston,” he says with a sudden heaviness. “I’m here about Graham Tate.” His jaw draws tight as he takes a beat to watch for Jace’s reaction. “He’s missing.”



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## 9 / PINCH

Jace paces the floor of Dr. Kessler's office erratically. His fingers tangle in his hair as he faces her with tears blurring his vision. "It's happening again. I can feel it."

"Jace, have a seat," she says calmly. She brushes a strand of red hair from her fair face and points to a leather sofa littered with pillows.

Jace does as he's told and chokes out a sob.

Leaning forward in her seat, her voice remains even-tempered. "You called rather early this morning." Her tone spikes. "To schedule an emergency session. Tell me what drove you to come in today."

"They think I have something to do with his disappearance. Both of them!"

"Who?"

"The police." Jace hugs a pillow to his chest like a lifejacket.

"And who is 'both of them?'"

"Neil and Graham!" He sighs and wipes his face with the back of his hand. "Graham's been reported missing. He was supposed to be in San Diego for work and never showed up apparently. The police followed-up on the report filed, and it looks like the last time he used any of his credit cards was here in Portland at dinner... with me, at OX. They think that's the night he disappeared."

Banks had relayed all this to him the night before, likely to gauge his reaction. To see if Jace might crack and confess to everything since he'd managed to corner him alone.

"We're gonna need you to stop by the station for a formal statement," he'd said with a gentle nod. He'd made it sound like a casual invitation, like, "Stop by next time you're in the neighborhood," instead of hauling him in on the spot. Still, Jace has a feeling that despite whatever small kindnesses

Banks has extended to this point, if he has to make the request again, it will be a direct order with a police escort.

Dr. Kessler leans back in her chair and crosses her legs. She grinds the heel of her black stiletto into the pale gray carpet and asks, “What do you remember about that night?”

Jace squints and thinks back, telling her everything. Dinner... his less-than-tactful confession about his father... getting ice cream afterwards...

“I liked him.” Fresh tears well in Jace’s eyes. It’s certainly not something he can say about everyone.

He recalls the way Graham smiled at him from across the table with that tiny gap between his teeth.

The nearly overpowering smell of his cologne Jace had grown accustomed to, by the end of the night.

The warmth of Graham’s fingers as they interlaced with his own...

“I thought, maybe, there was something there, you know?”

Her eyes narrow, playing back what Jace has told her. “That’s exactly how you remember that evening?”

His shoulders drop in dismay. “Yes. Why?”

“You, um...” She taps her pen on the notepad in her lap. “It seemed to me that you were having some trouble recalling that story just now. Would you agree with that?”

“It’s not a ‘story’,” he snorts. “And what are you even talking about? You asked what happened that night, I told you what happened that night.”

Her voice is calm and patronizing. “It’s just an observation, Jace. Tell me, how have you been feeling leading up to this?” Her face turns grave now, showing fine lines near her eyes that the Botox didn’t catch.

He slumps back into the sofa, allowing the pillows to catch him. He glances around her office, as if searching for the words.

Her office is tastefully decorated in serene gray, white, and chocolate tones, with oversized abstract paintings coloring the walls. There's a large, white, built-in bookcase behind her desk full of books he's never stopped to question before.

*Why does she have so many books?*

*Are they psychology journals?*

*Are they merely there for decoration?*

*Are they even real books?*

He's seen this before; rows of books sold in home décor shops glued together, full of blank pages or entirely made of paint and plaster.

He stares at them until Dr. Kessler breaks his trance.

She clears her throat and leans in with a kind smile. "Where did you go, Jace?"

He blinks.

"I asked you a question." She smiles again softly. "How have you been feeling?"

Jace chews on the question, clearly unsure where to start.

"Let's break down the question," she suggests, sounding more and more like a kindergarten teacher. "I'm going to ask you some questions. Just answer honestly. There are no wrong answers. Sound good?"

He rolls his shoulders. He can handle this, he tells himself.

She smiles between closed lips and launches into a stream of questions...

"Have you had problems concentrating?"

"Any headaches? Migraines?"

"How would you rate your anxiety on a scale of one to ten?"

"Have you had a hard time remembering things lately?"

"Any nausea or dizziness?"

"Any trouble sleeping?"

“How many drinks would you say you have a week?”

“Tell me again what happened the night you met Graham.”

“Overall, how would you describe your mood?”

“Do you find yourself feeling sad lately?”

“Have you thought of harming yourself?”

She takes notes as Jace answers, scribbling on her notepad...

Seems despondent. Anxious.

Increased drinking.

Look back at last session. Red flags?

Migraines.

Check his prescriptions.

Foggy memory of what happened. Lying or has convinced himself.

Dissociative identity disorder?

She stops writing and considers her next words carefully. So far, Jace has been cooperative even if he doesn't appear to be himself. Pushing the wrong button could cause him to clam up. “Have you...” she shifts in her seat and tilts her head. “Have you been... losing time? Any moments in time you can't account for or don't remember?”

“Does sleepwalking count?”

“Sleepwalking?” She balks and scribbles on her pad.

Sleepwalking. Past history?

“It happened a few weeks ago. At least, the one time I know of,” he shrugs.

She nods. She’s had patients who walked in their sleep, including one who did so for years without realizing it – until they strayed from their usual path and tripped over a dog toy, sending them reeling down the stairs. Until that night, they’d get up, stroll the empty hallways, and quietly return to bed, none the wiser. They’d awake to think they’d simply slept rough or had a strange dream.

“Once that you know of,” she repeats and scribbles...

WTF

Jace watches the pen move on her notepad. “What do you think’s wrong with me?” He’s already wincing.

She presses her lips together and leans in, making it a point to make eye contact. “I’m going to ask you another question, Jace, and I trust you’ll give me your honest assessment.”

There’s that word again. She’s always talking about building trust, partly because he’d been such a hard nut to crack during their first few sessions.

She has yet to meet anyone like Jace. He’s an anomaly, as far as clients go... Extremely high IQ but withdrawn... while possessing a charm she can never quite pin down as genuine or not.

A chill frosts the small of her back each time he walks in her office, and by the end, when the timer finally rings, she’s emotionally drained as he struts out. What’s worse, there’s always a pinch of doubt she’s left with as he leaves to go about his day.

“Do you think you had anything to do with the disappearance of Neil or Graham?”

Jace crumbles in his seat and fidgets with his hands. He reflects on the past few weeks, recounting everything he knows to be true.

“I don’t think I could have hurt them,” he says after a moment. “I don’t know where they are.”

Dr. Kessler pastes on a smile and draws a large question mark on her notepad, giving it a quick circle.

“Are you taking your medication?” She asks.

His eyes darken. “Why does everyone keep asking me that?!”

She’s stepped on a landmine.

“First Syd and Derek, now you,” he shudders. “What makes everyone think I’m not taking my meds?”

“Well, are you?” She asks this as plainly as she can, aiming to dilute his quick rage.

“Yes,” he blinks. “I’m taking those goddamn pills every day – and maybe that’s the problem!” He bites back. “Maybe that’s why I haven’t been myself.”

*Not likely, she thinks, but makes a mental note to double-check the dosage she prescribed.*

“Let’s do this…” She sets her notes aside and clasps her hands together, signaling this is enough for one day. “Let’s meet again on Wednesday for our usual session, and bring in what’s left of your prescription. Perhaps we do need to make some adjustments.”

“Fine. Okay.” He looks off, annoyed.

“And try not to get overwhelmed about having to give a statement. Visiting a police station may trigger some anxiety, but remember Detective Banks is here to help everyone involved in this matter. I’m sure this is all routine,” she says. “So, have a good visit there. And hey, at least he’s handsome, right? And that accent!” She cracks a smile. “I wouldn’t mind spending some time with a handsome detective!”

A photo of her husband, George, glares back from her desk in the background.

Jace gathers himself and makes a point to muster up a smile. “Right. Thanks for seeing me on such short notice.”

His smile sends a chill through her.

“I’ll see you on Wednesday, Jace.” She moves to stand and walk him out, but he’s already at the door, making a quick exit.

*Coming here was a mistake, he realizes now.*

He now knows, a little too late, that he can no longer trust or confide in her.

He’s told her things he’s never told Syd or Derek, out of fear of rejection.

He’s told her about his battles, growing up as the child of a monster.

He’s told her about the demons who haunt his dreams.

He’s told her details over the past few weeks that could very well prove the end of his sanity.

But, during today’s session, he never mentioned Detective Banks’ rugged good looks or the fact that he has an accent.

That, he’s certain of.



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## 10 / CLAUS

Ethel's in a good mood.

She rises from her stool and gives Jace a hug in the line, barely glancing at his ID; a half-hearted formality for those in line behind him.

Her almond-colored eyes shine expectantly behind her pink glasses.

"No news, yet," he's sorry to report.

She cocks her neck to the side and places both hands on her wide hips. "What's takin' them folks so long?"

"There's a lot of red tape."

She huffs and swats his arm. "Don't you give up hope, you hear? Everythang's gon' work out."

He nods, "Yes, ma'am."

"Put a smile on that handsome face and get on in there with your friends," she smirks.

He kisses her cheek, then heads inside, cutting through the crowd to find Syd and Derek at their usual table.

"You made it!" Syd stands with a tight smile. His eyes assess Jace, trying to get a read on his mood as they hug.

Derek waves a hand from his seat.

"Sorry I'm late. I could have sworn Syd said 6:30." Jace makes an exasperated face.

"No worries, babe."

Derek turns his empty beer glass on the table between his long, tattooed fingers. "I was about to get another round. Wanna come with?" There's a heaviness in his voice that pulls at Jace.

"Where's Angel?"

*Is their favorite server off tonight?*

Syd answers by glancing at another table where Angel delivers a pair of lemon drop martinis to two older women holding hands. He glances up in time to meet Syd's sad eyes and gives a weak smile before walking away.

"Yeah," Syd heaves a sigh. "I fucked that up pretty good."

"I need details but, first, a drink!"

Derek raises his eyebrows and Jace agrees to follow him to the bar. They toss Syd a glance over their shoulders, and he gives an encouraging thumbs-up in return.

Ever the optimist.

The bar is packed. Three bartenders maneuver behind the counter in a delicate dance, weaving around one another as they entertain the crowd and pour shots. Derek manages to catch the eye of Lincoln, the bulkiest of the shirtless trio. He flips a bottle of house vodka in the air and catches it before shooting them a nod. Moments later, he's leaning over the bar, straining to hear their order over the pulsing music as his jockstrap peaks from the back of his jeans.

Derek orders another beer for himself and Syd and a gin and tonic for Jace.

"My favorite," Jace smiles. "You remember."

Derek gives him a tortured look and runs a hand over his smooth, bald head. "I also remember what a dick I was the last time we were here." He closes the gap between them and takes Jace's hand. "I shouldn't have left the way I did, and I'm sorry I've been distant."

"It's fine. I get it."

"You know I get a little crazy when it comes to you..." He gives a sexy smile that's hard to resist and pulls Jace closer. He's not dressed for work this time. He's in washed-out jeans and a Seahawks t-shirt that puts his biceps on display. "You mad at me?"

Jace can't help but laugh as Derek snatches him into a tight hug. It's hard to stay mad at Derek. It's also hard to resist his

charm and the memories flooding back as he catches a whiff of Derek's cologne; the same cologne he wore the night they met at speed-dating.

The warmth of Derek's strong arms renders him still, and for the first time in weeks, Jace feels like he can breathe again.

He sighs into Derek's chest, breathing in his essence. "You wouldn't believe the week I've had." He gives a weary laugh. It's all he can do to keep from crying.

"It sounds like we've got some catching up to do." The bass in his voice is soothing, like sinking into a hot bath.

Jace moans softly and looks up to meet Derek's intense gaze. "We should talk."

Derek licks his full lips, and Jace can feel himself melting. He knows this look. He knows what can happen if he allows himself to fall back under Derek's spell.

Jace suddenly yawns loudly. "Sorry! New neighbor woke me up last night. Sounded like they were moving furniture around next door."

"Sounds like my neighbors," he rolls his eyes. "The last party they threw didn't end until 4 a.m."

Jace makes a face.

"I've missed you," he whispers. His lips brush Jace's ear, causing Jace to close his eyes in a quiet frenzy. It doesn't seem possible, but he draws Jace closer. "I'm always here for you. You know I'd do anything for you," he says in a low growl.

Jace suppresses a smile as Lincoln interrupts with their drinks. He takes a long drag from his straw as Derek pays, telling Lincoln to keep the change.

"Thanks, gentlemen," he gives them a sexy wink and blows a kiss as Detective Banks comes into view behind him on the other side of the bar.

Jace's heart lodges into his throat. "You gotta be shittin' me."

Derek follows Jace's stare, quickly connecting the dots to Banks, who turns his back a beat too late.

“You go ahead, with Syd’s drink,” Jace mumbles. “I’ll be over soon. Gotta handle somethin’.”

Derek nods weakly as Jace marches in Banks’ direction.

He pushes his way past the line crowding the bar and through a group of drag queens in sequin gowns doing jello shots to reach Banks. “Are you following me now, detective?”

Banks furrows his brows and shifts his weight from the bar. “This is not what it looks like.”

“You’ve already spoken to my therapist,” Jace cracks. “What is this now – a stakeout?”

A wry smile crosses his lips before he sets his beer on the bar. “Slow down, okay? First of all, I’m off duty.” He holds up the palms of his hands. “Secondly, I’m here with some pals from the station. My friend, Roy, is getting married.” He points to a rowdy group in VIP. “That’s Allister, his fiancé with no rhythm dancing next to him. They’re disgustingly sweet together,” he adds. “It’s their stag party. I was actually about to dip out when I saw you. Clubs really aren’t my thing.”

“What if I said I don’t believe you?”

“What if I said I bet you could dance circles around these guys?”

“Excuse me?”

“Do you salsa?” He does a few quick steps. His hips move hypnotically to the house music thumping over the speakers.

A bemused smile slips past Jace’s lips. “What are you doing?”

“Dancing on my own,” he smiles, swaying to the beat.

“I’m not dancing with you,” Jace says. “Besides, what would your cop buddies think?”

“About what?”

Jace scoffs and glances around the bar. “Us. Dancing! Are you sure we should be seen together? Men seem to have a way of disappearing around me, you know.”

“So I’ve heard.” He gives another wry smile and sips his beer. “I told you though, I’m off duty. No case talk tonight.”

Jace doesn’t know what kind of game he’s playing, but he’s intrigued. There’s something different about Banks tonight, an easiness and a flame dancing in his eyes that entrances Jace. He’s shed his drab work attire for jeans and a rosé-colored tee that clings to his broad chest and looks stunning against his bronze complexion glowing under the club lights. He looks remarkably at ease, less and less like a detective as the minutes tick by – which could also be the work of the alcohol settling at the bottom of his empty stomach.

“I’m starving,” he says. “The guys are going to Darlene’s after this, but I can’t wait.” He snags a bar menu and holds it up to the swirling lights, trying to get a good read. “What’s good?”

The tightness in Jace’s face eases as he gives a surrendered breath. “The chicken and waffles are amazing, but honestly, Ethel makes the most amazing chili.” He leans in to point it out on the sticky menu.

“Chili?”

“I know. It’s the dark horse on the menu, but trust me. You won’t be sorry.”

He grunts. “Last time I was offered chili, I swore I’d never go near it again.”

“That bad, huh?”

He chuckles to himself. “It’s just that every time someone says chili, I think back to this case I worked when I was on patrol with the force in Seattle.”

Jace watches his smile grow wider. “I feel a story coming on.”

“Oh, it’s a good one!” He gives a dry laugh. “I was two years in, still pretty green, without as much gray back then.” He weaves a hand through his hair bashfully.

Jace bites his lip. He’s always had a weakness for men who age gracefully, embracing the gray beginning to frost their hair like the first sign of winter.

“Anyway, we had a unit respond to a 911 call. Turned out to be a homicide – burglary-homicide,” he corrects himself.

“Happened in the middle of the day. Suburban, off the trail neighborhood... Older couple, like, late sixties... The wife comes home from the grocery store and finds the place ransacked and her husband lying face down in the kitchen. Stabbed twice in the throat.”

Jace’s smile fades.

“Some jewelry and electronics were missing, but no sign of the murder weapon, right?”

Jace leans in to hear him over the music.

“Turns out, this woman played Mrs. Claus every year in the Christmas parade, right? So, it makes major news, like, it’s huge! People are pouring out their hearts, so sad for Mrs. Claus. This happened, like, a few weeks before Christmas, by the way.”

Jace nods to show he’s with him so far.

“Well, two weeks goes by, and this story is still all over the news. There’s this public ‘call’ to deliver justice for ‘Mrs. Claus’ before Christmas.” He shakes his head, still in awe of the ordeal. “So now, it’s like a countdown! Everyone’s under pressure, everyone’s working to follow-up on leads and crack this case. Who would do something like this to ‘Mrs. Claus’? This sweet, old couple who never bothered anyone, right?”

“Did you have any suspects?”

“No suspects, no murder weapon – and that was something that really bothered me about this case early on. The way he died... Stabbed.”

“How do you mean?”

“Most home invasions that go bad involve a firearm,” he explains. “Even if her husband had surprised the intruder, it’s more likely someone breaking in would have had a gun with them. They wouldn’t have brought a knife to the party. Which told us that the murder weapon – the missing knife – likely came from the house and our guy panicked and took the knife with him when he fled the scene.”

“Elementary, my dear Watson.”

“Stay with me,” Banks bumps Jace’s elbow with his own, a playful move he instantly regrets. He quietly decides this will be his last beer and locks eyes with Jace, clearing his throat before continuing. “So, anyway... One day we get a call on the tip line from this guy who’s ranting and raving, saying he saw ‘Mrs. Claus’ through her kitchen window holding an ‘odd little shaped knife’ on the day her husband died – around the time of his death when she said she’d been out running errands and shopping. He calls twice, swearing the knife is still somewhere in the house.”

“Did you believe him?”

“No one really did. The thing is, we could account for about ninety percent of the places she said she’d been that afternoon, but there was a pocket of time unaccounted for. Long story short, the chief is under so much pressure with the Christmas parade coming up and the press, he agrees to a search warrant – specifically to find this knife the caller said he saw her with.”

“The murder weapon.”

“Right. So, the first responders did an initial sweep of the crime scene, and the autopsy showed he’d been stabbed with a small knife. It’d never been leaked to the press, but their best guess was that it was a pocket knife – but they never found one at the scene! So, this tip about an ‘odd little shaped knife’ sounded pretty close, right? So, we all go back for a full search of the property.” He satisfies his dry mouth with a quick sip of his beer and wets his lips. “A team of us go and start turning the place upside-down looking for a pocket knife – or anything the first team may have missed. Now, keep in mind, this is ‘Mrs. Claus,’” he raises a finger. “The guys and I go in and, I swear, I’d never seen this bunch be so respectful during a search! They put shit back where they found it!” He laughs. “I’ve seen these same guys completely wreck places during a search, just for fun! But this was different. It was obvious everyone hated being there. It was like conducting a search on your grandmother’s house, you know?”



Jace nods.

“Guys were apologizing left and right... offering to come back and cut the grass, help with chores around the house. It was wild,” he grins and his words slur for a moment. “To make matters worse, she was super-sweet, like... she reminded me of my abuela! Turns out she knew a few guys on the force. She’d been a teacher for a long time, so she even knew some of their parents... She was just a sweet old lady who’d lost her husband.”

“What does any of this have to do with chili?”

“I’m getting there,” Banks laughs. “Wow, you’re impatient!”

“I’ve been called worse.”

“I bet.” He shoots Jace a playful smile. “As I was saying... She was super-sweet, right? She offered everyone lemonade and basically told everyone to make themselves at home! So, everyone goes on about their work, and the whole time we’re there, she’s got this pot of chili boiling on the stove that smells amazing!”

Jace’s face brightens.

“See? I told you it was coming.”

“Keep going.” He swats Banks’ arm. “Get to the good stuff.”

“Okay, okay,” he laughs. “So, we’re there for a while and a few of the guys keep commenting on how good it smells, hoping she’ll take the hint and maybe offer a cup. We were working through lunch and everyone was starving! One guy even stuck his finger in the pot when she wasn’t looking.”

“Rude.”

“Well, hang on... Finally, someone gets her to offer them a cup. Next thing you know, it’s like a soup line in the kitchen! She turns off the boiling pot and starts serving everyone, dishing out bowls of it... The pot gets lower and lower, and soon everyone’s chowing down. Well, everyone except me.”

“Don’t tell me...” Jace covers his mouth in horror, “It was poisoned!”

“Interesting guess.” Banks shoots him a troubled look, “But, no. It wasn’t poisoned.”

“Why didn’t you have any?”

“I thought it was unprofessional,” he shrugs. “I was there to do a job, not eat chili and shoot the shit with ‘Mrs. Claus.’ This sweet old lady just lost her husband and, for all we knew, this pot of chili was all she had to last her a few days. I didn’t wanna take from this lady.”

Jace tilts his head, quietly grappling with his surprise. “That’s very commendable behavior.”

Banks gives him a long look, his eyes intense behind long lashes. “I always knew I wanted to be a cop... but a good cop.” He swallows hard. “Like my father.”

There’s a long pause before he continues. He composes himself and downs the last of his beer before finishing his story.

“Anyway, one of the guys had the audacity to ask for seconds. She’d left the kitchen to show someone where she keeps the lawnmower, so he asked me to refill his bowl. I didn’t want to, but, again, I was young and green, so I went to the stove to refill his bowl... I look in the pot and there’s hardly any left. She’s dished out most of it by now. So, I grab the ladle and go to get a small scoop, and that’s when I felt it. The spoon hits something at the bottom of the pot...”

“No!” Jace shrieks.

“Yep.” Banks gives a slick grin. “I scooped out a pocket knife. The one we’d been looking for. She must have hidden it there when the search first started. It’d been boiling in that pot of chili the whole time.”

“Clever, clever girl!” Jace huffs. “What a smart place to hide a murder weapon.”

Banks stares at him. “Is that your take on this story?”

“That’s what I would have done. I mean, who would think to check the woman’s dinner? You didn’t.”

“But I did find it.”

“Sooo... the moral of the story is what? You always get to the bottom of it?”

Banks crosses his arms and smirks.

“You ‘spoon’ out justice?”

“Stop,” he laughs.

“I can do this all night,” Jace snickers. “I get paid to think of funny taglines.”

“You call those funny?”

“Ouch. I’ll have you know, I’m up for a promotion at work. So, someone thinks I’m funny.”

“Ah. Touché.” Banks salutes him with his beer bottle.

“You know, speaking of ‘Claus’, I volunteer to play Santa every year at our office Christmas party.” Jace smiles. “Some people on the team bring in their kids or their nieces or whatever and they sit on my lap... I dish out presents with the beard... the whole bit.”

“Wow. A black Santa. How very Portland.”

“Indeed. But, it’s not easy playing Santa, you know. I mean, regardless.”

“No?”

“God, no! The things these kids ask for!” Jace reels. “I start working a few weeks ahead, getting a wish list going – you know, to make sure the kids get what they want – but, even then, there’s toys that come up day-of that don’t make the list.”

“Like what?”

“Ever hear of Zigmo?”

“Zigmo?”

“It’s like this non-binary AI teddy bear thing – that looks more like a possum if you ask me. Anyway, it projects cartoons on the walls and helps kids cheat on their homework because it knows everything. It’s terrifying.”

Banks laughs.

“Three kids asked for it last year, and I had to run out the next day and find a few for their parents to put under the tree.”

Banks tilts his head and a slow smile invades his lips. “That’s really sweet.”

Jace shrugs. “You may not believe this, but I do try to be a good person. Not that I’m into kids of my own, but I do remember what it’s like having nothing under the tree, you know? Christmas can be tough for some kids.” Jace takes a slow sip of his cocktail that’s turned watery by now. His eyes lock with Banks, who gives him a look that’s hard to translate.

“So, was that your boyfriend at the bar earlier?”

He means Derek.

“You mean Derek?” Jace gives a coy smile. “What makes you think he’s my boyfriend?”

“He couldn’t keep his hands off you.” His jaw hardens before he looks away. “Looked like you were enjoying it.”

“Why, Detective Banks!” Jace croons playfully. “Don’t tell me you’re jealous.”

“I’m not jealous.”

“Then why did you ask?”

“Because he’s headed this way.”

Jace’s smile slips away as he turns to see Derek emerge from the crowd.

“Hey, J...” He stuffs his hands in his pockets. “Just making sure you didn’t forget about us.” He says this jokingly, but his face tells a different story. He rakes his eyes over Banks, a scowl resting on his lips.

“Uhm, yeah. I’ll be over in a minute. I just—”

“This guy bothering you?” Derek asks.

Banks cuts through the tension with a sharp laugh.

“Somethin’ funny?” Derek bucks his chin in Banks’ direction. His hands are out of his pockets and have turned into fists.

“Easy, big guy.” Banks dips in his back pocket for his wallet, laying it badge-side-up on the bar. He shoots Jace a meaningful look. “I should get my tab, stop talkin’ your ear off.”

“Is that meant to intimidate me?” Derek glares at the antique-gold slab of metal that’s been melted, polished, and forged into a shield. “I could give a damn about a hunk of metal, man.”

“Derek.” Jace moves between them, reaching for Derek’s arm. “This is Detective Banks. I’m helping him with a case.”

Banks’ eyes go wide, awestruck.

*Helping him with a case isn’t how he’d put it. More like, at the center of it. And, now, he has to deal with a jealous ex-lover without drawing attention from his friends in VIP. Some of them love to throw their weight around as if a badge makes them invincible. Mix that with bottle service and it’s a recipe for disaster.*

He’s getting too old for bar fights. But this is what he gets for getting too close...

“I really thought we’d have a chance to talk tonight, work through things.” Derek turns on Jace. “But I see you’d rather cozy up this pig.”

Before Jace and Banks can recover from the blow, Syd breaks through the crowd to retrieve Derek.

“So sorry, officer! Sorry.” He shoots Jace a quick look and pulls Derek back by the arm. “My friend’s had a weebit too much. We’re going now! Sorry.” He throws up a hand and somehow manages the strength of twenty men to corral Derek away, back into the thick of the crowd.

“Sure that’s not your boyfriend?” Banks motions for his check.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into him lately. He’s usually not like this, I swear.”

“Well, I’ve been called worse.” Banks shrugs and tosses him a rueful smile.

They hover in awkward silence for a moment, daring glances at each other as Lincoln scrambles behind the bar to find a pen

to go with the check.

“He called you ‘J,’” Banks observes. “That a nickname? Short for Jace?”

It’s short for Jason, his real name, but Jace doesn’t offer this. He’s flirted with disaster enough for one night. He looks in time to see Syd leading Derek out the door, stopping to hug Ethel on the way out.

Looks like he’s back to square one.

“It’s a nickname,” he says quietly. “He’s the only one who calls me that.”

Banks keeps his opinions to himself as he scribbles on a wet receipt that’s arrived and stuffs his wallet back in his pocket. “I should go. I should tell the guys I’m leaving.” He faces Jace with a lull that stretches on. Neither of them knowing what to say or daring to shatter the moment lingering between them. Flashes of blue and purple color his face like police lights as a steady bass fills the air between them. “Goodnight, Jace,” he brings himself to say in a strained voice. “Get home safe.”

Before Jace can think of a sassy wisecrack, Banks is gone.

He bites his lip and watches him disappear into the crowd as a familiar loneliness closes in like the walls around him, making it hard to breathe.

Once again, he finds himself alone, with only his demons and a weak cocktail to keep him company.

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## 11 / CHEERS

It's last call.

Jace walks out of Ethel's and into the warmth of the night, feeling light on his feet but clear-headed enough to find his way home on foot.

His shirt sticks to his chest like papier-mâché – a cotton collage of sweat and cigarette smoke he can't wait to shower off.

He walks to the end of the block to cross the street and jumps as a police car chirps its siren and flashes its lights.

"No jaywalking, sir," a voice crackles over the loudspeaker.

Jace smirks and turns to find Banks sitting in a parked cruiser, smiling behind the radio held to his lips. Jace struts back and leans through the open passenger window, taking in the smell of leather and day-old coffee in a to-go cup. He peers into the car at the police laptop and equipment next to Banks' silhouette in the driver's seat, half-lit by a nearby streetlight.

Jace looks at him calmly and says, "License and registration, please."

"I believe I stopped you first," Banks chuckles. "For jaywalking."

"That's not a real thing."

"Of course it's a real thing."

"What's the penalty then?"

"\$90 fine. Pay up."

Jace whistles. "I'm a little short on cash. Think we can work something out, officer?"

Even through the darkness of the car, Jace can see Banks blush.



“It’s detective, and I’ll let you off with a warning. This time,” he warns. He points to the door handle. “Hop in.”

“Nice try.” Jace waves a finger.

“If I wanted to arrest you, I would have done it by now,” he groans. “Besides, I’m off duty, remember? Come sit with me.”

“I thought you left. And, hey, you’ve been drinking. What are you doing behind the wheel?”

“It’s Roy’s squad car. I got dropped off earlier. I just came out to get some quiet until they wrap up inside. Might walk up the block to get a burger.”

“You were waiting for me.” Jace smirks and rocks back on his heels. “Just say it. Admit you were waiting for me to come out so you could get me to yourself again.”

Banks shakes his head with a wild laugh.

“You know I’m right.”

He gives Jace a long look. “Fine. I was waiting for you to come out so I could get you to myself again.”

“I knew it. You’re a creep.”

“Ouch!” Banks pulls a handsome smile. “Really? A creep? Is that why you won’t sit with me?”

“Might be a trick.”

“Will you let me walk you home then?”

Jace’s playful smile flattens. “Why would you want to do that?”

He leans forward in his seat, his face crossing into the warm, yellow glow of the streetlights. “To make sure you get home okay.”

Jace weighs his words. “If you’re worried about Derek, don’t. Things are complicated with us, but he’d never hurt me. That’s... no. He’s a teddy bear.”

Banks fights to keep his opinion to himself but can’t help himself this time. “You wouldn’t believe how many domestic calls we answer from women – and men – who swore their

boyfriend or their husband didn't have a violent bone in their body."

"Derek's not like that."

"Maybe not." He leans his head against the headrest. "But I'd feel real shitty if anything happened to you. Especially on my watch."

Jace slips his hands into his back pockets and mulls over the position he finds himself in. This could all be a trap, of course; a clever ploy to catch him off-guard or obtain intel to use against him later. But then there's the look on Banks' face...

It consumes him.

"You can walk me home on one condition," Jace says. "Have a drink with me."

He groans. "This again."

"Come on. It's not 11 a.m.," Jace pipes. "And, as you've said a million times tonight, you're off duty. You've run out of excuses, Detective. So, what do you say?"

He rubs a hand over his face and laughs. "One drink!" He declares. "I'll walk you home, one drink, and then I'm headed home."

Jace smiles, watches Banks exit the car, and mumbles, "Famous last words," under his breath.

• • •

Frank is dead-asleep as they walk through the lobby.

"See?" Jace points. "Told you. I could scream right now and I bet he wouldn't wake up."

"Please don't." Banks calls the elevator and beckons Jace inside.

The doors close quietly and it's a tense ride to the top. A sudden attack of nerves hits Jace, and he can hardly look at Banks for long without breaking into an anxious, lopsided

smile. It might be the last shot he did on his own after everyone left him. It might be the fact that the universe has brought them together in such a serendipitous manner. Or it could be the sensation of being confined in a tight space with Banks' warm body mere inches away. Whatever it is, Jace is sure it's causing his heart to pulse with excitement in his chest. He makes a concerted effort to breathe as the doors part and he leads them to his front door.

Banks freezes as the lights glow on and moody jazz begins to play on Jace's command.

"Nice trick. I bet the boys eat that up."

"What boys?" Jace frowns, annoyed. Then Neil comes to mind and he swiftly removes his foot from his mouth. "I don't have many visitors."

Banks takes another look at the paintings plastering the large wall behind his leather sofa. "This is like the ultimate bachelor's pad, man."

Jace ignores the comment, kicks off his shoes, and waltzes past Banks to the bar. "Let's see... I can make you a gin and tonic if you swing that way... I've got vodka..." He plucks bottles at random, glaring at the labels. "St. Germain, Scotch and whatever this is... Oh! Tequila. This was a gift my friend, Syd, brought back from Cancun."

"Ever been? To Mexico?"

Jace laughs. "You mean like, wait, what do you call it? A 'vacation'?"

The thought of running away to blue water and white sand beaches has oddly never crossed his mind. But, surely, no one would know the story of the Brooklyn Butcher or care about his blood-stained past in a foreign country.

He puts a pin in the idea.

"You should go sometime. Mexico's beautiful." He places his hands in his pockets and shuffles closer. "I have family there in Sayulita."

Banks might as well have said Oz; Jace's expression says just as much. He knows little about traveling to exotic destinations and has never left the country.

"It's a small village, close to Punta Mita. It's popular. Beautiful beaches, lots of colorful little restaurants. Good food. It's touristy," he adds, amidst the memories surfacing. "But, it's home. My father was on the force there. Policía Federal."

"I bet you look just like your father in uniform."

"I do!" Banks smiles and taps the bottle of tequila in Jace's hand. "This one," he winks.

Jace cuts a lime with a small paring knife from the bar's drawer, then pours and hands Banks a glass.

"He was a good man," Banks says dourly.

"What happened to him?"

"He was killed in the line of duty. Robbery gone wrong. He jumped in to shield the cashier and got shot. Just like that, he was gone."

Without thinking, Jace places a hand on his shoulder.

"Ah, I'm okay! Really." He shrugs Jace's hand away. "He died a hero, right? How many people can say that about their father?"

Jace drops his head. The last thing Sam Mader was is heroic. If anything, people would say he died a cowardly death and took the easy way out by hanging himself in prison.

"He sounds like a good man. I'm sure he's proud of you," Jace says, hoping it doesn't sound as trite to Banks' ears as it does to his own. "Cheers to heroes!" He thinks fast and poses a toast.

They clink glasses and Banks' eyes sparkle over the rim of his glass before tossing the drink back. He compliments the tequila and tells Jace more about his family, who are mostly scattered throughout Mexico.

He comes from a large family and is the middle child, stuck between three sisters and an older brother – all of whom are married and popping out babies at lightning speed. He prides himself on being the fun uncle, giving his nephews and nieces rides in his squad car when they visit and spoiling them with candy and caffeine before returning them to their parents to deal with the aftershock.

His eyes soften when he talks about his mother, who he calls every day to check on. He's been trying to get her to visit him in Portland for years, but she's never been on an airplane. The thought alone makes her cross herself and launch into prayer.

“John Coltrane!” Banks points a finger, correctly identifying the saxophone solo playing through the speakers.

“I'm impressed.” Jace wishes he had a prize for him.

“He was one of my abuelo's favorites.”

“He's one of mine too.” Jace rolls his shoulders and gives Banks an appraising look. “So, where did the name Banks come from anyway? That a nickname?”

He laughs and hangs his head. “Long story.” He scratches the side of his neck and peers at Jace through his long lashes. “It's the name of the street I lived on when I first joined the force. It was my first real house I ever bought. The first big purchase I ever made in this country. This cute little one-bedroom, white house... Nothing fancy!” He waves a hand. “But it was mine, you know? And it had this bright red door. I loved it. Anyway, as soon as I joined the force, I invited my partner at the time over and some guys from work. We cracked open some beers, watched the game, and I made my mother's tamales – like she taught me. It was my way of making friends I guess. I was the newbie. I was gay – they really didn't know what to do with that!” He reels his head. “No one was really out on the force back then. I had a lot to prove. These older guys had been working together for years. I never thought they'd look at me like a brother, you know? But the tamales did the trick! Next thing you know, more guys from work start comin' over on weekends, and everyone knew where to go for some good tamales. Just get an invite from the new kid, right? None of

these gringos had ever had real Mexican tamales, by the way,” he laughs.

“I didn’t peg you for much of a cook,” Jace admits.

He places a hand to his chest. “I know my way around the kitchen, thank you very much.” His lips twist into a smile. “Anyway, so... yeah. I made friends, but the problem was no one could pronounce my name! They butchered it. Or they didn’t know if my last name was actually Hernández or Grijalva... Or if it was Mateo! But everyone knew where I lived.” He shrugs a shoulder. “The little white house on Banks Street with the red door... So, they’d start askin’ each other, ‘Hey, man, you goin’ down to Banks this weekend?’ or ‘Party over at Banks tonight, right?’ and so on... So, eventually they stopped trying to pronounce my name, and Banks just stuck.”

“Hmm.” Jace smiles, imagining Banks in the kitchen with his sleeves rolled up. He almost says something along the lines of ‘loving a man who can cook,’ but decides that sounds desperate and points to Banks’ empty glass instead. “Want another?”

“No. I told you one drink, remember?” He walks to Jace’s towering windows to peer out at the sprawling view of the city. “Bet this view never gets old.”

Jace takes in Banks’ wide shoulders and the curve of his back, leading to a perfect, round ass defying gravity. “Sure doesn’t.”

“Hey, you got anything to snack on?”

“Oh, right. You must be really hungry by now!” Jace walks to the fridge, his mind spiraling into a panic. He knows the fridge is empty, but he opens it anyway and pretends to act shocked and confused. It’s rare for him to cook, which would require groceries, which would require going to the grocery store, which he has little time for these days. He’s got the number for an (amazing) Vietnamese takeout restaurant committed to memory, but he’s fairly sure they’re closed by now. He vaguely remembers seeing half a bag of trail mix in his pantry and stalls as he desperately searches the shelves. “You know...” he calls out, “I haven’t forgotten. I was planning to go down to the station in the morning to give a statement.”

Banks turns from the window, his trance broken as the magic of the evening bleeds back into reality. “Right. That,” he moans. He wanders toward the kitchen, one hand rubbing the back of his neck, the other loosely holding the rim of his empty glass between fingers curled into a claw. “I wasn’t going to say anything, but since we’re here…” His eyes flit in Jace’s direction as the words for what’s brewing between them dissolve on his tongue. He can’t put words to it. He can’t say with cast-iron certainty what it is, but it’s clear there’s something here that wasn’t before.

There’s something different about the way they look at one another.

“What? What is it?” Jace sputters impatiently.

“I can’t go into specifics. I really shouldn’t say anything because you’ll find out tomorrow when you go in.” A reticent guise passes over his face. Finally, he sets his glass down on the kitchen counter and comes out with it. “There’s been a development in the missing person case on Neil Winston. I got word last night.”

“Oh, God.” Jace feels his knees weaken.

“It’s not whatever you’re thinking,” Banks promises.

*How could he possibly know what Jace is thinking?*

“Should I sit down for this?”

“All I can say is that the case is being brought to a close – so, hopefully, any guilt you might be feeling about his disappearance can come to a close too. Tomorrow should bring some closure if nothing else.”

*Guilt?*

*Closure?*

It’s a lot to chew on, but the gentle look on Banks’ face gives him a hint of reassurance. Whatever this news is that Banks has received may also account for the playful change in his mood. If it were bad news, it’s unlikely he would have agreed to come over for a nightcap, right? Fraternizing with suspects can’t be good for business.

Jace ventures, “You’re saying I’m no longer a ‘person of interest’ in the case?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“So, you are interested,” Jace teases.

“In you?” Banks inches closer as a smile tugs at his lips. He stands close enough for Jace to feel the heat coming off his hard body.

Jace finds himself suddenly drowning in his lust for Banks. His words barely reach the surface as Banks grazes his arm with the back of his knuckles, “You think you know me...” It sounds like less of a question and more of a warning as the words break through the shallow of his lips.

“I don’t,” Banks confesses, drawing closer with a pang of guilt in his voice, knowing he should pull back but can’t. “Just when I think I have you figured out, you surprise me.”

Jace braces himself against the cold, smooth marble of his kitchen island as Banks nears. “That doesn’t scare you?”

“I don’t scare easy.” Banks lets out a strangled breath as Jace returns a gentle stroke, running his fingers up his arm to the width of his bicep. There’s an illicit spark as Jace’s fingers softly brush his skin, trailing back down the veins of his forearm.

“Nothing scares you?” Jace’s voice is a whisper as Banks leans in and their hands grasp for each other and intertwine. He pulls Banks closer, gripping his callused palms, and their hips press together until Jace feels his hot breath dancing along his collarbone... teasing the soft skin of his neck... making its way up to the warmth of his lips.

“There’s one thing that scares me,” he says, hovering.

“What’s that?”

“I’m afraid that if I don’t kiss you now I may never,” he says in a husky voice. He peers into the quiet storm turning in Jace’s gray eyes and kisses him softly.

Jace feels the tension in his body give way, and a small moan escapes as their lips part and Banks’ lengthy tongue slips in,



making gentle sweeps of his mouth's vault. Their kiss is drenched in smoky notes of agave and smooth brassy jazz as John Coltrane serenades them.

Banks presses forward, deepening the kiss, and a heavy ache fills his groin as Jace grinds against him. Fingers still intertwined, Banks twists Jace's arms behind his back, as if he's cuffed, rendering him helpless. Their lips break apart only long enough to draw a quick breath before crashing together once more in a frenzied kiss.

Jace's body awakens as he feels Banks' thick, throbbing shaft rubbing against his own through the rugged constraints of their jeans.

Banks pulls back and his lips kink to the side in a knowing smile. His whiskers ignite Jace's skin as he nuzzles his neck, covering it in soft kisses before releasing his hands.

Jace drapes his arms around Banks, kissing him with more urgency. Adrenaline and alcohol surge through his veins as his fingers tangle in Banks' hair, exploring his body until they reach the cold metal of his belt buckle.

In one swift motion, he helps flip Banks' t-shirt over his head.

Banks emerges hungry and out of breath; his slick, dark hair tousled and wild.

Jace reels at the sight of his furry chest. His eyes slowly travel the trail of soft, musky hair leading down to his jeans.

"Undress for me..." Banks says in a raspy whisper.

It's an order Jace happily obeys.

Hooking his fingers under the lining of his shirt, he slowly raises it over his chest, teasing Banks with every inch of his honey-brown skin.

He tosses the shirt at Banks when he's done, then slowly pulls at his zipper.

Banks releases a low moan and licks his lips as he watches the zipper descend and spread open, giving him a hearty glimpse of Jace's pulsating arousal leaning to one side. The head, swollen and throbbing; begging to be released from his boxers.

The zipper continues to fall and plummet into the abyss, as time stands still around them.

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## 12 / TOOTHPASTE

Daybreak washes over them, illuminating tangled limbs and Banks' furry stomach softly rising and falling, as Jace stirs awake.

He finds himself in an uncomfortable jigsaw puzzle; his arm half-asleep as Banks snores softly into the crook of his neck. He watches Banks sleep, listening to the soft rattle in his throat as sunlight colors his face.

He looks like a handsome telenovela star laid to rest.

Jace remains still, savoring the moment like the final glimpse of a sunset extinguishing into the horizon. He ignores the pins and needles stinging his sleeping limb under the weight of Banks' head until he has no choice but to shift and allow the blood to return to his arm.

Banks groans and blinks awake, sharply rising onto his elbows.

"At ease, soldier." Jace squeezes his shoulder gently. "It's just me."

Banks looks to Jace and his bare skin peeking from beneath the tangled sheets. "What time is it?"

"Alexa! What time is it?"

"It's 8:17 a.m.," she replies. "Would you like to hear your horoscope for today?"

Banks makes a face. "You follow horoscopes?"

"God, no," he winces.

Banks takes the note and throws his legs over the side of the bed, raking his fingers through his hair. "Where's my phone?" He asks blearily.

His phone is in his jeans, downstairs on the kitchen floor where he shed them the night before. His shirt is halfway up the stairs, draped over the banister, and his briefs have

miraculously found their way to the opposite side of the bed, hanging off an open drawer on Jace's nightstand.

"Want me to call your phone?"

Banks smirks. "You put my cell in your phone?"

"You knew what you were doin' when you gave me your cell..."

He shrugs innocently. "It's not like you ever used it."

"Didn't need to." Jace rises onto his knees and waddles over to kiss Banks' shoulder and nibble on the soft of his neck.

"Stop!" He bursts into laughter, squirming to get away.

"That's right!" Jace recalls. "You are ticklish." Quite by mistake, he'd discovered several spots on his body yielding the same giddy response.

A spot behind his ear.

His neck.

The depths of his inner thigh...

He stands from his seat on the edge of the bed, giving Jace a clear view of his perfect backside and thick thighs.

Watching him retrieve and slink into his underwear one step at a time steals Jace's breath away.

It's also a marvel Banks can walk straight, Jace thinks to himself. At one point in the evening, Banks seemed sure he'd sprained an ankle although he kept up his pace, matching Jace's rhythm as the bed creaked beneath them.

"Your bed is so soft," Banks remarks. He glares at it as if it's evil. "It's no wonder I dozed off after... you know."

"Sure. Blame it on my bed." Jace sings.

"Maybe it was that second drink you made that knocked me out."

"Just say it. You wanted to stay over and wake up in my arms..."

"Right," he huffs out a laugh.

Jace rolls out of bed and saunters into his bathroom, feeling the cold tiles bite at his feet. "I'll start the shower."

Banks sneaks a peek at Jace, watching his naked form lean into the shower to turn on the hot, steamy water, then wills himself to search for his phone. He finds it downstairs with his pants, tucked away in his back pocket. His eyes go wide as the screen lights up with five missed calls and a text message causing his stomach to churn.

Upstairs, Jace is lathering his chest with soap and frothy bubbles filling the air with sandalwood and lavender. The sticky attestations of the night before go swirling down the drain, leaving his skin slick and golden amidst the steam billowing and clouding the glass shower.

He jumps as Banks taps on the glass with his phone, fully dressed.

"I have to go. Got a crime scene."

Jace kills the water and opens the glass door to lean out.

"Right now?"

Banks gives a shallow nod as he inhales Jace's scent, his eyes stealing a glance at Jace's manhood hanging heavily between his legs. "It's a warehouse clean across town. I better get going."

Jace could lie and say he was about to make breakfast for them; a hot meal of pancakes, bacon, and black coffee, but he knows there's only coffee in his pantry. "I guess, maybe I'll see you later?"

Banks hands him a towel. "Depends on how long this takes."

"Hope it's nothing bad."

The dim look on his face confirms it is and that he can't go into details. "Be sure to ask for Detective Marlow when you come in today, alright? She'll take your formal statement and go over Neil's case with you."

Jace gives an obliging tilt of his head, wishing he knew what has Banks in knots. He follows him to the front door, careful not to slip as he walks him out.

“Thanks for the nightcap,” Banks smirks, slipping back into his detective’s voice, back into the man in uniform on the other side of the law.

“Maybe we can grab dinner later? I feel bad for not feeding you last night.”

Banks knows this is a bad idea. He knows he’s playing with fire and risks burning down everything his badge stands for by fraternizing with Jace. Yet, he can’t help but give Jace a quick peck on his lips as he brushes through the door. “One condition.” He winks. “I choose the place.”

Jace watches him disappear down the hall, then closes the door with a content sigh and a smile bright enough to rival the sun.

• • •

The police precinct resembles those Jace has seen on television with its muted colors and vibrant characters being “booked” and shuffled around.

Upon arrival, he was quickly ushered into an interrogation room, where he now sits at a metal table before a wide two-way mirror.

He tells himself he has nothing to be worried about. Giving a formal statement is standard procedure and Banks has already leaked there’s been a “development” in Neil’s case.

A development.

He’s been turning the word over in his head all morning, that and memories of the night before. He spent the morning playing it back in his mind... The way Banks tasted on his tongue... The ungodly sound that escaped his lips as his body shuttered and collapsed onto Jace in a fit of ecstasy. Then, unable to help himself, Jace ran back upstairs once Banks left. He pulled his bed aside to check the contents of the small tackle box stowed away within the AC vent, giving a quick sigh of relief to find his secrets accounted for.

The door to the interrogation room opens and a tall, beautiful, dark-skinned woman with braids drawn into a low bun walks in. Her badge and the sterling silver bangle on her wrist gleam under the fluorescent lights.

“Mr. Lannister, I’m Detective Tamika Marlow. Thank you for coming in today,” she says briskly, not offering a hand to shake.

Banks trails in behind her. His eyes dart to Jace only briefly before taking his seat.

“I believe you know Detective Banks,” she says.

It’s hard to tell what she means by this.

It’s hard to tell if she knows.

“Hello.” Jace rubs a chill on his arms. “I’m happy to help where I can,” he adds, whipping up a pleasant smile.

She frowns weakly at the sight of it, then clasps her hands on the table, showing off a large diamond on her married finger as she leans in. “It’s a busy day around here. Let’s jump right in, shall we?” There are two folders with her and a sharpness to her tone with the potential to cut deep.

Jace shoots Banks a quick look but is met with cold silence as he looks straight ahead.

“So, there’s the case of Neil Winston, who we understand you knew briefly.” She opens one of the folders. “Mr. Winston went missing the night you claim you met. His partner reported him missing after discovering his cell phone discarded in a dumpster not far from where you reside.”

*Partner.*

She must mean the “roommate” Banks mentioned on his first visit.

*Son of a bitch...*

“Early Thursday morning, his body was discovered by a field officer in a dumpster off Sandy Boulevard.”

Jace’s chest tightens at the news.



This is the development Banks warned him of. His mouth falls ajar, dry and barren of words to capture his shock. His mind races, replaying that night in reverse, summoning details from the darkest concerns of his memory.

He doesn't have much time to react before she blurts out, "We recently received a statement from a Misty Prewitt." She reads from the file and pauses to see if Jace reacts to the name. "She walked in off the street, told us everything. Full confession."

Jace shakes his head aimlessly, still at a loss.

"Misty is the girlfriend of Travis Kelly. He's a small-time dealer who lives a few blocks from you. We've brought him in before on possession charges, usually deals out of the corner store he works at or his apartment." She stops to give him a discerning look. "That name sound familiar? Did Neil mention Travis that night – or Misty?"

Jace shakes his head.

"You weren't Neil's last stop the night he went missing," she says, finally. "According to Misty, Neil came over, banging on the door at around three in the morning. He was a regular customer... had fifty bucks with him he said he'd just scored, so they did a few lines of coke and her boyfriend sold him some heroin and let him crash on their sofa. In the morning, they woke up and found Neil in the same spot, OD'd."

If Jace were close to forming an audible sentence, the words are completely gone now. He sits there, stunned, glancing between Marlow and Banks, occasionally catching a glimpse of his reflection in the two-way mirror behind them.

"They panicked, of course," Marlow rolls her eyes at this. "Travis had her dispose of Neil's phone, and they put Neil in their bathtub until Travis and a buddy of his made a plan to dispose of the body. She claims she doesn't know who this third person is, but we have a few leads."

"Unbelievable," Jace mutters. "And they've been arrested?!"

"Travis and Misty are both in custody."

Jace thinks back to something she said earlier. "The money, the fifty dollars..."

This seems to pique their interest. Even Banks has left his daze to give Jace his full attention.

“I was missing some cash.” He recalls the morning he went in search of money to get his car detailed, and his wallet came up empty. “He must have taken it when I was starting to doze off.” This seems to fit. “I’m sorry to hear what happened to him,” Jace says despondently. “I wish I had asked him to stay or... I don’t know.” He rests a hand on his chest, collecting his breath. “Maybe he’d still be alive.”

“His family’s been notified,” Marlow says with the first glimpse of a smile, albeit bittersweet. “We originally asked you in to obtain a formal statement, but with Misty coming in, it appears this case should wrap up soon.”

Jace feels a weight lift as he passes Banks a quick look.

Banks lowers his eyes and his brows draw taut.

*Why won't he look at Jace?*

“Meanwhile,” she clears her throat and presses on, “A few things have come to my attention as of this morning.” Her tone drops as she leans back in her chair and passes a look between Jace and Banks.

There’s no question now that she knows.

She must – but why would it matter at this point? Jace is no longer a suspect in Neil’s disappearance and, when it comes to Jace and Banks, that toothpaste is not going back in the tube.

There must be something else, Jace thinks with a scowl.

Something she isn’t telling him.

“One matter will be dealt with internally,” she says, giving Banks the side-eye.

Jace has been working in the corporate realm long enough to translate what she means by this. There may be a separate investigation by human resources or worse.

“The other matter will require some answers from you.” She slides the second folder forward, letting it rest on the table between them before flipping it open.

Banks averts his eyes as Jace leans in, staring in disbelief at the photos she plucks from the folder... spreading them on the table like tarot cards.

She leans back in her seat once she's done, carefully watching Jace's reaction as she says her next words, "At 4:36 this morning, the body of Graham Tate was discovered in an abandoned warehouse... butchered."

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## 13 / GLOW

Detective Marlow could have used any word to describe the crime scene photos painting the ghastly portrait of Graham's fate.

Murdered.

Killed.

But the fact that she used the word butchered fills Jace with a dark, dismal dread that renders him paralyzed.

He feels ill as he scans the photos, trying to make sense of them; trying to put the bloody puzzle pieces together – ever mindful that the detectives before him and whoever is behind the two-way mirror are keenly watching his reaction.

The photos tell the story of a delivery truck, parked at an angle in the center of an abandoned warehouse that was once a discount furniture outlet. It's black and charred from being set aflame. The paint and logo on the side of the truck have been devoured and scorched away by the flames, leaving a burnt shell of the truck's frame smoking in a few of the photos.

Jace surmises that this is the crime scene Banks was called to earlier. The smoke must have been what first called attention to the scene. The firetrucks had arrived only to find much more than a case of arson and burnt embers on their hands.

The back doors of the truck are open. A thick trail of dark, congealed blood stains the bumper, pooling onto the ground as it made its way to rest at the base of the left tire.

There's a photo taken from the perspective of the open doors. Inside, there appears to be the shape of a body laid out on its back. Its arms and legs spread like the beginnings of a snow angel... only there's something frighteningly odd about the form.

It looks disjointed somehow.

Jace tilts his head and turns the photo, trying to follow the broken circle of logic. He refuses to believe what his eyes are telling him. The thought of Graham's body in the truck brings a slow ache to the back of his throat, and his eyes begin to swell as he takes in the grim sight before him.

A different photo taken from inside the truck gives a closer account of the contents, and a small cry escapes as the photo shakes in Jace's trembling hands.

*Body parts.*

Severed arms, legs, a torso, and finally the round shape of what could only be Graham's head wrapped in brown paper... reassembled to take the shape of the person who once was.

"It's butcher's paper," Marlow says, reading his expression. "Whoever took the time to cut him into pieces also took the time to wrap his limbs."

Like a present.

Or a leg of lamb.

The consistency of the paper registers with Jace as soon as she says the words aloud.

Butcher's paper.

He's spent hours upon hours of his youth wrapping deli orders from large spools of the stuff, often cutting his fingers on the edges until he developed a proper system.

The thought of Graham being savagely dismembered and ripped apart by his limbs makes Jace nauseous. "You're sure it's him?"

"The body has been identified as Graham Tate," Banks says, shattering any doubt. "Dental records came back an hour ago."

Perhaps they've set the worst of the photos aside for the moment. Surely, they unwrapped his entire body, piece by piece, and forensics took photos.

"Funny thing about the dental records," Marlow chimes in. "He was missing his..." she fumbles through her paperwork to

get this right, “his ‘mandibular second premolar’ on his right side.”

This doesn’t mean much to Jace.

“It’s not uncommon,” she shrugs. “Might have ruled it out as an earlier dental surgery except the autopsy report indicates it was removed not long before the estimated time of death.”

Jace looks to Banks, who offers no solace. His hazel eyes are a strange mixture of disenchantment and doubt.

“Further investigation of the body also showed a fingernail missing on his right index finger.” She points her finger at him, like a gun. “Not chipped!” She clarifies. “The entire nail was removed.”

Panic fills Jace as sweat collects under his armpits and at the small of his back. His body is on fire, alive with a sickening foreboding that seizes every nerve in his body.

“Can you guess what was missing when we unwrapped the head?”

Banks looks away, painfully.

Jace’s leg bounces under the table. He knows what they found – or rather, what they didn’t find. He knows what she wants him to say but refuses to give her the satisfaction.

“No hair.” She throws up her arms dramatically. “No hair, no eyebrows – all clean-shaven. In fact, his whole body had been shaved clean.”

Jace makes a strong effort not to react.

Anyone could be behind the mirror, watching to see if he’ll crack.

“It’s an odd thing to do, don’t you think? To shave someone’s hair off?” She asks this question to Banks, who looks to be in no mood to play good cop, bad cop. “The fire was set this morning, but deterioration of the body indicates his murder took place some time ago.”

“Graham didn’t deserve this,” Jace says weakly.

“No one deserves this,” she agrees. “This is the most heinous crime most of us on the force have ever seen.” She tosses Banks a quick look. “Right? Missing fingernails and teeth... You ever hear of such?”

He folds his arms and plays along, saying, “Never.”

“Neither had I!” She blinks her lashes and joins Banks in folding her arms. “Turns out though, someone here has heard of such.”

Jace glances between them, starting to wonder if he should lawyer-up.

“This has happened before,” she says with ice in her voice. “One of our veteran officers on the squad has been here for close to thirty-five years. We call him Papa Ray,” she explains affectionately. “He’s two years from retirement and has pretty much heard and seen it all – including a case out of New York back in the nineties about a butcher who took the hair, fingernails, and teeth of his victims.”

Banks jumps in, on cue, his voice hoarse as he forces himself to face Jace and say, “The Brooklyn Butcher.”

Jace swallows hard, wanting more than anything to fade away and disappear into the ether.

“When I heard Ray say the name, I vaguely remembered the case – it was big news – but then I thought, no.” She tilts her head theatrically. “No, it can’t be him because the Brooklyn Butcher killed himself in prison.”

Jace blinks as hot tears sting his eyes.

“It was a really fascinating case,” she raises a brow, almost impressed. “There are very few black serial killers in the books – especially back then – so the media went crazy! But the Brooklyn Butcher never did any interviews. Not one.”

Banks passes Jace a look that’s hard to untangle. It’s riddled and knotted with confusion and hurt.

It’s hard for Jace to fathom that this is the same man who awoke in his arms, who now looks at him as if he’s no better



than the hardened criminals who pass through the station's doors every day.

“Oh! And the public outcry that happened when he killed himself!” Marlow reels in her seat, recalling the case. “All those families of the victims robbed of justice... all that loss and anger and hurt with nowhere to go. It's no wonder they rioted... burning buildings and marching in the streets. They had to bring in the National Guard!”

Of course, Jace knows this. He was there.

After the trial, his mother moved them to a co-worker's small apartment ten blocks from their home. Jace still remembers the red glow from the streets burning with anger as he looked through the lace curtains with his mother glued to the television in the backdrop.

He can never forget the aftermath. He'll never forget how he cried the next day, passing by the deli and gasping at the destruction. The broken glass and graffiti made his family's business nearly unrecognizable. It had been reduced to a shell of its former glory, signifying the end of an era.

The end of a legacy.

Over the years, Jace has heard of new life being breathed into the brick and drywall that was once Cassex Deli. It's been bought numerous times by a range of hopeful owners who emptied their life savings to give the building a second life. It came back as a bakery after the riots. They painted it pink and filled it with light, fluffy desserts, which seemed promising to the city officials who ultimately rolled the property under their renovation project.

That lasted all of five months.

It went on to become a bistro and even became a stop on a New York ghost tour, claiming the ghosts of the Brooklyn Butcher's victims still roam the meat locker in the basement. They'd actually gone to great lengths to restore the space to its former prestige; even purchasing used equipment and second-hand meat slicers and hooks to add to the spooky ambiance of the space.

It was a legitimate deli for a short while afterwards. A Jewish family purchased it at an auction and brought it back to life, but even they failed in a matter of months, proving the building to be cursed.

Last Jace heard, it's sitting idly and deserted; waiting for its next owner to walk in and awaken it from its slumber like a sleeping dragon.

"It's funny how some of these old cases never seem to die," Marlow says, cutting through his thoughts.

He hopes he hasn't spaced out again. He hopes he hasn't drifted away and lost time as she's been rattling on, delivering her performance.

"Could always be a copycat, right?" She hunches her shoulders. "Some sick asshole who wants to pay homage to one of the 'great' serial killers of our time..."

"Why would anyone want to copy The Brooklyn Butcher?" Jace hisses. "The man was a monster."

"You would know, wouldn't you?" She cuts her eyes at him and settles back in her chair. "See, I did a little digging and found out this 'monster' had a son. A son who vanished off the face of the earth a few years after his father's suicide." She arches her manicured brows. "Has anyone ever told you you look like him... Jason?"

It's a weighted question, one that picks at a scab he's been trying to heal for years.

He also has no idea how she's managed to lift the veil and make the connection. The answer might be peering at her through smoky, gray eyes that match his father's. Then again, it's also conceivable he wasn't as successful in burying the past as he thought.

Jace turns to Banks, who can hardly look at him.

"For the record, you are Jason Maders," she insists.

He nods weakly.

"Did Graham know?" Banks asks. There's a bitterness to his words that were once so sweet. They've turned sour now, like

spoiled milk. “Did Graham know your real identity?”

“I told him at dinner, but that’s not—”

“Did he threaten to expose you or go to the press?”

“No!”

“Did he try to blackmail you?”

“It wasn’t like that,” Jace shakes his head.

There’s a contentious gleam to Marlow’s eyes now that she’s had her first taste of blood. “Could it be that Graham had something on you, and you wanted him gone to protect your identity?”

It’s a razor-sharp motive. Graham could have easily destroyed the new life he’s built by telling Alex, who might have told Foster – or by going to the press, who would have publicly raked him over the coals. It makes sense to have seen Graham as a liability – a threat and a danger.

It makes sense to have wanted him gone.

“It is possible your story about that night isn’t the whole story?”

It’s a blistering accusation.

“No,” Jace bites. “I told you. We left dinner, we got ice cream, and that was it! We each called a car afterwards and went our separate ways.”

“You’re sure you’re telling us the truth?” Banks’ eyes plead with him from across the table as if to suggest this is his last chance. This is no longer a missing person case; it’s officially a homicide, and he can’t predict how Marlow may play this if she leads the investigation.

Jace thinks back to that night and the bittersweet goodbye he’d shared with Graham.

It had been awkward – and not in a romantic comedy sense where each character is endearingly unsure of who should make the first move for a goodnight kiss. Graham had been polite but brisk in his goodbye, and although he’d been a perfect gentleman and said all the right things, Jace couldn’t

help but feel the relief radiating off him as he turned to leave; likely glad it was over.

He'd fulfilled his obligation and never had to see Jace again.

"I didn't do this," Jace says in a whisper. "I'm not my father!"

"Have you ever heard of the 'murder gene'?" Marlow asks.

He has, but he denies it. It's a haunting theory debated among criminal attorneys, psychiatrists, and scholars in the Biobehavioral Science field suggesting genetic destiny can override free will.

Most argue it's a myth; that, instead of an inherited genetic disorder, there are genetic factors – linked to psychopathy and a limited capacity for empathy – that can make someone more susceptible to commit a violent, bloody act.

To propose that Jace has inherited this curse from his father sends a chill through the air, and as controversial as the theory may be, it's certainly something a prosecutor may throw out in court – just to see if might stick.

"You need to tell us everything you remember about that night, Jace – I mean, Jason!" Banks corrects himself with a wince.

"The son of one of this country's most notorious serial killers is the last person seen with Graham Tate – whose body is found missing the very things your father collected from his victims. The fingernail... the missing tooth and the hair! It's a play from your father's playbook," Marlow seethes. "Are you tellin' us that's a coincidence?!"

"This wasn't me," Jace grunts between clenched teeth. "I am not my father!" He pounds a fist on the metal table, startling Marlow and Banks into silence.

His reflection stares back from the two-way mirror in the still of the moment.

Watching.

Jace glares back, and for a split second, he swears he catches the tail-end of a smile passing over his reflection's face...

Savoring the moment.

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## 14 / FREAK SHOW

Jace hangs precariously off the side of a ladder, stringing party lights.

This is probably the last place he should be, helping set up for Outpost's grand opening, but the day has finally arrived, and all eyes are on him to stick the landing and make the event a massive success.

All of his hard work has been building up to this.

Tonight's launch event is a welcome distraction, but even as he tacks the last light in place, he can't help but be drawn back to the confines of the cold, gray interrogation room. Detective Marlow made it abundantly clear that although they didn't have enough to detain him at the moment, he's certainly implicated in Graham's murder.

Banks had muttered a warning to not leave the country before he left the room, eyes downcast and murky. It stung to watch him leave, knowing that any sparks between them have now turned to ice.

Jace's phone pings with a text message.

I don't blame you for being mad. I know I fucked up. Hoping you'll let me make it up to you...

It's the third text today from Derek. Jace shakes his head, amazed by his sudden onslaught of man-trouble, and stuffs his phone back into his jeans as he descends the ladder. Glancing around the event space, things are beginning to take shape.

Outpost occupies a large industrial warehouse space in Nob Hill that's been gutted and renovated over the past four months to meet the brewery's needs. The shell is all polished concrete, exposed brick, and metal rafters supporting an open ceiling. Large, metal lamp shades hang over the bar and lounge area

filled with tufted, brown leather furniture. Wood high-top tables and bar stools surround the custom bar boasting more than fifty rotating beers on tap – including Outpost’s lineup of lagers, pilsners, pale ales, stouts, IPAs, and ciders.

There’s a small beer garden and outdoor seating area through a set of double doors, right before you reach the production area of the site – the brewery, itself – which is kept behind thick observation glass.

Jace watches the staff work behind the glass, moving large, steel kegs and pouring samples for tonight’s tasting and brewery tour. He’s scheduled fire breathers and dancers, contortionists, and silk aerialists as the entertainment. Dan had pushed for a full-blown circus theme, but Jace managed to corral the idea and shape it into an Old-World Carnival motif for the launch. “Circus” didn’t test right with their target demo, but the darker elements of a sideshow carnival is a perfect fit. They’ve even crafted a special brew for the grand opening affectionately called Freak Show, which Jace wasn’t completely in love with during the taste test, but he nodded along with everyone else to check the item off his list.

He’s also arranged for two of the area’s most popular food trucks to set up by the beer garden, peddling everything from street tacos and noodles to gluten-free, vegan, and paleo bites. It’s an elegant solution to the delay on Outpost’s food license, which Jace only learned of two days ago. Oregon’s Liquor Control Commission requires that licensees offer at least three different types of food to patrons whenever alcoholic beverage service is available. It’d taken a small miracle to get commitments from food trucks on short notice, so his fingers are still crossed.

He has no doubt someone from the license commission will make a cameo to check that they’ve crossed their t’s and dotted their i’s. Even the smallest of hiccups tonight can impact Outpost’s license and future success.

Dan walks into view with a clipboard and a small stack of menus. “Hey, buddy...”



Jace has always loathed being called buddy and wishes Dan wouldn't insist on doing so. Being called buddy always makes him feel small.

It's not what you call another grown man, in his opinion.

It's what you call your son when he makes a home run at tee-ball. "Great job, buddy!"

It's always sounded slightly patronizing and ridiculous to him when grown men call each other buddy, so Jace can't help but cringe a little.

"Hey, Dan, what can I do for you?"

He holds up a bar menu and beams. "These look fucking rad, man!" He grins and his thin lips are barely detectable under the shadow of his full beard.

Jace is relieved to find him in a good mood with the right menus delivered this time.

Thank God for small favors.

He smiles back and gives Dan a fist bump, waiting for his back to turn before rolling his eyes.

The menus are the least of his worries though. In addition to the food trucks, he's put in calls to his press contacts to cover the event, but no one's arrived yet.

He glances at his watch dismally. There's still much to be done, but at least the finish line is in sight, with perhaps a beer at the end of the night to celebrate, if all goes well.

• • •

Flames fill the air in a blazing burst of heat, as fuel drips from the mouth of one of the performers. The light from his torch sets his sweaty chest aglow as he licks his lips and tosses Jace a wink from across the room.

Jace makes a mental note to thank Syd later for the referral. It's amazing how many people he knows in Portland.

Foster stands next to Dan in the applauding crowd, a long-suffering look consuming her face. A few of Moxy's staff have also stopped in for the occasion to support the launch and tune in for the fire dancers.

Dominick is hunched over the bar on his fourth beer, taking in the scene with a fermented look. He gives an invidious nod at the large crowd assembled, most of which is too distracted by the entertainment to notice the rumblings in their stomachs.

Derby and Alex are huddled together at one of the high-tops, engrossed in conversation.

Jace can't help but smile at the sight, wondering if Alex has finally gotten up the nerve to ask her here tonight. He watches, like a proud poppa, and holds his phone to his ear for an ETA on the food trucks, but there's no answer

"Looks like you can use this." Syd holds up a frothy beer.

"Got anything stronger?"

"Wanna run to my car with me?"

"I was kidding," Jace smirks. "Forgot who I was talkin' to..." He sneaks a quick swig of Syd's beer and grimaces. It's the bitter Freak Show special brew.

By now, he's told Syd all about his harrowing gest with Banks, ending with him being questioned at the police station for close to two hours. By the time Jace finished, Syd's jaw was on the ground in disbelief. Any questions surrounding his time with Banks were quickly set aside at the mention of Graham's murder.

"Cut into pieces?!" Syd went pale and faint at the thought of it and has since been sticking close to Jace's side, even attending tonight's launch for moral support. "Still no word from the food trucks?" He asks with a hand to his stomach.

A sigh rises in Jace's chest and he exhales a dark cloud of frustration. "I don't know what could be taking so damn long. I told them to be here at four to set up. It's almost six, and no one's answering their phones!"

Syd flicks his locks over a shoulder and shrugs. “Maybe they’re stuck at another spot and have a line of customers?”

Like the call of a sixth sense, Jace’s gaze moves to Dominick stewing at the bar. “Something doesn’t feel right...”

“Uh oh.” Syd furrows his brow. “I know that look.”

“Just gonna chat with a colleague,” Jace swears. “Have another beer. I’ll be back.”

Before Syd can reel him back, Jace is halfway to Dominick. It’s only the sound of a vehicle’s brakes squeaking to a halt that steals his attention. There’s movement outside through the tall warehouse windows, and he recognizes Jabari Brown hop out of his news van with a mic in his hand. His tubby cameraman, Floyd, tries to keep up.

“Thank God,” Jace heaves.

Jace walks past Dominick, who’ll live to see another day, and quickly waves down Foster and Dan with a camera-ready smile. “Look alive, buddy! I’ve got some press here to interview you.”

Dan pulls at his shirt and stands tall, clearing his throat. “Let’s do this!” He grins and claps Jace on the shoulder.

Foster gives Jace an approving wink and raises her glass.

That’s one problem down. Now, if only the food trucks would arrive, he can breathe a little easier.

The front doors part and Jabari dashes in wearing one of his signature, bright ties – only he and Floyd are not alone. A small herd of reporters rushes in with mics and cameras at the ready, anxiously scanning the room.

“Come on in, folks!” Dan welcomes them with open arms, smiling like a used car salesman. “Welcome to Outpost! First drinks on me!”

A short brunette from Channel 12 in the group points her mic like a javelin, and the group rushes past Dan.

“Mr. Mader!”

“Jason! Over here!”

Jace freezes as a storm of flashing lights sting his eyes.

“Did you murder Graham Tate?”

“HOW DID YOU KNOW THE VICTIM?”

“Is it true you were the last person seen with him?”

“There’s a theory you were lovers. Is there any truth to that?”

Jace stumbles back as a hoard of microphones jabs the air. The shouts and throng of questioning grow louder like an angry swarm of hornets, drawing attention from the crowd.

“Is it true you used a chainsaw?”

“WHY ARE YOU LIVING UNDER AN ALIAS?”

“Will you plead guilty?”

“WHAT ARE YOU HIDING?”

“Is it true you’re the son of the Brooklyn Butcher?”

Jace stops breathing as the last question rings out, drawing pause from the swarm of reporters who lean in with bated breath. It’s Jabari who has asked. He extends his microphone with a look in his eyes that almost says, “Sorry, brotha. Just doin’ my job.” His red tie hangs in the balance.

Jace looks to Dan and Foster who wear matching expressions of horror and confusion. Murmurs ripple through the crowd as mention of the Brooklyn Butcher spreads like a virus.

They’ve heard the name.

They know the stories that transcend time like campfire urban legends.

They remember the monster who butchered his victims alive and left a wave of sadness and angry riots in the wake of his demise.

Derby comes into focus, covering her mouth in shock as Alex quietly whispers, “Holy shit,” beside her.

Dominick watches from the bar with a satisfied smirk, licking his chops like a hungry hyena at the smell of blood from a wounded animal. There’s a shimmer in his eyes that makes the hair on the back of Jace’s neck stand at attention.

Jace turns back to Jabari and mutters, “No comment.” He takes a step back as the mob springs forward in a roar of tangled questions.

Dan attempts to cut through the crowd and bring order, but his pleas are swallowed whole.

“DID YOU KILL GRAHAM TATE?”

“Are you under investigation?”

“Jason! Will you plead GUILTY?”

“Is it true your father faked his death in prison?”

Jace is startled by the question. For years, a popular conspiracy theory (he’s largely discounted) has been that his father staged his death. The New York City Medical Examiner’s Office ruled it as a suicide by hanging in his cell. “Doctored” medical records still float around the internet claiming the injuries found at the time of the autopsy – assuming an actual autopsy was done – are inconsistent with those of a hanging. Curious fractures of the left and right thyroid cartilage and the left hyoid bone in the neck are rarely – if ever – seen in this type of suicidal hanging, according to a forensic expert who wrote a book on the case.

Dr. Rialand Bell.

Some would say he’s obsessed with Sam Mader and his nineteen victims. He continues to publish his own wild theories that include murder by the guards and an elaborate escape plan leaving the ashes of an imposter – another prisoner – as his father’s cremated remains.

As Jace grew older, he took less and less stock in theories and speculation surrounding his father’s death. Criminal law attorneys and forensic pathologists have written enough books to fill a library about his father, arguably the world’s most notorious, black serial killer, but Jace has only read a handful, rarely getting halfway through the pages before tossing it in the trash.

He’s always felt that his father no longer walks this earth, but at his core, if pressed, he’d have to confess it’s always gnawed at him that neither he nor his mother saw the body for

themselves before it was cremated; another wrinkle in the case that sparked a full investigation into the jail after news of his father's death hit the press.

Now, it seems, questions he thought were long buried have clawed their way back into the light.

“Did your father fake his death?” They insist.

Jace feels a strong tug on his arm.

“NO MORE QUESTIONS!” Syd barks.

Jace barely recognizes Syd before feeling himself being pulled through the crowd to safety.

The shouting of the reporters and outrage of the crowd become one mangled voice, screaming and ringing through his ears like a siren. His surroundings become a blur of twisted faces and fire as he staggers forward, following close behind Syd.

He catches a fleeting flare of anger on Dan's face as daylight cuts in through open doors, and his gray eyes are filled with blue sky as Syd leads him outside.

The mob follows and shouts after them, wielding cameras capturing him in real-time and tongues as sharp as knives.

He knows they'll never stop now.

Not until they expose the truth.

Not until they get their pound of flesh.

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## 15 / ALIBI

He's an overnight sensation.

News of a homicide centered around a dismembered body is headline-worthy, but add in the son of an infamous serial killer with a dash of color and it's TV gold.

Jace is parked on his couch in sweatpants, watching his life go up in flames as he shovels Bún Chả into his mouth that's just been delivered. Nina Simone wails in the background as his photo flashes across his TV screen with headlines like...

Son of the Brooklyn Butcher resurfaces in Portland.

Son of Sam linked to gruesome murder.

Human remains found in warehouse fire.

That last one's not completely accurate. Only the delivery truck was on fire, not the entire warehouse, but semantics are the least of his worries. Foster has called to "check on him," which is code for, "What in the entire fuck is going on?"

The fiasco at Outpost's launch is unforgivable, and Dan was rightfully livid. Luckily, Alex had been there to smooth things over and phone in some different food trucks. He worked a miracle to find a mobile pizzeria and a boozy ice cream truck that was a hit and a welcome distraction from the chaos the media caused.

Jace was left with no choice but to confess everything to Foster; how he'd applied for the job and has been living under an alias... how the headlines were right about his father but wrong about his involvement with Graham's death...



She mostly listened, but it's hard to tell where her head is at with their largest account in jeopardy and her pick for partner implicated in a grisly murder.

“Take a few days off,” she said, which is code for, “Don't come anywhere near the office!” She sighed on her end of the phone, then added, “Alex can help run the leadership meeting while I'm in Cancun. I'm sure he knows your accounts inside-out, so don't worry. Once you get everything sorted out, let's chat when we're both back in the office.”

He can't decipher what she means by this. The Foster he knows believes in him and is likely telling herself this is all a horrible mix-up, but it's also possible this is just their legal department coaching her through what to say.

Jace slurps down a few noodles and jolts at the sound of pounding at his door. It rattles the headache he's been nursing most of the day, reviving it back to life.

It's much too hard of a knock to be a reporter who might have carved their way into the building past security. He's given Frank strict instructions not to buzz anyone through looking for him – unless it's a food delivery. Frank looked equally surprised by the crowd of reporters outside and to see Jace in person after just spotting him on the news, but if he had any misgivings about Jace's innocence, he didn't let on.

He gave a firm nod and a small salute, like a soldier, as Jace entered the elevator and rose to his fortress nine stories up where he's since been on lockdown.

A fresh set of knocks rattles his door.

Jace peers at the locked door, thinking, just maybe, if he doesn't answer they'll go away.

“Portland P.D. Open the door!”

He knows that voice.

He knows that accent.

Jace wills himself off the sofa and squints through the peephole.

Banks peers back from the other side, holding up a piece of paper. "Search warrant. Open up."

He's wearing a tie for once.

Jace frowns at it, like a bad omen, and reluctantly lets him in. To his surprise, a parade of police officers follows close behind wearing scowls and latex gloves. Some carry boxes. Others wear a camera around their neck, like tourists.

Banks hands the warrant to Jace as his team gets to work.

At first glance, it looks like gibberish. He's too stunned to make sense of the letters and words typed on the paper shaking in his hands.

Banks gives him an appraising look. "I'm not gonna find anything here I won't like, am I?"

"Don't worry. I'm not cooking chili," Jace glowers.

"Funny." Banks pulls on a pair of latex gloves, snapping the elastic against his wrist. "Any weapons in the house?"

"Just some knives in the kitchen I never use. Oh, and a chainsaw in the dishwasher..."

"Someone's dead. Someone you knew." He cocks his head to the side. "How can you make jokes?"

"How can you walk in here with a search warrant?!" Jace erupts. "That's the joke!"

His arms fall by his side. "Just let my guys do their job. We'll be in and out. You really shouldn't be here for this."

"You're kicking me out?"

"Protocol," he says as chaos breaks out around them.

Jace watches an officer throw couch cushions on the floor while another rummages through his record collection, dropping them to the floor, one by one. He yells, "Be careful with those!"

"This is not going to be easy to watch," Banks warns. "Maybe hang out at a neighbor's? I'll come get you when we're done and we'll talk."

It's a small kindness.

Jace doesn't know his neighbors well enough to knock on their doors and ask if he can "hang out." He's been meaning to introduce himself to his newest neighbor next door but has yet to muster up the courage. He has no friends in the building and Syd's at work, so...

"I'm not going anywhere."

Frustration tightens the lines on Banks' face. "Fine. Just stay downstairs in this area. Don't move or I'll have you escorted out."

Jace finds a spot in the kitchen to settle into – the same spot where they kissed just a few nights ago – and anxiously watches as his world is flipped upside-down.

Strangers rummage through his trash and belongings, jotting down notes and taking photos as they wreak havoc on his home. An officer leaves with his laptop tucked in a clear, plastic evidence bag. A few more bags of his belongings soon follow.

His books and music now lay in a pile on the floor after being riffled through, and even his pantry is raided – although, God knows, they won't find much there.

He watches as they dump out drawers and the search intensifies.

All he can think about is how long it will take to put everything back in its place.

But he can recover from this, he tells himself. These are all material things he can replace if damaged.

As if on cue, an officer removes one of his paintings from the wall.

It's all Jace can do to keep from charging him!

Seeing his collection ripped off the wall, piece by piece, leaving exposed nails and the shadow of what once made the space feel like a home leaves him gutted. It had taken forever to hang and level the assortment of paintings – not an easy

task to do alone – and it served as a symbol of his commitment to lay down new roots in Portland.

To stop running.

Now, as he stares at the empty wall, he's unsure of what the future holds.

Jace pulls Banks aside under the staircase leading to his bedroom. "You know I didn't do this. Tell them to stop," he seethes. "How could I have set that fire – how could I have been at that warehouse when I was with you all night?"

"How do I know this wasn't your plan all along? Inviting me home with you for a drink."

"Are you fucking serious right now?"

"What better alibi than a detective to account for your whereabouts?" He shakes his head in amazement. "And you were so insistent on that second drink! For all I know, you slipped me something and snuck out and back in."

The pills in Jace's cabinet flash before his eyes.

He couldn't have...

Jace shakes the doubt from his eyes. "I didn't drug you. My bed's just soft, remember, you said so yourself—"

They fall silent as an officer walks by.

"I didn't kill Graham," Jace says. "I never left that night. Check the security footage!"

"You don't think I've already done that?" He scoffs. "Sure. That footage places us together that night and shows you leave the next morning, but Graham died days before that. Days!" He spits. "There're a million scenarios for how his body got in that truck and how the fire got started."

"After spending the night with me, you really think I'm capable of murder? That I'm this devious mastermind who's orchestrated all this?" Jace huffs. "I barely know what day it is these days! I'm a mess," he laughs.

"But you're also your father's son," Banks angles his head. "Who knows? Maybe it's in your blood, this 'murder gene,'

like the news says.”

“You don’t believe that...”

Banks stands firm. “That night was a mistake,” he whispers. “I’m sorry I came here, more than you know.”

“Are you?”

The words hang in the air.

Banks softens his eyes before lowering them to the ground.

“You know I didn’t do this,” Jace says. “I mean, don’t you find all this strange? Graham’s body being wrapped in butcher’s paper... the truck was torched, but the body wasn’t... This isn’t my father’s M.O. None of his victims were ever even found,” Jace groans. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“That’s why it’s called an investigation.”

“My father wouldn’t have gone through all this trouble to be noticed. He killed quietly. His killings never made the news.”

“Funny you’re suddenly so chatty about this father of yours,” Banks narrows his eyes. “I told you how mine died on patrol. I told you about my family. All the while, you’re sitting on this bomb that your father’s a fucking serial killer!” He catches his voice spike and closes his eyes, taking a beat to calm himself. “I don’t even know what to call you. Are you Jace? Are you Jason?”

“You know who I am,” Jace draws closer. His hand reaches for Banks but falls short, brushing the tips of his calloused fingers instead. “Everything about that night was real.”

Banks bites his lip, his broad chest falling heavy with regret. “I want to believe that.”

Jace searches his eyes for some trace of the man who awoke in his arms.

Where is the man who couldn’t stop kissing him? Who couldn’t get enough of the taste of his mouth?

Where is the man who reached for Jace in his sleep without even knowing it?

Where is the man he hasn't been able to stop thinking about?

Banks weaves his fingers through his hair. His face hardens with resolve. "I have a job to do. If you're who you say you are, you have nothing to worry about," he states in his detective's voice and walks off.

A sharp pang hits Jace's chest as he watches Banks join the search. He moves back into the kitchen, back to the spot Banks told him to wait in, where an officer ensures he doesn't touch or disturb the scene. He has to wonder if any of them know he has history with Banks. He wouldn't be surprised if Marlow has let it slip and spread like wildfire throughout the precinct.

Seems her style.

He's surprised she isn't here for this, but as he looks over the search warrant Banks has left with him, he discovers her name and signature, confirming that this whole thing is her doing. She's filed to conduct the search, leaving Banks and a band of officers fresh out of the academy to get their hands dirty.

Again, seems like her style.

Jace gives a startled jump as someone yells from upstairs. There's commotion coming from his bedroom. Officers jog upstairs, followed by Banks, who shoots Jace a look laced with worry.

*What have they found?*

Jace makes a move to go upstairs, but an officer stops him.

It's impossible to tell what's happening with the majority of the group upstairs now. Jace strains to listen to the conversation happening above him as a camera flashes continuously; the light bouncing off the walls like bursts of lightning stinging his eyes.

It feels like an eternity before they descend the stairs.

His insides go taut with dread as the officers walk towards him with quiet fury in their eyes, jaws clenched tight. Banks is at the rear, holding something in his gloved hands. He cuts through the line of policemen, and it becomes clear they've

found Jace's box of memories stashed away in the air duct behind his bed.

This doesn't surprise him.

The average person may have overlooked it, but collectively someone in this bunch was bound to find it. If his true identity wasn't already leaked by the press, Banks would surely know it now by the box's contents.

They've no doubt photographed his old passport and IDs and discovered the old photo of Jace and his father, likely in awe of the faded keepsake.

It would probably earn a pretty penny on eBay or at auction.

Jace has heard of this.

An entire underground industry of traders and "collectors" who buy artifacts and pieces of history that once belonged to famous serial killers and psychopaths. Items from "monster celebrities" who never starred in any movies but have plenty of fans who write to them in prison and pay big money for a piece of them.

A comb.

A letter.

Shitty artwork made in their cell that sells for thousands...

Then, there's the online trade with items used by the murderer or items taken from the crime scenes themselves.

*Murder memorabilia...*

*Murderabilia.*

He's heard it called many things.

Looking at the box in Banks' hands, Jace has to wonder if it will turn up in someone's private collection someday when he's long gone. He wonders how much someone might pay for a rare photo of Sam Mader and his son smiling eerily into the camera.

Banks holds the box carefully in his grip as if it's a bomb.

“That’s mine,” Jace says between clenched teeth. “Those are my keepsakes. Don’t take those too.”

“Keepsakes?!” Banks balks, stunned by the plea. “That’s what you call these? ‘Keepsakes?’” He swiftly opens the lid of the small, metal tackle box and points angrily. “There’s a goddamn tooth in here! Look at this! There’s hair... Look!” He thrusts the box forward in disbelief.

The color drains from Jace’s face as he leans forward and glares into the box.

His stomach tightens at the sight of a tooth, the roots stained with dried blood that’s turned black. There’s a band of dark hair, like scorched molasses, bound together by a small rubber band. Finally, resting atop the photo of Jace and his father sits a small, plastic zip bag containing what appears to be a whole fingernail.

Banks’ face is mangled with disgust. “Are these your ‘trophies?’”

Jace’s mouth falls open, but no sound escapes.

“Something tells me this tooth – and everything here – is a perfect match for Graham’s body down at the morgue. Tell me I’m wrong,” he challenges. “Tell me this isn’t Graham’s tooth and his hair and his missing fingernail...”

“I... I don’t—” Jace squints and shakes his head rapidly. “That’s not mine!”

“You just said it was yours. In front of ten police officers.” Banks shuts the box and nods at one of the officers standing behind Jace. “Let’s go.”

Before Jace can react, a strong set of hands takes hold of his wrists, twisting his arms behind his back.

“Wait! Wait a minute...” He struggles against the hard body behind him.

“Jason Mader, I’m placing you under arrest for the murder of Graham Tate...”

“Wait! What?! I didn’t do anything!”



Banks watches with sad, wide eyes as the officer wrestles Jace into a corner. “You have the right to remain silent...”

“Banks! I didn’t do this!” Jace screams, his head and torso pressed tight against the wall.

“Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law.”

“This wasn’t me! Banks! You know me...”

“You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed for you.” His words trail off and lose their vigor at the sight of Jace. It’s hard to believe this is the same man he once kissed in this very spot.

Where is the man who took his breath away that night?

Where is the man he couldn’t stop thinking about after ditching his friends at Ethel’s?

Where is the man he imagined introducing to his family in Sayulita?

Where is the man he was beginning to fall for, and who is this monster standing before him now?

Jace utters a small cry as the cold metal of the handcuffs tighten around his wrists and click into place.

Like Banks, his head is dizzy with questions; questions that pull and tug at the fabric of his sanity. Questions that urge him to travel back to the night he said goodbye to Graham, back to the last time he saw Graham alive.

Jace is quiet as they lead him away, restrained and in handcuffs; ready to move him through the crowd of reporters who no doubt saw the police units enter and are waiting to film the outcome.

Jace is quiet as Banks squeezes into the elevator with him, ignoring the stunned look on his handsome face that begs for an explanation – even when his training and the evidence tells him everything he needs to know.

Jace is quiet as his mind searches for the truth... and the elevator doors slide shut, sealing his fate.

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## 16 / BURNT SUGAR

The courtroom looks like any other courtroom Jace has seen on television with its mahogany wood paneling and leather chairs. It's full of onlookers but, thankfully, press are not allowed in.

As Judge Obika walks in, he can't help but release a small breath.

She's brown and curvaceous with long, graying locks draped over her shoulders, cascading down the blackness of her robe like a silver waterfall. Her high cheekbones and smooth skin read late-thirties, which means she's likely in her late-fifties thanks to "black girl magic" and good genes.

She bangs her gavel, calling court to session, and leans back in her chair, giving Jace a thin, assessing look.

He looks well-rested and alert in a faded, gray jumper that's oddly the same color of the sweatpants he was arrested in.

After the chaos of yesterday's arrest, it's a wonder he'd slept as peacefully as he did. Perhaps better than he's slept in ages. Once his head hit the pillow, he drifted into a dark slumber far from the trials of the day.

Once Banks delivered him to the station, he'd been booked and processed to be held in custody until his arraignment. A wave of dysphoria hit him as he rolled his fingertips on the wet ink pad, watching his fingers leave dizzying spirals of consternation on the page.

*Is this what his father had endured?*

*Is this what it's like to walk in his shoes?*

His cell was small and smelled of piss, sweat, and metal. The smell got into his mouth, coating his tongue, and he could taste the acrid tension in the air.

Once night fell, the noise and screams from the other cells filled the muggy air like a symphony, luring him to sleep.

This morning, he met with Audrey Sedgwick, an attorney Syd referred to him who handles most of Hope House's juvenile cases pro bono. Audrey's wife, Justine, also happens to know Judge Obika from the hot yoga studio she frequents in Alberta. Or at least, that's the story.

Hot yoga may very well be a euphemism for a pre-grad late-night bout of experimentation during their PSU days, but who's Jace to judge?

He'll leave that to Judge Obika.

Audrey stands beside him now at his arraignment. She's thin with olive skin, wide-set eyes, and straight, jet-black hair dusting the shoulders of her blazer. You'd never suspect that, underneath, her arms are covered in tattoos – including a lengthy portrait of a pin-up girl striking a Rosie the Riveter pose. She'd listened to his version of events with quiet concentration, taking notes and only interrupting with questions she's predicted may come up at trial.

She asked about his history of mental health and how far back his treatments with Dr. Kessler go.

She asked him to recount how his evening with Graham ended, and if anyone can corroborate his story.

She asked about evidence found at his loft, the "trophies" taken from Graham's body and the half-empty vial of Halothane police found in his medicine cabinet.

"Halothane?" Jace nearly leapt from his seat at mention of this.

"After you were arrested, the search continued, and it was discovered in the back of your medicine cabinet with your medication," she explained slowly. "That's some pretty strong stuff you're on, by the way – but can you tell me why you had Halothane in your medicine cabinet?"

He can't, of course. He can't explain any of it. Over the years, Halothane has become increasingly hard to come by in North America – although it's still widely used in clinical practices in developing countries due to its low cost. How a vile found its way to him is baffling. Also, to know that Graham possibly

suffered in the same way his father's victims suffered makes him nauseous.

"What if the police planted it there?!" He suggests wide-eyed.

It's not the answer she hoped for. Wild conspiracy theories accusing the police of planting evidence isn't a great start. She winced, showing the first sign of doubt, but pressed forward, aiming to prepare him for his arraignment and any worst-case scenario.

Judge Obika reads his charges in a voice that's majestic and damning all at once. She leans forward to ask how he pleads, and Audrey gives him a tiny nudge.

"Not guilty, your honor."

There are murmurs behind him from the gallery, but sticking to Audrey's earlier recommendation, he stands tall and holds eye contact with the judge.

The hearing moves forward and the whole thing is over much sooner than Jace expected. There are only a few statements from the judge that he understands, one of which is on the topic of bail, which although has been set high, Audrey gives him a quick look to indicate the option alone is a godsend.

A little dazed by the abrupt bang of Judge Obika's gavel, he shakes Audrey's hand before being escorted back into a holding cell, where he mostly ponders how he can pull together enough money to make bail.

An hour later, his prayers are answered as his clothes are delivered to his cell and he's told he's posted bail.

He shuffles out of the station to find Derek and Syd, who greet him with customary, worried smiles as he hops into Derek's truck.

"I brought you some clothes." Syd holds up a gym bag. "It's donated stuff from Hope House, but I think it should fit. There's also a bottle of gin," he winks. "That's from me."

"When did you dye your hair?" Jace gasps.

It's lime green.

“Ohh, you like?” He gives his locks a shake.

“I love!”

“Just doin’ my part to keep Portland weird,” he shrugs.

“Are you hungry?” Derek asks. “What the hell did they feed you in there?”

“You don’t wanna know. I’m starving.” Jace gives them both a grateful hug.

“We drove by your place. There’re still a few reporters outside.” Syd swings his locks from his eyes.

“I can’t go back there.” Jace’s head spins at the thought of walking into whatever mess the police left behind. “Not now.”

“If we had an open bed at Hope House, you’d be welcome to it, but we’re full, babe.”

Derek rolls to stop at a traffic light and gives Jace a timid smile. “You can crash with me,” he offers. “Maybe take a shower while I whip up somethin’ to eat? Some real food?”

A dangerous proposition.

Jace takes in Derek’s soft, amber-brown eyes and quietly weighs his options.

Dinner and a hot shower at his ex’s?

*What could possibly go wrong?*

“That’s a great idea!” Syd grins to himself in the backseat, ever the matchmaker.

Derek and Jace share a meaningful look, flirting with the possibilities as the light turns green.

• • •

Derek’s pit bull, Stella, greets them at the door. Her tail wags as she jumps and spins in circles, whimpering until Jace bends down to love on her.

Once, Stella had felt like his dog too.

She looks older with more white spanning the bridge of her nose, but she still has the energy of a puppy.

“Look who’s here!” Derek says in a playful tone meant for Stella. “Did you miss this guy?! Huh? Did you?!”

Jace turns to mush as he scratches between Stella’s ears. Memories flood back of the three of them going for walks after dinner... waking up with Stella asleep at the foot of the bed...

Derek shoots him a complicated look as he tosses his keys on an end table. “Make yourself at home. You know where everything is.”

Jace stands and brushes the hair off his sweats. Stella still sheds like crazy. “Thanks for this. And thanks for bailing me out.” His shoulders fall. “I can’t believe you used your prize money from ‘À La Carte’! I’ll pay you back.”

“Don’t worry about it, J,” he gives an easy smile. “You know I’d do anything for you...”

His words linger.

Stella jumps on Jace, stealing the moment. He pats her on the head and chuckles, “Guess I’ll go clean up.”

“I’ll start dinner,” Derek says. “There’re clean towels somewhere in the bedroom, I think.”

Jace nods stiffly and leaves to wash the day off his skin.

Derek watches him go, allowing his concern to take over his face once Jace walks off.

Derek’s apartment still looks the same...

Messy.

Somewhere under dirty clothes and cookbooks strewn everywhere are beautiful, dark, hardwood floors. The kitchen was an obvious selling point with its high-grade stove and wide marble island. But the bathroom had once been Jace’s favorite spot with its rain shower head and heated floors.

Jace strips and stands under the hot water for what feels like hours, allowing his mind to wander and travel back in time.

Life could have been much simpler when he was with Derek. Life might have been perfect had he been in a better place. If he hadn't had so much baggage. If Derek hadn't been the one to find him unconscious on the shower floor with an empty pill bottle in reach...

*An incident so shattering it drove Jace to seek help from Dr. Kessler in the first place.*

He stares down at the tiles, gritting his teeth and replaying that day in his mind as the water beats down on his head. Finally, he wills himself to emerge from the shower and takes a slow breath, counting back from ten. He glimpses at the clothes Syd has packed and turns to Derek's closet, finding a pair of shorts and an old David Bowie t-shirt of his to wear. With the bottle of gin in hand, he walks back to the kitchen to find Derek hard at work as Maxwell plays in the background.

His breath catches at the sight.

Derek's changed out of his shirt, opting for a black tank that clings to his stocky torso, gripping the small spare tire at his waist. His arms wear a collage of sweat and ink that colors his biceps as he hovers over the stove burners. Tiny beads of sweat rest on his smooth, bald head that he wipes away with the back of his hand.

He looks good enough to eat as Jace nears, pouring a short glass for them.

"Feel better?"

"Much better!" Jace sits at the island and takes in the spread of ingredients before him. "You're making my favorite?"

Derek smiles, full blast. "I haven't made this in a while," he says, grabbing a handful of cilantro. "Also... it's my way of apologizing for being such a dick the other night at Ethel's."

Jace's smile fades.

"I had no idea all this was goin' on until Syd told me later that night." He clamps his lips together tight.

Jace's eyes fall to the cutting board on the island, catching the scent of fresh cilantro and ginger.



“If I’d known, I...” he trails off, shaking his head dubiously. “I’d already had too much to drink that night, and then I saw you at the bar with that guy—”

“The detective who wound up arresting me,” Jace says ironically. He dares not provide further detail. If Derek was jealous before, he’d be devastated to know Banks had spent the night with him.

“Sorry for the tough guy act,” he says with a stroke of his beard. “You know how I get when it comes to you...” The bass drops in his voice, striking a chord.

“You made a complete ass of yourself.”

He shrugs and admits, “Part of me thought maybe that’s what you wanted, you know?”

“To see you act like a meathead?”

“No. To see me fight for you,” he croons. There’s a sexiness to his voice that’s effortless.

Jace sighs as that all-too-familiar feeling creeps back. He feels it heating his cheeks and grazing his arms softly, filling his chest with warmth as it whispers sweet nothings into his ear coaxingly.

“Don’t say you didn’t like it,” he teases.

Jace takes a long, desperate sip of his drink, praying for strength.

He watches Derek pull a whole chicken from his fridge and lay it on the cutting board. He straps on a black leather apron, the kind he wears at work, and begins to sharpen a large kitchen knife.

Stella’s ears perk up from her spot beside Jace’s barstool at the sharp sound of steel on steel.

Jace watches the light flicker and bounce off the knife as it rotates in Derek’s large hand, sliding against the honing rod with calculated pressure. The shrill sound of the blade scraping against the rod shreds Jace’s thoughts.

He watches closely as Derek begins to drag the knife against a damp whetstone at a perfect 20-degree angle, sharpening the blade with careful accuracy.

“Gotta keep my babies sharp,” he says in a gruff voice, his face hard with concentration.

Jace nods, unable to look away until Derek’s phone pings twice, back-to-back, breaking his focus.

Derek grunts and pulls his phone from his jeans.

“Someone’s in demand,” Jace says.

“Please,” he huffs. “That’s my dad.”

“Aww!” Jace melts instantly. “How is he?”

One of the best things about dating Derek – aside from the food – and the sex – and Stella – had been getting to know Derek’s parents.

Unlike Jace, Derek had a picturesque childhood with two normal parents and family trips to Disneyland. As an only child, he’d been spoiled rotten and, to this day, he speaks to his mother – a science teacher back in Sacramento – daily. His father, very much a man’s man who enjoyed a decorated military career, supported Derek when he came out to them. Still, he quietly held tight to his reservations until Derek brought Jace home the following year at Thanksgiving.

“He’s good. You know, they ask about you all the time.” His smile is bittersweet. “I finally had to tell them we broke up.”

Jace goes limp in his seat. “Derek...”

He shrugs, going back to his knife work. As Jace watches, mesmerized, he carves into the chicken, breaking it down with the skilled precision of a surgeon. “I knew it’d break their hearts. Maybe, part of me was holding out, hoping...” He glances up to gauge Jace’s reaction.

Jace drops his shoulders softly in return.

Of course, Derek would do this now when Jace is at his most vulnerable.

It doesn't help that he's saying all the right things. He's always been good at that; knowing just what to say and do to comfort Jace. If it wasn't making Jace's favorite dish of curry chicken over rice after a long day, he'd dim the lights and massage Jace's tension away after starting a hot shower for him.

He always knows what to do, and tonight is no different.

"A guy can hope, right?" He winks and gives Jace an adoring smile.

Sweet like spun sugar.

Jace smiles back weakly and watches him butcher the chicken; working his knife around the joints, removing the leg quarters, separating skin from bone. He expertly butterflies the thighs, his hands making the movements instinctually as they've done hundreds of times before. His knife cuts deep along one side of the breastbone until it hits the ribs, then he carves away the meat using the curve of the wishbone as a guide.

When he's done, he stands back proudly to inspect eight perfect pieces – wings, drumsticks, breasts, and thighs – ready to be seasoned and seared. There's no waste on his cutting board, just the empty shell of the chicken's carcass.

He gives a nod of approval, washes his hands, then brings out a grocery bag of ingredients from his pantry, adding them to the pile on his cutting board.

Yellow onion.

Habanero peppers.

Thyme.

Tomatoes.

Then, something catches Jace's eye. "Crème Chews?!" He holds up a small, gold foil bag of candies. "I haven't had these since I was a kid! I thought they stopped making them."

"You've had these? Are they good?" Derek asks. "The restaurant wants to do a new dessert based on old-fashioned candy. I thought I'd make ice cream out of 'em."

“That would be amazing!” Jace swoons and cracks open the bag, inhaling the nostalgic aroma of smoky, sweet caramel.

“I’m also thinking about Cracker Jacks—”

“No, just wait until you try one,” Jace insists. “They’re sooo good!” He unwraps one of the candies and feeds a piece to Derek.

A moan escapes and he closes his eyes, moving the candy from side to side in his mouth, savoring the flavor profile.

“Hmm! Tastes just like—”

“Crème brulee, right?! Well, sort of.”

Derek nods thoughtfully. “This could work! Maybe with some sort of crumble on top I could torch...” He pulls a notepad from one of the kitchen drawers and begins to scribble.

“Maybe a peach or mango reduction underneath...”

“I’d eat that.”

“I think I have some mangos in the fridge. Wanna be my taste dummy?”

It would be like old times. Jace was always the one to sample his new recipes; even Derek’s wildest kitchen concoctions that didn’t stand a chance of making the menu.

“Hey, how’s work?” Jace asks. “Any word on your star?”

“Nah,” he sucks his teeth. “Just may not be in the cards for me. I’ve got other shit to worry about though like – get this – they want me to start ‘live streaming’ from the kitchen now.” He makes air quotes. “Live streaming!”

“I think that’s a great idea – and there’s no need for the air quotes, grandpa. It’s a real thing. Everyone does it.”

“What the hell do I know about social media and going live?” He grumbles. “I’m not even on social media anymore!”

Jace can relate. Outside of managing social media campaigns for clients, Jace has no personal use for social media. It’s easier this way, having left the boy from the deli back in Brooklyn. The last thing he needs is deranged fans of his father’s work trolling him.

“Can you imagine me tryna make ice cream from scratch with my phone in my hand the whole time? Dropping it on the stove or in a pot of hot water?!”

“Sooner or later, you have to give in and create an account. Tons of chefs are doing it now. It’s on-trend. Promise me you’ll at least create an account. Just practice shooting around the house...”

“I guess,” he pouts.

“Promise me.”

“Fine,” he huffs. “I promise.”

Jace sucks on the hard candy, satisfied. “You know, if this new dessert’s a hit, you should name it after me on the menu.”

“Yeah? Deal,” he laughs. “It’s umm, it’s funny. I saw these and just picked ‘em up on a whim. I thought they’d be too sweet.” He folds his arms and swirls the candy inside his mouth, “You say you had these when you were a kid?”

Jace twists the empty, gold candy wrapper between his fingers. “When I worked at the deli, one of my dad’s regular suppliers would give me one of these when he dropped off an order... Mr. Myer.”

As the taste of caramel and vanilla bean swirls around his tongue, Jace is transported back to Cassex Deli.

Much like Mr. Catlett, Davie Myer had been a favorite of his at the shop. If Jace squints hard enough, he can see Davie Myer walk in with a dolly of boxes for his father to sign off on. He always had a Crème Chew for Jace and one already in his mouth moving around in his jaw like chewing tobacco, so he always smelled like caramel and vanilla as he gave Jace a high five and asked how he was doing in school.

Unlike Mr. Catlett, he wasn’t much to look at. He was an oaf of a man; sort of a gentle giant with mousy-brown, thinning hair and a bushy mustache that would curl around his smile like the tail of a Cheshire cat whenever he made lame jokes. He was married with a son around Jace’s age who played baseball and he talked about often, and he always shook Jace’s hand on his way out, making Jace feel like an older equal and

more of a man than he was at the time. Unlike with Mr. Catlett, Jace's father seemed to have a stronger rapport with Davie. His entire mood would lift when he strolled in with a delivery. They'd swiftly handle business and then retreat into the back office or step outside for a smoke while Jace watched the shop and worked the register.

"He was such a nice guy!" Jace squints. "I wonder what happened to him."

Derek bites into the candy. "It's funny hearing you talk about the deli." He crunches and makes a face.

"Is it?"

"I mean, it's just weird hearing you talk about it now. You never really talked about it much before."

Jace thinks back and realizes Derek's right.

He hadn't made much effort to talk about his past while they were together. He was always careful of how much to divulge, always fearful Derek would see him differently if he knew the truth about where Jace came from.

Derek takes a mango from the fridge and playfully tosses it to Jace, who barely catches it.

"You know, when you first told me about your dad, a lot of stuff started to make sense." Derek's face saddens as he walks around the island and sits on the stool next to Jace. Stella pops up from her spot on the floor and wags her tail. "I just wish you would have told me while we were still together, instead of just breaking things off." There's a twinge of hurt in his voice. "We could have worked through it, you know. I don't judge you for what he did."

Jace shrinks in his seat. "I know that now. Back then, I just... I dunno. I was still dealing with a lot." He clenches his jaw and looks off. "I think I was still trying to figure out why he did what he did, you know?"

Derek winces as if feeling the weight that's been dropped on Jace's chest, as he sorts through memories.

Jace brings a hand to his chest, absentmindedly clawing at the fabric.

“He never gave a reason that day in court. Never explained how he chose his victims. Why he killed them. Nothing,” he snorts. “So, I always suspected he just couldn’t help himself. Like... maybe it was just something inside of him that woke up one day and took over. Like a virus.”

Derek’s eyes sear into him as he takes Jace’s hand into his own. “I know things are crazy right now, I do get that,” he pivots, trying to assure him. “I just want you to know that I’m always here for you. You can always count on me.”

“That means a lot.” Jace squeezes his hand and smiles softly, “Thanks, Derek.”

“I mean it. You can stay here as long as you like. I’ll take the couch.” He looks off with a quick raise of his eyebrows and clears his throat. “I’m here for whatever you need.” His thumb strokes Jace’s knuckles as their eyes meet again.

“Whatever I need?” Jace asks weakly. His pulse quicks as the suggestive twinkle in Derek’s eyes becomes less coy and more of an invitation burning between them.

It’s been months since they had sex, but Jace can still feel Derek’s large fingers wrapped around his neck from their last late-night tryst. They made it as far as Derek’s couch, peeling their clothes off along the way before Derek pushed him down on the cushions with a hungry smile and ravaged him. Unlike Banks, Derek knows from history what buttons to push to make his toes curl. He’s memorized the curves of Jace’s body like a road map, traveling the peaks and valleys with the tip of his tongue. He knows how to tease and stroke Jace’s body like an instrument, building up the melody until tears well in Jace’s eyes, and their song reaches an earth-shattering crescendo.

Jace came so hard that the neighbors knocked on the ceiling the last time he was here.

Derek’s eyes darken with desire as he leans in, erasing the space between them. “I’ll always take care of you.” His voice softens. “I’ve never stopped loving you.”

Their lips meet, and his kiss tastes like burnt sugar and scorched caramel.

Jace feels his body awaken, stirring in his shorts at Derek's familiar touch. He gasps for air as Derek's hands roam under his t-shirt; the rough pads of his fingertips grazing his chest and nipples that harden under his touch.

Their kiss burns bright as Derek pulls him close, savoring the sweet taste of Jace's tongue in his mouth.

Suddenly, it feels as though Derek may devour him whole.

Jace's eyes snap open and he slowly gathers his strength to draw back. His body throbs as he pulls away. "Let's, let's take this slow," he says, out of breath. "Okay? I could use some time to figure things out."

Derek nods back slowly with stardust still in his eyes. "Sure. Of course!" He says, stung. He gathers his composure as he settles back down to earth. "Whatever you need, babe."

"My head's just all over the place right now."

"Right. Of course." Derek sits back on his stool, flustered but smiling through it.

"It's not that I don't want to."

He shakes his head robotically. "I get it. You're... in the middle of an investigation, work is crazy. Last thing you need is me..." He waves a hand in the air between them. "Doing this. I get it."

Truthfully, Jace wouldn't mind a rough ride down memory lane to forget his troubles for a while. Derek has always had a way of putting him at ease and making him feel like life isn't all that bad – even when the dark shadows of a past he's tried to outrun threatened to consume him. Even when it felt like he may never be free of them, and there was only one way out...

Derek has always been there to kiss away the pain.

Jace pulls Derek into a tight hug and mumbles into his neck, "Thank you for loving me so much."

He can feel Derek's smile on the other side.



He sighs as tears blur his eyes, but then his body begins to tense against Derek.

He can't put his finger on it, but something doesn't feel the same. Something doesn't feel right.

He should feel happy.

Derek's letting him crash and is making his favorite meal with homemade ice cream from his favorite childhood candy. As far as ex-boyfriends go, he's hit the lottery.

He should feel safe.

If there's anyone who'll fight for Jace, it's Derek. Even if he comes across like a meathead at times.

Perhaps most importantly, Jace should feel at peace.

But as Derek tightens their embrace, Jace's eyes can't help but go back to the knife lying on the cutting board, its sharp edge shining in the light.

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## 17 / SIDECAR

The lobby bar is next to empty.

Jace stares into the bottom of his glass. Half-melted ice cubes and the scent of citrus and cognac swirls in his hand.

He's exhausted from the day, having slept awful at Derek's the night before.

Derek took to the couch, leaving Jace to wallow and toss in bedsheets smelling of his cologne... leaving Jace to wonder with bated breath if Derek might abandon his post in the living room and slip under the sheets in the dead of night. The prospect kept Jace restless and awake, slightly hopeful with the knowledge that he'd be too weak to resist and fight Derek off.

At one point, as he slipped into a deep sleep, the bed creaked with a sudden weight that jolted him awake, snatching him back into consciousness. It was only Stella coming to lick the side of his face before making two circles and plopping down with her head resting on his leg, like old times.

Only then did he drift off, but not without nightmares of Graham and returning to jail.

Jace awoke sweaty and exhausted to the scent of pancakes and bacon. Peach cobbler pancakes and maple bacon, to be accurate.

Derek whistled in the kitchen, bathed in sunlight, while Stella watched on, laser-focused on the plate of savory bacon as if it might topple at any moment.

Jace had forgotten how good Derek looks in the morning, standing in the kitchen making breakfast for them in his boxers. He's another of those annoying morning people, singing and whistling to themselves as they start their day. He looked particularly happy this morning, and Jace could only guess it had to do with him stumbling out the bedroom in boxers and Derek's old David Bowie t-shirt.

What a sight they were. If Syd could have been a fly on the wall, he would have died from the sheer serendipity of the moment.

Derek peered at him enticingly as he drizzled warm maple syrup on his pancakes, licking the sweetness from his fingers. Peppy and already one coffee in, he launched into conversation...

How did Jace sleep?

Would he like more bacon?

It's crispy, just how he likes it!

What's on his agenda today?

How about dinner later?

He can cook!

Or if Jace prefers, they can go out.

He can make a reservation at Desta's, an Ethiopian restaurant where they had their second date.

Maybe a movie afterward?

The new Lena Waithe movie's out.

Reviews are good, or at least according to one of the busboys at the restaurant.

They could also just stay in if Jace wants.

Open a bottle of wine...

Put on some Jhené Aiko and Esperanza Spalding...

Jace chewed quietly, thinking they might as well just jump on the breakfast table and go at it, rolling around until they're both sticky from the syrup and sex. But he knows it's the last thing he needs right now... As good as he knows it would be, something still doesn't feel right.

So, he rushed through breakfast, explaining he had a meeting with his attorney, Audrey. Then, he hugged Derek on the way out, knowing deep within himself that he won't return.

His meeting with Audrey proved arduous and ran long, stretching well beyond lunch and into late afternoon. She asked a million questions, mostly centered around the evidence found at his loft.

The pieces and bits of Graham in his hidden box are incriminating enough, but the Halothane is the real smoking gun.

For every question, Jace had an answer for her – most of which were a variation of “I don’t know” or “I don’t remember.” When more questions about his medication and history of therapy arose, Jace could sense the uncertainty in her voice, and for the first time, it dawned on him that she may truly not believe him, and perhaps rightfully so.

She asked if he has a history of schizophrenia or if he has been diagnosed as bipolar or having any degree of a multiple personality disorder. All of which, he checked no next to.

She did her best to end on an encouraging note, reminding him that, evidence aside, reasonable doubt is the highest standard of proof in reaching a verdict. If the judge or jury has a reasonable doubt about his guilt, he cannot under legal standards be convicted.

It does little to make up for an afternoon of anguish; reliving the days centered around Graham’s death and having his sanity questioned. But, when it comes to the subject of doubt, Jace has plenty of that laying around.

He left Audrey’s downtown office and checked into a hotel, where he now nurses the last of his cocktail alone at the end of the bar.

He sends Derek a text, short and sweet, explaining that he’s grabbed a hotel for the night, choosing one close to Audrey’s office for convenience. It’s a flimsy excuse he knows Derek will see through, but the Derek he knows will also take the hint that he needs his space.

Dinner and a movie sound good on paper, but they both know it won’t end there.

Together, they're a force of nature. When things were good in the past, they were very good; all smooth sailings and clear skies. But, when they get ahead of themselves, things quickly spiral off course and turn stormy, proving there truly is such a thing as "too much of a good thing."

Derek can be intoxicating, even dangerously so. It had been so easy to fall for him and get lost in the relationship when he moved to Portland. It had been so easy to dive headfirst into the depths of Derek's affection and stay there, warm and content, far from everything he left behind in New York. But, a small part of him always feared that one day he wouldn't be able to find his way back to the surface.

Jace's thoughts are cut short by the bartender who slides a fresh cocktail in front of him.

"On the house. Compliments of the gentleman..." The tall brunette behind the bar points to a man alone at the other end and raises a sharp eyebrow. "He never does this," she whispers, raising both brows now.

Befuddled, Jace looks to discover his benefactor watching on with an amused smile resting on his lips. He's ruggedly handsome with a five o'clock shadow, copper skin, and deep-set eyes the color of water. His dark hair is cut low and wavy, and he looks tall even while seated. He wears a plum dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up, his tie long forgotten. He waves two fingers in Jace's direction, like a salute.

Jace salutes the air with his drink, mouthing a leery thank you before taking a small sip for show.

It's only a few minutes before he strolls over, tall and lanky, just as Jace suspected.

"Hope you don't mind the extra sidecar. I just can't have anyone looking unhappy in my hotel... I like to see smiling faces."

The words "my hotel" register along with something close to an English accent.

"Levi Chandler." He extends a warm hand.

Chandler.

The name matches the gold logo on Jace's drink coaster.

Jace shakes his hand and musters up a poor excuse of a smile. "Jace Lannister. Nice place you have here."

"Thank you." He slides onto the stool next to Jace. "There're twelve more just like it in the works for the west coast. I'm actually in town for a meeting with my builders."

"Guess you're like the Monopoly guy, huh... with the top hat and the cane..."

The comparison's lost on Levi. He tilts his head with a playful glint in his eyes.

"You know... Boardwalk? Hotels? Go directly to jail... do not pass GO?"

"Ah! The board game!" He laughs. "No, not quite. That guy's loads richer."

Jace nods and takes a slow sip. "Well, I was never good at Monopoly." Unless you factor in the "go directly to jail" part. He's been there, done that. "Hope I wasn't looking too 'unhappy' earlier. Just lots on my mind."

"Fancy a chat then? I'm an awful good listener." His accent is heavy and musical.

"I don't wanna bore you. I'm sure a man like you has more important things on his plate."

"Nothing," he emphasizes, "is more important than my guests' experience."

Jace stifles a laugh. "I bet you say that to all the guests."

"Only the ones I like."

"We just met. Don't tell me I've bewitched you with my charms already," Jace laughs cynically. He's far from feeling his best. He can only guess what he must look like, having not shaved. He's still in sweats and an old gym t-shirt he borrowed from Derek; dressed far too casual for the glamorous hotel he's checked into. Perhaps that's why Levi has singled him out; to gauge if he's a guest or just a random bum with expensive taste in cocktails who's wandered in off the street.

Or, perhaps, Levi knows exactly who Jace is from the news and this is his way of defusing any potentially toxic scenario that might follow. Perhaps, he doesn't want his lobby stormed by reporters should Jace's location be leaked.

"Do you know who I am?" Jace asks, bracing himself for the answer.

Levi's face softens. He raises a finger to signal for a drink and gives Jace an appraising look. "I only know what the news here says and, from experience, I know that doesn't mean much." Like magic, a new glass of rosé appears. "I've had my run-ins with the papers and the media." His face sours. "I just went through a rather nasty divorce." He pauses to see if this rings any bells, but it's clear Jace is unfamiliar with the scandalizing details of his divorce that's made international news. "Levi Chandler, golden child of the Chandler family dynasty, files for divorce amidst gay rumors," he recounts the headlines.

It's one hell of a headline.

"I think I can top that," Jace smirks. "How about 'Son of the Brooklyn Butcher arrested for gruesome homicide – linked to dismembered body.'"

Levi's eyes go large. "Touché."

"I won't cry victim and say they're 'crucifying' me," Jace says offhandedly.

He scoffs. "Just 'doing their jobs,' right?"

"Oh, you should see the case built against me," Jace says in awe. "I'm almost wondering if I really did it!"

Levi laughs, showing perfect teeth. "Bloody hell. Sounds like you're in the thick of it."

"Any advice?"

"Aside from hiring the best publicist money can buy?" He laughs and takes a healthy sip before scratching the whiskers on his face. "Well, there's no substitute for preparation. That's really my best advice. Hope for the best, but certainly, prepare for the worst. And remember, the press is not the jury," he



adds with a meaningful nod. “It can feel that way, certainly, seeing yourself on TV and seeing the headlines... but remember, they’re just words on a screen. They don’t define you or seal your fate. Unless the headlines are true,” he adds, raising an eyebrow.

Jace inhales through his nose, weighing the question dangling in the air. The last few weeks flash before his eyes and with new resolve, his lips find the words, “I didn’t do this.” He looks at Levi head-on and says, “I’m innocent.”

It dawns on him that outside of his “not guilty” plea, this is the first time he’s said the words out loud with certainty.

*I’m innocent.*

A smile tugs at Levi’s lips. “Well, there you have it, ay?” He raises his glass in a toast. “To innocence.”

Jace clinks his glass and gives a sly smile, “Why do I get the feeling that you, sir, are not so innocent?”

His laughter fills the bar. “I never said my headlines weren’t true.” His blue eyes flicker with mischief before he winks and tosses his head to swallow the last of his wine.

A rush of warmth fills Jace’s chest as he suppresses a smile.

*How does trouble always seem to find him?*

“So, are you visiting the area alone?” Jace dares to ask, glancing at Levi’s bare ring finger.

“Afraid so.” His face falls for only a moment before brightening again. “There’s someone I was hoping would join me on this trip. I’m in the states so rarely these days, but he, uh... well, things are complicated.”

“Ah!” Jace smiles into his glass. “Now there’s a word I know very well. I’m very good at complicated.”

“We’re trying to give the long-distance thing a proper go, but...” he shrugs. “Who knows. I’m trying to convince him to move to London, but I’m not having much luck.” He laughs bitterly and moves his gaze to hang wistfully in the air. “He wants to stay close to his mum. They have a farm! With

chickens and horses and... 'taters.' It's a very different life from what he'd have with me, I suppose."

Jace turns to him with a half-smile. "If it's meant to be, it will be," he assures him.

"Good advice." He half-smiles back and adds. "For now, we're sort of doing our own thing. He's gone through some things... I think he's got some healing to do if we decide to make things official."

Jace nods appreciatively, silently wondering what the person he speaks of might have "gone through."

He can't possibly imagine.

Levi carefully sets his empty wineglass on the bar and settles back on his stool comfortably, stretching out his long legs.

"So, I hope you are enjoying your stay here so far?"

Jace looks about the lavish bar and lobby, decorated in white marble and gold accents, and shrugs. "Meh. I'd give it four out of five stars."

"Four bloody stars?!"

"I mean, it's a lovely hotel. I love what you've done with the place."

"But?"

Jace hunches his shoulders by his ears. "Five stars is a pretty big feat. I have to be pretty impressed to give a five-star rating."

"Lucky for you, I do love to impress." Levi shoots him a sexy smile. "Just tell me what I have to do to earn five stars."

It's a loaded question.

Jace's mind quickly does the math, weighing the pros and cons. He would love to blow off some steam, and, for the moment, Levi comes without strings and the history and complications tied to Derek.

Plus, they're already in a hotel. Levi's hotel, at that.

It couldn't be more perfect.

However, shaking the cognac haze from his eyes, he considers the aftermath.

“I should probably get my tab and head up. It’s been a long day,” Jace says.

A flash of disappointment ripples across Levi’s face, but he smiles diplomatically and waves a hand. “Of course. And, please, no worries about the tab. It’s my treat.”

“That’s very kind.” Jace gives him a final look as he stands and rolls his shoulders back. “And thanks for the advice. I feel ready to take on the world again.”

“Just glad I could get you to smile,” he says.

Jace shakes Levi’s hand on his way out. Their handshake lingers in a warm grip as their eyes meet, and Jace draws his last bit of strength to say goodbye and retire to his room.

Once inside his junior suite, he flips the lights, turns the deadbolt, and sighs dubiously.

He’s either made a very mature decision or is incredibly stupid.

He’s not sure which.

He kicks off his shoes and starts to call for Alexa – but catches himself with a light chuckle.

Here, at The Chandler, the rooms are controlled by an iPad. From closing the curtains to ordering room service, a touch of a button is all it takes.

He strips down to his boxers and orders room service; a hearty pasta dish with scallops in a champagne sauce with a glass of water to wash his medicine down with.

It’s only once he’s halfway through dinner that he glances at his phone.

Derek still hasn’t texted him back.

*Not good.*

He settles under the covers as ‘The Golden Girls’ plays in the background, allowing his mind to wander and get lost in

thoughts of Derek and his pending court date.

There's a lot of work ahead, but as he drifts off to sleep, a sense of peace washes over him. A sense that, perhaps, just maybe... he's found his smile again.

• • •

Morning greets Jace with sunlight shining in his eyes and a knock at the door that drags him from bed.

He opens the door to find a bellman in a black uniform staring back. With one hand over his heart, he takes a slight bow and says, "Good Morning, Mr. Lannister. My name is Stefan. I am here to escort you to your new room."

"My new room?" Groggy from his medication, Jace rubs the sleep from his eyes and shakes his head at a loss.

Stefan is short but stocky with blonde hair and piercing eyes the color of technicolor hills Julie Andrews once twirled upon. He flashes a set of braces as he smiles. "Your room has been upgraded, sir."

"I didn't ask for an upgrade."

"It's complimentary, sir." He smiles again, but his eyes dull impatiently. "I'm here to take your bags."

Jace peers back into his suite with an awkward shrug. "It's just me. No bags."

So, he quickly dresses and follows Stefan down the hall and into the elevator that plays a watered-down ballet version of a Radiohead song over its speaker. Once inside, he watches the numbered buttons climb and light up until, finally, they arrive on the penthouse level.

"There must be some mistake," Jace insists.

Stefan uses a gold key card to unlock the double doors at the end of a long hallway and escorts Jace inside with another silver smile. "Welcome home, Mr. Lannister."

Jace does a lap around the suite that's twice the size of his old one, appraising the tasteful décor. Large slabs of abstract art cover the walls; gray muted colors matching the tufted sofa and chairs in the room. Dark, hardwood floors stretch throughout, leading to a full kitchen, a bedroom behind another set of double doors, and a lounge area with a fireplace, pool table, and bar. Just beyond are French doors that usher him onto a large, wraparound balcony with a view of Mount Hood in the distance. Jace pokes his head into the bathroom, which is all-marble with a jetted plunge tub large enough for two.

On the kitchen counter, there's a bucket of champagne with a handwritten note.

Still aiming for that 5th star! Keep smiling. It looks good on you...

-Levi

Jace smiles and rubs the card stock between his fingers as Stefan approaches.

"The suite is voice-activated," he explains, handing Jace a card with instructions and sample commands. "Please. Give it a try."

Jace faces upwards toward the ceiling and says in a clear voice, "Turndown service!"

On cue, soft jazz plays from the ceiling's speakers as the sheers and blackout curtains close one by one. The lights turn on and dim to a warm glow, and the sleek, stone fireplace in the lounge ignites!

"Neat parlor trick."

"Is there anything I can get you before I leave, sir?"

Jace digs in his wallet for cash. "Please tell Mr. Chandler I said thank you, and I'll be giving my review some thought."

No harm in playing hard to get, Jace figures, although he'll be sure to write a lovely five-star review for the hotel once his laptop is returned to him.

Stefan graciously accepts the tip and bows on his way out, leaving Jace alone with his thoughts.

He reads Levi's note again and opens the bottle of champagne.

The cork pops and echoes throughout the suite like a gunshot. The bubbles tickle his nose before burning his lips as he takes a first sip from the neck of the bottle. He pours himself a full glass and makes his way onto the balcony, out into the warm breeze of the morning, and sips as the city below passes him by. For the moment, he feels safe with the knowledge that no one knows his location.

Not Derek.

Not Syd.

Not Audrey.

Not his job.

And certainly not the press.

The last few days have been a whirlwind, but he can finally take a moment to breathe and embrace a moment of peace now that the worst is over.

He relaxes his shoulders and rolls his neck with quiet relief, but the feeling is short-lived as he stares into the distance and it strikes him that perhaps the worst has yet to pass.

What if this is only the quiet before another storm?

What if he's actually in the eye of the tornado?

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## 18 / SORRY

Jace polishes off the bottle of champagne that sits heavy on his stomach now. He's camped on the sofa following his news coverage that, to his surprise, has spawned several special reports about his father.

It now dawns on him that the timing of Graham's murder is oddly close to the anniversary of his father's suicide. Several crime TV channels have worked up hour-long exposes to remind everyone where it all began, complete with dramatic, poorly-done reenactments telling the tale of the Brooklyn Butcher.

It's eerie seeing old photographs of his father on the screen, back from the dead.

Old news footage from the riots makes Jace light-headed. Watching the deli being vandalized by mobs with rocks and signs demanding justice for the victims is an image he knows he'll see when he closes his eyes for the night.

The few people interviewed, who purportedly claim to have been regulars in the deli, all look like strangers to Jace except for Jeremy Catlett, who he'd recognize anywhere – and who he's slightly surprised to see is still alive. On a reflex, a smile reaches Jace's lips at the sight of him on the 65-inch screen splattering the dimly lit walls of the lounge with flashes of light and color. He's still well-dressed with handsome features, but age has crept up from behind and stolen the life from his eyes. Worse is the cutting assertion he gives the interviewer in response to Graham's murder.

“Of course, Jason did it!” He rocks back in his seat on camera and swats the air with his long, elegant fingers. “Sam taught that boy everythang he knew. Like father, like son!”

Jace leers back in disbelief, the air knocked out of him. He stares, unblinking, until his eyes water from the brightness of the screen and he's forced to turn away. Thankfully, a knock at



the door gives him reason to peel himself from the sofa and stretch his legs.

The lights in the suite glow brighter, on a sensor, as he makes his way to the double doors and pulls them apart.

“Huh! You’re not sushi...” Jace frowns at Banks. “I thought you were room service.”

“Sushi on a room service menu?” He peers back suspiciously in his off-duty jeans and a faded, gray Trail Blazers t-shirt under his black jacket. His beard is fuller and exponentially grayer since Jace last saw him. He looks tired around the eyes. “That’s not a thing.”

“Of course, it’s a thing. This place is amazing.” Jace leans against the door frame with folded arms. “How did you find me?”

“It’s sort of what I do,” he says. “I’m a detective. Or at least, I was.”

Jace blinks back.

“I’m on administrative leave.” His handsome face sours. “Something about improper conduct with a suspect during an investigation...”

“Nooo!” Jace gasps. “I don’t believe it! How could you?”

“Are you going to let me in?” His accent flairs.

“Why should I?” Jace’s face hardens as Banks gives him a look full of anguish.

“I come in peace,” he mutters.

“Fine,” Jace huffs and steps aside. “But I’m not sharing my sushi.”

Banks strides in with a long whistle, taking in the length of the suite that stretches into infinity. “Wow. Someone’s doing well. Quite an upgrade from a jail cell.”

“Why are you here?”

He’s too distracted by the chandelier over the pool table to answer.

“If you’re here with another search warrant, knock yourself out. I’m wearing everything I have at the moment.” Jace recognizes what he’s described is a strip search, but luckily this goes over Banks’ head.

“No search warrants this time.” His hazel eyes soften as he slumps closer. “I was just following the evidence, Jace.”

“Oh, it’s Jace now? Cuz you seemed very confused about that last time... ‘Am I Jace? Am I Jason?’ Remember that?!”

“Bust my balls all you want. I know you’re upset.”

Upset.

Jace laughs under his breath. “I’m gonna ask you one more time why you’re here. Tell me, or I can call security and have you removed. I happen to know the owner,” he shrugs. “and I don’t think Levi will take kindly to having his guests harassed. Ruins the five-star experience.”

“You know Levi Chandler?” A bemused smile takes over. “The hotel mogul. That Levi Chandler.”

“He bought me a drink. He was... very nice to me when I needed someone to be nice to me.”

“I bet he was,” Banks growls. “From what I hear, he’s a playboy. You know someone almost died in one of his hotels? A shootout! You think you’re safe here?”

“Did you bring me a bulletproof vest?”

“I came to warn you. FBI’s takin’ over the case. It’s a whole new set of rules now,” he says. “Your father slipped through their fingers. Now they have a chance to ‘right a wrong’ in the books and put you away for good.”

Jace chews on this as he plops down on the sofa.

It would be a public win for sure.

“Marlow’s pissed,” Banks adds smugly. “Hates that they’re takin’ the case from her.”

A small consolation prize.

Jace gives a small shrug, twisting his lips to one side.

“They’re looking into the truck,” Banks says.

“The delivery truck?”

“Yeah. It’s probably still being processed or with forensics, but I’ve been doing some digging of my own.” Without warning, he plops down next to Jace, spreading his legs wide as he leans back to pull something from his jacket.

A photo.

“Here’s the truck from the scene prior to being torched.”

Jace accepts the photo and gives it a careful scan.

“It’s a ‘vintage model ‘94 Feinkost Light Duty Box Truck.’ They don’t make them anymore. The truck you’re looking at – the truck Graham was found in – went missing from a plant in New York. Stolen.”

“From New York?!” Jace peers closer at the photo. “You’re sure?”

“Part of the VIN was salvageable. Even with the plates switched after it was stolen, this type of truck isn’t hard to track down with part of the VIN.”

“So…” Jace strains as he focuses on the photo, as if the answers lie hidden within the grainy pixels. “There must have been a report filed, right?”

“That’s the thing,” Banks grimaces. “It was stolen three years ago.”

“Three years ago?!”

“It goes missing in New York three years ago.” He taps the photo. “Then pops back up in Portland with a dead body inside.”

“This doesn’t make any sense.”

“When did you move to Portland?” Banks asks. Of course, he knows the answer by now, but in true detective fashion, he can’t help illustrating his point.

“Uhm, it was three summers ago. Early July. The 6th! I remember because the 4th had just passed, but people were

still shooting fireworks.”

He taps the photo again. “Police report on the theft was dated July 5th. It goes missing around the same time you move to Portland.”

“Soo... wait. Are you suggesting I took the truck?!”

“If I’m the prosecution, I can find a way to make that stick,” he argues. “There’s no video of the theft at the plant in New York. Cameras were down. So, anyone can at least suggest you stole the truck.”

“That’s crazy. Why would I steal a meat truck?”

“You’re the son of the Brooklyn Butcher. It’s bound to come up at trial,” Banks warns, rubbing the back of his neck.

Audrey has asked Jace about the truck, but her focus has mostly been on Graham and the evidence at his loft, which he can only assume was planted. His mind spirals with this new information, trying to piece together how the truck found its way to him.

“It just doesn’t make sense,” Jace insists.

“Maybe not to you, but look at the facts. You’re from Brooklyn, and the truck Graham’s body was found in was stolen from Brooklyn – stolen around the same time you moved clear across the country to Portland. Doesn’t take much to connect those dots. What are the odds, right?” He wets his lips, rolling them together. Despite the direness of the matter, his voice is calm and collected. It reminds Jace of the day they met in his office, but he’s equally amazed by how much has changed between them since then.

“So, that’s what I’m up against then, being linked to the truck.” He wonders if Banks will allow him to keep the photo to show Audrey, or at least snap a picture of it with his phone.

“That and evidence from the search...” A darkness passes over his face. It’s a topic he’d love an explanation for, but one fire at a time. “I’ve been trying to track the truck from the time it was stolen,” Banks says wearily. “The plant’s still in business, but there’s a new owner. He didn’t even know about this happening three years ago, so what does he care, right? Plus,

there's no CCTV of the theft. Hardly anyone keeps footage that long."

Jace looks off. "So, what now? I mean, how can you track it?"

"I'm looking at tolls along the most likely route. Gas station footage. Hotel parking lots," he shrugs. "It's not the easiest job, but the good news is that I'm not looking for the average car. This is a very distinct truck, and it would have had the green Feinkost logo on the side of it at the time. It's bound to turn up in footage somewhere. It's all in knowing where to look."

"Like knowing where to find me?" Jace surmises. "How did you find me? Really?"

"I have my ways," he smirks.

"You followed me, didn't you?" Jace leans back into the cushions with a matching smirk. The thought of Banks watching him go into Derek's apartment and leave the next morning gives him a strange thrill. He must have seen Jace go to meet Audrey and then check into the hotel. "Just say it. Admit it. You've been following me because you know in your heart I didn't do this, and you couldn't wait to tell me how wrong you were."

Banks shakes his head and laughs.

"Just say it," Jace shrugs. "Two little words. I'm... sorry."

He slumps his shoulders. "I was doing my job, Jace," he says. His voice is level but firm. "But I do regret the way things went down. Especially between us. I wish..." He scratches his head, grabbing a handful of his hair. "I wish things could be different... I really do." There's a heaviness to his voice, weighing down his expression that's full of remorse.

"Wow... You're really bad at apologies," Jace says.

"I'm here, aren't I?" He reaches for Jace's hand but stops himself. "I wouldn't be here if I didn't believe in you, if I didn't want to help, and make things right."

Before Jace can attempt to explain how it felt to be arrested in his own home, there's a knock at the door.

“That must be room service.”

Banks gives a playful smile and says, “You’re really not gonna share?”

“My sushi?” Jace hops up and tosses a look over his shoulder. “I ‘regret’ I won’t be able to share, Detective Banks. I wish things could be different...” he chirps. “I really do.”

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## 19 / ROSE CITY

A breeze floats off the Willamette River as runners and lovers holding hands move about the River Walk, taking in the sun-soaked day. Under a cloudless sky, the Saturday Market buzzes with food truck lines and rows upon rows of vendors selling art and handmade goods.

From artisan jewelry made from used skateboards to blown glass and farmer's market wares like "atomic pickles", there's something for everyone in the crowd of shoppers. Street performers draw small circles of curious observers along the long stretch of concrete tracing the river, while musicians play for spare change lining the bottom of their guitar and violin cases. Children waddle and run through the sidewalk fountain, screaming in delight as the jets seem to anticipate their every move. Some have come prepared for battle in swimsuits while others, much to their parent's resignation, have joined in the fun fully clothed, shoes and all.

The lawn is sprinkled with people lying on the grass or camped on blankets while "the bubble lady" entertains another set of children. She's here every Saturday with her bucket of suds and a giant wand made of dowels and rope, casting huge, life-size bubbles floating in the breeze. They glisten with holographic swirls of light before popping or being chased down by grubby hands.

Syd takes a huge bite from the Buddha Bowl he's ordered, containing black beans, brown rice, cilantro salsa, and kimchi with a house tahini sauce that's a smidge too bitter for his liking. He chews loudly in his red Rose City Rollers t-shirt and cut-off shorts; his bare legs tucked and crossed underneath him as if he's about to do yoga. He listens to Jace, who sits across from him, bringing him up to speed.

They've found a shady spot under a tree, away from the bustle of the shoppers and lines of hungry people waiting for food.



Jace wears gray shorts and a pale blue tank top he bought on a clothing run, after buying a new laptop. He cracks his toes and wiggles them before burying them in the grass. “So, according to Banks, the truck was stolen three years ago!” He bellows. “Can you believe this shit? The whole thing makes no sense.”

“Wait...” Syd swallows and digs a fist into his hip. “How the hell could you not tell me you banged Detective Hottie?”

“So, out of everything I just told you, that is what you’re choosing to focus on?”

“I mean, I saw you guys together at Ethel’s – but you never told me you slept with him! This is just like episode twenty-four, season two, when Dorothy falls for the detective!”

“This is nothing like that.”

“Does Derek know?”

“God, no!” Jace nearly chokes on his ramen. “And let’s keep it that way. Actually...” He chases down his food with a sip of beer. “Don’t tell him where I’m staying. At least, for now.”

“Why not? Are you guys, like, not in a good place?”

They’re both momentarily distracted as a jogger passes; his cinnamon skin and bare chest glisten in the sunlight as his shorts cling to his glutes. To top it off, he looks like he might have stepped out of a barbershop recently, and Jace is a sucker for a fresh fade.

“Uhm...” He’s forgotten what he was going to say. “Shit. I forgot what I was gonna say!”

They both laugh.

“I asked what’s up with you two. I thought things were on the up and up with you crashing at his place and all...”

“Ugh, right. Things are just so complicated with us – as usual. I’m just not in a good place to rehash anything, and...” Jace squirms, unsure how to say what comes next. “There’s something off about him lately.”

“Off how? Like insanely-jealous off? Cuz you should have heard him that night at Ethel’s. He went ballistic when he saw

you with Columbo.”

“Who’s Columbo?”

“You know. The detective! From TV.”

“You’re giving him nicknames now? Don’t do that.”

“Why can’t I give him a nickname?”

“That whole thing is done and done. We’re past the nickname phase.”

“But he’s still helping you with the case, right? Even though he’s suspended? That says something.”

Jace isn’t sure what it says, but he can’t let himself get tangled up in Banks again. “I just hope he finds something on whoever stole the truck. That could be the key to this whole thing.”

Syd chews and asks, “What about all that shit they found hidden behind your bed?”

Jace starts to answer but stops short. “I... never said where they found it...” He tilts his head and meets Syd’s blank stare.

*How can Syd possibly know where Banks’ team discovered the box containing pieces of Graham’s remains?*

“You told me on the phone. When I was connecting you with Audrey because you needed a lawyer, remember?”

He doesn’t.

“You were freaking out because they arrested you for this shit you didn’t even know was there,” Syd says.

It’s possible.

The day he was arrested was a blur. He might have said anything in his state of panic. Also, his recollection of events isn’t what it used to be. He’s still losing bits of time, and the days seem to easily bleed into the next ever since he was released on bail.

Syd’s face is unflinching. “You seriously don’t remember?”

“No, I, uhm. Yeah, I guess I just forgot for a second. That day was so crazy.”

Syd shoots him a wary look before changing the subject.

“Wanna hear something else crazy?”

“Sure.”

“I finally took the plunge! I applied for a business loan to start my own non-profit. I got the call yesterday that I’m approved!”

“Syd! That’s fucking amazing.”

“I start shaking just thinking about it,” he grins. “It’s starting to feel real! I’ve already looked at a few buildings that could offer room for boarding... I have some people in mind for staff – just to get things started, you know?”

“Yeah, right...”

“And Audrey’s helping with all the legal stuff,” he waves a hand. “I have to register a name, get permits. Ugh. So much to do, still.”

“I’m seriously impressed. At least one of us has our shit together. I’m proud of you.” Jace pauses as an older couple passes, giving him a long, inquisitive look. He sharply turns his head in the opposite direction and mutters, “So much for no one recognizing me. That’s the third time today.”

“Maybe they think you’re a celebrity. Like a movie star,” Syd smirks. “You know they think we all look the same.”

Jace wonders who might be cast to portray him in the inevitably bad TV drama to come, rehashing the events surrounding Graham’s murder. His face drains its color and he rolls his neck in a tense circle.

“I’m just tired of it. Anyway, congrats again on your loan. That’s a big first step.”

“Angel’s taking me salsa dancing tonight to celebrate.”

Jace passes him a surprised glance. “Yeah? So, things are back on with you two?”

“We had a long talk. I basically came out to him.” He grabs a sip of Jace’s beer before continuing. “I could tell he was a little

embarrassed he didn't know. He asked why I didn't tell him before."

"What did you say?"

"I mean, it's not like being trans comes with an instruction manual, you know? When is the right time to tell someone you're interested in?"

"You did it when you were ready. That's important."

His eyes make a circle as he shrugs. "I told him if it's a deal-breaker, that's fine, but I'm gonna keep bein' me all day long."

"I know that's right," Jace shakes his head. "Life's too damn short to live it for someone else."

"Exactly!"

"Well, you know I love you, and I'm proud of you." Jace makes a sappy face.

"Thanks, babe. You know what, though? He actually surprised me! He's not... hung up on it like I was worried he might be. He said he just feels a little lost and doesn't want to fuck things up. He's never dated a trans man before." He stops to aim a finger at a pregnant woman walking by. "It's a girl," he chirps matter-of-factly.

Syd has two hidden talents. One is being double-jointed, which is mostly useless outside the bedroom; the other is the innate ability to predict the sex of unborn babies in his presence. It's an odd claim, but for as long as Jace has known him, Syd has never been wrong. Like an oracle who has crossed over, worldly of a dimension few understand, he's been granted a sixth sense for doing gender reveals.

It's quite the party trick.

Any time someone announces they're pregnant, he guesses correctly well before the sonogram. Among his circle, he's the go-to once women find out they're pregnant and want to start planning what color to decorate their nursery in.

He's made at least fifteen correct predictions Jace can think of offhand, including two of his co-workers, five waitresses,

Derek's cousin, Brenda, and a cashier who wasn't even aware she was pregnant at the time.

When his co-worker, Sara, who had been trying for years to conceive, came into work with news of twins, he correctly predicted boys but didn't have the heart to tell her one was already gone.

Every gift has its curse.

"Anyway, we're just gonna take things slow." He gathers his locks into a bun on top of his head using a hair tie on his wrist. "Starting with tonight."

"Slow is good."

"Although..." A devilish smile grazes his lips. "I really wanna jump his bones!"

They burst into a fit of laughter, and Jace retorts, "'Jump his bones'?! Did you really just say that?"

"He's just so yummy. And those dimples!" Syd swoons, channeling a boy-struck Sydney Aldridge from the depths of his teenage diary. "I'm gonna try to behave, but no promises."

Jace smirks and finishes the last of his ramen.

"What are you up to later tonight?"

"Aside from stress-eating and trying to prove my innocence? Not much!"

"You'll get through this," Syd says soothingly and stretches out his legs that have fallen asleep. "You're the smartest person I know, and you're no killer."

Jace gives a weak smile.

"Audrey won't let you go to prison. She's on it. Trust me."

Jace peers off over the horizon of the river, unsure of his fate and what the next few days will hold. The only thing he's sure of is that time is not a luxury he has.

He's staring down the barrel of a gun... with no clue whose finger is on the trigger.

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## 20 / TROUBLE

The door opens, and Banks holds out a plastic bag full of to-go containers. “I brought dinner.”

Jace cautiously accepts the bag. “Is this a peace offering?”

“It’s sushi.”

Of course, it’s a peace offering, wrapped in sticky rice and nori, but it’d be off-brand for Banks to say so. Jace glowers and steps aside, allowing him to enter.

“It’s from Kumi, my favorite. Better than that room service sushi!” He calls out over his shoulder. Soon enough, he’s opening containers on the kitchen counter, creating a colorful spread of rolls and sashimi.

“I hope you brought more than food,” Jace says, exasperated as a headache inches closer. He yanks at the hem of his gray t-shirt and pulls in a deep breath. “I spoke to Audrey today. Don’t suppose there’s a Hail Mary in that bag...”

Banks holds up his phone and gives it a wave. “I have something to show you,” he says with a mouthful of rice and spicy tuna. He punches the screen on his phone. “Sending you some video stills of our stolen truck.”

“Video?” Jace perks up.

“Don’t get too excited. It’s not a good angle. It’s gas station security footage. Parking lots and pumps.” He chews loudly. “My lab guy found two stations that keep downloads of their CCTV tapes. Couldn’t get a shot of who was driving, but it’s definitely our truck.”

Jace’s hands shake as he opens the attachments from Banks. “Where is this?” He squints.

“One’s from a gas station in Kearney, Nebraska. The second one’s from Twin Falls, Idaho.”

“This is good, right? It’s a lead,” Jace assumes.

“Not much of one. Both are bad angles, so you can’t see who’s at the pump or the wheel.”

“What about receipts from the pumps?”

“From three years ago?” Banks breaks apart his chopsticks. “I’ve put in the request, but if there’s a record it can take weeks to come back.”

“I don’t have that kind of time.”

Banks slides a container of edamame in his direction. “Make a plate. I know. Trust me, I know.” He softens his gaze. “But this is where we’re at. It’s a start.”

Jace swipes between the photos, glaring at the shadowy black and white images containing the truck. In the first photo, the door is ajar, but it’s impossible to make out the figure standing on the other side of the gas pump. In the other photo, had it not been for part of the truck’s logo jutting out behind a column, Jace’s eye might not have caught it.

“This is the best footage they have?”

Banks gives him an insufferable look through his chewing. “If you had any idea how many man hours it took to find that...” His brow creases. “I’m not supposed to be working this case either, remember? Luckily, Roy did this favor for me before he left for his honeymoon.”

Jace blinks. “Your friend who was getting married,” he recalls. “So, they...?”

“They did. Probably sipping Margaritas in Puerto Vallarta right now. They fly back soon.”

That sounds nice. Jace would love to be on a beach far away with a strong margarita and sand between his toes.

“How was the wedding?” Jace asks.

He swallows before answering, “They had a mashed potato bar.”

He need not say more.

Jace gives an impressed nod.



His eyes soften as they fall on Jace. “You know, I thought about inviting you as my date,” he mumbles, mostly to himself. “I was gonna ask. Before all this.”

Jace bites at his lower lip and rolls his chopsticks between his fingers.

Banks clears his throat, shifting back into his detective’s voice. “Don’t get discouraged about the truck. Seriously. A break in a case can come just as easily. Just come eat something, before I eat it all.”

They exchange weak smiles, and Jace joins him; pouring them the last of the white wine he ordered from room service earlier.

Eventually, Banks comes out of his jacket, and Jace streams Dizzy Gillespie from his phone, stealing occasional glances at the photos of the delivery truck on his screen.

The scent of Banks’ cologne is stronger than the last time he was here. He looks like he’s had some rest and a shave since Jace saw him last. His hair is still a tousled nest of slick, black waves and curls Jace once ran his fingers through, grabbing handfuls as Banks bobbed his head between Jace’s thighs.

The image stays with him, seared into his memory.

Having Banks sit across from him in an armchair with his shoes off as he devours the remaining salmon rolls is a strange sight. It feels like it could be a “quiet night in” for them if they were dating, but this night is anything but that, and Jace has yet to fully forgive him.

Jace reminds himself that although Banks is suspended for the moment, he’s still very much a detective – a figure of the law. He reminds himself that he’s a suspect in a murder investigation and can hardly step outside without being recognized from the news. He reminds himself that although things may be all sugar and spice between them now, Banks would arrest him again if he had it to do all over.

“Check your phone,” Banks says gruffly over the music. “One of your boyfriends just paid you a visit.”

Jace ignores the jab and swipes open a new text from Banks. He squints into the brightness of his screen at a photo of his

building. There, leaving from the lobby at dusk, is Derek in dark sweats and a hoodie. It might appear that he was out for a late jog except for the brown paper bag in his right hand. There's an unreadable look drawn on his face as he exits, unaware of the photographer parked across the street.

"Just came in. I ordered surveillance on your building," Banks explains. He's been hoping for insight on the evidence found at Jace's loft but then Derek, of all people, just showed up.

"You've been watching my place? Like a stakeout?"

He cracks his knuckles and settles back in his chair. "Mostly to see what might turn up since your arrest. Any idea what he's doing there this time of night while you're away?"

Jace shrugs. "Probably looking for me, I guess. I haven't told him where I'm staying."

"And why's that?"

"I see what you're getting at," Jace points a chopstick. "I just haven't, okay?"

A slippery smile slides across his face. "Trouble in paradise again?"

"I'm not discussing this with you."

"How did you two meet anyway?" He asks.

Jace folds his arms after a bite of sashimi. "You really want to know?"

He stares back, unyielding.

"Fine. We met at speed-dating. He was Bachelor #10. We went on a real date afterwards, and the rest is history."

But not ancient history.

Banks gives this some thought. "So, he just happened to be at speed-dating that night."

"Derek and twenty-nine other guys. Anyone can sign up, you know."

"Exactly." Banks gives him a pointed look. "What if you actually didn't meet by chance that night?"

The thought gives Jace a chill, but he quickly shakes it off.

“That hasn’t crossed your mind by now?”

“You’re stretching, Columbo.”

“Columbo?” He makes a face.

“Never mind. My point is, you’re connecting dots that aren’t there.”

“Dots like what might be in that bag he has with him?” He arches his eyebrows.

“You’re stretching.”

“Why are you protecting him?” Banks marvels. “I’ve seen that temper of his flair up, firsthand. He damn near wanted to take my head off when he thought there was something between us.”

Jace is deliberately quiet as Banks cracks a wide smile.

“Huh!” He leans back in his chair. “He doesn’t know, does he?”

Jace huffs and turns his attention back to his phone, back to the photos of the truck. He mumbles, “Doesn’t know what?”

“About us.”

“There is no us,” Jace says without looking up. “Never was apparently.”

Looking wounded, Banks takes a moment to swallow the hard lump in his throat before he speaks. “That’s not fair.”

“Life’s not fair,” Jace bites back. “Trust me, I know all about being dealt a shitty hand of cards. A serial killer for a father and a nutcase for a mother who, knowingly or not, was his accomplice! We can’t choose our parents...” Graham’s words echo eerily between them. “And we can’t help who we fall in love with. That’s not fair.”

Banks leans forward in his chair and strokes a hand over his face. He slowly closes his eyes and braces himself before asking, “Are you still in love with him?”

The answer isn’t a simple one.

“We’re great on paper,” Jace offers, falling back into the couch cushions. “We’re great in public and at parties, we’re great in extremely stressful situations... We’re great in the kitchen, we’re great in bed... Everything’s great except for where it really counts. Our timing!” He says ironically. “We just can’t get it right, and it’s like...” He searches for the words. “It’s like we keep trying to make it fit. We keep trying to bend time to our will. It’s like trying to fit a square into a circle, and it just doesn’t fit! It just doesn’t fit, but what do we do? Instead of just walking away like normal people, we implode. And then we make up the only way we know how... And it starts all over again.” Jace sighs, scratching the back of his neck and adds, “He’s always been the jealous type, but lately...”

Banks looks on with sadness in his whiskey-colored eyes. “I can’t blame him for being crazy about you.”

The mix of his words and his accent sluggish from the wine would normally light a fire under Jace, but instead, he turns back to his phone, grinding his teeth.

“You’re enough to drive any man crazy,” he tries again with a swagger in his tone this time. His eyes strain, heavy with the weight of his thoughts.

“Crazy. Sounds about right,” Jace snorts and his expression dims as he peers at his phone with a critical eye. “Are you sure these photos are of the same truck?” He asks.

“Positive. Why?”

“The front tire is different on this one. Look.” He passes Banks his phone and kicks back on the sofa with a sigh.

Banks studies the photo, his brows scrunched in concentration as he flips back and forth. “Huh! You’re right.” He stands to his feet. “Good eye!”

“It’s all the proofing I do,” Jace says lightly and thinks back to the Outpost print campaign and the hours of reviewing drafts that filled his desk once upon a time.

“Do you see what this means?” Banks gets a wild look in his eyes.

Jace is too tired to fully make the connection, so he lets Banks do the honors.

“This means they must have gotten a flat!” He walks over and plops down next to Jace to illustrate his point. “See, here’s the photo in Nebraska, and the front tire on the driver’s side looks like the back tire, right? But here, in Idaho,” he swipes, “it’s a different front tire, right? Looks like a thinner, cheaper spare or a... I don’t know... maybe it’s like a donut for this type of truck? Different brand? Point is, they put on a new tire, and I bet they didn’t do it themselves. Not with this model truck.”

“So...” Jace leans in to complete the thought but falls short.

“So, they probably had it towed or a service station replaced it. This truck is practically vintage. I bet they had to place an order for this tire.” He curves his lips to one side, thinking.

“So, somewhere between this gas station and the one in Nebraska, someone most likely changed this tire for them. If we find out who, they could have a receipt, an invoice for the order, or, hell, they might even remember the truck! This could be the break we need!” He stops to catch his breath, looking as if he wants to kiss Jace for the discovery but doesn’t.

“How do we... Where do we even start?” Jace feels a sudden weight on his chest that could only be his anxiety returning.

“Let me worry about that.” Banks rests a hand on Jace’s knee and gives it a reassuring squeeze. “It’s not as big of a footprint as you may think. I can pull a list of service stations on that route in no time and start working my way through them.”

“But, what about your suspension? Won’t you get in trouble?”

He laughs softly and gives Jace’s knee another squeeze. “I think it’s too late for that, Jace. I fell in trouble the moment I met you.”

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## 21 / NEMESIS

Dominick is the first person Jace sees as he walks into Moxy. The irony is almost crippling.

His red glare sears into Jace's skin while the rest of the staff watch from afar, pretending to work amidst shuffling papers and incautious glances.

"Here to pack your shit?" He asks, loud enough for all to hear.

"I'm here to see Foster."

"Take a number. She's in a meeting with Alex. Looks like neither one of us is making partner."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Jace balks. His knees weaken as he mulls over Dominick's claim.

"That little shit's managed to weasel his way in." Dominick folds his wide arms, and his azure-blue eyes darken. "He really 'saved the day' cleaning up that mess you left at Outpost after your little media stunt. She's given him your accounts since you've been out."

Jace is aware Alex stepped up to help during his absence. He knows Alex helped smooth things over by calling more food trucks on the night of the launch, but to now be completely taking over his accounts?

"I'm sure it's just in the interim," Jace says, forcing a smile. "Alex knows my accounts, so who better? It makes sense," he tells himself.

It's what he would have done in Foster's position. Still, he can't help but feel stung by this news.

"I'm surprised to see you show your face here." Dominick saunters closer. Something sharp hides beneath his tongue. He inches closer and his voice is a near whisper. "Shame your food trucks didn't turn up for the launch. Someone must've called and canceled 'em last-minute... At least, that's the rumor."

Jace's mouth falls open. He gapes at Dominick in shock. "That was you?!"

"Oh, I wish I could take credit for that," he chuckles. "But no. I made a few calls of my own that night though, and I gotta tell ya..." He leans closer and sneers into Jace's ear, saying, "Watching the press eat you alive was better than I imagined."

Jace staggers back. His heart bangs in his chest and his hands take on fists.

If what Dominick is insinuating is true and Alex sabotaged his food truck order to "save the day" and make himself look good, Jace can't help but feel stupid. He should know, by now, that there's no loyalty in this business. Alex saw an opportunity to go after his spot and seized it. He begrudgingly has to admit it was well played. But the revelation that Dominick tipped off the press turns his blood cold. It's the mere tip of the iceberg with a mountain of questions lurking beneath the surface.

Aside from the police and Derek and Syd, how had Dominick, of all people, come to learn his true identity?

How long has he known?

"I always knew there was something off about you."

Dominick circles like a vulture, then draws a quick smile, for show, as one of the editors pass by. "I knew you were hiding something when I couldn't find a record of a 'Jace Lannister' at one of your previous jobs. What did you do? Use fake references? Recruit people you know to answer when Foster called?"

He must have gotten his hands on Jace's resume.

"I knew you were hiding something, but I had no idea your old man was a fuckin' serial killer. Jesus." He looks disgusted. "If it's not me, I'm glad Foster's choosing that little douchebag over you. Someone like you has no business bein' on the loose." He grits his teeth as his rage boils over. "It's just a matter of time before you're back in jail where you belong, you freak!"

Jace's mind spirals.



*Armed with the knowledge of Jace's identity and the bloody legacy he's inherited, how far has Dominick gone to keep him from becoming partner?*

"You're the freak," Jace says between clenched teeth. "You've had it out for me since day one. Trying to steal my clients... Watching my every move here... You're obsessed!"

Dominick laughs, but as Jace stands before him, something finally clicks into place. He sees Dominick for who he is now as the pieces come together.

By now, everyone has stopped pretending to work. It's a full-on show without intermission.

His nemesis leans in, close enough for Jace to smell his stale breath. "Better watch your back, Butcher Boy. All it takes is one slip-up to put you back in prison—"

"Dominick," Foster calls out from down the hall. "That's enough."

Jace looks to find her standing outside her office, fists dug into her hips. She beckons for Jace to join her and gives Dominick a weak shake of her head. Behind her, Alex shuffles down the hall, back towards his desk. He tosses a look over his shoulder but offers Jace no further acknowledgment.

*So much for loyalty.*

Jace quickly moves out of Dominick's reach. Even with an audience, there's no telling how low he may go to instigate a fight. One slip-up is all it takes for Jace to violate the conditions of his bail.

As he walks to Foster's office, he tosses a glance at the handsome, red devil he's been battling ever since he walked through Moxy's doors. He never imagined that one day they'd be at war, but in desperate times, you never know what someone is truly capable of. If Dominick's anything like his famous poker-playing father, he hates to lose, and the thought of losing again to "someone like Jace" might be enough to have sent him off the rails.

Jace wonders what Banks might say about this theory.

He knows that if anything can tie Dominick to the crime scene at this point, it's the stolen truck. But he doubts Dominick has been sloppy. He's surely covered his tracks, leaving no evidence – and evidence is the first thing Banks will look for to even consider Dominick as a suspect.

A new sense of dread floods his stomach.

Foster raises her eyebrows, hurrying him into her office. Once inside, she closes the door and plops into her chair with a huff.

“How are you?” She asks. Her head and blonde bob tilt to one side. There's a weight to her expression that tells him this isn't going to be an easy conversation.

“I'm okay,” he manages, wondering if he should mention Dominick.

Maybe not.

“We've missed you around here.”

Apparently not too much, he thinks, but smiles in return.

“How was Cancun? How was the wedding?”

Her pink lipstick falls flat. “Awful! Half the wedding party got sunburn.” She raises a hand. “The other half got food poisoning the night before and could barely get through the ceremony.” She leans in and whispers, “I refused to drink the water over there! No way, Jose.”

“I've never been to Mexico, but I'm pretty sure it's safe to drink the water...” Jace narrows an eye.

“I wasn't taking chances. Oh! Speaking of taking.” She leans back in and scowls, adding, “One of my earrings went missing from our suite! One of the housekeeping-maid-ladies must have taken it.”

He winces. “Are you sure? I mean, maybe you just misplaced it?” He can count on two hands the number of times he's seen her wandering the office with one earring.

“No, I'm sure it was stolen.” She nods firmly. “I filed a complaint with the property manager, Miguel, or whatever his name was. He hardly spoke any English!” She rolls her eyes.

“He said they’d look into it, but of course I haven’t heard anything. I plan to follow-up next week.”

“Wow.” Jace is at a loss for words. “Sorry you didn’t have a good time.”

“No matter.” She flips her hair from her face and glances at her nails. “I’m never going back to that armpit of a country.”

“I hear Mexico’s really beautiful,” Jace says in a tone that wipes the smugness from her face. He thinks back to Banks’ description of Sayulita with its beautiful beaches and colorful restaurants. “I have a good friend who was born there.”

She goes rigid in her chair.

“Well, maybe we were just in a bad area.” She waves him off and wrings her hands. “Anyway, I’m glad you stopped in. Everything’s okay with Dan at Outpost. Not great, but we didn’t lose the account. I had to throw in some extra ads to make up for the launch—”

“Again, I’m really sorry that happened, Foster. I had no idea —” His phone buzzes in his pocket, cutting him short.

“It is what it is at this point,” she says grimly. “But, I would like for you to take some more time off, officially that is. Let’s make it a two-week leave and, when you return, we can discuss your future here.”

“You want me to go on leave? Like... probation?”

“Think of it as taking time for you.” She poses with a light flourish of her hands. “Take some time to get your affairs in order and to really think if this is where you want to be, given everything that’s happened.”

He swallows hard.

“Of course, this is where I want to be! I’ve given this agency three amazing years. I have the most lucrative portfolio out of anyone here. I put my soul into this job.”

“No one’s denying that.”

“Then why do I feel like you don’t want me here?”

She shifts in her seat, and he can almost see her walls go up. “Legal has advised that you take personal leave until the outcome of your trial.”

There. She’s said it.

Jace blinks back in disbelief. His phone buzzes a few more times as she attempts to soften the blow.

“I can’t imagine the stress you must be under. You have a ton of PTO,” she offers. “Please, take some time for you, Jason.”

He glares at her.

“Jace! I meant to say Jace. Unless you prefer Jason now?” She backpedals, choking on the foot in her mouth.

Jace’s eyes cloud over as a storm brews in his chest. His voice is hollow as he stands.

“I think I better go now.”

She jumps to her feet.

“I’m sorry. This is not going the way I wanted this to go.” She outstretches her arms like Eva Perón begging Argentina not to cry. “You know we love and support you – the whole team loves you, you know that, and you still have a place here.” She wrings her hands again. “But, I do think it’s best that you not return until this matter reaches a resolution.”

He hangs his head, nodding at the floor, then leaves before she can utter another word.

On his way out, he quietly passes Derby in her neon orange sundress. She tosses up a confused wave as he staggers by. It’s only once he’s outside that he lets out the breath he’s been holding – only his breathing is labored, coming in small bursts out of his control. His heart races as sweat beads on his forehead.

*Breathe, Jace. Breathe!*

He can’t stop his hands from trembling as he reaches for his phone to dial Syd. Syd has talked him down from a panic attack before.

*He’ll know what to say, Jace tells himself.*

He manages to pull his cell from his pocket and is instantly met with messages that buzzed through moments ago.

They're all from Banks...

Been at it all night. Got a hit on a service station that worked on our truck

Mechanic remembers the truck but didn't meet the driving

\*driver

Hate this phobe

Ugh

\*phone

The front desk was only people to interact with driving. That lady left a year ago for new job

So no description but good news! They still have the invoice. Driver paid with credit card

Got a name!

“Jace!”

Jace looks up to see Derby running toward him. Her dress is blinding in the sunlight as her cowboy boots stomp the pavement.

“Where are you going?!” She's arrived nearly as winded as he is.

He takes a shuttered breath, gathering himself as he meets her puzzled, green stare, caked with blue eyeshadow. “I, uh... I'm taking some time off. Foster and I both think it's best until things blow over.”

Her shoulders slump, and her face crumbles. “This fucking sucks. I miss you!” She pouts, going in for a hug. “I can't believe all this shit on the news.”

Jace tries to grab a quick look at his phone, but she comes in too fast, smothering him in a muggy embrace laced with her

signature Chanel perfume. He mumbles something along the lines of “I miss you too” into the crook of her neck and manages to switch his phone to his other hand to read the rest of Banks’ message over her shoulder.

Squinting past the glare on his screen, his body goes stiff, and his eyes go wide with confusion as he quietly reads the name of the driver...

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## 22 / SCORNED

Jace stares at Banks' text, mulling over the name on his screen.

Liam Garvey

“Where do I know that name?!” Jace grunts and rakes his fingers through his dark curls.

“Liam?” Banks hands him a glass of wine.

“No, Garvey. I swear I've heard that name somewhere before.”

Try as he may, Jace can't ignore the faint sense of disappointment that tugs at him. To have a name linked to the crime scene of Graham's murder, and for it not to be the name of someone he knows is maddening.

Liam.

Garvey...

“This is killing me.”

Banks parks himself next to Jace on the sofa. He's returned to The Chandler, bearing dinner – a large margherita pizza – and a cheap bottle of wine. He looks comfortable in a pale blue, lightweight knit top with the sleeves rolled up. He's in ripped jeans with his shoes left at the door.

Jace casually glances at Banks' bare feet. He hadn't gotten a good look before, but he's pleasantly surprised to see they're in decent shape. No corns, calluses, or bunions.

Thank God for small favors.

“I asked Roy to run the name and see if we get any hits. Outstanding warrants, prior arrests. All that fun stuff. I should know something by tomorrow morning.” He looks to Jace,



who's changed into gray sweats with the legs rolled up and an old Prince t-shirt.

"You'll have to thank him for me. Or maybe, one day, I can thank him myself."

"Sure." Banks gives him an appraising look. "You know, I think he and Allister would like you."

"You think your friends would like me?" Jace laughs. He imagines if he had gone to their wedding as Banks' date... The awkward first introduction... Banks trying to classify their relationship on the spot, compartmentalizing it into something his friends can understand.

"This is Jace, my..."

Friend?

Date?

On-again-off-again suspect?

Jace gives Banks a dull look and frowns into his wine glass.

"Why wouldn't they like you?" He insists.

"People like me don't..." Jace trails off with a shake of his head.

"Don't what?"

"What are we doing here, Banks?" Jace gestures around the room. "You're here almost every night. You practically have a shelf in the fridge. What is this?"

"I'm helping you."

"Why? Why now?"

"It's my job," he winces. He turns from his spot on the sofa to face Jace, and his shoulders drop. "Look, we both know I doubted you before, and I'm sorry for that. I am, Jace." His expression softens. "I'm trying to be the best detective I can be – and at the end of the day, a good detective helps people. It's not about being the hero or how many bad guys you put away. It's about helping the people who need help. That's what my father taught me." He reaches for Jace's hand. "I want to be

here for you. I know you may not be used to people being good to you – and you probably don't trust easy. I get that. I can't imagine what you've gone through with people judging you your whole life for what your father did. And I know saying sorry doesn't magically fix everything, but let me start somewhere, okay?" He laces their fingers together. "Let me do this. I'll have Roy run our guy Liam through every database we have at the station, okay?"

Jace searches Banks' eyes and his gaze slowly falls. "You know, tomorrow's the anniversary," he says dully.

"Anniversary?"

"Of my father's suicide. Or, his alleged suicide. Some people think he staged it, and he's still out there somewhere."

Banks releases a troubled breath.

"Sometimes I look in the mirror, and I swear all I can see is him staring back, like he's trying to tell me something." Jace laughs bitterly. "It's like he just takes over." He turns to Banks with a shimmer in his eyes. "Do you think I'm crazy?"

"No." He slides closer and croons, "I don't think you're crazy."

Jace muses, "You don't think I could have the 'murder gene' like the news says?"

He laughs, showing nearly all of his teeth. "You're never going to let me live that down, are you?"

"I'm a Taurus. We hold grudges like it's an Olympic sport."

"I knew it." He grins and leans in. "You do follow horoscopes." He rests his chin on Jace's shoulder and sighs. "Guess you're never gonna forgive me for arresting you, huh? Even though I had no choice?"

"I'll need some time. Not sure I'd say never though." Jace leans into Banks and says, "Guess you could make it up to me one day."

"How about now? I could get my cuffs... you could put me under arrest..." He gives a low growl before his warm mouth

finds Jace's neck, leaving a soft trail of kisses behind as he makes his way towards Jace's full lips.

It takes the strength of ten men for Jace to pull away. "What are you doing?" He sighs.

"What does it look like?" He grins and wets his lips. "If I'm ever gonna make it up to you, I better get started..." He presses his warm lips to Jace's in a slow, sweet kiss.

It feels like eons until their lips break apart and Jace groans, hating how good of a kisser Banks is. He hates how much he's missed his touch.

"You have to know this is a bad idea, Columbo." Jace breathes heavily as their foreheads touch. "We don't stand a chance."

"We don't know that." Banks takes Jace's face in his hands and kisses him softly.

Jace looks away, but Banks brings him back center with a gentle glide of his fingertips. There's no avoiding the depths of his brown eyes.

"We won't know unless we try."

Jace nods weakly.

"I want to get to know you, Jace. All of you," he swears. "The good, the bad. All of it."

A blush warms Jace's face.

"I believe you're a good person," he says. "Otherwise, I wouldn't be here."

Jace exhales, and a smile reaches his lips.

"Also, I'd really love a do-over," he smirks. "I'd love to wake up next to you—"

"And not have to rush out to a crime scene I'm implicated in? Yeah. That'd be nice," Jace says, rolling his eyes.

Banks hunches his broad shoulders. "Maybe I could run out and bring back bagels, or... we could do whatever normal people do the morning after?"

"I'm pretty sure they just have sex again."

“Even better! Who needs bagels?”

Jace smiles and raises a shoulder by his ear. “If we try this... you sure I’m not too much ‘trouble’ for you, Detective Banks?”

Banks cups his face and kisses him gently. “I think I can handle you...”

“Famous last words,” Jace teases. “Famous last words.”

• • •

Jace blinks and his eyes slowly adjust to the darkness. He gasps and staggers back as the figure before him staggers away, equally spooked.

A slippery shadow in the dark.

His back hits a wall, and he spins around wildly, trying to grasp his surroundings.

It takes a moment to realize where he is, to realize he’s been sleepwalking.

He’s made his way into the bathroom and has awoken in front of the wide vanity mirror. His reflection gazes back through the darkness, mimicking his disoriented movements.

He has no idea how long he’s been standing in front of the mirror naked, but he can’t help but feel as if it has somehow summoned him from a dream... As if something from the other side called out to him, luring him over in his sleep.

Being scared awake by your reflection is startling enough, but what’s most disturbing is the kitchen knife gripped firmly in his right hand!

As the sudden weight of the handle registers in his hand, he drops it to the floor in shock, covering his mouth to contain his muffled cry.

He draws his fingers back and finds them slick with fresh blood.

*What has he done?*

He wills his legs to work and races out of the bathroom, flying past the kitchen and into the bedroom. His heart lodges in his throat as he pushes through the double doors and peers into the thick darkness.

Banks lies in a heap under the covers. His arm dangles off the edge of the bed, lifeless.

Jace's stomach twists into a tight knot. He rushes over and stands over Banks' body.

*How could this have happened?*

The last thing Jace recalls is Banks' weight on top of him... the smell of his cologne and sweat filling his nostrils as they bucked and tussled in the sheets. Banks had moaned and smiled down at him before throwing his head back in ecstasy, giving Jace a clear view of his throat; the veins bulging and strained against the thin layer of skin.

Hot tears fill Jace's eyes as he braces himself for what he's sure he'll find and reaches for the lamp on the nightstand.

There's a click and light floods the room.

"Whah-what's wrong?!" Banks shouts and jolts awake. He throws off the covers and is on his feet with lightning speed.

Jace grabs his chest and nearly keels over. "Fuck! You scared me to death!"

"You scared me to death! What happened? What's wrong?"

Jace thinks fast. "I thought I heard something. In the living room."

"Stay here." Banks pulls on his underwear and starts to leave when something catches his eye. "You're bleeding! Your hand..."

Jace turns his palm, realizing the blood he saw on the knife must be his own. The knife must have cut into his fingers as he was holding it. Now, there's blood smeared on his chest and dripping off his fingers, seeping into the carpet.

“I must have...” Jace doesn’t have a smooth answer for this. “I’m okay! It was an accident.” He cradles his hand as Banks nears, his face riddled with sleep and confusion.

“Put pressure on that. I’ll be back.” He strides off to investigate the imaginary noise Jace has concocted.

Meanwhile, Jace gathers his nerves on the edge of the bed. He grabs a sock off the floor, unsure whether it belongs to him or Banks, and nurses his wound; watching the soft cotton become soaked with blood.

*What’s happening?*

He’s sure he’s losing his mind – which shouldn’t be occurring. Not with the medication he’s been taking religiously.

It dawns on him that things have only grown worse under Dr. Kessler’s new prescription.

His fogginess.

His forgetfulness.

His headaches.

Losing time.

Sleepwalking.

It’s no wonder he feels like a stranger in his own body, possessed by something unseen that’s just ripped him out of his sleep.

Banks reenters the bedroom holding an umbrella he must have taken from the closet for a makeshift weapon. The pointed metal end catches Jace’s eye. “All clear,” he mumbles.

“Maybe it was the room next door you heard?”

“Maybe so.”

“How the hell did you hurt your hand?”

“I was sleepwalking,” Jace hears himself say. “I must have banged into something and cut myself.” He doesn’t mention the knife, figuring that’s too much honesty for one night. “I woke up in front of the mirror and—” Something clicks in his mind. A memory springs out of the darkness and into the light,

plainly visible as if it's been there all along. "Oh my God," he gasps and rises to his feet. "I know where I've heard that name before!"

• • •

Jace types furiously while Banks hovers over his shoulder. He's completely abandoned the idea of going back to sleep and has made coffee for them.

"What are you looking for?" He takes a long sip.

Jace narrows his gray eyes, squinting against the glare of his laptop. "I may not know a Liam, but I know where I've heard the name Garvey." He clenches his jaw. "I can't believe I didn't think of this before."

Banks watches the screen as Jace scans search engine results, scrolling through hyperlinks and old articles. The glow from his laptop bounces off his plush, white bathrobe with the Chandler logo embroidered on his chest in gold thread.

First light has begun to slip through a crack in the curtains. Banks tries to think of the correct command to convince Alexa to open the drapes but resorts to turning on an extra lamp instead.

"Here." Jace points to a new tab. "Found something! Read this."

Banks leans over his shoulder and squints at the screen.

"With heavy hearts, we are saddened to announce that on June 19, 2004, Gordon Morell Garvey (Brooklyn, New York) was officially determined and pronounced deceased after having been reported missing prior to a year-and-a-half-long search. Born and raised in Brooklyn, he leaves behind many loved ones including a family of former students. In his early years, Mr. Garvey—" Banks shifts his lips into a scowl. "It's an obituary."

"Right."

“From more than ten years ago!”

“That’s the thing,” Jace says. “On the day my father was sentenced, I remember the evening news doing this special segment – it was like a tribute to the victims of The Brooklyn Butcher. My mother made me watch the whole thing with her. Most of it’s a blur now, but I remember the name Garvey being announced as one of the victims.” He points to the black and white photo in the obituary. Gordon Garvey looks like a typecasted all-American suburbanite as he stares back, stoic but handsome in a dark, nondescript suit with his black hair slicked to one side. “It’s rumored he might have been the first victim.”

Banks takes this in and continues to read.

“In his early years, Mr. Garvey graduated from Hamilton College in 1978. He taught high school in Hicksville, N.Y., while completing his M.A. degree at NYU, then went on to the Harvard Graduate School of Education program in language education. He is survived by his mother and stepfather, Evelyn and Dennis Howard, his father, John, his wife, Sharon (Austin) Garvey, his son, Liam, and many close – wait,” Banks erupts. “Liam Garvey is—”

“His son!” Jace collapses back in his chair.

A heavy silence fills the air as they retrace the words, rereading the paragraph for certainty.

Jace’s mouth goes dry as the weight of his discovery makes it hard to breathe.

“This means our guy, Liam Garvey, is the son of my father’s first victim...”

Banks paces the living room while Jace sits in stunned silence.

“I’m going down to the station.” He shakes his head and moves his hands from his hips to his hair, raking his fingers through dark, unruly waves. “I need to move on this. We need to find this guy and get an arrest warrant.”

Jace sits quietly with his thoughts and prepares to browse more articles. He quietly tries to reconcile what this discovery means, replaying the last few weeks in his mind.



Banks gulps down his coffee and announces he's going to get dressed, but not before giving Jace a careful glance. "Are you okay?" He stands behind Jace and gives his shoulders a squeeze. "This will all be over soon. I promise, babe."

Jace can't fight the small laugh pushing past his lips. He tilts his head back until Banks falls into view. "You just called me babe."

"I guess I did," he squints. "Too soon?"

Before Jace can answer, Banks bends to give him an upside-down kiss. "Don't answer that." He marches off to get dressed.

Unsure of what else to do, Jace continues to browse, first looking for anything he can find on Gordon Garvey.

He finds:

A few more articles surrounding his death.

Photos of his leaked dental records that tie him to the remains found at the deli, confirming his murder.

An interview his wife did with The Times.

Old wedding photos.

His graduation photo.

Photos from the high school newspaper in Hicksville, where he also led the yearbook staff.

A lengthy article by Dr. Rialand Bell outlining theories of how Gordon came to cross paths with Jace's father.

Finally, Jace finds a lone photo of the funeral, likely taken by paparazzi who earned top dollar for the candid shot.

In the photo, Gordon's widow, Sharon, stands out amidst a sea of black umbrellas. The camera has caught her mid-cry; her face twisted in anguish as she clutches a wad of tissues in her right hand. She's in a tasteful black dress that hits just below her knees. Her veil is caught in the wind, cutting below her eyes, squeezed shut. To her right is an older woman Jace can't place. Maybe a sister or perhaps a family friend. She's in heels that sink into the wet ground with one arm wrapped around Sharon's waist, likely the only thing holding Sharon up. The

pastor holds an umbrella and a bible, addressing the mixed crowd. There are faces, young and old, comprised of colleagues, family, and past students sprinkled around the gravesite.

Gordon's casket is covered with red and white flowers Jace can't identify.

*Gladioli?*

That seems right.

Sharon must have paid a small fortune on flowers alone. Similar arrangements surround the gravesite, all in full bloom under a gray sky that has opened, showering the crowd assembled below.

It's then that Jace's stare takes aim at the gangly teenager holding the umbrella Sharon stands under.

His heart stops as he deduces this must be Liam.

At first glance, he looks like any angst-ridden teenager who has just lost their father, but unlike Sharon, he looks more angry than distraught.

He's tall with pallid skin; his brown hair plastered to his forehead, wet from the rain. Angry freckles and acne color his face and for a moment...

Jace blinks and leans into the photo, his face mere inches from the screen...

*It can't be!*

His suit looks ill-fitted and the odd configuration of straps and buckles fastened to his left leg confirms Jace's suspicions.

The freckles...

The resemblance...

The leg brace!

All this time – for years – Liam Garvey, the scorned son of his father's first victim has been closer than Jace ever could have imagined. Only, Liam Garvey, much like Jason Mader, has reinvented himself. Liam's fled New York and followed Jason,

like a shadow, to the other side of the country. Liam's injected himself in Jason's life, executing his plans and his influence like a slow poison. Slow and deadly like the Halothane Jason's father pumped into Gordon's veins, just before he sliced into him.

Jace sits paralyzed as his eyes tear up, staring raptly at the screen. He can't take his eyes away from Liam Garvey, who looks no older than Jace was the year his father was arrested for the murder of nineteen innocent people. Alex Cruise stares back at him, quietly holding the umbrella over his mother with rage simmering in his eyes.

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## 23 / NAILS

The lobby of the Chandler is bustling with guests checking in as Jace marches through the crowd. He's called Audrey twice without success. He figures she must be in court and can only guess what her reaction will be to what he's discovered.

Although his legs work, taking him from one end of the lobby toward the exit, they're operating purely on auto-pilot as he dodges a herd of businessmen pulling roller-cases behind them. His mind is far away, fixed on Alex and the story of the "tin man" – an enemy he didn't know he had.

Looking back, now that the initial shock has lost its edge and he can follow the logic, it makes perfect sense.

Who introduced him to Graham in the first place?

Who else had access to his calendar?

Who had access to his loft, dropping off dry cleaning and even dinner on occasion?

A wild thought breaks his stride; his shoes squeak on the marble floor as he comes to a halt.

Amidst having his car washed and running errands, who volunteered to pick up his new prescription from the pharmacy?

Jace stops breathing.

He's been under a completely new prescription from Dr. Kessler. What if Alex tampered with his medication from the start or switched the pills with something else entirely? Jace would never have known, and it would explain a lot.

His headaches and foggy memory. His recent sense of losing time.

"Motherfucker..."

"You alright?" Levi's voice chimes out as he glides from behind the front desk. He's in a dark navy, plaid suit that's

molded to his tall swimmer's physique. His shoes shine like black diamonds.

Jace stammers, "I'm fine."

"Yeah? Looks like you were just talking to yourself."

"Talking to yourself's actually a sign of intelligence," Jace enlightens him. "It's when you start answering yourself that you should worry."

Levi notes this with a cheeky smile. "How have you been enjoying your stay, Jace?"

Jace glances at a red Infiniti pulling into the valet area. "Uhm, it's been good. Really good, thank you." He makes an effort to give Levi his full attention. "And thanks for the upgrade! The room's amazing. I mean, wow."

Levi shifts his weight on his feet and grins. "That suite's one of my favorites."

Jace glances toward his ride.

"Are you... checking out?"

"No. Just running home to grab a few things, more clothes."

Levi eyes his gray sweatpants with quiet relief.

Jace hasn't slept. He's thrown back on his Prince t-shirt and sweats with Nikes for the journey to his loft. He hopes fewer reporters are lurking about his building by now – although it is the anniversary of his father's suicide. A few clever ones may still be about, hoping for a photo or comment on the occasion.

"I'm hosting high tea at 5 today – sort of a private reception for some VIPs checking in. You're welcome to pop in, ay? There won't just be tea," he promises, clasping his hands behind his back. "My bartenders make a great sidecar."

Jace smirks. "Still chasing that fifth star, are we?"

Levi saunters forward. His blue eyes sparkle playfully against his copper skin. "Some things are worth chasing."

Jace curls his lip. "You mean like your farm boy?"

He tilts his head, fighting a smile. "I see what you did there."

“I’ve gotta run, but let’s make a deal.” Jace rubs his palms together. “Promise me you’ll go after him and that fifth star is yours.”

Levi inhales deeply, his face riddled with emotion.

“I know long-distance can be scary, and when you come from two different worlds there are no guarantees. Maybe it’ll work, maybe it won’t – but you won’t know unless you try. Someone pretty special told me that recently.”

It may not have appeared like it at the time, but Jace had been listening.

Levi’s shoulders fall and he gives a slow nod. “You really are something, aren’t you?”

“Do we have a deal?”

Charmed and ever a sucker for handsome, American men, he shakes Jace’s hand. “It’s a deal. Offer still stands for tea though, ay? It’s a group of old gits from a commercial real estate firm. I could use a mate in the room to keep me from noddin’ off.”

“Can I bring a plus one?”

He instantly gives in. “Why not?”

Banks will never come, especially once he learns who the invite is from. Jace can’t wait to tell him. He can see the scowl on his face now...

There’s a sudden burst of static followed by a voice over the radio clipped to Levi’s belt. Apparently, Levi doesn’t just prance about the place, dishing out free drinks in the lobby bar like he owns the place. He actually owns the place and works here too.

“Duty calls. I’ll see you later though, ay?”

Jace accepts the invite and heads to his car.

Banks has left more than two hours ago to put in for an arrest warrant to bring Alex in for questioning. If it weren’t a Sunday, apprehending him would be easy. Alex would be at

Moxy on his second cup of coffee by now, likely browsing for furniture to fill his new corner office.

So, they'll go to his home first, starting with whatever address is on file at the DMV.

Jace hopes Banks kicks the door in. He hopes Banks and his team show no mercy as they drag him from the comfort of his home in handcuffs in front of his neighbors and the people who think they know him. He hopes Derby happens to be there to witness the whole thing.

That would be the cherry on top.

Jace hopes Alex's arrest is every bit as traumatic and embarrassing as his was – and that the press crucifies him for what he's done.

These thoughts circle in his mind like black, ravening vultures as he rides to his loft. Anxious thoughts consume his—

“How's your day goin' so far?”

It's the driver.

Seth.

“Uhm, fine,” Jace says automatically. “Thanks.”

Things are far from fine, but Jace makes an effort, meeting Seth's large brown eyes in the rearview mirror. Seth is stocky, like a retired linebacker with sandy brown hair and—

“You're actually my first ride of the day!” He beams.

*Oh, God. He's a talker.*

Jace digs out his phone and puts his head down, eyes glued to the screen. He doesn't have the patience for pleasantries. Not now. Conversing with Levi, albeit lovely, had zapped what little energy he has, having slept a mere four hours the night before.

“Looks like we're headed to the Pearl, huh? I had a girlfriend who lived over that way...”

“Do you mind turning on the radio? Please.”



Seth is quick to oblige, and soon Raveena's newest single fills the car. "This good?"

"Great. I love this song. Turn it up," Jace says plainly.

*That should do the trick.*

It doesn't matter what's playing as long as it's loud enough to suffocate the need for idle chit-chat.

Jace misses his car more than ever now. That, too, had been seized during his arrest with an array of his personal effects. He wonders how long it will take to piece his life back together, as the car stops in front of his building.

"Have a fantastic day!" Seth says loudly as Jace exits, waving from the wheel like a mom in the carpool lane, dropping her kids off at school.

Jace makes a face, but despite his poor mood, makes a mental note to give Seth a good rating and a tip later.

Good karma and all that.

He's surprised to find the entrance and lobby empty. There's an eerie silence suspended in the air as he pushes the button for the elevator. Frank has yet to come on duty; his desk stands empty next to the wall of metal mailboxes.

Jace shudders to think how much mail awaits him.

Once on his floor, he turns the lock to his door and slinks inside. He's thankful to be home, but the bliss quickly dissolves like sugar on his tongue as he takes in the state of his loft, left in shambles by the police search.

He wants to scream. He wants to cry. Seeing his one piece of earth turned upside down makes his chest tight.

It's hard to breathe.

He's been looking forward to showering in his own space upon walking in, standing under the force of his rain shower for at least an hour, but his anxiety won't allow it. He spits a stream of obscenities that bounces off the walls before diving into the mess.

Digging through a pile of records, he finds his favorite Nat King Cole album to put on. Nat's tender voice soon takes the edge off as Jace works over the next hour, putting his kitchen and living room back in order. He leaves his paintings for last, knowing he'll need to borrow a ladder from maintenance, but he starts on the bottom row anyway, removing his shoes before standing on the sofa. Gripping the largest of the paintings, he struggles to remember the order they were in when his phone rings.

The caller ID reads Columbo.

"Hey. Did you find him?! What's happening?"

Banks scoffs into the line. "The address on file belongs to a delicatessen off MLK."

Cute, Jace thinks. Of course, Alex – or rather, Liam – would use a fake address when he applied to Moxy.

"Uhm... what about utilities? Can't you use your fancy supercomputers to get an address somehow?"

"No need. Tracking his phone, and we got a lock on his position. Headed there now. You won't believe—"

"Who's we?"

"Huh?"

"You said we. Who's we?"

"Oh. Marlow. I'm riding with Marlow."

Jace rolls his eyes. "Don't give her my regards."

"Yeah, yeah," he smirks from his end of the line.

"Let me know when he's in handcuffs. I want details," Jace says. "Meanwhile, guess what I'm doing."

"What?"

"Cleaning up this mess you and your boys left for me. I should have made you help with this," he realizes, too late.

"Wait..." The line goes silent. "Where are you? Did you go home?!"

"Yeah. I came to get some clean clothes."

“Jace, get out of there! Go! Now!”

“What – why? What’s wrong?”

“We tracked his phone to your place! The signal’s coming from your building. He’s there! Get out!”

His heart stops as he slowly turns.

*How could he have not seen Alex hiding? Waiting for him.*

It’s a classic scene taken from any number of movies he’s seen... The protagonist dramatically turns, only to come face to face with the monster they’ve been trying to evade – but it’s too late! The music soars and the monster or the ghost or the killer is already upon them, leaving no chance of escape.

*How could he have been so stupid?*

Jace turns and releases a confused breath, finding himself alone in the living room.

Downstairs looks clear.

“Jace?!”

“I’m here,” he puts the phone back to his ear. “I don’t see anyone here,” he whispers, confused. “I’m gonna check upstairs.”

“Wait for me. I’m on my way with backup.”

“This is my home.” Jace steps down from the sofa. “I’m not letting him run me out.”

Banks curses into the line, hating and loving how stubborn Jace is, all at the same time. “Goddamn Tauruses,” he mumbles.

Jace quietly wanders upstairs, one foot in front of the other. He spends the next few minutes opening closet doors and snatching back his shower curtain. Lastly, he checks under the bed for monsters.

Only dust and emptiness greet him.

“All clear,” he breathes into the phone. “Maybe your tracker thingy’s wrong.”

There’s a pause on the line. “You’re sure you’re safe?”

“I looked everywhere. He’s not here.”

“Hmm. That can’t be right.” His voice is strained, and Jace can picture his thick brows knitting together, the breeze from the passenger window ruffling his hair. “Just stay put, okay? Lock the door. We’re on our way.” Banks sighs before hanging up.

Jace shrugs and returns downstairs. There’s relief in knowing he’s alone, unless you count Nat King Cole, who belts a long sensuous note from his record player.

Jace climbs back onto the sofa with a new painting in hand; a portrait of a black mother and child he hangs back onto the next nail in the wall.

He hops off the sofa again and stands back a few feet to look at his work. Three paintings in, they look pretty level. Not bad for just eyeing the job, he considers.

He peers at the remaining nails scattered up the wall and frowns.

His stare fixes on the near-bare wall. His eyes move from nail to nail... scanning from the floor to the ceiling.

“Huh.” He bites his bottom lip and squints at the sight before him. An idea teeters on the tip of his tongue; a thought too frightening to take the leap and become words he dares to speak aloud.

He rests his hands on his hips and takes a step back.

Banks had said the signal was coming from Jace’s building.

“What if...” he bites his lip harder, on the verge of breaking skin, then takes a breath and gathers his courage.

He slips on his shoes and leaves his loft, taking a sharp turn and stopping in front of his neighbor’s door.

It takes a moment to find a second burst of courage, but once it fills his chest, he acts fast, moving before he has a chance to change his mind.

He makes a fist to knock, but stops himself and carefully tests the knob first. To his surprise, it twists open with ease.

Unlocked, as if he’s been expected.

He inches inside, armed, and prepared with an excuse in case someone's home.

“Sorry for the intrusion! I knocked, but I guess you didn't hear me,” he'll say. “I thought I'd come by to welcome you to the neighborhood.” He'll end with one of his patented smiles.

But after trudging deeper inside, his mouth falls agape, and his blood runs cold.

Even with the best of excuses and an award-winning smile, nothing could have prepared him for what he finds.

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## 24 / MIRROR MIRROR

It's his loft.

At first, Jace thought his mind was playing tricks on him; that, somehow, he must have gotten turned around and gone back into his apartment – which would explain the door being unlocked – but, no.

It looks like his home, but something is off.

Although the space is full of his furniture and décor he's picked out, everything, including the layout, is opposite – a mirror image of his apartment next door!

*Has he walked into another dimension?*

*Is this a glitch in the matrix?*

As he stands aghast in the middle of the living room, his eyes land on the collage of paintings filling the space over the sofa.

It's complete and hung in its correct order.

There's also no sign of Nat King Cole playing from the record player, which confirms he is indeed in an exact replica of his home.

“Mirror, mirror,” he gives a low gasp. He moves closer to the paintings to discover they're duplicate prints; photos of the originals that have been printed on canvas. He takes a long look at the gray armchair next to the sofa; the same chair he saw being delivered a few weeks ago in the lobby.

“Like what I've done with the place?” Alex slowly descends the stairs like a supervillain, dressed in all black. He's not wearing glasses – which was perhaps part of a disguise all along, Jace realizes now. Aside from that, the only thing missing is a cat in his arms to stroke as he delivers a speech outlining the next step in his evil plan to end Jace once and for all. As far as his question is concerned, it's appropriation at its finest. Jace is not only stunned to discover Alex is his new

neighbor he'd yet to meet, he's actually impressed at the lengths he's taken to replicate what's next door.

Everything looks the same.

Same furniture.

Same shag rug and throw pillows.

Same floor lamps in their exact position next door.

The same style bar, stocked with Jace's usual brands.

There's even the same photo of Jace and Syd on the fridge, taken a year ago at Pride.

"You simply must give me the name of your decorator," Jace snorts, taking a preemptive step back.

"I'd say I wasn't expecting company, but these walls are so thin," Alex says. His jaw hardens. "Was that your boyfriend on the phone?"

Jace takes another step back, keeping his distance. "He'll be here any minute with backup. So, it's game over, Liam. I know who you are."

"And I know who you are, Jason. I've always known." He descends the last of the steps, and it's here that Jace spies the cleaver clutched tightly in his hand.

Jace raises his hands, glancing about the room for something to defend himself with. "No one else has to get hurt. It can stop right here, Liam."

Alex sneers and cuts across the room, blocking Jace's path to the door. "I left Liam back in Brooklyn." His freckles are scorched across his face like red, burning stars falling from a white sky. "Liam was weak. He was broken," his voice splinters and cracks. "But I'm taking the life that should have been mine. Your father never paid for what he did – for the lives he took! I won't sit back and let you just move on and pretend like nothing happened!"

"I am deeply sorry for your loss, Alex," Jace heaves. His chest swells with regret. "I'm so sorry for what my father did. I've



been carrying the weight of what he did for years – I’ve been paying the price ever since he died.”

“With your fancy apartment and fancy job? Bullshit.”

“You think I like running? Hiding? Changing my name?” He beats his chest and takes two steps back as Alex nears. “You know what that feels like – but imagine being the son of the man who took nineteen innocent lives. That will stay with me forever.”

“You don’t know what it feels like—” He shudders and points the cleaver. “To have your father taken from you! That stays with you forever!”

Jace looks past him to the door. It feels a million miles away. Even if he sprints and rushes Alex, he knows he won’t reach the door in one piece. Thinking back to Graham’s dismembered body, Alex has proven himself to be adept with a cleaver. But perhaps, if he can disarm him or make it to the kitchen to pull a knife of his own, he has a fighting chance. Alex isn’t the only one well-versed with sharp objects.

“I know I can’t right my father’s wrongs.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Alex’s smile twists into a snarl. “See, he may have escaped justice – but, one way or another, you won’t.”

“So, you framed me. But why Graham?!” He asks desperately, taking a step back. “Why kill Graham? What did he ever do to deserve what you did? You’re no better than my father,” he spits venomously.

The edge of the cleaver gleams as it catches the light streaming through the windows. Alex tilts his head. “You haven’t put it together, have you?” He asks with wild glee. There’s a baleful sheen to his eyes that borders lunacy.

“Put what together?”

*If he can just keep Alex talking...*

“Maybe I won’t tell you,” Alex poses with a nefarious flick of his brows. “Maybe you’ll just die never knowing.”

“Knowing what? Why you murdered someone who was supposed to be your friend – who was kind and had nothing to do with any of this?!”

“Huh.” He chokes out a laugh. “You really fell for that act of his, didn’t you?”

Jace’s breath catches in his throat.

“He wasn’t my friend. He was a fraud, an opportunist. He was that way back in school.” He smirks to one side. “Let me guess. I bet he told you all about how he likes jazz, and that he still calls his poor old dad once a week, right?”

Jace gives a nod.

“Bet he bragged about his dad being a prison guard too.”

He’s three for three.

“Bet he left out the part about his dad being quietly let go, about the investigation?”

“What investigation?”

“Well. If you can even call it that,” he scowls. “Graham’s dear old dad worked at the prison your father was being held at.”

Jace’s mouth goes dry.

“Surprised? Oh, it gets better!” He cuts his eyes. “Graham’s father was on duty that night – the night your father offed himself? Yeah. He was right there.”

“What?” Jace freezes where he stands “You’re lying...”

“He either handed that animal his belt to do the deed or offed your father himself. Either way, there’s blood on Arthur Tate’s hands.”

There it is.

No matter how much Jace wants to believe it can’t be true, part of him knows Alex is telling the truth. The man who killed his father, the man who slayed The Brooklyn Butcher, is Arthur Tate.

Graham’s father.

The back of Jace's throat tightens and burns as he fights to keep his bearings. "So, that's why?! You killed his son for revenge?"

"Justice. Arthur loses his only son, and you take the fall."

Jace crumbles. "There's no justice in this," he cries out. "This isn't justice."

"Easy for you to say." Alex slinks closer, waving the cleaver. "At least you have ashes. Teeth are all I have left of my father!" He bares his own and barks, "Teeth, and hair, and fucking fingernails!"

A tear escapes, rolling down Jace's cheek.

"We buried an empty casket," Alex says incredulously. "My mother insisted on it, thinking it would help somehow – to be able to go, and visit with him, and 'lay his spirit to rest,' but guess what? It didn't fucking help! Who wants to visit an empty fucking casket?"

Jace looks to the door as his breath quickens.

*Still, no sign of Banks...*

He could yell. He could scream for help, but what good would it do? The police are already on their way, and anyone walking through the door would only be another lamb for Alex to slaughter.

Enough people have died, and there's already blood on Jace's hands.

Sweat beads on his forehead as his heart accelerates.

*Breathe, Jace. Breathe!*

"Now. You're gonna tell me what you know, even if I have to carve it out of you," Alex sneers. "What did they do with the bodies? Where is my father?!"

"I don't know," Jace swears.

"Don't fuckin' lie to me." He jabs the cleaver in Jace's direction with fresh fire in his eyes.

“I swear! I don’t know. I was a kid back then! I didn’t know what he was doing.”

“You worked there. Don’t tell me you didn’t see what they did. You KNOW!” Alex bellows.

Jace’s voice cracks. “Why do you keep saying they? Who’s they?”

“Don’t play stupid.” His knuckles have turned ghost-white as he grips the handle of the cleaver, ready to swing. “Your father may have done the butchering, but he sure as hell had help. How else could he have transported all those bodies out of there?”

Transported.

The torched truck from the crime scene flashes before Jace’s eyes.

“A driver...” Jace is stunned. A hint of intrigue reads on his face. “You think a driver helped him move the bodies?”

“It’s all over the internet.”

He means blogs and underground forums filled with conspiracy theorists.

If Jace weren’t being held at knifepoint, he would love to compare theories and pick Alex’s brain. He’s likely heard many of the same theories about the murders Jace did growing up, but how much of it does Alex believe?

*What else has he been able to uncover on his own?*

“Dozens of drivers were in and out of that shop,” Alex points out. “Most of them from Feinkost.”

But only one driver leaps to the front of Jace’s mind.

The taste of burnt sugar and scorched caramel suddenly fill his mouth, like a dim memory flung into the light.

“Arthur Tate loves to run his mouth,” Alex adds. “I’ve seen him in the chat rooms bragging about how he was the last one to see the butcher alive – and according to him? Your father had a lot to say in his cell. He never gave up a name, but he

had a buddy, alright. Some sick fuck who liked to watch in exchange for removing the bodies.”

Jace’s stomach cramps. It’s almost too much to imagine.

The thought of his father butchering someone alive with Davie Myer and his bushy mustache standing over his shoulder with a Crème Chew in his mouth makes Jace nauseous.

It’s clear Alex doesn’t know about Davie Myer though; his father’s favorite delivery driver who he’d oddly retreat into his office with after handling business. For all of his investigating, Alex hasn’t been able to form this connection.

“This is your last chance to tell me what they did with the bodies,” Alex says between clenched teeth. His face is red and wild as he spits words like bullets. His brown hair falls into his crazed eyes. “I’ve waited a long time for this. I searched and searched – until I found you! No easy feat getting into Moxy, by the way, but once I made it through the last round of interviews, I knew I had you. I found you and brought you your fucking coffee every goddam morning! Picked up your dry cleaning... Washed your car... You have no idea how many times I wanted to walk in and slit your fucking throat right at that desk, but killing you would have been too fast. Too easy. You don’t get off easy like your father did. I wanted you to rot in a jail cell – the way he should have! Someone has to pay!”

Jace glances behind him. He’s mere feet from the sofa. Soon, there will be nowhere to run as Alex closes in.

“I’m gonna gut you alive, so you’ll know what my father felt. You don’t get to live and go on like nothing that happened matters anymore. You don’t get to forget!” Alex surges forward and swings the blade.

Jace flails backward and grabs his chest. His hand searches the fabric of his favorite Prince t-shirt, somehow still intact, as his hand comes back clean of blood.

He missed.

Alex swings again, wildly, as Jace topples back onto the sofa. He grips the handle with both hands, raising the cleaver over

his head! Aiming for Jace's skull, he chops down – stopping just shy as Jace grabs his wrists.

They're at a standoff.

Alex presses down as Jace pushes against the weight in his hands; the blade mere inches from Jace's face.

Jace grunts, straining under the weight. The space between his shoulder blades burns as he grips Alex's wrists. He tussles for the knife with Alex, who makes an ungodly noise before wriggling free of Jace's grasp!

Jace's gray eyes go white with horror as Alex raises the blade again to deliver a deadly blow. Jace quickly kicks in the outside of Alex's knee with the back of his heel.

Hard!

There's a bone-shattering snap as Alex screams in pain and doubles over.

Jace rolls to safety, falling off the edge of the sofa. His legs gallop beneath him as he tries to stand, but he falls as he fights to regain his balance, landing hard on his shoulder. He rolls over in time to see Alex hobbling toward him. One hand clutching his kneecap, the other wielding the cleaver.

Jace crawls backward, and his gaze shifts to the replica of his bar. He races over and grabs a bottle by the neck, hurling one after another at Alex, who takes a hit but dodges and knocks the rest to the floor. The bottles shatter and explode on the concrete floor like fireworks.

Jace is relieved but spooked to find his exact corkscrew there among the bar tools. He'd bought it at a wine booth a few months ago at the Saturday Market.

*Had Alex followed him there?*

Jace grips the corkscrew between his knuckles, the sharp winding end pointed at Alex as a warning. "You don't have to do this, Alex. Put the knife down."

He huffs and attacks, slashing the air wildly, grunting with every swing.

Jace dodges, knocking back into the bar. He manages to block one of Alex's blows with his arm but is knocked to the floor. In a flash, he jabs the corkscrew into Alex's leg, then once more into his thigh and twists!

Alex gasps and throws his head back as he drops to his knees, landing hard. He grunts from the sharp pain coursing through his body and curses the air.

Jace makes a move for the front door but falls face-first as Alex grabs his ankle. The fall knocks the wind out of him, and soon he feels himself being pulled, sliding back on his stomach into Alex's clutches. Tiny shards of glass bite his arms and hands. He kicks, fighting for his life, but Alex refuses to let go.

Jace crooks his head back in time to see the cleaver rise and fall, planting itself into the back of his shoulder.

He screams.

Every nerve in his body feels like it's on fire.

Alex removes the heavy cleaver and hacks again, driving the blade deeper this time into the thick of Jace's back.

Jace's scream is inaudible this time as his mouth gapes open. His vision blurs with tears as a low rattle escapes his throat.

*This is how it ends, he tells himself. Butchered, just like the other nineteen.*

Alex withdraws the blade and Jace feels his lungs suck in air. His back feels hot and numb from the pain all at once; his body going into shock. He kicks and manages to turn onto his side, wrestling with Alex who, ultimately, pins him down. The cleaver raises once more, this time aiming for Jace's head on its way down!

"Hey! Hey! Stop!" A voice roars from the front door. "Stop right there!"

Alex freezes and Jace cocks his head back, expecting to see Banks barging through the door with the calvary. Only, it's not Banks.

Derek slowly creeps forward, one foot at a time. One hand is up, signaling for Alex to stand down, the other wields his phone pointed in their direction.

“You’re live, motherfucker! Put down the goddamn knife,” he growls.

Jace heaves a sigh that lands somewhere between relief and marvel as Derek calmly inches forward.

*He’s kept his promise.*

To hell with live-streaming homemade ice cream at work!  
Derek’s managed to catch Alex red-handed.

He holds the phone like a weapon, his eyes locked and loaded on Alex. “I’ve got six hundred and seven—” he glances at the screen. “Six hundred and nine witnesses tuned in!”

“Liam Garvey killed Graham Tate!” Jace shouts. “He’s trying to kill me!”

Alex looks from Jace to the camera. His head snaps back and forth between the two as he lowers the cleaver. “You can’t prove anything. You have no proof,” he spouts.

“Put down the knife!” Derek yells.

Jace’s eyes frantically search the floor around him. The neck of a broken bottle comes into view, but far out of his reach.

“Arthur Tate is the real murderer!” Alex cries out. Spit and conspiracy theories spray from his mouth. “Reopen the investigation! Tell the fucking FBI to review the tapes! He’s not wearing a belt when he leaves that night. It’s clear as day! Look at the fucking tapes!”

Jace’s gaze lands back on the corkscrew lodged in Alex’s thigh. He slowly, quietly, reaches for the handle... his fingers stretching through space and time as Alex waves the cleaver over his head at the camera.

Derek’s eyes flit to Jace, then narrow in on Alex. “Why are you doing this? Tell us why,” he insists.

Alex scoffs and leers at Derek. “None of this would have happened if Sam Mader hadn’t killed my father! If Arthur Tate



had let him just rot in prison!”

Jace strains as he reaches from under Alex’s weight. Alex is practically sitting on top of him, distracted for the moment by Derek, but Jace is careful to go unnoticed as his fingers inch closer to the handle of the corkscrew.

“You don’t have to do this,” Derek pleads, inching closer.  
“Please. Whatever’s goin’ on, we can get you help, man.”

Alex stares into the camera, and his lips curve into a sneer.  
“It’s already too late,” he laughs bitterly. “I have to finish what I’ve started.”

*Just a little bit more...*

“This is for my father,” he says through a sob, no longer speaking to Derek but addressing his new audience now. He’s willing to become infamous, forever etched in history like Sam Mader, to avenge the death of his father and the other eighteen victims. He closes his eyes for a moment and a tear trails down his twisted face. “May he rest in peace...”

Jace desperately lunges for the corkscrew, but his fingertips slip off the handle!

Alex’s head snaps down, and before Jace has time to scream, he raises the knife over his head!

Derek lunges as two shots ring out, sending Alex reeling back. His body jerks and spasms as the bullets explode into his chest.

Jace scurries from Alex’s limp body, and Derek wraps his arms around him, pulling him to safety.

“Portland PD!” A voice shouts.

Banks rushes over, gun still drawn. His finger twitches on the trigger. His face is flushed with adrenaline as he peers at Alex for any sign of retaliation, any sign of movement. Marlow trails him, shouting numbers and police codes into the radio on her vest.

“You’re okay,” Derek mumbles into Jace’s ear, rocking and holding him close. “You’re okay, J.”

“We need a medic!” Marlow shouts. There’s more activity behind them as three officers move to secure the scene. She gives Jace a faint nod before moving to assess Alex’s vitals.

The cleaver lies beside him on the floor before she kicks it out of his reach.

Banks places his gun in his holster and kneels before Jace.

“Where are you hurt? We need to put pressure on that!”

Derek peels off his shirt and applies it to Jace’s blood-soaked back.

Jace winces from the pain as Banks and Derek awkwardly acknowledge one another with a quiet nod.

“What are you doing here?” Jace looks to Derek, seeing spots flash before his eyes.

“It’s Sunday,” he shrugs. “I was out makin’ a food delivery to the kids at Hope House. I brought you a burger.” He points to a brown paper bag he’s dropped by the door. “I know you don’t keep groceries, so I wanted to make sure you were eating. I stopped by last week too, but you weren’t home.”

The surveillance photo from Banks instantly registers in Jace’s mind.

*Kobe beef burgers and truffle fries.*

“I got off the elevator and heard you yelling. The door was cracked, so I walked in, thinking this was your place, but...” He trails off, still disoriented as he looks about the loft. “What the hell is goin’ on?”

“Good work distracting him,” Banks says out the side of his mouth. “We’ve been looking for this asshole all morning.”

“Good work getting a confession. Six hundred and nine followers? Not bad,” Jace muses. “I’m impressed.”

He closes one eye, wincing. “I might have exaggerated.”

“How many people were watching?”

“Three? I think? Definitely the strangest cooking show they’ve ever seen.”

Jace chokes out a laugh. “Doesn’t matter.” He groans weakly, trying to sit up as a wave of dizziness takes him. He wonders if this is what shock feels like. “You recorded everything. Once you share it, it’ll go viral in no time.”

Derek stares at Jace. “Shit. I think we’re still rolling!” He turns the phone over in his hand and glares into the screen. “You might have to show me how to stop this thing—”

“Give me the goddamn phone...” Jace takes it with his good arm, then makes the video public.

Derek peels his hand from Jace’s back. It’s covered in blood, his shirt soaked through. He shoots Banks a wary look.

Banks looks to Marlow.

“Ambulance is on the way,” she confirms, hands on the curves of her hips. Her face is tight as she surveys the scene.

Banks takes Jace’s hand, giving it a squeeze. “Hang in there, okay?”

Jace gives a weak thumbs-up and looks to where Alex sits, slumped against the wall. His chest heaves, fighting for air, as two officers stand over him.

“He’s... dying,” Jace says so lightly neither Banks nor Derek notices.

Through the slow agony and coughs of blood rattling his chest, Alex stares back at Jace, stunned. His breathing turns shallow as Jace watches from Derek’s arms.

There’s a flurry of activity around them as officers storm about the space, and a siren wails in the distance.

Jace watches in quiet fascination as Alex’s breathing slows.

He’s never seen someone die before.

*So, this is what it looks like, he thinks.*

*Is this what got his father off? Watching a life slowly come to an end?*

*Is this what got the Brooklyn Butcher addicted to the scent and taste of death?*

*Is this why Jace can't look away?*

Alex gurgles, trying to speak, but his words are drowned out by blood.

Jace watches, captivated, as Alex grows still, and the light leaves his eyes.

He's never watched someone die before.

Now that he has, there's no turning back.

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## 25 / FLAME

A pop rings through the air, and Syd raises his glass.

“To the best friend a guy could ask for! Here’s to you, Jace.”

“Here, here!” Derek drums his knuckles on the table.

Jace waves them off and sips from his champagne glass.

Behind them, Ethel’s is packed with regulars crammed at the bar for \$5 happy hour and cheap shots. It feels like old times. It’s hard to believe it’s been a month since Alex died, since Jace’s past and present collided in bloodshed.

“I can’t believe you’re leaving,” Syd pouts from his usual seat at their usual table.

“It’s just temporary. I need to get some things in order, and then I’ll be back.”

“What about work?” His eyes widen with a gasp. “What about the promotion? You worked so hard for that.”

Jace sighs internally but puts on a brave face. “Yesterday was my last day. It’s just not the place for me, not after everything that’s happened. Foster and I reached an agreement, so I’m able to leave on my own terms. It’s an amazing severance package,” he has to admit. “I won’t have to worry for a long while. I could take a year or two off, maybe even go to Cancun.”

“You? Takin’ a vacation?” Derek reels in his chair. “I’ll believe it when I see it on Instagram.”

“Stranger things have happened.”

And truer words have never been spoken as a thick silence consumes the table, and the three reflect on the past few weeks.

“I still can’t believe it was Alex this whole time.” Syd shakes his head. “Worst assistant ever.”

“The worst,” Jace agrees.

“I can’t believe he was drugging you,” Derek growls.

“Audrey confirmed with Dr. Kessler my prescription was tampered with, but it makes me sick thinking about what else Alex might’ve got into. I keep thinking about how he brought my coffee every morning.” A chill grazes his arms. “He really had me thinking I was crazy. I really thought I might have—”

“That’s in the past now.” Syd reaches to rub his shoulder.

“You’re healthy, and you’re safe now.”

“Thanks to this guy.” Jace passes Derek a heavy look. “If you hadn’t walked in when you did...”

Derek shrugs his broad shoulders. “I didn’t do anything.”

“Derek, you saved my life. I’ll never forget that. And that footage you took cleared me of everything! All those reporters had to eat every word they said against me.”

“And I hope they choked!” Syd cuts his eyes.

“I’m just glad I could help.”

“If you had been a second later walking in, I wouldn’t be here now.”

“It’s just a good thing you’re loud,” he says with a look Jace knows only too well.

Jace feels himself blushing.

“I mean, it’s a good thing you were yelling,” he tries to clean it up. “Otherwise, I might have just turned around and gone home.”

“Right.” Jace clears his throat and meets Derek’s gaze full of longing. An ache that never goes away.

Syd sips his champagne; a tipsy fly on the wall taking it all in.

“Anyway,” Jace rolls his shoulders and changes the subject. “I know I keep saying it, but really, congrats on getting your star. That’s huge!”

The tension in Derek’s face is replaced with a smile. “I still can’t believe it.”

“You’re a black chef with a Michelin Star,” Syd says. “That’s dope as fuck.”

“What did your parents say?”

“Aside from volunteering me to cook Thanksgiving Dinner for the rest of my life? Yeah, they were happy,” he laughs. “Dad cried.”

Of course he did.

“You’re dad’s so sweet.”

“Wait, hold up.” Syd waves a hand. “Now that you have your star, you’re culinary royalty. Networks and restaurants are gonna be beating down your door!”

“It’s already begun.” He grits his teeth, nerves showing. “I got invited to cook on ‘The Morning Show’. They want me to cook breakfast though of all things. Not sure what I’m gonna do.” His lips shift to one side of his face in an airtight frown.

“Eggs Benedict?”

He tilts his head thoughtfully. “Not a bad idea. Just has to be something people can make at home. That’s easy enough.”

“For you, maybe. Some of us could burn a salad.” Syd tosses Jace a look.

“I never said I could cook.”

“Very true.” Derek narrows his eyes, evoking scorched memories of the grease fire that nearly burned down half his kitchen.

A song comes on that Syd recognizes. He swings his locks over a shoulder and bops his head, mouthing the lyrics.

“So, are you gonna do more cooking shows? Competitions?”

He bites his lower lip. “I’ve been approached to do a pilot on the Food Network.”

Jace launches forward in his chair. “You didn’t tell me that! That’s amazing. Your own show? Why didn’t you say something?”



“Tonight’s not about me.” He gives a bashful smile and holds a shrug by his ears. “And it’s not really my show. I may have a co-host. Possibly. It’s too early to say.”

“You think you’ll leave Barlo’s?”

“Can’t stay there forever.” His words are bittersweet. “I mean, the goal has always been to open my own place one day.”

“Oh! I should put you in contact with my realtor, Petra.” Syd scrolls through his phone. “She’s amazing. Moved here from LA six years ago, super cute, practically raised by drag queens – you’ll love her! She’s helping me find a building for my non-profit.”

Champagne bubbles tickle Jace’s nose as he drains what’s left in his glass. “You’re gonna be up and running in no time, huh?”

“Things are moving fast. I’m just trying to keep up.”

“You’ve got this, Syd. And, when I make it big, I’ll donate all the burgers you want for the kids.”

“Kobe beef?”

“Don’t push it.”

“Damn, I’m gonna miss you two,” Jace says, releasing a weighted sigh.

“We’re gonna miss you too. New York is so far away!” Syd groans. “What am I gonna do without you? Oh, God...”

“Don’t cry!”

It’s too late.

“Goddamnit.” Syd blinks back tears and snorts. “I said I wasn’t gonna cry until after you left!”

“Don’t cry or you’ll get me started.”

“Hey, I thought this was supposed to be a party...?”

A new voice draws their attention, and the three turn to find Banks scowling.

He’s not good with tears.

Should he leave?

He's missed his window, he realizes.

They've seen him now.

Jace wipes an eye with his palm and waves Banks closer. "You made it."

"Had some stuff to wrap up at the station." He returns Syd's wave and pulls out the chair next to Jace. "Looks like I'm just in time for the waterworks."

Derek gives him a look that's hard to decipher, and Jace holds his breath until Derek offers his hand for a handshake.

There are no words, but something passes between them that faintly resembles respect as Banks shakes Derek's hand; each matching the pressure of the other's hand in a brief but manly contest of strength.

Even through his red, teary eyes, Syd still manages a slick smile.

"The gang's all here."

Jace searches Banks' hazel eyes for clues to what he's thinking.

"Thanks for coming."

"Yeah, of course." He gives a quick glance around the table. "Wouldn't wanna miss your send-off."

There it is; classic Banks has arrived. There's a bite to his words that drip with cynicism, and Jace detects a hint of frustration before he averts his eyes.

"I'm trying to convince Jace that New York is too far away, and we need him to stay in Portland," Syd says. "Feel free to back me up."

"It is far away." He doesn't look at Jace, but his hand finds Jace's knee under the table. He gives it a squeeze.

"I'll be back before you guys know it, and besides, you can visit anytime you want!"

Banks shoots him an insufferable look.

“I think it’s time for another bottle,” Derek mumbles.

As if on cue, Angel pops over and surprises Syd with a hug from behind.

“Aww! It’s my honey-bunny!” Syd melts into his arms and tilts his head back for a searing kiss. “I missed you, bunny!”

“I missed you too, boo-bear.”

Derek winces and tosses the champagne cork at them. “You two just saw each other five minutes ago.”

Angel grins, flashing his dimples before assessing the bottle they’ve killed off. “‘Nother round? Four glasses?”

Derek nods.

“Well, since this is a party and all,” Banks says wryly, “Guess you can say I brought a ‘going-away gift’. Got some news today you’ll want to toast to.” He pauses to remove his jacket, and his eyes soften at Jace. He’d planned to tell Jace this news over a nightcap, assuming Jace planned to sleep over again. Peering around the table, he realizes this is just as good a time as any and explains, “Feds found Davie Myer early this morning. Took him into custody.”

It takes a moment for the words to have impact. Jace blinks hard and stumbles through his response in shock. “They found him? He’s... Where?! Where did they find him?”

“Turns out his family owns some land in Warwick. They used to take visitors on the farm there. People came to tour the orchard back in the 90s – to pick apples, take hayrides with their kids, that sort of thing. It went under. Land dried up, and he’d been hiding out there.”

“In Warwick!” Jace oddly can’t recall Davie Myer ever mentioning a farm. It seems like the kind of thing that would eventually come up in conversation. It seems natural he might have invited Jace and his parents out one weekend. “Come pick as many apples as you can carry back,” he might have said, jostling the hard candy around in his mouth. But he never made that offer.

“They busted down the door and found him sitting in his recliner. Didn’t try to run. Didn’t struggle. It’s like he’s been waiting for them all this time.” Banks draws a long breath. “He confessed to everything, Jace. Told them the bodies were buried on the property, even walked them around to the spots where he dug the graves. Most of them were buried in the old orchard.”

The thought of an older, withering Davie Myer hiding out, living among the dead, makes Jace’s skin crawl.

“They found all nineteen,” Banks says morosely.

Jace swallows the lump in his throat as Alex flashes before his eyes, screaming with the cleaver in his hand. Begging to know what happened to his father’s remains.

“They booked him, and I hear his interview was pretty revealing.” He rolls up the sleeves of his shirt, resting his forearms on the sticky table. “He said he had a deal with your father.”

Jace’s mouth goes dry.

“According to him, one night, he came back to the deli because he couldn’t find his wallet anywhere. He’d been retracing his routes. Thought he might have dropped it on the delivery dock. He came around the back, heard a noise, and ended up walking in on your father during one of his, um...”

They get it.

“He said he agreed not to go to the police. Then, he offered to help dispose of the body in his truck as long as he, uh...” The color drains from his face. “As long as he got to watch your father finish the job.”

It feels as if the entire bar has gone silent, but Jace knows it’s only in his mind. What Banks has confirmed is the stuff of nightmares; too evil to imagine, although he can picture it playing out clearly in his head... His father and Davie Myer talking – negotiating – over the body on his table that’s alive but might as well be dead as the Halothane sets in, rendering their muscles and limbs useless.

“After that, he said it just became a thing,” Banks says, hunching his shoulders with defeat. “He’d get rid of the bodies, as long as he got to watch. Sick asshole said it gave him ‘a rush.’”

Jace pictures Davie Myer strolling into the deli with his cart and a smile perched on his thin lips, as he’s done hundreds of times. He sees his father shaking Davie’s hand, grinning from ear to ear before they’d slip into the back office to talk about God knows what.

Jace always assumed his father never disclosed the locations of the bodies as a means to hold power over the victims’ families. His trophies and their grief weren’t enough for him. He’d held out on giving them any semblance of closure, even when questioned in court by the judge. But now Jace has to wonder if his silence was also a means to protect Davie, a blood brother who shared the same lust for carnage.

Syd and Derek watch a wave of emotions color Jace’s face, and when he finally speaks his voice is raw.

“What happens now?”

“He’ll pay.” Banks rubs Jace’s thigh with his thumb. “He’ll pay for the part he played. He’s going to get at least two life sentences. I’d put money on it.” He careens his head, trying to imagine what that would be like. “He’s never getting out once he’s sentenced and processed. If it’s Green Haven, he’ll never see daylight again. Total cell confinement. No yard privileges. He’s done.”

Jace should feel relief. He should feel like toasting to the news as Banks suggested, but all he can manage is a weak tilt of his head as he realizes, “It’s over.”

“It’s over,” Syd harmonizes. “That fucker’s going to prison where he belongs. Good riddance to bad rubbish!”

Derek observes Jace quietly, reading through the emotion on his face, and watching him nibble his bottom lip – a telltale sign of his mind at work. The wheels turning at warp speed.

Angel returns with a new bucket of champagne on ice and—

“Unicorn shots!” He holds up his tray and a wicked grin.  
“Gotta have one for the road before you leave us, Jace.”

Jace cringes and breaks into a laugh as Angel dishes out a round of the glittery concoction.

“On the house!” Angel says as if he’s doing them a favor.

Banks holds his shot glass up to the light dubiously. “Is that glitter? What the...”

“It’s better you not know,” Jace promises. “Bottoms up!”

The drinks and the laughter carry on into the night, and eventually, Jace relaxes enough to enjoy himself. Enough for the clouds to lift from his gray eyes. Looking around the table, he’s grateful for the people who have stuck by him, even when he doubted himself. He knows he won’t find a bunch like them in New York.

There’ll never be another Syd, who somehow manages to corral everyone onto the dance floor. There’ll never be another Derek, who sees through the smile painted on his face even when Jace is doing his best to laugh and be completely present in the moment. And there’ll never be another Banks, who intercepts him on his way back from the bathroom, pulling him aside...

“Finally. Got you all to myself.” He gives a rogue smile.

Jace enters his embrace and smirks. “You got somethin’ to say to me, Columbo?”

“You sure you’re okay?” He asks gently. “I know I dumped a lot on you tonight. Wasn’t really the plan.”

“I’m okay,” Jace answers slowly. “I mean, this is good news, right? It’s finally over, and now all those families can have some sense of peace... Give their loved ones a decent burial... This is good.”

“And you? Does this give you peace?”

“Going back will.”

It’s not the answer Banks was hoping for. He holds Jace carefully, as if he might break.

The stitches in Jace's shoulder have been removed more than a week ago, and he no longer has to wear a sling. Luckily, Alex didn't hit any major blood vessels or nerves in his neck, and he hasn't needed physical therapy to regain function of his shoulder. So, aside from a little stiffness from time to time and the fresh scars that color his back, Jace has mostly healed from the ordeal.

Still, Banks holds him in his hands like a precious piece of Fabergé, fragile and rare.

"So, you're just gonna leave everything here to start all over in New York?"

"It's not that—" Jace peers at him closer, momentarily distracted. "Here. You have, uhm..." He laughs and strokes Banks' bottom lip with his thumb. "You've got glitter right there. Let me get that for you."

Before Banks can react, Jace leans in and kisses him, softly caressing and sucking at his bottom lip. Their lips move in sync, and the fire builds until Banks tilts his head and covers Jace's mouth with his own, his lips demanding. His tongue pushing past the seam of Jace's full lips.

Eventually, reluctantly, Banks pulls back, taking shallow breaths.

"Well? Did you get it?" He asks in a husky voice.

"Yeah, but I see more in your beard now."

Banks rolls his eyes and chuckles. "I can't believe you're leaving me now, when I just found you."

"There's always long distance." Jace rakes his fingers down Banks' chest as the DJ changes songs. "We could give it a proper go."

"A proper go, huh?" His hands wander Jace's body, trailing his arms and the small of his back as if trying to memorize how he feels. As if trying to record the moment with his fingerprints.

It's been a month since he fired his weapon and took down Alex to save Jace; his first kill on duty. After three days of

paid leave, the department's shrink assigned to his psych evaluation insisted on using the term "deadly force", which did little to relieve Banks of his nightmares. The internal affairs officer who interviewed him was also careful not to use the K word, but Banks has no illusions over what he's done. He's killed someone. He's taken a life that can never be replaced.

A month has passed since he gunned down Alex, and although things between him and Jace have been a string of romantic dinners, movies in the dark, and all the things normal people do on dates, Banks can't help but return to the day he pulled the trigger. He can't help but recall the way Jace and Derek looked at each other at the scene, the way Jace got lost in Derek's orbit as Derek cradled him in his arms on the floor... in a pool of Jace's blood. They'll always be tethered, Banks realizes. There will always be a part of Jace's heart reserved for Derek alone.

He'll never have all of it.

"Maybe it'll work, maybe it won't – but we won't know unless we try, right?" Jace says evenly.

Banks sighs and presses his forehead to Jace's. "What are you gonna do in New York anyway? And what about the press? Think they'll finally leave you alone?"

"Funny you say that. There's this journalist from The Chronicle who wants to interview me when I get there. A, uhm, Quinn Harris I think he said his name was." He shrugs his shoulders. "I looked him up. He's got some personal experience with this sort of thing, wants to tell my side of the story."

"Just be careful who you talk to. What time are you getting on the road?"

"First thing in the morning."

"I want to fly out and see you."

"Once I'm settled."

He casts his eyes downward and shifts his weight onto his heels. "Maybe you'll give me your address then?"



“Don’t make this a thing.”

“It’s just weird,” he mumbles. “I mean, how do I know you’re not shacking up with some hometown ex who’s offered to let you crash until you get your own place?”

“Is that what you think?” Jace couldn’t hide his amusement if he tried. A lot of worry and thought must have gone into this theory Banks has. There’s something about watching Banks squirm and get knotted up with jealousy that gives Jace his jollies. He could let this ride out, but he’s feeling kind. “You don’t have to worry about that. Besides, it’s not like I still talk to any of my exes.”

Derek walks by, as if on cue.

“Okay, fine. I talk to Derek, but, trust me, there’s no one waiting for me in New York.”

He tenses, and the muscles in his arms draw tight. “I just don’t get why you’re being so secretive about your new place.”

Jace pulls him close and quiets him with another kiss. “It’s my last night.”

“Alright. I know... I’ll shut up.” He heaves a sigh, flustered but slowly weakening under Jace’s touch. The detective in him wants answers. The detective in him is tempted to launch an impromptu investigation and call in favors from his brethren at Brooklyn PD, but the smile on Jace’s face calms his nerves.

He tells himself to trust Jace.

After all, what more could Jace possibly have to hide?

Practically the whole world knows his story now.

“Let’s hang out for a bit. I wanna spend more time with the guys. Then maybe I can come by your place, and you can give me another going-away present? Something a little more fun this time?” Jace’s wistful gaze takes a nosedive down Banks’ hard body, traveling the depths before resurfacing to give him a wink.

“Something to remember me by?” He gives a sly smile and takes Jace by the hips. His fingers hook through the belt loops of Jace’s jeans.

Someone shouts at the bar, and they reluctantly separate as the scenery fades back in.

“To be continued?”

Banks circles his jaw and licks his lips.

Jace takes that as a yes and elbows him playfully in the ribs.

A while later, Lincoln shouts last call from the bar and everyone issues brave goodbyes, staying true to their promise not to cry.

Derek gives Jace a platonic PG-13 hug, although the look in his eyes tells Jace he hasn't seen the last of him.

Syd squeezes Jace and whispers, “Thank you for being a friend.”

Jace nearly loses it.

Finally, Banks sweeps Jace into an embrace and kisses his neck. His whiskers light Jace's skin on fire. “Text me later,” he whispers.

Jace nods, waves goodbye, and heads to the door. He's almost in the clear when Ethel blocks his path with her arms folded; her signature pink eyeglasses crooked above a frown.

“I know you ain't think you were gon' leave without givin' me some sugar!” She cackles, and Jace falls into her motherly arms, breathing in her warmth.

“Thanks for always taking care of me.” His voice is muffled as he exhales, feeling a weight finally lift from his shoulders.

He thinks about his time in Portland and quietly says goodbye.

Goodbye to Moxy and the job he thought would absolve him of his past.

Goodbye to killer assistants and red-headed rivals who meant him no good.

Goodbye to Neil, who died tragically over fifty stolen dollars.

Goodbye to Graham, whose life was senselessly taken in the name of revenge.

Goodbye to Derek, who never gave up on him — even when his stomach was full of pills.

Goodbye to Banks, who, albeit adorable, has no idea what he's signed up for.

Goodbye to Syd, who found himself, his calling, and a love to call his own with a fierce strength Jace wishes he possessed.

Goodbye to Angel, who should stick to serving drinks instead of making them.

Goodbye to Dr. Kessler, who can keep her pills, potions, and prescriptions. He no longer needs them.

Goodbye to Frank, who's probably snoring softly at his desk.

And, lastly, goodbye to Ethel, who whispers in his ear, "Baby, I knew you didn't do those things they said on the news." She grabs his face and makes sure he hears her good. "You are not your father. You are your own person! Don't let nobody tell you different nah, you hear?"

Jace nods his head as the tears fall uncontrollably. He hugs her back tightly and sobs in her arms.

• • •

The road home takes longer to travel than Jace expected; much longer than his journey to Portland three years ago.

He stops on occasion, taking in landmarks and marvels of the countryside. He fills the car with jazz and small souvenirs as he makes his way across state lines, only running into one snag that left him deserted until help arrived.

A flat tire.

As his Beemer slumped to a stop on the side of the road at nightfall, he had to laugh at the irony. Without a spare, he did an overnight stint in a sleepy town called Sweet Ridge, huddling down in its only hotel until Randolph, the local mechanic, could replace his tire the next morning. He paid in cash and ate a quick breakfast at the town's diner, followed by

a thick slice of the best cherry pie he's ever had on suggestion from the waitress, who later told him it was on the house. Holding a lukewarm pot of coffee in her stained '50s waitress uniform and smudged eyeliner, she was fascinated to learn he was on his way to New York.

"I got a cousin who went there once. Flew on an airplane for the first time and everything!" She said with a wave of her arms. The coffeepot clutched tight in her hand barely held onto its bitter contents, sloshing and making waves behind glass. She then launched into a long story Jace half-listened to as he kept a close eye on the time; something about missing boys... Her best friend disappearing, but now he's back...

He smiled and nodded politely until she apologized for chatting his ear off and left to get his check.

With a full belly and Duke Ellington riding shotgun, he said goodbye to Sweet Ridge and made his way to New York without further incident.

Now, as he rides into Brooklyn's familiar cityscape, midnight approaches. A pale, full moon hangs in the sky, shining on streets lined with empty, parked cars and abandoned playgrounds. It follows him like a careful, untrusting eye in the sky, watching him.

Moments ago, his eyes were fighting to stay open, but as he nears his final destination, he sits tall and grips the steering wheel with fresh resolve.

He's done what he vowed he would never do three years ago.

He's returned.

He passes familiar neighborhoods, empty basketball courts, and deserted schoolyards, each with their own sweet and sour memories. He slows along a stretch of sidewalk where he once ran home, pinching a bloody nose and fighting back tears. Charlie Mattox trails behind him, like a phantom, calling him a faggot and "pig boy", one of many nicknames bestowed on him by Charlie and his gang of misfits. Jace wonders what's become of Charlie. By now, he's no doubt married and miserable with kids. Jace imagines two boys who look just like

him. One of which is probably gay, much to Charlie's chagrin. He loves playing with Barbies and will grow up to marry a man and fight for LGBTQ-equality, marching in all the pride parades Jace never went to as a kid. A big, sparkling, middle finger to Charlie from the universe.

Jace blows the air out of his chest and shifts in his seat. He can't wait to park, stretch his legs, and take a long shower. He prays for hot water and quiet neighbors. He prays he'll find a decent Vietnamese restaurant in the area. He prays that the space between empty walls will feel like home once his furniture arrives and he has a chance to hang his art.

He reminds himself that he deserves a fresh start.

But first, there's the task at hand.

He stops by the realtor's office to pick up keys left for him in the drop box. The weight of the jagged pieces of metal in his hand cause him to tense and curl his fingers into a fist around them.

It's only a short drive to his next stop. He finds parking behind the building and walks to the front entrance where he's met with the smell of fresh paint as he steps inside. Moonlight pours through the windows, drenching the floor, and lighting his way as he ventures farther inside.

It takes a few minutes for him to remember to breathe. He forces out a breath and does a slow spin in the middle of the room until his eyes land on the front door. He strolls back, approaching one of the front windows, and opens the blinds where he finds what he's looking for.

A sharp laugh escapes him as he peers at it, stunned to see the past tenants left it in place, preserved in time.

It takes him a moment to gather his courage, but he fixes his jaw, wraps his fingers around the beaded chain of the fluorescent sign, and yanks hard.

The sign clicks on, awakening in bright neon letters softly humming and crackling as the word OPEN illuminates the storefront window. He's both delighted and slightly startled to find it in working condition after all these years. He peers into

the red, electric glow warming his face like the start of a new dawn, then turns and walks back into the belly of Cassex Deli.

It's been gutted with the exception of its original counter still intact. The row of refrigerators that once held beer and soda are now gone. As is the golden broom that hung near the entrance, a prop in a twisted story that was far darker than those who stood under it realized at the time. The industrial appliances behind the counter are all new, like the pale, gray tiles that now pave the way to the basement.

Jace pauses at the top of the stairs, peering down into the darkness. He flips the switch by the mouth of the stairway and remembers that the power has not been turned on. He bites his bottom lip, sighs through the opening in his mouth, and grips the railing as he makes his descent.

The air is cool and smells of his childhood as he drops one foot in front of the other. He can still smell blood in the air. Blood, and metal, and dust. The taste is thick on his tongue as he winces in the dark. Even without sight, his feet remember how many steps they must take to reach the bottom. Once there, he stops on the final step and leans into the stillness.

Jace dares not take another step off the stairs.

He reaches into his back pocket for a book of matches. It's pink with Ethel's logo splashed across the front sleeve in a font he's never cared for, if he's honest. He wishes he knew her before the renovations to help with the rebranding, but oh well.

He strikes a match and a glow fills the basement, giving light to the murky memories surrounding him. He gasps, shocked to find the lower level as he remembers it. It's as if he's traveled back in time, and his father might slink out of the fridge at any moment, closing the heavy door shut behind him.

The hidden back room was sealed off years ago according to an article Jace read. But it makes little difference as the hairs on his arms tingle with a sudden chill.

He stares into the flame between his fingertips.

*It would be easy to toss the match.*

The shops next door are empty this time of night. He could recoup the insurance money and pretend to mourn the loss. Most of all, he could wipe the slate clean and be rid of the ghosts lurking in the shadows of the basement.

*He could also reopen the deli.*

He could restore it to its former glory and keep it in the family as those who came before him would have wanted. He could shape Cassex Deli into what it could have been all these years; a successful, black-owned business that's survived gentrification in the neighborhood.

Of course, he wonders how far he might travel in his father's shoes. If he might slip...

Alex's face flashes before him, the life drained from his eyes... Jace's first taste of watching someone die and finding a strange sense of joy and peace in it. He hasn't looked at himself in the mirror since, afraid of who he may find glaring back.

He wonders... And as the fire inches closer to his fingers, what he came home to do now becomes clear.

His lips curve into a smile, and he blows out the flame.

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