



# Love, Again

L A U R A S . F O X

**Love, Again**

**By**

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M/M Romance

Intended for Mature Audiences Only

This book contains graphic depictions of sexual intercourse and it is not meant for readers who are less than 18 years of age.

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## *Chapter One – Weird Day*

“Thirty,” Mason said through his teeth as he forced his chin over the training bar for the last push.

His phone went off right at that moment. He had a mind to let it ring, but he did expect a call since he had been out of work. It could be sooner rather than later, as the bills piling on his desk in orderly fashion were trying to tell him. He wasn’t the type to be picky, but his best friend had been pestering him that he would have something lined up for him, something that was worth the wait.

On his way to the phone, he grabbed a towel and wiped his brow. “Yes?” he said roughly, trying to hide that he was a tiny bit out of breath.

“Training hard, like usual?”

His friend’s voice was cheerful and getting a bit on his nerves.

“Yes, like usual.”

“Keep that sexy bod of yours in tip-top shape, my man, ‘cause yours truly, Boyd Lamartine, just found you the dream job.”

“Shoot.” Mason was in no mood to fool around. He stole a look at himself in the full-size mirror. At thirty-four, his body was starting to get a bit heavier, a bit thicker, but his abdomen was still flat, and he looked ready to take head-on any baddies crazy enough to stand in his way. His casual flings always commended him on his physique, but Mason never thanked them for it. His body was a tool to get something he needed, which, in his line of work, meant that being in shape equaled paying bills and keeping the fridge stocked. If people went to bed with him because they liked his dark, brooding looks – their words, not his -, and hard body, that was their choice, not his. It suited him since he was never interested in more than the occasional release, as pleasant as it could be with the right individual.

“It pays a ton of money,” Boyd blabbered. “And you don’t have to do much. Just walk around, looking like a badass, which I think you have right down to a tee.”

“Sounds fishy to me,” Mason said right away. Boyd was a good friend – maybe the best? the only one? – but Mason knew the guy to go the extra mile for his finder’s fee. In other words, he didn’t precisely believe Boyd to be eager to read the fine print. Nonetheless, he had to admit that, usually, his friend had excellent gut instinct.

“It’s always the bottom line with you, isn’t it, Mason?” Boyd complained. “Don’t look a gift horse in the mouth.”

“I knew I should have grabbed the paper when I went shopping for groceries this morning. You know, so I could start looking for a real job.” Mason wasn’t beyond teasing Boyd. It went both ways, and they understood each other well.

“A real job? Like what? Washing dishes? You know you won’t find the kind of work you’re made for in the papers. And hey, did I ever get you in trouble? Last time, you went for a gig I didn’t arrange, and what happened? Do I hear it?”

Mason rolled his eyes and stared at the ceiling for a moment. Then, he admitted defeat with a long sigh. “Not good. You want to hear me say it.”

“Yes. I do. I totally do.”

“Fine, fine, the guy was a screw-up. He deserved that punch and more. What, did you expect me to assist him while he was trying to turn his ex-wife into a punching bag?”

“And, and,” Boyd said excitedly, “who arranged that gig for you? It wasn’t me, was it?”

“It wasn’t. I screwed up. Please, Boyd, accept my sincere apologies. And please let me kiss your ass while at it.”

Boyd laughed wholeheartedly. “I would totally let you do that to me, but I don’t swing that way. You know me. If I ever changed my mind, you’d be the guy I’d flip for, cross my heart.”

“I’ll keep you to that. So, what’s this dream job all about?”

“You will love this,” Boyd said in an exaggerated tone.

Mason grimaced. That was the kind of tone people took when hiding something. “Come on, Boyd, I don’t have all day, as much as I love you.”

“I love you, too, man. Gosh, I wasn’t expecting a confession. But I’ll take it.”

“Sure, sure. Now, shoot already.”

“You’ll be in charge of a celebrity.”

“All right.”

“Are you jumping up and down for joy? ‘Cause I don’t hear it. It’s an easy job, Mason. You only need to look the part. Well, you know; walk around staring menacingly at people as you usually do, and that’s all.”

“Celebrities have their fair share of crazy fans, stalkers, and all that jazz,” Mason said flatly. “The jobs that seem the easiest are usually the trickiest. This woman, I suppose, goes to parties, events, and whatnot, and gets exposed all the time.”

“It’s not a woman.” Boyd’s voice dropped a note as if he was trying to communicate a secret.

“Okay. A guy pretty much does the same things, and they can have stalkers and crazy fans, just as well. So, out with it. Who is it?”

“Rhys Harmony,” Boyd said in one go.

Mason frowned and began searching through his mind. Was he supposed to know the name?  
“Who’s Rhys Harmony?”

Boyd seemed strangely relieved and not disappointed at all. “Okay, he’s not Brad Pitt or P. Diddy, but he is a celebrity in his own right.”

“Actor or singer?”

“Singer,” Boyd replied promptly. “And songwriter.”

“I’ve never heard of him, but I don’t listen to music much anyway. What kind of music does he play?”

“It’s hard to describe. You have to listen to him. It’s really something.”

“If you say so,” Mason said dryly. “What’s the gig?”

“His producer needs someone to protect Rhys pretty much all the time. That means that you’ll have to pack your bags.”

“Okay. Anything else? What’s the pay?” Mason stopped himself from whistling when Boyd recited him the daily amount he would get. “And for how long?”

“For as long as you’re needed.”

“Sounds good. Why did you have to act all shady, asshole?” Mason said in as an endearing tone as he could muster. “You made me think that I must work for America’s Most Wanted or something.”

Boyd offered a strained laugh in reply. “The guy’s an angel, Mason. You should see him. If I ever flipped, it might be because he jumped my bones out of the blue.”

“Fucking two-timer,” Mason said with a chuckle. “I thought I was the only one for you. Just said so, too.”

“Well, normally, yeah. But you should see this guy. An angel, I’m telling you.”

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t fuck where I work.”

“Correct. That’s why I trust you for this job. No one else.”

“Stop buttering me, or I’ll start thinking myself as toast.”

Mason was satisfied when he put the phone down. But still, he had a feeling that there was another shoe somewhere, waiting to drop.

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A coquette mansion on the hill opened its gates as he was chauffeured in by his friend, along with another man also hired to ensure security. Throughout their ride there, Boyd and the other guy had been driving him nuts with their constant chatter. Mason preferred silence, as much of it as he could get. Maybe that was why he wasn’t a big fan of music.

“Is he at home?” he asked curtly.

“Who?” Boyd asked as he maneuvered the car into the driveway.

“The guy I’m supposed to work for,” Mason said, throwing Boyd a well-aimed glance in the rearview mirror. He had to ride in the back when the other bodyguard had called dibs on shotgun. His name was Billy, and he looked like a fresh-faced rookie. Mason found it a bit odd that he had been paired with such a novice. But maybe he was jumping to conclusions, and Billy could be a black belt or something.

He somehow had his doubts. The guy’s body frame was on the chubby side, at least for that line of work, and he seemed a bit of a simpleton. Boyd had sold him on some crazy story about how he had once got the autograph of a famous football player. Billy had eaten that straight from Boyd’s hand and had expressed his enthusiasm through a plethora of expletives that somehow hadn’t sounded aggressive at all in his mouth.

Still, maybe he had some skills.

“Rhys is not yet at home,” Billy told him dutifully.

Mason stared at his would-be partner, who had turned in his seat to look at him. “All right, Kung Fu Panda. If you’re so well informed.”

Billy’s brown eyes widened in surprise, and then, he burst into wholehearted laughter. “I’m a huge fan of that movie! How did you know that?”

“Just a hunch, I guess,” Mason offered back, fighting hard to keep a straight face. Billy’s laugh was infectious, and a guy who was either too naïve to figure out when someone was pulling a joke on him, or smart enough not to get pissed, was all right in Mason’s book.

“Let’s get you settled, guys,” Boyd said as he cut off the engine. “Rhys is not yet here, but his producer, Levine Goldman, is. He’ll take you through the paces. Is this great or what?”

“Awesome!” Billy exclaimed, as expected.



Mason kept in a sigh. He somewhat suspected that it took little to get Billy excited. He stepped out of the car, and Boyd hurried to straighten his tie. His friend himself was dressed to the nines, and the dark suit looked good on him. Only two years younger than him, Boyd was already starting to show evident signs of balding and a potbelly, but it suited his businessman persona well. When he wasn't a total joker, Boyd had the gravitas demanded by interactions with high-profile clients, as the current one seemed to be.

"There you go, sugar," Boyd said as he patted Mason's chest.

Billy examined them with curious eyes. "Are you two together?"

Now, Mason couldn't keep it in any longer. He began laughing. "Kind of," he joked. "I'm his side piece. He's married," he said as he pointed at Boyd.

The other snorted. "Don't believe this joker. He's my one and only true love."

"I'm telling Sarah you practically called her a beard right now," Mason teased his best friend.

The reply was a horrified face. "No way. She might make me sleep on the floor."

"Even that would be too good for you," Mason said.

"Come on, guys. It's time for us to get busy. Levine is waiting for us, and trust me when I tell you that the guy is a stickler for the help being on time."

"The help?" Mason asked and quirked an eyebrow.

"Levine Goldman is a billionaire," Billy whispered, and his eyes darted around as if expecting someone to eavesdrop on them.

"And the logic is?" Mason asked.

"He can and will treat people like trash," Boyd said airily.

"And here comes the other shoe," Mason said with a sigh, mostly to himself.

"What shoe?" Billy asked. Mason offered only a shrug. "He can be a bit of a scumbag, I heard," the rookie added, in the same conspiratorial manner.

Mason pondered for a moment. Something was irking him at little. "So this guy can hire the hottest shot of the all hotshot security companies in the city, and he settles for Kung Fu Panda and me, here?"

Boyd threw him a sidelong glance. "Rhys is a pet project for Levine. He doesn't make enough money to justify that kind of expense. Also, he's not in imminent danger or anything. Throwing cash on expensive services is not something Levine does."

“Oh, a cheapskate,” Mason commented. “And what does a billionaire like him do with some small-time celebrity like this Rhys guy?”

“Rumor has it --” Billy started.

“Billy, shut it,” Boyd said curtly. He straightened up his suit jacket, kicked off some invisible lint off his lapel, and then rang the doorbell.

A stern-looking woman in an apron opened the door, and, without a word of welcome, retreated so that they could all walk inside.

“Good afternoon, ma’am,” Billy offered like the good kid he was.

The woman’s washed-out eyes didn’t even spare him a glance. They were set on Boyd, as he appeared to be the only one important enough to be worthy of her consideration. “Mr. Goldman will see you now,” she announced in a cold voice that brooked no contradiction.

They proceeded to walk single file, following the woman to what looked like an office, discreetly tucked under the stairs leading to the first floor. Mason observed his surroundings with critical eyes. There seemed to be a security system in place already. The artificial eye of a camera blinked at them as they passed by it.

They entered the office in absolute silence. A man at the north of forties was standing behind a huge desk made from solid oak, and he was talking on the phone, his eyes fixed somewhere in front of him. Mason noticed the expensive pin-striped suit right away. His salt and pepper hair was brushed to perfection, and his features were angular, something that made him look like a predatory bird. He wasn’t unattractive, but his demeanor was cold and calculated. Just like there was no hair astray on his head, it appeared that the man didn’t leave anything to chance.

Whatever the conversation was about, he seemed displeased with it. He was balancing on his feet as he talked, which Mason found it a bit strange. It was as if he was trying to appear taller; Levine Goldman was of average height, but probably that didn’t suit his bank account or something. “Results. That is all I’m asking. Is it too much? I hope not.” He cut off the conversation without saying goodbye to the person on the other end. Mason understood what Boyd had meant by his short, but to the point, description of the prick.

Levine Goldman set his eyes on them. “You’re here. Good. Let’s make this quick since I don’t have all day. Are these two the people you hired for Rhys?” Just like the maid who had gotten the door, Levine completely ignored Mason and Billy.

“Yes, sir,” Boys said promptly. “Mason Knight and Billy Jackson.”

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, sir,” Billy said enthusiastically. He was about to take a step and extend his hand, but Mason caught his elbow in warning.

It seemed that Levine noticed him now. His eyes, of pale, indistinctive color – grey, blue? - , set on him. They appeared to scrutinize him. Mason looked back, schooling his face into neutral. With some satisfaction, he noticed that Levine set his chin high as if he was trying to compensate for the difference in height.

“Rhys should be home soon. Anita will show you to your rooms. She will have to leave in half an hour, which means that you will be on your own, so pay attention to all the rules she lays down for you.”

“Do I get my own room?” Billy asked excitedly.

“Yes,” Levine replied from the tip of his lips, as if it required way too much effort to talk with his entire mouth, effort he didn’t want to spare on the likes of Billy. “This isn’t summer camp.”

“Super,” Billy commented, totally unfazed by Levine’s contempt.

Being a little simple had its perks, Mason thought. He wasn’t that lucky. Levine Goldman seemed like a good candidate to meet his fist, but Mason didn’t do personal at work. Without a proper reason, he wouldn’t give Levine a piece of his mind unless the guy started beating up his ex in front of them.

“Rhys has the soul of an artist. That means that he needs his space to listen to his inner music. In other words, you two should be out of his way as much as possible. Make sure that you’re invisible and don’t get in the way of his artistic process.”

“We will be like ninjas, sir,” Billy replied. “Rhys won’t even know we’re here.” Mason had a hard time trying to picture that.

“Aren’t you talkative for a bodyguard?” Levine asked. “And you? Are you mute?” His attention shifted to Mason.

“No,” Mason offered curtly.

Levine examined him. “A man of few words. I like you.”

*The feeling’s not mutual, asswipe.*

“What you two need to do is to make sure no one disturbs Rhys. He needs his quiet,” Levine insisted.

“Do people usually disturb him?” Mason asked.

Levine stared at him, and his eyelids dropped. “You could say that. And he is easily disturbed. That is something I would dislike to hear. Is that clear?”

“Crystal,” Mason shot back.

The asswipe's phone rang, and Levine dismissed them with a flick of the wrist. Mason felt none the wiser about the nature of his current job. That meant that he would have to figure everything out on his own.

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"Man, can you believe how cool this house is?" Billy looked around in wonder.

"Don't eye the silverware too closely, Kung Fu Panda. They might suspect you're planning to steal it."

Billy snickered and stared at a metal trophy placed neatly on the upper shelf of a bookcase. "Rhys is such a god," he said reverently. "Have you listened to his last hit? *Nothing cuts like love?*"

"Can't say that I have," Mason replied dryly.

Billy's eyes grew wide. "You have to be kidding me. You must listen to this."

Out of nowhere, Billy produced a set of airpods and offered them to Mason.

"I'd rather not. We're here to figure out what this place needs, not play hooky."

"No, man. I won't budge until you listen to this. You must."

Billy looked like he'd have a hard time taking 'no' for an answer. Mason took the airpods with a sigh and fitted them into his ears. He would listen for precisely fifteen seconds, and then he would start kicking his partner's ass.

Billy fiddled with his phone for a bit, and Mason used the reprieve to examine the room some more. A rich jazzy sound filled his ears, and he stopped. Then, the weirdest thing happened; the singer began singing to him, and him only.

*Nothing cuts like love,*

*You won't feel when it cuts you,*

*You won't feel when it strikes you,*

*You won't feel when it hurts you,*

*Nothing hurts like love,*

*You won't know when it hits you,*

*You won't know when it bleeds you,*

*You won't know when it leaves you,*

*Nothing cuts like love,*

*It won't be here when you need it,*

*It won't hear when you shout it,*

*It won't care when you're ... gone.*

Mason stood there, dumbfounded. The room, the things around him, Billy, nothing, and no one was there anymore. There was only him, him, and the music filling his ears, the voice of the singer, so throaty, velvety, and intimate, as if his lips were right against Mason's skin, making him feel each vibration, each note, deep inside the marrow of his bones.

The song ended, and Mason blinked a few times. He cleared his throat and barely stopped a shiver; under his suit, his skin was all goosebumps.

"Well?" Billy asked, his eyes as big as saucers. "What did I tell you? Is he a god or what?"

Mason took the airpods out of his ears and handed them back to Billy. "We have work to do."

"What?" A moan accompanied the complaint. "Is this all that's on your mind? Mason, you don't have a heart, man, if you don't like this."

"I'm not into this whiny kind of music. I dislike people who make a display of their emotions while they've never been through anything real in their lives." Mason stopped his tirade when he noticed how Billy's face fell. "He's decent, I guess," he changed tack, "but I'm no critic. What I'm good at is my job. And yours. So let's do it."

Billy followed him without a word, behaving like a kicked puppy trailing after his cruel master. Mason told himself that he wouldn't feel bad about that. He had enough trouble trying to get that throaty sexy voice out of his head. He hoped he hadn't caught an ear wick.

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Billy decided that he would be better out of Mason's way and went to investigate his room, which most probably included how fluffy the sheets on the bed were. It was annoying to be careful with other people's feelings, and Mason liked his line of work because he didn't have to deal with that kind of thing too much.

Levine had left a set of instructions for them to investigate all the rooms for security flaws, which meant that nothing was off-limits. Mason wasn't particularly comfortable about inspecting Rhys's bedroom, but that was his job, and his interest was only professional. Also, he was happy that he no longer had Billy with him, as he half-feared the guy doing something outrageous like sniffing Rhys's pillow or trying out his sleepers. The guy was a die-hard fan, as it seemed, so

maybe Boyd should have considered other options before hiring him. It appeared that the chances were high for Rhys's artistic process to be disturbed, after all.

Mason shook his head. The singer did have a very distinct voice, but maybe it was all the result of some sophisticated audio processing software that made him sound like that. His room could be considered eclectic, compared to the rest of the house. There were mismatched pieces of furniture, and the bed had a vibrant violet coverlet on it. The carpet was thick enough to make Mason feel his feet sinking in, even with his shoes on, and the walls were covered floor to ceiling with what looked like a complicated potpourri of aesthetic quotes.

*"Beauty is how you feel inside,"* Mason murmured as he leaned in and chose to read one at random.

The whole room was arranged to trigger and channel inspiration, Mason realized. Without overthinking things, he pulled open the top drawer of the nightstand by the bed. His eyebrows shot up at the sight of what looked like a realistic silicone toy placed neatly in a transparent case. Lube, condoms, and a pack of batteries were there, too. Well, all people needed hobbies. Who said Rhys Harmony didn't need one, besides his music?

On the other hand, it wasn't his business. He pushed back the drawer carefully. Well, he would need to check the perimeter outside, as well. Depending on what Rhys agreed to, they could install an additional camera on the balcony adjacent to the bedroom. It appeared so easy for someone to access the room from outside if they wanted. He would think of other ways to secure it, as well.

The sound of the door opening made him turn quickly on his heels. A man in his mid-twenties walked inside, and Mason couldn't help gawking. He was tall and willowy, and the way he moved was graceful and provocative. He consciously rolled his hips, and there was a come-hither look in his deep blue eyes. Mason barely had time to take in the wavy golden hair, the tall forehead, the perfect eyebrows, and the full lips when the man began talking.

"I'm glad to see you're already here." Mason had heard that throaty voice before. "You don't look like in the pictures, but I'm pleased with what I'm seeing."

Was he Rhys Harmony? Mason was rightfully dumbstruck. He stood there, baffled, something that was totally uncharacteristic for him. Rhys walked over to him and grabbed him by the back of the neck, placing his lips directly on his.

And if that wasn't enough to startle him, a hand went straight to his crotch to feel his cock. Mason grabbed Rhys fast by the upper arms and pulled him away from the kiss. Unconsciously, he licked his lips and tasted something sweet.

The blue eyes stared at him in surprise. "I don't remember ordering 'hard to get'."

“Mr. Harmony,” Mason began, trying hard to rein in his fascination with the beautiful man in front of his eyes, “I think you just took me for someone else.”

Perfect eyebrows shot up. “Really?”

“I’m Mason Knight, the person in charge of your security,” Mason said quickly.

Rhys’s features metamorphosed into amusement. “Ah, I see. Well, I don’t mind,” he said and leaned in closer, “if you don’t.”

Mason kept him at arm’s length. He briefly wondered if Rhys was high on something. “I do mind.”

Rhys sighed and pushed back on his heels. “Sure. So, where is my date?”

“Your date?” Mason asked, puzzled.

Rhys took out his phone and looked at the screen with a focused look on his face. That allowed Mason some time to examine him some more. Rhys wore white clothes, made from some light material, and the shirt was opened in front down below his solar plexus, allowing Mason to see a silver pendant encasing a stone as blue as Rhys’s eyes. When Rhys moved his arms, Mason caught sight of a pink nipple.

This job was starting to prove harder than he had initially thought.

“Ah, damn, it was canceled,” Rhys complained. He placed the phone to his ear right away. “Levine, what the hell?” he said, as soon as someone answered at the other end. “What? Now I’m not even allowed to play anymore? As usual, you’re no fun.”

If Billy thought Rhys was a god, he had to be a really flighty one. Still, the magic was there; Mason couldn’t tear his eyes off him. When Rhys turned, he checked his behind. For a guy as skinny as him, that looked pretty yummy. It wasn’t big or anything, but it was perky and just how Mason liked them best.

No, he needed to pull his mind out of the gutter. Now wasn’t the right time to get sidetracked, and, when he was on the job, he was entirely blind to men’s charms.

It looked like there was a first time for everything.

Rhys turned and caught him staring. A small all-knowing smirk lit up his face. His lips parted, and when he licked them, Mason swallowed hard.

“Yes, I do see him. I like what I see very much. What? He’s not allowed to play with me, either? I might just die of complete boredom. And don’t behave like you’re my dad or something. I don’t like my real dad, and I don’t want a replacement. What? There are two? Why would you think I need two bodyguards?” Rhys was starting to get agitated.

Mason read his body language with increased curiosity. He noticed how the corners of Rhys's mouth fell, and then he saw something he had failed to see at first glance. There was a sort of bitterness marking that lovely mouth. A glimpse of sadness in his eyes convinced Mason that maybe Rhys Harmony wasn't as flighty as he wanted to appear to the outside world.

"All right. If that's what you think. But you have to give me a bit of space. Living with two strangers is not something I agreed with. No, I don't need someone to keep an eye on me. The mere idea gives me the creeps. I can handle the press. It's nothing I haven't heard before. What else could they do to me? Fine, have it your way. Just for the record, I'm not happy at all. Have a nice evening."

Mason stood straight when Rhys finished his conversation. Rhys tapped his phone against his lips as he took in Mason, now with different eyes. "Are you all right working for me?" he asked, out of the blue.

"Yes. Why shouldn't I be?" Mason asked, puzzled.

Rhys shrugged. "You look like a straitlaced kind of guy. And, apparently, I'm the controversial type."

"The pay is good," Mason offered in reply. He hadn't missed the sarcastic 'apparently' inserted in Rhys's words.

"All right." Rhys seemed suddenly tired. "Are you going to live in this room?"

"No," Mason replied.

"Then, I'm sorry, but I'll have to ask you to leave."

"It would be a good time to talk about the security you need for this place," Mason said with determination.

Rhys quirked an eyebrow. "Really? What do you want to know?"

"You were expecting someone."

"Yes." Rhys covered his mouth as if he was yawning.

Usually, Mason would have gotten pissed over that. But he couldn't bring himself to dislike Rhys. He was too pretty, and that felt like a dangerous thing right now.

"Someone you never saw in your life."

Rhys nodded.

"And he was supposed to be inside when you came? How?"



“I sent him the code to the front door, obviously,” Rhys said with a shrug.

“We will change it. Never do that again.”

Rhys stared at him for a brief second, and then he exploded. “You have to be kidding me! Do I have to ask you for your permission to have people over?”

“Yes. That’s how security works. Giving your alarm code to strangers is forbidden. Also, the balcony should have a camera --”

Rhys moaned and rolled his eyes, interrupting him. “Did Levine put you up to this?”

“He told me to make sure you’re undisturbed. This is me doing my job.”

“This is you being a complete asshole. Let me guess. You’re straight as an arrow, and you despise me.”

Mason frowned. “I don’t despise you, Mr. Harmony.”

“Mr. Harmony.” Rhys laughed, a throaty, pleasant laugh that made Mason feel goosebumps everywhere. “That sounds so silly. Just call me Rhys, like anyone else. And Harmony, if you haven’t guessed by now, is a stage name.”

“Then, let me know your real name, and I will call you that.”

“Rhys will do just fine.”

“I’m not on the first-name basis with my employers, ever.”

“Just what I thought. Straitlaced and straight in bed.”

It irked Mason that Rhys was pointing at his sexuality so boldly; also, it was a wrong assumption. Yet, somehow, Mason didn’t want Rhys to know he actually liked guys, too. It was a private detail about his life, and he had every intention to keep his personal stuff separated from his work.

“Well, how should I call you?”

“Rhys, and don’t you dare to put ‘Mr.’ in front of that,” Rhys warned him, pointing a long elegant finger at him.

“Okay,” Mason admitted with a sigh. He gave Rhys a short once-over.

Rhys scoffed. “I don’t have two heads. Stop staring at me like that.”

He couldn’t be further from the truth, Mason thought, but he was glad Rhys believed that. It meant that there would be fewer complications in the long run.

“Do we agree on not giving the alarm code to strangers?” Mason asked.

Rhys shrugged. “Okay. What else do you want me to do? Wake up at six? Take cold baths?”

“Just let me do my job, and you won’t regret it.”

“I already regret it,” Rhys said. “But not entirely. You’re pleasant to look at. Can I see you naked?”

Rhys was trying to provoke him. Mason didn’t bite. “No.”

“Too bad,” Rhys said, shaking his head. “I bet you have a fantastic body. I heard that there are two of you. Is your partner just as zero-fun as you? If he’s half as handsome, I can live with it.”

Mason kept in a smile as he thought of Billy and his effervescent personality. “I don’t know,” he offered.

An energetic knock on the door interrupted their conversation.

“Come in,” Rhys said.

Billy put in his head and stared at them. “Rhys, you’re home!” he exclaimed.

Rhys’s eyes lit up upon seeing Billy. It looked like there was a mutual agreement. Those two liked each other at first sight, Mason could tell.

“Yes, I just got in.”

“So cool! Can I come in?”

Rhys opened his mouth to say something, but Mason stopped him. “Wait, do you always talk to strangers like this?”

“He’s your partner and my other bodyguard, right?” Rhys said. “Who else could be in the house?”

“Your date,” Mason said, seasoning his words with plenty of vinegar.

Rhys gave him a withering look. “Come on in, honey,” he said and gestured for Billy to enter.

Billy almost stumbled toward Rhys and stopped inches from him. “I can’t believe I see you in flesh and blood!”

Rhys pushed one strand of golden hair behind his ear in a coquettish gesture. “Yes, this is me. What’s your name?”

“Billy, Billy Jackson. Boy, I’m so glad to meet you.” Billy hesitated to extend his hand, although he made a move for it, and then reconsidered while stealing a nervous glance at Mason.

Rhys didn’t let him debate for long; he opened his arms and walked over to him. Billy squealed in delight as Rhys hugged him and placed a small peck on his cheek.

“Is your producer okay with your fraternizing like this with the help?” Mason asked.

Rhys threw him a stubborn look. “Are you Levine’s lapdog or something?”

Mason grimaced. That was the last thing on earth he ever wanted to be.

“He’s not. Arnie’s a badass,” Billy said.

“Arnie? I thought his name was Mason,” Rhys replied and looked, a bit quizzically at Mason.

“I call him that,” Billy said proudly. “We’re partners, so we gave each other nicknames.”

That was news to Mason.

Billy continued. “He calls me Kung Fu Panda.”

Rhys stared at Mason crossly now, thinning his eyes. “Now that’s just plain --”

“Awesome!” Billy interrupted him. “That movie is everything to me! I mean, all three of them!”

Rhys smiled and bit back any scolding he might have had in store for Mason. But his eyes remained on him, and Mason felt a bit weird under their stare. The beautiful blues were obviously capable of many things, and one was to see through clothes and even more. It was a heated look, and Mason felt a small tremble of anticipation. Rhys made it seem like they were along in the room, ready to tear their clothes off each other. Suddenly, Mason had a feeling that this job would be harder than usual. Rhys Harmony, an angel? Make it a sexy demon, and you would be closer to the truth.

“Well, my dear bodyguards, I will still have to ask you to allow me to rest. We’re going out tonight, so make sure you get some rest, too. Have you eaten anything?”

Billy opened his mouth, and Rhys turned toward him, but Mason made a cutting gesture with one hand, and the other bodyguard remained silent.

“I believe we were told everything we needed to know by the maid in charge. If we’re hungry, we can fix ourselves some sandwiches,” Mason said in a cool voice.

Rhys let out a small, throaty laugh. He also threw his head back as he did that, and Mason had a sudden flash of fantasy, of his fingers touching that elegant throat and wrapping around it. Damn,

what a fucking hard job. Maybe that was why Boyd had been so secretive about it; he must have imagined what effect a man like that could have on Mason.

“What? Did you guys think I would fix you dinner? Maybe in an apron?” Rhys asked teasingly.

“Far from it,” Mason said with a grimace he made no effort to hide. “But you look like you could use someone cooking for you.”

“I’m fine, thank you,” Rhys replied, his lips pursed. “Hey, Billy, would you like some pizza before we go out tonight? There a small wooden pot downstairs. I keep some money in there, so feel free to order whatever you want.”

Billy looked at Mason, his eyes bright. Mason rolled his eyes. “You should really watch that gut, Billy.”

Billy made such a disappointed face that Mason had instant regrets. “Don’t call me Billy. Call me the name you gave me.”

“What? Kung Fu Panda? It’s a bit long, don’t you think?”

Billy shrugged. “Then, just call me Po.”

The guy really liked his cartoon characters.

“All right,” Mason said with a sigh. “But what’s with the Arnie thing? Where does it come from?”

“It’s Arnold Schwarzenegger’s nickname,” Billy explained with enthusiasm. “You’re built like him.”

“Let’s not exaggerate.” Mason knew he was all right, but nothing like the bodybuilder turned actor turned politician.

Rhys had taken his time to examine them during their exchange. Mason hadn’t looked in his direction, but he knew those fascinating eyes were on him. “Po, Arnie, how about you, guys, let me get my beauty sleep?”

“It’s five in the afternoon. What beauty sleep?” Mason asked.

Rhys made a show of yawning, covering his mouth with an elegant hand, adorned with a single ring on his middle finger, decorated with a blue stone to match the one on the pendant around his neck. “I’ll see you, guys, down, at eight. I can only assume that Levine wants me to take you everywhere with me.”

Mason nodded. He had to push Billy out of the room, as his partner seemed to be rightfully mesmerized by Rhys.

“He’s even more beautiful in flesh and blood,” Billy said dreamily, as soon as they were out of earshot.

“You’re not acting very professional, Po,” Mason said directly. “Don’t let Levine see your gushing over Rhys like that. He might get the wrong idea. By the way, when we were coming here, you wanted to say something about Rhys and Levine, but Boyd didn’t let you talk. What was it?”

Never in his life had Mason been interested in celebrity gossip, but nothing was like the rest of his life today. So, he could allow himself a pass.

“Ah,” Billy said with self-importance. Apparently, he took great pleasure in educating Mason on the topic of Rhys Harmony. “There are some rumors that Levine has certain feelings toward Rhys, hence the close attention he pays to him.”

“It doesn’t look like those feelings are reciprocated,” Mason said with internal satisfaction. “Rhys was expecting an escort upon returning home.”

“An escort?” Billy’s eyes grew wide. “It’s impossible. Rhys is not that kind of guy.”

“Right,” Mason said, letting the sarcasm in that single word seep through. “Or maybe your idol is not the angel you think. A guy needs to get laid. And since he has the means and the money, why not?”

“Rhys is not like that,” Billy said with conviction.

Mason rubbed his forehead. “Po, I feel the need to ask you. Do you still believe in Santa Claus?”

Billy stopped for a second and then burst into laughter. The bout ended in hiccups, and Mason had to pat Billy on the back a few times to make him get his normal breathing back. “No, but I believe in Rhys,” he finally said, while wiping tears from his eyes.

Flighty fans for a flighty idol. Mason just shook his head. “I’ll inspect the house some more. If you need your beauty sleep, too, or want to order that pizza, feel free to do it.”

Billy caught his arm. “Rhys is more than meets the eye, Mason,” he said, and this time he was serious, which was definitely a sudden change from his earlier shenanigans.

“If you say so,” Mason replied and stared, a bit surprised, at Billy. There was an intense expression in his eyes.

“You’ll see it yourself,” Billy said. “I’m sure you will.”

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Mason stood with his back straight and scanned the room. Rhys was in a conversation in a private booth at that club with his producer, and he and Billy were guarding the door. He had his earpiece on, and a rubber bullet gun was pushing against his back. He was all about non-lethal weapons, but he didn't like the idea of letting any perps think he was some fangless guard dog. His gun looked pretty much like the real thing, and enough to impress stupid assholes. And, if need be, Mason was handy with it so that he could deliver a painful blow and stall any wrongdoing.

Billy patted his arm. "I need to visit the little boys' room. Can you hold the fort, Arnie?"

"Sure thing," Mason said. "It doesn't look like there's anything to worry about around here. Levine might just overpay us. And I thought him to be a cheapskate."

Billy snickered. "But that's all the better for us, right?"

"Right." Mason kept the smile that threatened to curl his lips.

Billy went away, and Mason remained in the same vigilant state. Someone moved in his field of view, and Mason set his entire attention on the target, his senses tingling in high alert at the blink of an eye.

The stranger walking slowly toward him wore a leather jacket and what looked like expensive jeans. That was what Mason could glean in the soft lights of the club. There were few patrons inside, as it wasn't yet the time for the crowds to assault the front door.

He snuck a hand at his back and frowned. The stranger seemed a bit drunk since he was moving hesitantly as if he didn't know which way to go. Mason relaxed a fraction. The guy was average in height and lean, so Mason doubted that he could be a match for him.

The stranger was holding a hand to his left temple and walking about without any evident purpose. The other people around ignored him, and Mason stared a little more. He could see a mane of chestnut-colored hair but not much of his face.

The stranger suddenly looked at him. Mason stared back without flinching. And then, he noticed what the stranger was doing with his hand at his temple. There was blood on the left part of his face. With a small, annoyed tsk, Mason moved an inch from his place. "Hey, buddy," he called.

The stranger stared at him, taken by surprise.

"Do you need a doctor or something?" Mason asked.

The stranger stared at his left hand and looked like it was for the first time that he noticed he was bleeding.

Mason sighed. That wasn't the night for him to play the Good Samaritan. But it looked like other people couldn't care less about the wounded stranger.

"Hey, I'm talking to you," he said, a bit louder.

One of the patrons sitting at the bar turned to look at him. Mason refocused his attention on the stranger in the leather jacket.

"Man, you're bleeding. Do you want me to call an ambulance?"

The stranger now looked at him again. "Can you see me?"

Mason's frown deepened. Was the guy high, too, besides having been hit in the head? "What the fuck do you mean? Of course, I see you. Can you believe this guy?" he asked the guy at the bar looking at the entire scene with growing interest.

"What guy?" the patron asked and stared at Mason with a bit of wariness in his body language.

"This guy." Mason pointed directly at the stranger.

"Oh my God, you see me!" The stranger walked closer to him.

"I don't see any guy," the patron replied.

Was that some stupid prank? Had Billy thought it would be funny to set him up? But when could he had been able to put the stranger and the patron up to it? They had been together the whole time.

Mason moved to touch the stranger's shoulder to make a point, but then the weirdest thing in his life happened. His hand fell through the air, reaching nothing. He took a step back, disoriented now.

"Are you okay, man?" the patron asked and half-stood from his stool.

Mason searched with his eyes for any beams creating the thing in front of him – what? A hologram? He saw nothing.

"I think I'm a ghost or something, man," the stranger said. "And you're the first guy to see me."

"Are you high?" It was the patron again who was grinning and probably found Mason's behavior a bit funny.

Mason moved his eyes from the stranger who wasn't really there to the patron. "Just go back to your cheap beer, asshole," he said through his teeth.

The patron stood back on his stool and waved at him like he couldn't be bothered.

Mason stared at the bleeding stranger again. Tentatively, he put one hand up and pushed against the stranger's chest, but he met nothing but air. The patron at the bar turned to sneak a peek, but one single glance from Mason made him set his eyes on the drink in front of him in an instant.

Right. There had to be an explanation.

"You see me," the stranger exclaimed again. "Oh, fuck, I'm so relieved. Someone finally sees me!"

Mason was speechless. He put one hand over his mouth. What the fuck was that? Was he suddenly losing his mind? He stared around some more, but there was no sign that the stranger in front of him was a simulation of sorts.

"Hey, Arnie, thanks for holding the fort. Ugh, my bladder was about to explode," Billy started blabbering from his right.

Mason looked at him.

Billy must have seen something in his eyes because his right hand went to his belt. Unlike him, Billy had a real weapon. Mason hadn't commented on it, but now, he felt a bit good that he had some backup. There was some weird shit going on.

"Billy," Mason said slowly, "do you see anything strange around here?"

Billy's eyes scanned the room, and, without mistake, they went through the bleeding stranger. "What is it, Mason?" he asked in a whisper. "I don't see anything."

Mason walked back to his place by the door to the private booth. "I just got a weird feeling for a moment."

Billy relaxed a fraction, but his eyes rested on the patron at the bar. Mason was pretty sure his first assessment of Billy had been, at least to some degree, wrong. The guy knew his job. Billy looked back at him and made a small gesture with his chin at the patron who was sitting with his back at them.

Mason just shook his head. Billy nodded and went back to his place, too. "Don't scare me like that, Arnie. You looked really serious, for a moment, there."

The stranger moved close to Mason and stared at him. "You still see me, right?"

Mason could feel a tick in his jaw growing stronger.

The stranger began bouncing up and down. "I can't fucking believe it! You see me!"

Mason let out a sigh.



“Does your back hurt or something?”

“What? Yeah, a bit,” Mason replied.

“My mom has one of these things. A posture brace. It worked wonders for her. I could call her and ask her what brand it is. I’m sure they make some for guys, too.”

Mason grimaced. From the corner of one eye, he could still see the stranger doing some weird victory dance. No way in hell was happening to him. He had zero inclinations to believe in supernatural things, and he didn’t believe in ghosts.

## *Chapter Two – Play Dead*

The stranger hopped around him, going through Billy, the walls around them, and everything that represented a solid mass, without a problem.

“Man, we have so much to talk about. I mean, do you even know me?” the stranger asked, stopping for a moment.

Mason shifted his weight from one foot to the other and looked straight ahead.

“You can’t ignore me,” the stranger pointed out. “There must be a reason why you, of all the people around us, can see me.”

“Just shut the fuck up,” Mason said under his breath.

“Did you say anything, Arnie?” Billy asked.

“No. I was just wondering what the hell those two could talk for hours.”

“Hours? They’ve been in there for forty minutes, tops,” Billy replied after checking his watch.

“Yeah? It seemed longer.”

“You’re more of an action guy, right?” Billy nudged him in the ribs playfully. “What kind of jobs have you had until this one? I bet they were some hot action ones. Can you tell me about them? No names, just you know, the hot bits.”

Great. Now, Mason had to deal with two chatterboxes, not one.

“I understand, man, I understand,” the stranger said. “I can’t have you neglect your duty since you seem like you’re guarding the president on a romantic rendezvous or something. So, I’ll keep my mouth shut. For now. After this, I’m coming home with you. You have to tell me where you know me from.”

“I don’t know you,” Mason whispered angrily.

Billy turned toward him again. “You don’t know me? Man, that hurt. C’mon, I know we’ve been partners for only a day, but I feel like we’ve known each other for longer. Don’t worry. You’ll get to know me plenty. I promise. We will be the best of friends.”

Mason could feel a headache coming up. So, he was seeing ghosts now, and Billy thought they could be friends forever. And he was bodyguard to a guy who could make the heavens sigh, with a golden voice that could turn stone into hot lava. Nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing at all.

There was movement behind them. Finally. Mason offered Billy a curt smile just so that the guy didn’t think he didn’t like him or something. As expected, Billy beamed back at him.

“Did you guys at least had a drink from the bar?” Rhys asked them as soon as he was out. “We’ve spent an awful lot of time inside. You must have been bored out of your mind.”

“Rhys, darling,” Levine cooed, “they’re on the job. They’re not allowed to drink.” He placed a hand on the small of Rhys’s back.

“Well, whose bodyguards are they?” Rhys asked.

Mason noticed how Rhys moved discreetly in such a manner so that he could shake off Levine’s touch. Whatever feelings Levine had for Rhys, they weren’t reciprocated, just as he thought. That was a fair point in Rhys’s favor. What celebrity didn’t want the attention of a billionaire?

“They are yours,” Levine replied. “But that doesn’t mean that you should let them run around like they have nothing better to do.” The producer’s voice was a tad sweetened over what Mason had heard him talking to others, but there was steel in it, nonetheless.

Rhys offered Mason and Billy a strained smile. “Are we ready to go home?”

“Sure,” Billy replied. “Wherever you want to go, Rhys, we’re down with it.”

Rhys laughed. “You make it sound like I’m inviting you to some after-hours party. I’m sorry if I’m so boring.” Rhys looked around. His eyes stopped at a point behind Mason, and then he frowned for a second.

Mason followed his line of sight and noticed that the bleeding stranger was right behind him. Could it be that Rhys had seen something right at that moment? He couldn’t just ask outright.

Rhys shivered slightly, and then he wrapped one hand around Mason’s left arm. “Will you take me home, my knight?”

With some satisfaction, Mason noticed the small grimace of envy on Levine’s lips. How would it feel to have the world on a silver platter, except for one thing? Or, better said, one person? It looked like Rhys had no intention to return Levine’s advances.

“Don’t be so friendly with the help, darling,” Levine said and pulled Rhys by the elbow toward him.

To his and by the looks of it, Billy’s surprise, Rhys stood his ground and wrapped his arm around Mason’s firmly. “I think it’s good to have a good relationship with the people working for me,” he replied. “And I’ll never forget where I came from, Lev dear.”

Despite the nickname and the term of endearment, Mason could swear Rhys had not much-lost love for his producer. Whatever was there, it was one-sided like hell.

Levine offered a paternal sigh in reply. “Which is what makes you you, love,” he said. “But I wish you would rise above your station and humble beginnings. You’re a star now.”

“I used to be nothing but a half-decent indie singer and songwriter with a few thousands of wonderful listeners until yesterday.”

“Until I found you.” Levine pushed one strand of rebel hair behind Rhys’s ear in an unhidden gesture of affection. “And I intend to make you as big as you can be.”

“Thank you, Levine,” Rhys said politely. “I appreciate everything you’re doing for me. I really do. So, please forgive me if I sometimes behave like a spoilt, ungrateful child.”

“How couldn’t I forgive you? Of all my children, you’re my favorite. And don’t worry. Everything will come to pass. You’re young, and you’ll forget.”

Mason felt Rhys turning rigid by his side. There was a missed beat, and then, his answer. “Let’s hope so,” he said, but his voice was strained, and there was forced enthusiasm where none was felt.

“Trust me. I’ve lived a little longer than you,” Levine said with a small laugh. “You’re going straight home?”

“Yes. I need to get my beauty sleep,” Rhys replied.

Rhys talked a lot about beauty sleeps. It was barely past nine, and Rhys had slept earlier for more than two hours. It didn’t matter. Whatever Rhys’s habits were, they were none of Mason’s business, unless they interfered somehow with his job. Maybe the guy woke up at four in the morning to make his music. What did he know?

“Then I’ll see you tomorrow,” Levine said and placed a small kiss on Rhys’s cheek.

It was funny to see the hotshot billionaire producer struggling to get on his toes to do that, as Rhys didn’t care to accommodate him by offering his cheek.

“Have a nice evening, Mr. Goldman,” Billy said in a loud voice.

Levine stared at Billy for a brief second. “You, too, boys,” he said with a forced smile like it hurt him physically to reply to something as innocuous as that.

“Billy, will you give me your arm, too? Since I have two handsome bodyguards, I don’t see why I shouldn’t parade both around,” Rhys said, as soon as Levine was out of earshot.

Billy hurried to stand by Rhys and offered his arm gallantly.

“Well, sure thing, now I feel very much protected,” Rhys said with a small, musical laugh. “So, I hope you guys aren’t tired.”

“Didn’t you say that you wanted your beauty sleep?” Mason pointed out.

“Oh, please, it’s only nine. And that was for Levine so that he would leave me alone, finally. So, let’s have some fun.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea. Where are we going? What are the possible challenges?”

“Challenges? I don’t know,” Rhys seemed to ponder for a second, “maybe how much champagne can you pour down your throat? Something like that.”

“You want to get drunk?” Mason questioned.

Rhys tsked. “If you spent as much time with Levine as I did, you would need a drink, too. But I see you’re no fun at all. Billy, what do you say you and I should go partying and leave boring Mason here go home?”

“That’s a great idea,” the stranger intervened.

Without thinking, Mason turned toward his right.

“Look at him. He’s not paying me any attention anymore,” Rhys said, pretending to be upset.

“Yeah. Ditch these two and let’s go home so that you can tell me everything you know,” the stranger said.

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” Mason shot back at the stranger.

“Oh,” Rhys said, and his hand began to slide from Mason’s arm. “You surely don’t mince words, Arnie. If you cannot stand me that much --”

In the blink of an eye, Mason caught Rhys’s hand and wrapped it around his own arm. “Sorry. I wanted to say that I’d go anywhere with you.”

Rhys sighed. “You’re such a bad liar, Mason. But you’re handsome, so all is forgiven. Now let’s get some drinks and have some fun. And of course, I don’t need to tell you, I hope. Levine doesn’t have to know about this. He’s watching me like a mother hawk.”

The guy was a hawk, all right, Mason thought. Not a mother hawk, though; just a predatory bird on the prowl.

“Oh, man, now I have to go with you wherever this pretty guy wants?” the stranger complained. “Not that I blame you. I’d so love to change places with you so that he could hang off my arm like that. I think he wants you bad, man.”

Mason set his jaw hard. Why the hell was he seeing ghosts? As much as he needed to get to the bottom of that, he also had to make sure that Rhys and Billy and anyone else didn’t suspect that he was going cuckoo.

For now, he needed to ignore the ghost and focus on ensuring that Rhys was properly protected. There was no way he would get drunk tonight. That was the last thing he needed.

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“Would you like to dance?” Rhys asked him, staring at him through his eyelashes as he stretched lazily on a comfortable sofa in a fancy club where every drink seemed to have a different decoration.

“No. I’m working,” Mason said shortly.

“You haven’t touched your drink,” Rhys said, pointing at Mason’s full glass.

“I’ve only ordered it because you wouldn’t stop about it.”

“Billy had some. How you feeling, Po?” Rhys drawled as he turned his attention for a second on Billy.

Billy raised his full glass. “This club is liiiit,” he said with enthusiasm.

Mason frowned at Billy, but his partner didn’t seem to take the cue. It didn’t matter. If anything happened, Mason was ready to intervene. At least, the ghost was silent. Apparently, he liked to mingle as he passed through the people on the dancefloor without being seen and felt by anyone.

“Then I’ll dance with Billy,” Rhys said with determination and tried to get to his feet.

Rhys had downed at least three glasses of champagne, and he looked like a lightweight, too. It was clear as day that he wasn’t in complete control of his body. Mason stood up. “You two are both drunk. We’ll go home.”

“We just got here,” Rhys said stubbornly. “And I’m not going home until I’m dancing.”

Mason sighed. Just the kind of stuff he needed; a spoilt celebrity. He took Rhys’s hand and dragged him to the dancefloor. The funky beat could hardly count for something they could dance on without looking like epileptic dummies, but if Rhys wanted to dance, Mason would show him dancing.

They were barely on the dancefloor when the music changed to a slow tune. Rhys wrapped his arms around his neck and pulled him close. Mason knew it had to be a horrible idea, but now there was no escape. He placed his arms on Rhys’s waist and stared ahead.

“Don’t play the stoic, Mason,” Rhys said into his ear, sending eddies of warmth down his spine.

Mason hadn’t drunken one drop of alcohol, but Rhys’s soft voice had the effect of a shot of the strongest stuff. He needed to get a hold of himself. “Just shut up and dance so that we can go home.”

Although he was taller than him, Rhys placed his head on Mason's shoulder. He relaxed in Mason's arms, leaving him no option but to embrace him properly just so that he could support him.

Now that was hell, Mason thought. Rhys smelled so good, and he was sure that it wasn't only because of the expensive cologne he wore. His body was warm, and his soft breathing blew over Mason's neck, making his blood hot.

"Do you think I did it, Mason? Just like them?"

"Did what?" Mason asked.

"Don't make me say it," Rhys mumbled. "I can't bear it. Just hold me."

"Man, aren't you supposed to be this guy's bodyguard? Is this how you do your job?" The ghost was suddenly next to them.

Mason ignored him.

"I mean, I get it that he's so pretty and all, but you're all over him," the ghost said.

"And? You jealous or something?" Mason whispered.

"What?" Rhys asked and tried to move his head. Mason moved one arm to catch him and push him back with his head against his shoulder.

"Nothing. I'm just talking into the earpiece with Billy," he lied.

"Okay," Rhys said.

"Maybe it's time to go home, man. A little more slow dancing like this, and I think you'll be out of your job."

Mason was starting to get pissed at the ghost. He was a bit of a prick. What business did he have with anything? "Let's go home, Rhys," he said.

"But it feels good like this," Rhys replied.

"You need your beauty sleep," Mason said.

"What he needs is for you to stop pawing him," the ghost said.

Mason took Rhys gently by the shoulders and guided him back to where Billy sat. "I think we're ready to hit the road."

Rhys didn't protest, but he continued to hang on his arm until they were back to the car. Billy was the designated driver, but Mason was sure as hell not going to let him behind the wheel tonight.

He helped Rhys get on the back seat, and then he moved to climb in front. Billy stopped him. "It's okay. I got this."

"You got pissed drunk inside," Mason protested right away.

"Ah, you mean, the plant behind me got pissed drunk. Just smell my breath, man," Billy said and blew into Mason's face.

Mason grimaced and waved in front of him. "You should chew some gum or something, though. What do you know? Po here actually makes a good bodyguard," he said jokingly and punched Billy in the arm in a friendly gesture.

"I just wanted Rhys to feel less alone in there," Billy explained his behavior.

"Why should he feel alone?" Mason asked with a snort. "He's rich, beautiful, and sings like an angel. What gay dude wouldn't want him?"

"It's not about who wants him, though, right?" Billy said back. "It's about who he wants, and that's tough, man."

Mason was about to ask him what the hell he meant by that when Rhys dropped the window on his side and called for them. "Are you guys coming, or did you change your mind? You want to party now? I know a place --"

"No place. We're taking you straight to bed," Mason said.

Rhys snickered. "It's a promise? No offense, Billy, but it's Mason I want to take me to bed."

"None taken, Rhys. I like you to the sky and back, but I have a girlfriend, and she's keen on not sharing. She just wants all this," he made a gesture, patting his belly, "for herself."

Mason rolled his eyes. "Aren't you the funniest thing since standup was invented? Billy, drive. And you, Rhys, get your head back inside. No need for your boss to suspect you've been out drinking when you meet him tomorrow."

"My boss?"

"The one and only," Mason explained. "Levine Goldman."

"He doesn't own me," Rhys said sharply for a man who was supposed to be drunk.



“All right. Whatever you say. But he’s still in charge of you, and you answer to him. And so we do, too. Let’s just get you home and in bed before he gets the crazy idea to call and find out where you are.”

“He thinks I’m sleeping,” Rhys said petulantly.

“Maybe, maybe not. You’re not that good a liar, either,” Mason replied.

In the backseat, Rhys rested his head against Mason’s shoulder. There was nothing to do but help him. He was about to relax one inch when he noticed the ghost standing next to him. Despite his training, he couldn’t suppress a small jolt. Rhys moved, and Mason froze. Under his breath, he whispered, “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Did you say something, Mason?” Billy asked from his seat.

“I’m just repeating something. I need to do some math, and it helps if I mumble to myself,” Mason explained.

“Okay.”

“Don’t mind me.”

The ghost moved and crouched in front of him, part of his immaterial body swallowed by the front seat. “Didn’t mean to scare you.”

Mason just sighed. He made a small gesture with one hand.

“I just need to be alone with you so that we can talk.”

Mason observed the stranger. He was quite attractive. He could have passed as charming if it hadn’t been for the blood oozing wound on his left temple. The light inside the car was on, after Rhys had insisted over hating the dark, even if he was half-asleep, so now Mason could make the stranger’s features better.

From under well-defined eyebrows, intelligent brown eyes were staring at him. It appeared that the ghost was running an assessment of his own, as much as Mason was, of him. The arch of his upper lip curved enticingly, but Mason’s eyes were drawn to the wound, more than everything.

“You might wonder how I got this,” the ghost began talking and pointed at his head. “I’m wondering, too—a lot. I have no idea for how long, I’ve been wandering about, not recalling a thing. Do you have any idea how it is to discover you’re a frigging ghost or something?”

Mason shook his head just a fraction and frowned.

The ghost sighed. “I can tell you this. It sucks. I mean, why not a zombie? At least, then I could have fed on brain or something like that.”

Mason could feel his lips twitching. The ghost had a sense of humor.

“But no, when I kicked the bucket, I had to become this,” the ghost said while pointing at his body. To make it even clearer, as if there was any need, he moved one hand in and out of his chest. “And it’s not as fun as I would have thought when I was five. Going through walls, peeking at what people do behind closed doors, and all that, I can tell you, man. It’s overrated.”

Mason had a thousand questions to ask, but he couldn’t talk at the moment. As the initial shock was wearing off, his mind was trying to make sense of the ghost in front of him. There had to be an explanation, albeit not one that could be considered reasonable by any living person.

A small memory flared in his brain. A finger following each letter on the page, as the young mind guiding it was trying to make sense of it. Those things were long in the past. Mason pushed them away.

The ghost scratched his head. “I’d tell you more about me, but, hell, I know squat. The thing is, at first, I felt every crap.” He began counting on his fingers. “Hunger, cold, pain, you name it. It’s better now. I guess I got used to it. Imagine my shock while trying to bite out of a hamburger.” The stranger made a gesture with his hands and mouth, pretending to munch on imaginary food.

“How did you get a hamburger?” Mason asked, forgetting, for a second, that he was talking to a ghost.

“Hamburger? Did you say hamburger?” Billy asked excitedly. “Can we stop by a fast food place before we get home?”

“Billy, I’m not your dad. Just go ahead and stop wherever you want,” Mason said, much in the mood to bite his tongue over talking freely with his ghost. Wait, it was the wrong way to put it. That stranger was not his ghost. He was just a ghost. A ghost like many others in the world who probably tormented other people like him. But this one saw him, so, somehow, he could call him ‘his’, in a very liberal sense of the term.

“Thanks, dad,” Billy joked. “What would you like?”

“I’m not going to eat a hamburger right now.”

“Man, can you believe it? I don’t recall how a hamburger tastes like,” the ghost said. “And I didn’t exactly get one. I just tried to have a bite from some dude’s hamburger while he was holding it.”

Mason cocked his head.

“Well, I couldn’t hold anything in my hands, so I tried different approaches,” the ghost explained. “As you can easily imagine, it didn’t work.”

Mason shook his head. Maybe he was in a dream. He didn't dream often, but that seemed like a logical explanation because there was no way he was having a conversation with a ghost about hamburgers.

"Are you sure you don't want anything?" Billy asked him as he pulled the car in front of a drive-thru.

"Sure."

"Eh, it must be that's why you keep that body, and I get to keep mine," Billy said with a sigh.

There was no real regret there, Mason could tell. He didn't like people much, especially guys he barely met, but Mason had a good feeling about Billy. It looked like there was not a bad bone in his body.

"Is it far? Your home?" the ghost asked.

Mason made a small gesture to make him cut it off. If he was starting to appear in front of other people as someone who spoke to himself, he was just the right candidate for a straitjacket. For now, he needed to play along, but not too much. Did crazy people entertain their apparitions, usually? The evening had happened too fast. Once he was alone, he could clear his head.

Rhys shifted and sighed in his sleep. Damn, he was a lightweight. A few drinks, and he was gone to the world. Mason enjoyed the weight of his head on his shoulder, their bodies so close that they fed on each other's warmth. He sighed, as well. One day into his new job and all sorts of weird things were happening.

"Toby," Rhys called in his sleep and shifted again.

Mason tensed. Rhys was getting agitated, so he moved his arm to embrace him and pull him close. The agitation subsided. Who was Toby, and why was Rhys becoming frantic in his sleep over him? Billy was busy munching on his hamburger, so he must have missed Rhys moaning that name while still asleep.

Whoever that was, it was not Mason's business.

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It took a bit of skill to take Rhys to his room, but in the end, they succeeded.

"Are we going to let him sleep in his clothes?" Billy whispered.

"I'm not going to undress him," Mason protested.

"But he will sleep badly if we leave him like this."

With a sigh, Mason grabbed Rhys's shoes one by one and pulled them off. Skillful manipulation helped Rhys out of his shirt, too, but Mason wasn't going to take things further.

"We should take his pants off, too," Billy suggested.

"We?" Mason turned toward his partner. "I don't see you doing any heavy lifting."

Billy shrugged. "You already seem better at it than me."

Mason shook his head and went for Rhys's belt. It took him longer to struggle Rhys out of his pants, too, but, finally, they were off, along with his socks. Rhys turned on his belly, and Mason pursed his lips at the minuscule underwear that barely covered one of the loveliest behinds he had seen in a long while. He grabbed the blanket and pulled it over Rhys.

He reached for the bedside lamp to turn it off.

Billy stopped him. "Don't. Rhys hates the dark."

"Yeah. When he's awake or almost. It's not healthy to sleep with the lights on like this. And he's not five."

"He'll wake up if you turn it off."

"And how do you know that?"

"He said it in an interview that he always sleeps with a light on."

"Fine, number one fan. Let's get some sleep. Tomorrow, we need to bring this place up to speed."

"Okay. Goodnight, Rhys."

"Hush, not so loud. And he's out, don't you see?"

"Goodnight, Po. Arnie," Rhys murmured and turned on one side, pulling the blanket over his shoulders.

"You have to be kidding me." Mason felt his jaw pulling tight. Rhys must have had a lot of fun, while Mason had struggled with his clothes.

Celebrities. What did he know about them? Now, he had to live with one, so he needed to get used to their shenanigans. Still, he couldn't bring himself to feel really mad at Rhys. There was a light burning bright inside him.

Mason rolled out his shoulders. He wasn't the type of guy to think of poetic stuff like that. Rhys was pretty, and Mason liked pretty guys. There wasn't anything else to it.

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“Finally, alone.”

Mason couldn't even say he was surprised when the ghost emerged from the shadows. “Look, man, I don't know you.” He began to get ready for bed.

“That's impossible. Why are you able to see me?”

Mason shrugged. “I have no idea. Maybe it's some glitch in the matrix.”

“Yeah, right. I'm just a ghost, man, not a ghost in the machine.”

“I'm pretty sure you're not using that expression correctly.”

“Okay, so you don't know me,” the ghost said. “But maybe you see me because you can help me.”

“Sorry to break it to you, man, but it looks to me like you're beyond any help.”

The ghost remained silent for a moment. Then, he suddenly began singing out of tune and very loudly.

“What the hell are you doing?” Mason asked.

“I'm trying to convince you to help me.”

“Really? How is that supposed to work?”

“I would bribe you, man, but I have nothing to give. So, I'm going to prevent you from sleeping until you promise you'll help me. I must warn you. I don't know any songs except what I happened to hear on the radio this morning. I'm sorry if I'm a bit rusty and sound out of tune. It's probable that I wasn't a singer before I kicked the bucket.” He began singing again.

Mason sighed. He would have kicked the guy's ass, but that wasn't possible, right? Then an idea came to him right away. “Hey, hey, stop it for a second.” The ghost obeyed. “There's nothing I can do right now. But, tomorrow, I promise, I'll start searching for who you are. What do you say?”

“Yay, that's great!”

“Good. Now I really need my sleep.” Mason had the hope that a good night's sleep would make the ghost disappear. If whatever was happening now was nothing but a dream or a hallucination, the chances were that it would be gone by morning.

He climbed on the bed and turned off the light.

“Are you really going to sleep so fast? I thought maybe we could sit up late and get to know each other.”

“You know nothing about yourself. You practically depend on me to find out who you are.”

“Right. But what should I do until you wake up? I’m fed up walking the streets.”

“Then don’t walk the streets.”

“Still, what should I do?”

“How should I know? Just play dead.”

The ghost laughed wholeheartedly. “Good one, man.”

“Yeah, yeah, now shut up.”

“Okay, shutting up. Goodnight. And thanks, man.”

Mason offered a grunt in reply. A good night’s sleep was bound to make the ghost disappear.

### *Chapter Three – Smiley Face, Side Up*

Mason opened his eyes as the clock struck five in the morning. He didn't need an alarm to get up at the same hour day after day. Discipline was one of the defining principles guiding him in life, and events like those from the day before weren't enough to disturb his routine.

He looked around as much as he could without getting out of bed. There was no sign of a ghost. Of course, it had to be some weird incident, or maybe he had dreamed it all. It surely hadn't felt like a dream, especially since it was clear as day that everything else had happened for real. He wasn't in his bed at his rented apartment, so at least the part where he had been hired to protect a celebrity who looked like he needed protection only so that he didn't drink himself into a stupor and do something stupid was true.

Well, he wouldn't ever tell anyone that at one point in his life, he had thought he could see ghosts. He went directly to the bathroom and began brushing his teeth. There was plenty of planning he needed to do for the day. Security equipment didn't come cheap, but Boyd had informed him that he could order anything he needed and put it on Levine's tab. He almost felt the itch to overcharge the bastard, but that wasn't him. As much as he didn't like the guy, Mason was always correct in his business dealings.

He couldn't even say why he disliked Levine so profoundly. He wasn't the first rich bastard Mason had ever met in his life, and usually, stuff like that moved under his radar. As long as he didn't have to interact with the asshole more than needed, things were fine.

"So glad you're awake."

"Fuck," Mason let out and almost hit his head against the mirror.

"How are you going to start?"

Great. Just fucking great. Mason shook his head. "I must be crazy."

"Crazy? Why? Because you can see me? You're not crazy."

"And how do you know? Are you a doctor? Sorry, let me phrase that correctly. Were you a doctor?"

"By how I'm still dressed, I don't think so. And, I don't know, I don't give off that vibe, right?"

Mason pushed the balls of his hands into his eyes.

"I'm not going away. I've been wandering for days, and no one, absolutely no one, saw me."

"Hmm, so lucky me, right?" Mason liked to think he was a practical man. If that were all it took for the ghost to disappear and him to get his sanity back, he would find out who the guy was.

"No. Lucky me," the ghost said, and he sounded serious.

"Let's do this," Mason said abruptly. The ghost followed him back into the room. Mason grabbed his phone. "Do you have roughly any idea for how many days you've been a ghost?" He couldn't believe himself. He was talking to an imaginary person. Things like that didn't happen to people.

"It's a bit of a blur. At first, I was in complete shock, just running to and fro, and yelling at people. It must be a month or so."

Mason stopped for a moment. How did it feel to be so alone in the world, screaming at strangers who didn't hear you and didn't give a damn? He shook off the wave of empathy rising like a tide; pity and other feelings served for nothing. What he could do to help was to find out the identity of the stranger.

"I will start by checking any news related to people going missing or, you know, dead, in the area, one month ago," he explained his strategy. "Wait, did you travel a lot to get here, in this city?"

"No, I woke up here."

"Okay. Hmm, can I take a look at your head? It would serve to know if you got shot or not. To narrow down the search."

The ghost lifted his hair on the left side, and Mason moved to examine the wound. "You weren't shot. You got hit with a blunt object, by the looks of it. A baseball bat or something like that."

"I must have pissed off someone really bad. Maybe my lover," the ghost said and chuckled.

Mason frowned for a moment. "Last night, you kept pestering me about the guy I'm in charge of protecting. Do you like guys?"

The ghost shrugged. "I have no idea, but your boss is really pretty. Maybe I swing both ways, who knows?"

"Let me check the news from one month ago." Mason began typing on his phone. He ran one hand over his face. Just how many people turned out dead every day? If he wanted to lose faith in humanity, all he had to do was read all the news related to crimes of all sorts.

A loud rap on the door startled him. "Hey, Arnie, rise and shine!"

So Billy was an early riser, too. Who would have guessed?

"Sorry, man, but duty calls," Mason told the ghost. "As soon as I have a free moment, I'll continue my search, okay?"



"Okay, man, no sweat. I can wait. And it's a nice place to wait. I feel like it has positive energy, this house."

"It belongs to a musician. I guess it should have a certain vibe," Mason agreed with a shrug. He wasn't the type to get attached to places, but Rhys's home was nice. Even he had to admit that he hadn't expected the bed to be so comfortable. Also, there was something about the color scheme chosen that was pleasant to the eye. Kudos to the decorator, whoever that was.

"Do you mind if I hang out with you?" the ghost asked.

"I can't stop you, right? But keep your mouth shut. The last thing we both need is for people around to think I'm crazy. There won't be much I can do for you if I'm stuck in a straitjacket. Got it?"

"Yeah. I'll be as silent as the grave."

Mason shook his head. Why, oh, why did he have to see dead people all of a sudden?

"Arnie, you in there, man? Rhys needs us."

"Coming!"

He dressed up in less than thirty seconds. On his way out, he spared a short glance at the ghost.

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"We need to be ready for a radio show that goes live at seven," Rhys explained.

The guy must have slept through the night; yet, the dark circles under his eyes spoke of insomnia. It was his choice to sleep with the lights on, Mason thought. Plus, what was he thinking, drinking until late?

After his antics from last night, Mason would have expected Rhys to be as playful this morning. But the shroud of sadness he had glimpsed the day before was there, again.

"First, we will have breakfast," Mason said.

"We don't have time. I mean, you guys, go ahead. I never eat breakfast anyway."

"Oh, yeah?" Mason quirked an eyebrow.

One layer of shadow slid off Rhys's eyes. "Yeah."

"I don't think so. We're not leaving anywhere until you eat something."

Rhys's perfect mouth morphed into an 'O'. "Who's the boss here?" he managed after a couple of moments of utter surprise. "And what? Are you going to make me?"

"Yes. Billy, explain to Rhys why breakfast is the most important meal of the day. In the meantime, I'll make an egg white omelet."

"Billy, you can't be on Mason's side," Rhys protested as he was grabbed and dragged to the kitchen. "You love me, right?"

"I do, but I also love food," Billy said, his tone only half apologetic. "Sorry, Rhys. Arnie here really thinks we should all eat. And he's like the leader of our group."

"Why is he the leader?" Rhys complained some more. "I'm the tallest."

"Yeah, but he is the strongest."

Rhys sighed exaggeratedly. "I can't put anything in my mouth so early. You'll see."

"Yes, we'll see," Mason said and pushed Rhys to walk faster.

"Tormentors, inquisitors," Rhys moaned. "That what the two of you are. Po, you are so unforgiven for this."

"He'll live with the thought," Mason replied in Billy's stead. "Now, you two sit while I prepare the food."

Mason hoped there was something in the fridge. After all that talk about making something to eat, it would have been a bummer to discover the refrigerator empty. At that point, he could just agree with stopping at some fast food place only so that they could grab something before heading over to the radio station.

"Man, how I wished I could still taste food," the ghost said all of a sudden. He was sitting on a counter, his feet balancing above the floor.

Mason pursed his lips. "What the hell, man? I told you to stay silent."

"Po, make this clear for me. Is Arnie cussing at us right this moment? He mumbles to himself, and I can tell by how tense he is that he wants to beat the crap out of someone," Rhys commented.

"I just mumble when I cook," Mason explained. "Some people hum, I mumble."

"Just admit it. You hate it being in charge of me."

"Why would I hate it?" Mason rolled up his sleeves. "Anita, the maid, does she come every day?"

"And, look, how fast he can change the topic," Rhys said. "I can't stand Anita. She'll come when she has to vacuum and change the sheets. Otherwise, she can spend her time doing the Hoovering in some bunker somewhere."

Mason chuckled. Rhys looked like the kind of person to appreciate all human beings. Of course, Anita looked only half-human, so maybe that wasn't against his first impression of Rhys.

The ghost came behind Mason and stared at the sizzling pan. "You know what would work with that? A smiley face. Made with ketchup."

Mason ignored him.

"I'm telling you, man. Look at the guy. He could use to see a smiley face, side up."

"Why the fuck do you care? I thought I told you to stay silent," Mason hissed under his breath.

"Wow, Mason, you huff and puff, and even hiss like a dragon. What's next? Are you going to spit fire?" Rhys teased him.

That must have been retribution for making him eat breakfast. Mason decided to ignore the provocation.

"Get the ketchup, man," the ghost insisted. "I'm telling you. He'll love it."

"Fine," Mason agreed and went back to the fridge.

"It's there," the ghost said and pointed at the ketchup bottle on a lower shelf.

Mason shrugged as he took the ketchup bottle. He returned with it and decorated Rhys's plate. "Happy now?" he asked the ghost.

"Perfect. Smiley face, side up."

"What's this?" Rhys asked as soon as he took a look at his plate.

Billy was already halfway through his. Mason sat and began eating. "You're not a child, Rhys. Eat."

"I'm serious." Rhys's voice was tense. "What's this?" There was such a strong expression of revulsion on his face that Mason put his fork down.

"An omelet. Oh, yes, with a smiley face, side up."

"A what?"

Mason sighed. What kind of stupid game was that? "It's only ketchup."

"I know what it is. Why did you add it? And only to my plate?" His voice rose a notch with every word coming out of his mouth. "And why did you say it like that? Is this your idea of a joke?" Rhys stood up abruptly and walked out of the kitchen.

Mason stood there, flabbergasted. "What was that about?" He turned toward Billy. "Some guys just hate breakfast, huh?"

Billy seemed as surprised. "I don't think it's about breakfast, Mason."

"Right. It's about a flighty character who runs hot and cold as he sees fit."

"I'm going after him to ask him what's wrong." Billy stood up.

"Sit and finish your breakfast," Mason ordered. "We're not here to indulge the tantrums of a spoiled child. Rich people, am I right?"

Billy looked at his plate and said nothing. For a guy who seemed to like food more than many other things in life, it appeared as if he was trying hard now to work an appetite.

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Rhys kept looking out the window on their way to the radio station. Force of habit or not, Mason got in the back with him, but this morning surely wasn't last night. There was a solid distance between them, filled with an invisible block of ice. Mason felt a small itch in his fingers. One strand of golden hair haphazardly curved to one side of Rhys's head, as if its owner hadn't cared about brushing after waking up. It would take so little to run his fingers through that beautiful mane of hair and make it behave.

Mason got a hold of himself. His attraction toward the guy he was supposed to protect was uncanny. He saw a ghost with a sense of humor, and he couldn't stop feeling drawn to a celebrity named Rhys Harmony. Stranger things had happened before, but nothing as strange as that.

"We're here," Billy said.

Rhys said nothing and got out without waiting for Billy to hold the door for him. Mason followed them quickly. Purposely, Rhys walked in front, without waiting for them, or even acknowledging them. The guy at the entrance threw them a surprised look.

"They're with me," Rhys said from the tip of his lips as if it was too much effort to talk.

Mason wanted to feel pissed at the guy. He really wanted to, but his built-in human repellant didn't seem to work in this case. Maybe he just needed to get laid, take the edge off; find a pretty blond like the one walking in front of him, give it to him hard, and then get back to business as usual. His hands were full, though, for the moment. So, no time to get laid.

"So, your boss is a singer or something?"

What business as usual? He saw ghosts. "I thought I told you I'd get back to you once I have a free moment."

The halls of the radio station were teeming with people, so his mumbles passed unnoticed this time.

"I know. But I'm bored."

"How can you be bored? Can you even feel boredom?" To mask his mouth, Mason covered it with one hand, while observing his surroundings. He was there as Rhys's bodyguard, so he was supposed to pay attention to possible threats. So far, he hadn't noticed crazy fans throwing themselves at Rhys, not even last night at the club, so maybe his charge wasn't that big a celebrity.

"I told you. Being invisible to the world is not funny at all. There's nothing for me to do. So I'll just hang out."

"Do it and stay quiet."

Rhys was invited inside a broadcasting room, and Billy and Mason remained outside. Through the large window, Mason could clearly see Rhys taking a seat and nodding politely at his hosts. The two men measured him a few times and exchanged a look between them. Mason watched them. One of them smirked and leaned toward his coworker, whispering something while placing a hand over the mike. Rhys seemed deep in thought as he arranged the headphones on his head.

A young assistant passed by. Mason turned and caught his arm. "Can we listen to what's going on inside?" He pointed at the window.

The assistant looked at him like he had horns on his head. "It's live. It's on the radio. Do you think you can figure it out, big guy?"

Mason let go of the young man's arm. He reached into his pocket for his phone, but Billy touched his arm.

"We can listen on mine," Billy said.

"Okay." Mason crossed his arms over his chest and watched.

Rhys raised his eyes and stared at him. Mason didn't look away. Eventually, Rhys gave up on the staring contest. His hosts began firing questions at him.

*"So, Rhys, it's been ... how long?"*

*"Since I've been on a live show, you mean?"*

Rhys's voice was as pleasant as always, but he sounded tired and a tad distant. If all it took was a poor breakfast choice to make him feel like that, Mason could understand why Levine was overprotective of his little protégé.

*"Yeah. You disappeared."*

*"Around a year. Yes, one year."*

*"And now, you're ready to be under the hot lights, again."*

*"It appears so."*

*"How are you feeling?"*

*"Great. Everything is ... just great."*

Rhys wasn't that good a liar. The two radio show hosts exchanged another look that didn't go under Mason's radar. They were with their backs at him, but their interactions were pretty obvious.

*"But, as you know it, I'm working on a new album."*

*"Yes, we listened to your latest song, and we're fired up. Should we take it that the other songs on your album will be in the same vein?"*

*"What vein is that?"*

Mason grinned. Rhys was no fool. Whatever those two hosts wanted to do to get a rise from him, they were subtle like bricks, and Rhys was showing them that he wasn't blind.

*"Heartfelt."*

*"Sad."*

Exaggerated trash. That was the translation Mason thought up in his head. Whoever those two radio hosts were, they had no lost love for Rhys Harmony by how they talked, sugar mixed with poison.

Rhys straightened up in his chair and linked his hands in front of him on the table. *"Yes."*

*"Would you like to tell us more?"*

*"Sure. I am trying to bring a new instrument to the mix. I don't know if you noticed, but there's a harp in there."*

*"We are more interested in the lyrics. You still write your own songs, right?"*

*"I wouldn't have it any other way."*

*"So, what are the songs about? Heartbreak? Don't you think they are a bit on the nose?"*

Rhys's blue eyes fogged, and he licked his lips slowly. Mason tensed.

*"An artist never creates in a vacuum. It is only natural that artists are influenced by what happens in their lives."*

*"Influenced by what? In your case?"* That was the other man speaking.

*"One of you tells me my music is too obvious, and the other asks me about it like he cannot understand a thing. What is this shit? Good cop, bad cop? I've been there before, thank you very much."*

*"Hey, hey, Rhys, what the f, man? You just can't say four-letter-words on the radio."*

*"Really? I thought we were busy milling garbage right now."*

*"Wow, wow, don't come so hard at us, man. We just want to help you promote your new album."*

*"Let's put the cards on the table, boys. What is really that you want to know? It's not about my music, right?"*

Mason threw Billy a short look. "Is this how this radio show is supposed to go down?"

Billy shook his head, and he looked tense, too. "They're just a bunch of assholes. Good for Rhys that he had seen straight through their bullshit."

*"Well, if you put it like this, yes, we want to know what everyone wants."*

*"And what's that?"*

*"What really happened that night?"*

*"I've been questioned by the police, time and time again. I have nothing else to add."*

*"Still. I mean, you say you can't remember a thing? Who can believe that?"*

Rhys wavered. Mason straightened up. He had no idea what was going on, but he wouldn't wait, arms crossed.

*"There was probable cause."* That was, again, the other host.

*"And?"*

*"And we just want to know. Did you do it?"*

Mason pushed open the door.

"Hey, man, you can't just walk in like this!" One of the hosts protested. "Can't you see we're live?" He pointed at the neon sign.

Mason brushed against the man, making him squeeze, chair and all, against the table. He offered Rhys one hand. "We're going," he said calmly.

Rhys took his hand without a word of protest.

"Hey, Rhys, you're supposed to be on air with us for twenty minutes more!" The first host called loudly, and half stood from his chair.

"Your little show is over." Mason pushed him back down with one heavy hand on his shoulder.

He marched out of the room, with Rhys by the hand. Billy hurried after them. "Jesus, Arnie, that was so friggin' cool!"

"Let's get home. Is there somewhere else you need to be?" Mason asked Rhys. "Right now?"

"No."

"Is home all right?"

"Yes, it is."

Rhys's hand was cold in his, and Mason could feel him trembling slightly. Whatever that shit had been in there, it had rattled him quite badly.

"Billy, drive. And you can be fast, as long as you don't break the law."

Once they were on the backseat, Rhys started shaking for real. Mason took off his jacket and put it over Rhys's shoulders. Then, he pulled him close to his chest and held him tightly. Rhys's phone went off.

"Let it," Mason said shortly.

Rhys continued to tremble, but he ignored Mason's order. He answered the phone with shaky hands, without pulling away from Mason's arms. "Yes?" His voice was a whisper.

Mason leaned in to listen to the conversation.

"How could you leave a live show like that, Rhys?"

Ah, sure thing. El Crappo di tutti crapi. How the fuck had he found out so fast?



He let go of Rhys only to take the phone from his hand. "Mr. Goldman, sir. They were harassing Rhys. I intervened."

"Who's this? The mute bodyguard?"

"Mason Knight, at your service, sir."

"It doesn't look like you're at my service. Why did you pull Rhys out of that show? It wasn't your place to --"

"You hired Billy and me to do a job, which is to protect Rhys. They were tearing him to shreds for their stupid show. With all due respect, sir," Mason added after one heartbeat.

"It appears that I need to make it clear to you what your job description is."

Rhys covered Mason's hand and took the phone. "Lev, he did the right thing."

"These two are not fit to be your bodyguards. I will find someone else more qualified."

"Don't you dare," Rhys whispered. "It's been a long time since someone stood up for me."

Mason listened, his ears perked up.

"That's not fair, Rhys. I've always protected you. I've always held your best interests in mind."

"I do not want this life, Lev. It is only because I'm indebted to you that I continue. Just say the word, say you don't want me to do this for you, and I'll be out of your hair in a heartbeat. I can sing anywhere."

"Don't say that, dear child." It looked like Rhys's little speech had affected Levine. "Continue to sing, and I will continue to take care of you. Your talent won't be wasted."

"I get to keep Mason and Billy."

"All right. You get to keep them." A sigh followed the words.

Mason had thought that Levine Goldman was a good candidate to meet his fist. Now, he knew why. The fucker wanted to throw Rhys to the wolves only so that he could make a few sales. Just how much money some people needed? He remembered how Boyd had said that Rhys was a pet project for Levine.

Right. Of course, there was that other thing. Levine wanted to get in Rhys's pants, and if Rhys gave up on his help, he would have no leverage.

Mason tsked.

"Just rest for the day. You still have those pills I gave you?"

"Yes."

"Make sure not to take too many at a time, okay?"

"Yes."

Mason frowned. What pills were those? He put his arm around Rhys after the conversation was finished. At least, Rhys was no longer shivering as severely as before.

"Who are you, Mason?" Rhys asked softly.

"Your bodyguard. You know, as in the guy who has to protect you."

"I know that. You and Billy were great today."

"To my shame, I didn't do anything," Billy said from his driver's seat, apparently in tune with everything happening around him.

"You were present, which is a lot. It sucks to be alone in this shitty world."

Mason felt Rhys sighing. Yeah, it sucked. But one didn't have to dwell on that; one had to fight and push back the world if that was what it took.

"My knight in shiny armor," Rhys murmured as he put his head on Mason's shoulder.

"In a cheap suit, rather," Mason said with a small chuckle.

"I'll buy you a better one."

"Don't you dare."

"Why not?"

"I like this one. I don't like new clothes."

Rhys snickered. It was a sweet sound to hear after the tense atmosphere from before. "Billy, can I at least spoil you?"

"Yeah, sure," Billy replied. "But don't buy me suits. How about we just all hit a fast food joint and eat greasy food and drink sugary beverages?"

"We had breakfast, Billy," Mason warned his partner.

"Rhys didn't," Billy pointed out.

Mason tensed. Whatever he had done at breakfast had upset Rhys badly, and now he didn't believe it had been just a tantrum.

"I'm sorry, Mason, for this morning," Rhys said. "It's just that ... it doesn't matter. I shouldn't have reacted like that. So, let's indulge Billy this time. But no greasy stuff, okay? I can agree with something sweet."

"Hmm, pancakes?" Billy suggested.

"Pancakes sound like the perfect pick-me-up," Rhys confirmed. "Can we, Mason? Pretty please with whatever topping you prefer on top?"

"All right." Mason smiled. "Let there be pancakes. But only this time, okay? You two are the poster boys for unhealthy eating."

"Sure. What do you say, Billy?"

"Sure."

"And look at them how fast they hurry to agree. So that you know, though. I'll have both of you eat your veggies."

"Sounds tough," Rhys said with a small giggle.

"Sure thing sounds tough," Billy added, but he wasn't as amused.

"Worry about that later. Now, let's head over to the best place in town where they serve pancakes. I imagine you know where that is, right, Po?"

"Sure thing, chief."

"Chief? What happened to Arnie?"

"I can give you as many nicknames as I want, right?"

Mason just nodded. Rhys cuddled next to him, and the trembling was gone from his body completely.

For a couple of seconds, he looked around. It seemed that the ghost wasn't with them. Not that Billy and Rhys could see him. But Mason wondered briefly where he could have gone.

## *Chapter Four – Lost Children*

Mason moved the toolbox from one hand to another and knocked on Rhys's bedroom door. It seemed that the earlier ruckus had worn out Rhys a little, and he had asked to be left to sleep for a while. At least, he had eaten a pancake, and Mason had had to be satisfied with that. Seeing how skinny Rhys was, it was a miracle he didn't come undone at any moment.

Still, he had a job to do, and he hadn't forgotten about the camera that he needed to install on the balcony. That was why he was there, and not because he needed a reason to check on Rhys. At least, he could tell himself that. Nobody in good health needed to sleep that much.

He waited patiently. At the second knock, a sleepy voice invited him in.

Rhys was still in bed, even in his pajamas. Mason stole a quick look at him. The silk top was open in front, allowing milky skin to show. It wasn't a good idea to gawk.

"Sorry about this, but I need to secure the perimeter properly."

Rhys nodded and followed him with his eyes. He turned and propped his head against one hand, lying on one side.

Mason opened the door to the balcony and examined the location. Mounting the camera required a bit of drilling. "If you want, you could go somewhere else for half an hour. It's going to get noisy." From his toolbox, he retrieved a portable drill.

"I don't mind the noise. There's so much quiet, it's annoying."

"Seriously, don't you have somewhere you need to be? Like making music and that?"

"I'd rather stay here and watch you."

Mason shrugged. He turned on the drill and stole a quick look at Rhys over one shoulder. It didn't seem that he was bothered. Without another word, he got to work. His hands were steady; a pretty man watching him couldn't intimidate him that easily.

He checked the wiring and the Wi-Fi signal. It looked like everything worked well. "This is all for now."

"Mason, wait."

He turned and looked at Rhys. Why did he have to be such a pretty thing? Mason couldn't erase if his life depended on it, the taste of those rosy lips when Rhys had kissed him the first time they met. "Well?"

"How come you don't question me?"

“Question you? About what?”

“You know what.”

“Actually, I don’t. And I never question the people I’m working for.”

“Never?”

“It’s usually Boyd’s job to see that I don’t work for some scumbag. I trust him.”

“Ah, I see. Okay.”

“Is this all?”

“Yes. I mean, thank you. For today. You really were there for me. You went beyond the call of duty --”

“You don’t have to thank me for doing my job.”

“It was more than that, and you know it.”

Mason was trying hard not to stare, but not to avoid looking at Rhys, either. It was a losing battle, either way. “Anything else?”

“Nothing. I just wanted to thank you again.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Why are you so cold?”

“I’m working. Something you should be doing, too.”

“Really?” Rhys was trying to start something. His lips curled up, and his eyelids dropped.

“Get out of bed. You’ve slept for two hours already. It’s unhealthy to dwell in bed for so long.”

“Hmm, but I don’t have any reason to get out of bed.” If that was Rhys’s impersonation of a petulant child, he had it spot on.

“Find one.” Mason turned toward the door again.

“Wait, aren’t you going to make me?”

“Why would I do that?” This conversation took longer than expected.

“Because it’s your job or something.”

“My job is to protect you, not to help you out of bed.”

“But you just said it’s unhealthy to spend so much time in bed. And, if you care so much --”

“I don’t care. I’m doing my job.”

“Then do your job and make me get out of bed.” Rhys crossed his arms over his chest.

Mason put down his toolbox. He walked over to the bed, Rhys’s eyes on him, never missing a beat. Calmly, he pulled the blanket from Rhys’s body, folded it, and then threw it on the balcony.

A surprised gasp came from behind him. That wasn’t all. Mason came back and began searching the drawers, carefully avoiding the one he knew well what it contained and hoping there weren’t any other surprises waiting for him. Finally, he found what he was looking for. Armed with a brush, he climbed on the bed. He grabbed Rhys by one arm and turned him.

“Oh,” Rhys murmured.

Mason didn’t plan to waste any more time. The brush went through the blond strands and muddled in them immediately.

“Ouch,” Rhys protested. “This hurts! Do you even have any idea what you’re doing?”

“You’re behaving like a spoilt kid, so you must be treated like one. The thing is, I’ve never had a kid in my care, so I’m just doing my best here.” To make his intentions clear, Mason pushed the brush harder, making Rhys yelp.

“You’re ripping off my scalp, you demon!” Rhys reached back to grab the brush.

Well, mission accomplished. Mason tried to move out of the bed, but Rhys moved fast and cut his exit by simply throwing himself at him.

Great. Now the blond hair he had tried to brush earlier was caressing his face as Rhys hovered over him. He was pinned to the bed, but that wasn’t a problem. The problem was the sexy guy straddling him and pushing his hands against his chest.

“Your hair is a mess, and you look like shit,” Mason told him. The easiest way to push off temptations and the person causing them had to be an insult. There was no way someone so pretty could tolerate being commented like that on how he looked.

Rhys made a face, but he didn’t look upset. He just reached for the brush, removed it from his hair, and threw it away. Then, he returned to teasing Mason with a vengeance. “There is always something that could convince me to move, although not out of bed.”

Mason grunted as Rhys pushed his crotch into his. “I’m afraid you’ll have to find someone else to play with, sugar lips.”

“Sugar lips? Ah, so you do remember our little kiss. Trust me; it was just a demo.”

Mason moved his head away just in time. Rhys huffed in annoyance but didn't give up. Instead, he bit Mason's cheek. Not hard, but enough to be felt.

Their little fooling around was getting out of hand. Mason pushed himself up, taking Rhys with him. There was laughter as he stood up, without releasing Rhys. Of course, it stopped when Mason planted Rhys on his feet.

"You don't like me?" Rhys whined, but Mason could tell it was all an act.

"I don't like spoiled celebrities with unkempt hair and who don't brush their teeth."

Rhys blew air into his cupped hand. "I brushed my teeth this morning. And I didn't sleep for real. My mouth doesn't smell or anything."

Mason had no plans of checking that in detail. "To the bathroom with you. Brush your hair, brush your teeth --"

"Again?"

"Yes, again. And get out of these pajamas. You look like a clinically depressed housewife."

Mason bit his tongue. For all he knew, Rhys could be depressed. He surely showed some signs, although Mason was no doctor.

To his relief, Rhys began to laugh. "What else do you want me to do?"

"Anything that doesn't involve you spending time in bed all day long, feeling sorry for yourself. Okay?"

"Okay," Rhys agreed. "But, I want something to keep me motivated."

"What?"

"A kiss."

Mason sighed. "A kiss, and you're going to stop moping around?"

"Scout's honor."

Mason took Rhys by the upper arms, looked him in the eyes for a moment, and then kissed him quickly on the lips with a loud sound. The beautiful blue eyes grew wide but then warmed with laughter.

"Thank you, Mason."

"Nothing to thank me for."

“Why? It wasn’t that unbearable?”

Mason’s eyes narrowed. What was Rhys playing at? “What do you mean?”

Rhys began walking toward the bathroom while discarding pieces of clothing on his way. “I was worried you’d be really straight, Arnie. Good thing you’re not.”

Mason left the room as Rhys was pushing down his pajama bottoms. By the looks of things, there was no underwear anywhere in sight.

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He wouldn’t question Rhys about what that thing at the radio station was about, but he didn’t want to start reading tabloids, either. What he needed was an opinion from someone who wouldn’t judge Rhys like a media monkey with a mental disorder.

Billy was busy testing the surveillance equipment in the small room they had set up for that purpose downstairs. “How long do you think we should keep the records?” he asked, without moving his eyes from the screen.

“We could archive them and upload them to the cloud.”

“Most people would erase them after twenty-four hours.”

“I know, but I don’t want to miss anything, just in case.”

“You know we’re not guarding the president.” Billy finally moved slightly from the computer so that he could reach for his bag of chips.

Mason took the bag before Billy could have it. He opened the trash can placed near the desk and dropped it inside.

“Hey, man, not cool.”

“Yes cool. You might hate me now, but your heart won’t twenty years from now.”

Billy snickered. “I and Rhys both might get in shape while you lord over us like this.”

“Hopefully. Hey, Po, you’re an expert in all things Rhys Harmony, right?”

“I’d like to think so. I’m a big fan and everything.”

“What was that shit on the radio this morning?”

Billy’s eyes grew wide. “You mean, you don’t know?”

Mason shrugged. “I never knew who Rhys Harmony was until yesterday.”



“And you didn’t google him or anything?”

“No. I don’t pry, as a general rule.”

“It would hardly be prying. It was all over the news a year ago.”

“Okay, what was?”

“Did you really miss it? You must have seen it by accident when turning on the TV --”

“I don’t watch TV. I don’t even own one.”

“Wow, that’s, um, that’s healthy, I think.”

“So, now, what happened one year ago? Why was Rhys questioned by the police?”

Billy looked away, and his facial features morphed. He suddenly seemed sad. “Rhys’s boyfriend got killed.”

Mason froze. “For real?”

“Yeah. Toby. Tobias Davis, that was his name.”

“All right, how did it happen? Was Rhys the main suspect?”

Billy nodded. “It was an ugly thing. They were at some club, and Toby went out after a row with Rhys. It was around five am, and the people were starting to leave. There was a big party or something.”

“They were fighting?”

“Yeah. A bit too often. About money and things. At least, that was what everyone was saying at that time.”

Mason nodded. Now he needed to know everything. “So, what happened?”

“Rhys wasn’t quite himself that night either. He was drunk, like really drunk. It happened when he got into those fights with Toby. The thing was, he went to the bathroom after Toby walked out. He locked himself in a stall and passed out.”

“Hmm. And don’t tell me. People say they don’t remember when he disappeared from view.”

“Exactly,” Billy confirmed. “Not that you could count on anything anyone said. They were all a bit too drunk, a bit too high; you know how it is. The thing was, Toby was found in the back alley, dead, only a few hours later.”

“I see. And how did he die?”

“At first, people thought that he was just dead drunk and slipped. You know, fell and hit his head. But the police came, and what do you know? They suspected foul play after quickly checking the body.”

“And Rhys?”

“He said he couldn’t remember a damn thing.”

“All right, so the cause of death was what?” Mason asked in a measured voice.

Billy looked straight at him. “Blunt trauma to the head.”

“Where to the head?” Mason could only congratulate himself for keeping a steady voice. A suspicion was starting to form. The timeline didn’t match, but he couldn’t take the words of a wandering ghost who didn’t remember anything about his former life at face value.

“Does it matter?” Billy asked, a bit surprised by Mason’s line of questioning.

“Just tell me if you know.”

“The left side of the head, above the temple, I think.”

Mason nodded. “Why did they suspect Rhys?”

Billy grimaced. “They fought a lot. And they were loud about it, too, especially that night.”

“But many people fight, and they don’t turn murderous on each other. The police must have had more than just that.”

“Besides probable cause, you mean?” Billy’s eyes shone in the semi-dark of the surveillance room.

“Yeah, besides that.”

“Rhys couldn’t say what he did during the time frame established for Toby’s death. He completely blacked out.”

“And he was in the bathroom. Even with no one seeing him go there, still, what reason did they have to believe he was involved?”

“Toby’s blood was on his clothes.”

“Shit.” Mason rubbed his mouth. “Was there an explanation for that? Other than killing him in a feat of rage?”

“There was broken glass. Toby had broken a bottle while fighting with Rhys. There were cuts on his fingers. When Rhys had tried to reason with him, Toby’s blood might have gotten on his clothes.”

“Fair enough. What about the murder weapon?”

“None in sight,” Billy said.

For a moment, Mason’s mind searched for something. “Was all this in the papers?”

“Yeah. It made the headlines for days. The problem was that Rhys, well,” Billy sighed, “he even thought, at first, that he might have done it.”

“What? For real?”

Billy waved. “It was more like he blamed himself. I don’t like Levine Goldman, either, but the guy went the extra mile to get Rhys out of this mess. He couldn’t have done it.”

“You seem so sure of it. Don’t tell me that, being the rabid fan that you are,” Mason joked, “you managed somehow to get your hands on the police report.”

Billy laughed. “I may be a rabid fan, but I’m not that well connected. The thing is the police eventually decided that Rhys couldn’t be the perp. End of story.”

“Was anyone else suspected? Did they even consider someone else?”

“Not that I know of. All eyes were on Rhys. For all the shitty papers and entertainment media, it was like mana from heavens. They just loved it, the fucking scumbags.” Billy got a bit agitated as he continued. “Rhys and Toby had been childhood friends, joined at the hip and all that. They left the slums together; they did everything like they were brothers. They were two lost children facing the world together. At least, that was one of the stories some papers loved to tell. But Toby got all kinds of weird ideas in his head. Rhys started making money, but, you know, he’s not Beyoncé or anything. Toby thought he could do better. He even suspected Levine of not giving Rhys his share. Well, at least, that was what the papers said at the time. They could have fought about anything, from money to who didn’t take out the trash. Who knows? Rhys got through a really rough patch. He’s better now, but, you know.”

“How can you be so sure he didn’t do it, Billy? It could have been an accident, not that he meant to off his boyfriend. You know. Shit happens.”

“His blood alcohol level was almost zero point four. Well, that was the estimate, considering the drop for the hours that went between five am and the time when Toby’s body was found, and the police took Rhys in for questioning. How could he manage to hide the murder weapon? And then, what? Just waltz back inside and pass out? Zero point four, man. Not even the highest

functional drunk can pull off something like that. Also, there were plenty of people vouching that all night, he poured booze into his system like it was the last thing on earth he wanted to do.”

“That much?” Mason’s head spin. “He could have died.” He couldn’t even think of Billy’s reasoning right now. A cold chill traveled down his spine. “Why didn’t you tell me? We should have never let him drink last night.”

Billy offered him a strained smile. “I kept emptying his glass when he wasn’t looking. He didn’t have as much as he thought he did. If we told him ‘no’ directly, he would just go behind our backs, right? Why do you think Levine considered having two bodyguards with him all the time? So that he doesn’t get into the same kind of trouble again.”

“You think that’s the reason?”

Billy moved his head to one side, then the other. “I have my suspicions.”

“Spit out everything,” Mason ordered.

“Whoever killed Toby, it’s still out there, right?”

“Yeah. I guess because no one really cared to investigate more, right?”

Billy’s smile thinned. “Right. So who’s to know if this person is not after Rhys, too?”

“That’s a bit of a stretch. That Toby character could have just gotten into a fight with some street punk. It could have been something completely random. And why get the needed security for Rhys now? It’s been a year, right?”

Billy grimaced. “Until one month ago or so, he’d been in rehab.”

Mason ran one hand over his face. But it made sense in a way. If the pieces of the puzzle fell as he suspected, that was a link of sorts. “Again, why the hell didn’t I know all that? That guy doesn’t put a damn drop of alcohol in his mouth again, do you hear me?”

Billy just nodded.

“I don’t hear you, and I need to hear you.”

“Crystal clear, chief.”

“All right.”

At least, that was one thing to put down to rest. Mason’s favorite ghost would learn about his real identity, soon. But first, he needed to check on something.

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Mason opened the cupboards one by one, methodically taking bottles and bags of food out and putting them back. So far, so good. The house seemed clear. But drunks could be inventive people when they had to be.

With one hand, he fiddled with his phone. The string of search results flicked on the page. On the top, from a series of pictures, Rhys and his boyfriend smiled for the camera, from a time when things must have seemed all right. Yeap, that was his ghost, right there. Nice to finally put a name on him.

For a moment, he left the phone on the counter as he began searching through yet another cupboard. Crouched in front of it and half inside, he missed approaching steps until it was too late.

“Curious, after all?”

Mason almost hit his head. First, his eyes met a pair of long legs, this time dressed in jeans, not pajama bottoms. His eyes traveled higher. Rhys held his phone and was, without a doubt, checking the information displayed.

“Not surprised,” Rhys said and threw Mason’s phone back on the counter. He turned on his heels and stormed out of the kitchen.

The first impulse was to run after him and hold him. But Mason didn’t follow his instinct. No matter how protective Rhys could make him feel, that wasn’t in his job description. Not that kind of protection. There was personal, and there was stuff that wasn’t personal. The two didn’t mix, ever.

Mason abandoned his search for hidden alcohol for the time being. He took his phone and leaned against the counter. There was a lot of history to cover, and, as much as Mason didn’t get involved in the lives of those he worked for, this time, he had to do it.

His sanity was in balance, so, whether he liked it or not, it was a fair trade.

He skimmed through a bunch of articles that said nothing he didn’t already know from Billy. Never one to judge people, Mason still wanted to know more about Rhys’s relationship with his boyfriend. Had Tobias, Toby, been violent toward his lover? Whatever had happened between them before that fatal night, it had been at a boiling point for some time, according to the tabloids.

He shifted his weight from one foot to another as he took in the pictures with Rhys in cuffs. His shoulders were slumped, the look on his face was distant, and he could barely walk. One could say that was a guilty man, right there; Mason saw something else. Rhys’s whole world must have come crashing down that night. For all the judgmental commentaries and hardly veiled satisfaction some of the authors of those articles must have had while writing that garbage, he

understood one thing. Rhys had only had Toby, and Toby had only had Rhys. There were no mentions of families, past, or anything along those lines.

Things were much clearer now. Mason, like Billy, couldn't stand Levine, but the man was looking out for Rhys. He hadn't come out and told them they needed to protect Rhys from himself, more than the outside world. Probably, he hadn't wanted them to believe Rhys was a helpless drunk who might have killed his boyfriend and forgotten about it. For his tactful attitude, Mason had to commend him, albeit reluctantly.

It was easy to see the world in black and white. But things were never like that. Levine Goldman had protected Rhys against the world at the right moment. Maybe he had done it for the wrong reasons, but the truth remained. It was most likely that Rhys wasn't rotting in a prison cell, somewhere, innocent or not, only because Levine had stood up for him.

Funny how things looked now. Toby had a lot of things to be held accountable for. Could it be he had gotten on the bad side of some loan sharks? Why would he be so obsessed with his boyfriend's money otherwise? Gambling? Addictions? His ghost looked like a swell guy, but that was, for now, at least, an empty shell.

For all that Mason knew, Tobias Davis could have been a world-class scumbag while alive. Levine Goldman stank of scumbag, too, but at least Rhys was home, and relatively in good health, only because of him.

Mason closed the browser and stood there for a while, phone in hand, taking in his surroundings. It wasn't an easy job, for sure, and on several accounts. Rhys Harmony looked like an angel, but his closet was full of skeletons, and that wasn't just a way of saying. Levine Goldman was a rich prick with dubious interests in Rhys, but who seemed capable of doing the right thing.

And, last but not least, Tobias Davis, who was supposed to be dead and buried somewhere, had decided to become a friendly ghost. Mason pinched the bridge of his nose. Boyd must have thought that he had gotten him the best job ever, but Mason had a feeling he would earn every penny, to the last one.

At the back of his brain, a somewhat annoying sensation was telling him that he was missing something from the picture. He would figure it all out later. For now, maybe it was a good idea to find Rhys and apologize for prying. Perhaps his words wouldn't sound sincere, but Mason needed to build a new bridge of trust between them. Even if it wasn't in his job description, it was something he wanted to do.

He was lost in thought as he walked out of the kitchen.

"Man, you won't believe what I just found out!"

Mason cursed under his breath. Before him, the ghost was jumping up and down as if he could barely wait to break some news to Mason.

“Could you stop that? It’s pretty annoying.” One beat. “Tobias.”

“Huh?”

Damn. That was going to be a long explanation.

## *Chapter Five – Bitter Pill*

“You found out who I am? Man, you’re a frigging genius! Damn! Is that my name? Tobias?”

“Curb your enthusiasm. And Toby sounds a bit better.”

“Okay, okay, so I’m a guy named Toby. What else?” Toby fell in line with him as Mason walked toward his room.

“This is your boyfriend’s house.” Mason didn’t slow down. Not that he had to since Toby was already inside his room when he walked in.

“Boyfriend? Oh, hot damn!” Toby made a gesture like he wanted to bite his fist. “I tapped that? For real?”

Mason went to the window and leaned against the sill. “Your full name is Tobias Davis. You were Rhys’s boyfriend, that until you got killed in a back alley behind a club.”

“Fuck,” Toby groaned, “I used to have it good, right? Wait a minute, killed? I mean, I suspected that, but, still --”

“Your boyfriend was the first suspect,” Mason continued, his eyes wandering outside, away from Toby.

“Who? That pretty boy? Nah, no way he whacked me. Unless I was cheating on him. Then maybe I deserved it. Was I cheating on him?”

Mason shrugged. “No idea. But you two were fighting like a couple on the brink of an ugly divorce when that happened.”

Toby scratched his head. “Maybe I was cheating on him. But why would I do that? I must have been both crazy and a total scumbag to cheat on that hottie.”

“He didn’t do it. The police released him.”

“Well, that’s unsettling. Who must have done it, then? And wait, he doesn’t even mourn me. I barely died and --”

“You’ve been dead for about a year.”

Toby stopped in the middle of the room. “What? A year? Nah, that’s not possible. Maybe I’m not this Toby guy.”

Mason took out his phone and displayed one of the pictures he had found earlier. “Is this you or not?”



Toby frowned and stared at the picture. Then he hurried to a small mirror on the wall and checked himself. At least, he wasn't some vampire, incapable of seeing himself in the mirror.

"Yeah, it looks like I'm that guy." Compared to his enthusiasm from earlier, he sounded pretty deflated right now.

"Now you know who you are," Mason said. "My job is done."

"Wait, wait, wait," Toby said and turned away from the mirror. "It can't be."

"You asked me to help you find out who you are. I did."

Toby stood in the middle of the room with a frown etched on his face. "It can't be all."

"It can be. I did my part, so this must be when you disappear."

Toby looked at his hands, then at his feet. "Sorry, man, it looks like I'm not disappearing at all. You're stuck with me. Sorry."

"Yeah, I bet that you're sorry."

"Hey, man, it's not really my fault that I'm not disappearing. There must be other stuff I need to find out before I get my peace or whatever ghosts do when they stop being ghosts."

Mason ran one hand through his short hair. Whether he liked it or not, Toby was right. He didn't look like he was about to dematerialize into thin air.

"Maybe," Toby offered, "you must find out who killed me."

Mason tsked. "The police dropped the investigation. Unknown prep. End of story. I'm not a PI. I'm just a bodyguard. Plus, any clues must be cold as ice by now."

"There must be a reason why I'm here, right now. You can't say it's random, right? You work for my boyfriend, and bang, you can suddenly see me. How long have you worked for him?"

"Just got hired yesterday."

"And yesterday, we met! Come on, Mason, that can't be a coincidence."

He didn't like it, but it was the truth. But what the hell did the universe want from him right now? He was just a simple guy, leading a simple life. Complications like seeing ghosts and trying to figure out who killed them weren't supposed to happen to him.

"Now that you know your name and who you were, does anything seem familiar? Around here?"

Toby looked around. "Not really. And if I don't remember being with that angel, whoever offed me must have hit my head pretty hard. Sorry. Nothing rings a bell."

Mason rubbed his eyes. There was no manual on talking to ghosts and solving their problems. Maybe he could find a psychic; nah, the chances were zero for him to meet Whoopi Goldberg in real life and convince her he was seeing ghosts. Wait, was that how that movie played out? He couldn't remember it well. That had been someone else's favorite.

"All right. I can read you your life's story, at least how it was told in the papers." Mason stopped and looked around the room. "Now, where the hell he went out to?"

Toby was no longer in sight. Mason had a hunch, but he debated with himself whether it was a good idea or not to follow his instinct, after all.

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"This morning, at least you knocked." Rhys welcomed him with upset eyes, his mouth a straight line, arms across the chest.

Mason was a bit surprised with himself, too. He was standing in the middle of Rhys's bedroom, much in the mood to grab a certain ghost and give him an earful about leaving in the middle of a conversation.

"What were you doing in his bedroom this morning?" Toby asked. He was moving slowly around Rhys, trying from time to time to reach him with one hand, but pulling it away as if he were afraid he could be discovered.

"Look, pal, I'm your only friend around here."

"For real?" Rhys's eyes grew wide. "A lot of people claim to be my friends. None of them are. And yes, you included."

"I wasn't talking to you." Damn, that was the wrong thing to say.

Rhys pursed his lips. "You don't have the earpiece on. I know you're not talking to Billy."

The angel was so damned pissed. For a moment, Mason played with the idea of telling him he could, somehow, see his dead boyfriend; maybe that would tear the magic veil, and Rhys would be able to see Toby, too. That would solve a lot of problems in one go.

But he couldn't risk it. If things had been so simple, the universe would have given him a sign by now. No, the universe was silent, as Mason had known it to be since forever.

"Sorry for not knocking. I was just worried about you."

Rhys sighed. "And it took you half an hour to realize that. I can only imagine how worried you were. And what the hell were you doing in my kitchen? Looking for places to put more of your cameras?"

Mason decided to take the bull by the horns. “No. I was looking for booze.”

Rhys stared him up and down for a few long moments. “You don’t seem like the type looking to get smashed so early in the day.”

“No, I’m not that type.”

“Hey, man, are you suggesting that my boyfriend is an alcoholic?” Toby intervened.

“Not your boyfriend,” Mason said through his teeth. *Anymore.*

“Not my boyfriend?” Rhys began tapping one foot. “Can you talk in full sentences? I know you’re not my boyfriend. What really is your deal, Mason? Come on, spit it out.”

“You’ve been out of rehab for one month. And last night, you went out drinking. Just for the record, I’m not going to assist you in destroying your life. My job is to keep you from doing that.”

Rhys began laughing, first, only a chuckle, and then it progressed from there into full hysteria mode. He bent from the waist, and there were tears in his eyes. Mason watched him nonplussed for a bit and then hurried by his side. Rhys pushed hard against him, but, this time, Mason wouldn’t have it. He took Rhys into his arms and then to the floor, keeping him there until the nervous howls of laughter turned into sobs.

“Fuck, you’re such an asshole. You made him cry,” Toby said.

“Just shut the fuck up,” Mason whispered while keeping one hand over Rhys’s exposed ear and holding him with his head pressed against his chest. Talking to two people at the same time was dangerous.

Rhys struggled against him, probably in need to breathe. Mason let him be but hurried to find a tissue to hand it to him. There was no sign of being acknowledged for a bit, but eventually, Rhys took it.

“What’s this?” The voice was faint, but it sounded sane. That was all that mattered.

Mason shrugged. “No matter how much you cry, you still have to blow your nose.”

“Are you some kind of philosopher now? What kind of quote is that?”

“I don’t know. Rhys, look, I’m not judging you or anything. But I’m in charge of you, so no drinking till you pass out on my watch. Get it?”

Rhys shook his head. His nose was red, and his eyes runny, but he was still beautiful. His back against the bed, Mason took his time to look at Rhys. Billy could be right; the police, too; and

Mason, just like them, couldn't picture Rhys Harmony killing his boyfriend, even angered and drunk beyond his wits.

"I wasn't prying," Mason continued to justify himself. "I just want to know what to expect when we go out there. Stuff like that shit on the radio that shouldn't happen on my watch."

Rhys laughed, but this time it was sad and heartfelt, unlike earlier. "You can't plan for everything, Mason. And I'm fine. I can deal with assholes. I mean, I have to. It's sort of a condition if I want to --" he trailed off.

Mason nodded. He could figure out the rest.

"Ask him if he still remembers me," Toby said, all of a sudden.

Mason threw him a brief look. There had been enough blunders for one day. He was in no mood to entertain Toby and his shenanigans anymore.

"Don't ignore me. Just, please, ask him." Toby's voice dropped to a whisper.

Mason worked his jaw. Who in their friggig right mind on the other side of the living world had thought he would be a good candidate for seeing ghosts? Or this ghost, in particular? "Rhys, about your boyfriend, the one who got killed."

Rhys wiped his tears and watched him. "Do you want to know if I did it?" His voice was bitter.

Mason shook his head. "You didn't do it."

"How can you be so sure? You don't know me."

Mason linked his hands in front of him, balancing his elbows on his knees. "The police let you go."

The answer was a short snort. "That's not enough for most people."

"You couldn't have done it. You loved that guy, as much as you used to love yourself."

Rhys turned his head away from Mason. "Do you have more of your bullshit philosophy to serve steaming hot?"

"Plenty." Mason didn't laugh. "I don't know what went down with you two. But you're a wreck, one year after his death, and if that's not love, I don't know what is." He was talking out of his ass, but sure as hell hoped it would work.

"Love." Rhys scoffed. "That's just another pile of shit, isn't it?" He got up and ran his hands through his hair. For a couple of moments, he looked around the room as if he was seeing it for the first time.

“For a guy who writes and sings about it so much, you surely sound like a cynical ass.”

“Thanks.” The simple word wasn’t said in spite, but more like a foregone conclusion.

“So, you didn’t love him? Is that what you’re trying to say?”

Toby was pacing the room, stopping from time to time, and stealing glances at Rhys.

“Love him?” For a moment, Rhys looked ready to lose it again. “I don’t. I just frigging hate him.”

Mason stared at his hands. That was just fucking great. The use of the present tense wasn’t lost on him. He had a few ideas about why Rhys felt like that, but he didn’t plan on debating them. “Enough to knock him out cold?”

Rhys let his eyes wander over the room again. “I don’t know. I don’t remember a thing.”

“Right.”

“You don’t believe me, do you?”

“I do.”

“You don’t.” Rhys’s voice was one notch higher, sharper.

Mason pushed himself up. “I suppose you’re used to people telling you lies. I’m not lying. Get used to it.”

Rhys caught his arm as Mason walked toward the door. “Look me in the eye and tell me you don’t think I’m capable of murder.”

Mason shook off his hand but took him by the shoulders. He squeezed them and looked at Rhys. “It wasn’t your fault.”

With that, he turned on his heels and left. He could hear the soft sobbing behind him, but he was done comforting Rhys for now. There was a lot of stuff to clear out; and Toby had to help him.

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“You’re not going to cry, too, are you?”

Toby had found refuge in a corner of Mason’s room, and stood there looking down and gloomy.

“What did you want to tell me when you got back here?” Mason had no time to waste.

Toby looked in no mood to talk.

Mason took out his phone. There were many things unclear, and if he wanted to get rid of weird things such as seeing ghosts, he needed to get his ass in gear.

“He hates me.”

“Now, he hates you,” Mason pointed out.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Mason sighed. “Do you really want me to spell it out for you? He hates you now that you’re dead.”

“In what universe does that make any sense?”

“You left him alone, idiot.” Mason never put passion in his words, and he wouldn’t start now.

“And that’s why he hates me?”

“Clearly, he didn’t choose you for your brains.” That was said under his breath.

“I heard that!”

“And boy, am I glad. Now, stop moping around. What did you find out?”

Toby looked like he wanted to argue a bit more, but eventually, he reconsidered. “When you guys left the radio station, I stayed behind. Guess who those fuckers called like, right then?”

“Who?”

“A guy called Levine Goldman, and boy, that was one strange conversation.”

Mason put his phone on the nightstand. He was all ears. “Well?” he asked, seeing how Toby remained silent.

“First of all, it looks like this Levine dude is some big shot.”

“He is a big shot. Also, Rhys’s producer.”

“Ah. Okay. Anyway. The sooner you’re gone, one of those douchebags hurries to the phone. He gets in touch with Levine, not before boasting to the other host that Levine’s door is always open for him like that’s a big thing.”

“Okay. What next?” The smell of scumbag was getting stronger again.

“He just tells Levine a short version of what happened and then, he asks: ‘We still get our money, right?’”

“And?” Mason was starting to become impatient with Toby’s constant interruptions.

“And apparently, the answer was ‘yes’, because he high-fived the other asshole.”

“That’s it?”

“Yeah, that’s it. Don’t you find it weird?”

“Levine must have prepared the appearance for Rhys on that show. That’s not so strange, seeing how he’s his producer.”

“A little bit too hands-on, don’t you think? And I couldn’t hear him, but he didn’t seem upset or anything that those two had harassed Rhys. That’s weird as fuck, right?”

“Right,” Mason agreed.

No moment like the present. He swiped through his phone until he found his friend’s contact. “Hi, Boyd.”

“Hey, Mason, what’s up?” Boyd sounded as energetic as ever.

“I need Levine Goldman’s number.”

“No shit. And I need a Lexus in front of my house, but we can’t always have what we want.”

“I’m serious.”

“And so am I. I don’t have Levine Goldman’s personal number. Let’s say that we’re not that well acquainted.”

“He needed you to hire Billy and me.”

“And did so through one of his assistants, like any normal billionaire. Before yesterday, I never met him in flesh and blood.”

It made sense, and Boyd wasn’t the type to beat around the bush. If he didn’t want to give Mason the guy’s number, he would just say so.

“And how can I reach him?”

“I can give you the office number I have. What business do you have with him?”

“It’s private and about Rhys.”

“Okay.” Boyd didn’t comment anymore and gave Mason the number. “Everything well there?”

“Peaches.”

“Hmm. Not that great, huh?”

“It’s okay,” Mason said. He didn’t need Boyd to start asking questions now. There was plenty on his plate as it was.

“Well, call me if you need anything.”

“Sure. Bye.”

Mason called the number to Levine’s office right away. A pleasant but distant, feminine voice welcomed him. He was put on hold after he insisted that he needed to talk to Levine on a private matter. Eventually, he was transferred to another equally pleasant and distant voice, and after dropping Rhys’s name, he was finally rerouted to Levine’s private number by the looks of it.

“Who is this?” Levine’s voice was distant but unpleasant.

“Mason Knight, at your service, sir.”

Toby was looking at him with curious eyes. At least, he had learned, like a good ghost, to keep his mouth shut when needed.

“Please, stop it with this introduction. It grates my nerves.”

“I apologize, sir. I have a question, and then, I’ll be out of your hair.”

“Go ahead. Is Rhys all right?” A tad of worry affected the icy voice. At least, there was some life in that block of granite.

“He is fine. This is about the radio show from this morning.”

“All right. Please, make it fast. I don’t have time for you to work your suspense into my workday.”

“Did you pay the radio show hosts to harass Rhys?”

There was a short pause at the other end. “That’s preposterous --”

“It’s the truth, and I know it for a fact. Why?”

“That’s a second question. I thought you only had one.”

At least, he could give points to Levine for keeping his cool once outed.

“Indulge me. Please.”

Levine let out a sigh. “Rhys is not so well.”

“And a bit of harassment was all he needed, right?”

A short chuckle followed. “Call it a bitter pill, if you will.”



“A bitter pill?”

“Yes. Rhys insisted on coming back home, telling me he was completely fine. I know he might not see it that way, but what happened at the radio station this morning was nothing but a small demonstration. The world out there is still ready to rip him a new one, pardon my French. He would be better if he focused more on his health.”

“Do you mean that it would have been better if he had stayed in rehab some more?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“How long was he in there? Sounds like a long treatment.”

“The alcohol was the smallest of the problems.”

Mason knew what Levine wasn't saying, and he didn't like it. “As his bodyguard, I have the right to know. Has he ever hurt himself?”

“Those are personal details.”

“I'm in charge of his protection. I am only trying to do my job, sir.”

“All right. Since you're so keen. Yes. The first sign of relapse and I intend to put him back into a facility where he can receive the proper care he requires.”

“You mean, where he can be watched.”

“Potayto, potahto. Let's not split hairs. As I told you, I don't have all day. I trust you will let me know if Rhys does anything that puts his life in jeopardy, right?”

“I should have known that firsthand.”

“Frankly, I didn't think you would last.”

That was a strange thing to say. Mason had even more questions.

“I hope this is all.” Levine cut the conversation without saying goodbye. That came with any scumbag's territory, so Mason wasn't in the least surprised.

“Well?” Toby asked the soonest Mason put down the phone.

“He didn't deny it, in the end. He just thinks Rhys would be okay locked away somewhere, with people in white serving him pills for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.”

“I don't trust this guy.”

“I don’t, either. But hey, he allowed Rhys to come home when he could just say the word and keep him away for who knows how long.”

“Yeah. Any idea why he did that?”

Mason had an idea, but he didn’t want to share it with Toby. Since Levine Goldman wanted to get in Rhys’s pants, having the object of his lecherous affection stashed away in some rehab facility or clinic for the depressed couldn’t work for his plans.

The most important thing was, Rhys had been right about not having real friends. Mason wasn’t his friend, either, but, at least, he wanted to protect him because that was his job. That was something that worked in his favor, and Rhys, like everyone else, had to take from life what he could get.

Mason lay on the bed, his arms behind his head.

“Hey, man, are you spacing out or something?”

“I’m obviously trying to think here. Were you a chatterbox when you were alive, too?”

“No idea. Do you think Rhys hates me because he still loves me?” The last words were said quietly.

“That’s a reasonable explanation, yeah.”

“Why can’t I remember him? I can totally see myself loving someone like him.”

“Because he’s pretty?”

Toby snorted. “Pretty doesn’t cover it. He’s beautiful. I don’t think I’ve ever seen someone like him.”

“You’ve barely been seeing people for one month. That’s hardly enough for comparison.”

“You know what I mean, man. I noticed how you kept looking at him.”

“You must be imagining things. I’m not looking at him in any way. He’s just the guy I’m paid to protect.”

“Nah. You like him. You can admit it. I won’t mind or anything.”

“I don’t think so. You strike me like the jealous type.”

“With a guy like that, can you blame me?”

No, Mason couldn’t say that he blamed Toby. “Has anything jogged your memory yet?”

“Nothing. I’m still blank.”

“Then maybe you should read some of this stuff.” Mason took his phone again and handed it to Toby.

The ghost threw him a crooked smile. “Really, man? This is the ‘let’s have fun on the resident ghost’s account’ hour or something?”

Mason sighed. “I could scroll the pages for you.”

“Nah. How about you just tell me what’s important?”

“All right. What do you want to know?”

“Tell me about how I died.”

Mason pulled at his ear lobe. “Okay. According to what the papers say, you and Rhys were at this big party at some club. You two had a row, and you went outside. Rhys was drunk to the point of becoming comatose and locked himself in a bathroom stall. Hours later, you were found dead in the back alley behind the club.”

“That was the shortest and most boring story I’ve ever heard in my life,” Toby moaned. “You make it look like I died like a schmuck.”

“The chances are that’s what you were at the time,” Mason said.

“Why were we fighting? Me and Rhys?”

“Apparently, because of money.”

“Money?”

“Yeah.”

Toby thought for a while. “It must be my current non-material form that makes me think that I couldn’t be in love with such material things.”

“You don’t remember anything, so everything is game.”

“Ask Rhys what we were fighting about.”

“No can do. The guy’s a nervous wreck.”

“That’s because he’s still thinking about me. But if you find out how I died, then Rhys will know, too.”

“And? Will that suddenly make him happy or something?”

“No, but maybe, you know, it could give him closure.”

“You must have watched a bunch of stupid movies before you died. There’s no such thing as closure. When someone dies, they die. It’s forever.”

“People move on.”

“If they cared for real, they don’t.”

Mason pushed himself up and out of bed. He had no time for that crap. There was plenty to do, and sitting around, talking to a ghost, was not that.

## *Chapter Six – The Carrot And The Stick*

“Do we have anything else scheduled for today? Anywhere we need to be?” Mason linked his hands in front of him and watched his partner.

Billy hid a lollipop behind his back, not fast enough. “Why don’t you ask Rhys? He’s in charge of that.”

“I’m asking you because you seem to be well informed all the time when it comes to our precious charge. I bet you even know what brand of toothpaste he uses.”

Billy offered a crooked smile. “Guilty as charged.”

“Throw away that diabetes-inducing thing.” Mason was firm and intended to remain so.

With a sigh, Billy dropped the candy in the trash can. “Are you not talking to Rhys for a reason? You two got into a fight or something?”

“He needs to rest a lot. I was just thinking of his wellbeing.”

“Right. You know, Arnie, you’re not that good a liar. You’re avoiding Rhys for a reason.”

Mason scoffed. “That’s not true.”

“Yes, it is. It’s okay, you can tell me.” Billy rested his cheek in his palm, his elbow on the desk.

“Aren’t you a gossip? We have work to do, and our work involves escorting Rhys anywhere he goes.”

“All right, all right. Since you’re all work and no play.” Billy consulted a document on his screen. “According to this little schedule we just got from Levine, Rhys should show up at the recording studio where he normally works on new albums.”

“Just show up?”

“Yeah. Levine’s secretary was like a rock when I tried to ask for further explanations over the phone.”

“The people at the studio must know Rhys well. I think it would help him see some friendly faces after the episode from this morning.”

Billy shrugged. “I feel like Levine is pressing Rhys more than it’s necessary.”

He wasn’t the only one.

“Maybe. But it’s not good for him to mope around the house all the time. We don’t know him, and we’re not his friends. He needs to be among people who care about him.”

Billy made a face. “That’s not true. If Rhys wants to spend time with us, I’m all game.”

“Speak for yourself.”

“What do you have against him?”

“I don’t have anything against him.”

Billy stopped for a moment and then laughed. “Of course. You like him, but you need to keep your distance. And you’re failing hard because Rhys is so pretty and --”

“Are you sure you didn’t miss your calling? You could have worked as a matchmaker. A bad matchmaker, but still.”

“Laugh at me all you want, Mason. The truth is, this morning, when we left the station, you held Rhys in your arms like he was the most precious person in the world to you. And now, you act all cold and distant because you realize you like him too much.”

“Are you done psychoanalyzing me?”

“For the moment. Just so you know, Arnie, I got your back. No one will know if you and Rhys ever --”

“Nothing like that will happen. And aren’t you tired switching from nickname to nickname to my real name?”

“No way, chief. It’s awesome fun.”

“Thought so. Po.”

Billy’s grin stretched ear to ear. “I know your type. You’re all cool and a badass, and you pretend that you don’t give a damn, but inside, you have a heart of gold.”

Mason crossed his arms. “Oh yeah? If I sniff out your junk food stash and throw it all away, will you still think that?”

“You wouldn’t do that.”

“Try me. Now, please talk to Rhys about this visit to the recording studio. When is it?”

“In around two hours, but we don’t have to be dead on schedule. Artists, you know.”

“All right. Tell him we’re ready when he is. I suppose he knows about it already. This is just so that he knows that we know.”

“You are bent on preventing Rhys from feeling like shit,” Billy said. He leaned against the back of his chair and observed Mason.

“It’s my job. And yours. As a true fan, I suppose you don’t like to see him feel bad all the time, either.”

“That’s true. But, unlike you, I can’t do much to make him feel less miserable.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” The last thing Mason wanted right now was to play games.

“Rhys likes you back. It’s visible from the moon.”

“You imagine things.” Mason rubbed the back of his neck. It just felt ticklish all of a sudden.

“Nah. I’m okay with standing on the sideline and measuring the sexual tension between the two of you. It’s going to be fun.”

“I didn’t peg you for the sadistic type, Po.”

“I’m not. Okay, I won’t be just standing. I will root for the two of you.”

“You’re a riot; you know that?”

Billy smiled. “More than you think.”

Mason made a move for the exit. Did Rhys like him? He was a flirt, that was for sure, but that couldn’t mean a thing. On the other hand, Mason never fucked where he worked. Playing with Po’s scenarios served for nothing.

“So, will you be going to talk to Rhys, after all? I still have some things to do concerning the surveillance software.”

Mason had left Billy in charge of that, as he had quickly proven to be the more technical inclined of the two of them. “It would take you two minutes, tops.”

“Yeah, but you’re closer to the door. Think of all the precious time we save.”

“A total riot.” Mason sighed and walked out. As much as he wanted to avoid Rhys, that was no long-term plan. He had to live with everything, from the fact that he could see the guy’s boyfriend’s ghost to the fact that he liked him too damned much.

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There was no answer from behind the bedroom’s door this time around, so Mason decided to look for Rhys around the house, while secretly hoping that he wasn’t the one avoided right now.

What seemed to be the keys of a piano being struck could be heard through a door on the ground floor. Mason moved toward the source of the sound, one step at a time. The door was ajar, but he stopped in front of it.

*All the little things you did to me,  
They come back to haunt me,  
All the little things you told me,  
They don't want to leave me.  
They will stay with me forever,  
And I want them here,  
Because they are, like a much-welcome guest,  
The only thing I have near,  
After you left.*

Rhys could run his mouth all he wanted that love was nothing and that he hated his late boyfriend. Just like he had told those assholes on the radio earlier that day, he poured it all into his music.

He had a unique voice. Maybe Levine didn't just want to get a pretty man in bed with him; it could be that he saw true potential there. Rhys's voice was a bit too strange to become mainstream, but Mason could see how a cult could rise around him; Billy was enough proof of that, and Mason supposed he wasn't the only one. Regardless of who Rhys's fans were, they had to be hardcore.

The music died, and only then, Mason decided to knock.

"It's open," Rhys said. "Ah, it's you."

"I didn't mean to bother you while you work." There was no piano in sight, but a sizeable keyboard. Rhys's long fingers rested on the keys, and the look in his eyes was vacant. Although he talked to Mason, he wasn't looking at him. "That thing really sounds like a piano."

"It's convenient," Rhys explained. "Of course, it sounds nothing like the real thing, but it's good enough."

"I couldn't tell the difference," Mason said. "But I have no ear for music."

Rhys looked at him. "That can't be true. Come here."

Mason had a mind to deliver Rhys the message about the later visit to the recording studio and make himself scarce. But there was a new light in Rhys's eyes as he invited him to join him on the bench behind the keyboard.



He obeyed but pretended to ignore how close Rhys stood. There was something about him that could make Mason come undone in a heartbeat. The truth was, Rhys was a stranger to him, and he could be anything, even a guy who had killed his boyfriend.

Lies kept together by a thin thread. Mason shook his head. He could give up on telling them to himself, but then he would be in a world of pain. There was no way he could give in to the attraction he felt toward Rhys. Levine Goldman would probably have his heart on a stick, served for breakfast.

And there were lines he never crossed. “Well.” His voice was unusually harsh. “What do you want to show me?”

Rhys took his right hand and placed it over the keys, and then the other. In a soft voice, he began explaining, but Mason’s mind was blank. Rhys was too close. His fingers hit the keys too hard, and the harmony set as background tore. “I’m obviously no musician material.” He made a move to get up, but Rhys kept one hand over his.

“Do you always play hard to get, Mason?”

“Not always.” He gave up on getting up, his eyes on their hands together. Rhys’s fingers were long and white. They covered Mason’s rough hand like a touch of satin.

“So it must be because you don’t like me enough that you’re doing this?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m not doing anything.”

Rhys laughed. Mason looked away. “How many hearts have you broken with this cold attitude?”

“I’m not some heartbreaker. You’re wrong about that.”

“Then, what do you do? You just fuck and forget?”

In a nutshell. Not because of some impulse to hurt others, but because he had nothing to give. That was too much to explain to someone he had barely met.

Rhys caressed his hand slowly. “I could use a cold hard fuck.”

Mason moved his hand away. “Sorry, but I’m not going to be the stick you’re beating yourself with.”

He stood up and put a bit of distance between them.

Rhys measured him with different eyes. “You don’t know me. How could getting pleasure from sex be a way of punishing myself?”

Mason shrugged. “You continue to pour your soul into those songs. That’s the only thing that’ll heal you. Not fucking a stranger.”

Rhys linked his hands in front of him and stretched with a yawn. “And here comes another gem of wisdom from Mason Knight’s ‘how not to live your life’ handbook.”

“We’re due to visit your recording studio today.”

“Ah, that. Yes. Was that why you came here?”

Mason offered a nod in reply.

“All right. I suppose parading the ‘barely out of rehab’ small-time celebrity has begun.”

A sudden thought crossed Mason’s mind. “Your boss put up those assholes to harass you this morning.”

Rhys stopped and looked at him. He pressed his index finger against his lips. If he knew about that already, he wasn’t keen on touting it everywhere. “And how do you know that, Mason?”

“A hunch.”

“You said it as if it was the truth and nothing but.”

“It’s how I present my hunches.”

Rhys chuckled. “How long has it been since you raised the bridge, Mason? You should know that separating yourself like this from the world can’t work forever.”

Mason had never been big on metaphors and all that. But he got what Rhys was saying. “It’s worked so far. Just let Billy and me know when you’re ready to go.”

“Sure thing. I wouldn’t keep my two favorite bodyguards waiting on me.”

“Do you know many bodyguards?” The air was too heavy; they needed to make it light.

“Shoo now, Mason. If you know what’s good for you.”

He knew, and too well.

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“When you made me listen to that song,” Mason started without any introduction as he walked back into the surveillance room, “you said it was Rhys’s latest piece.”

Billy looked up from the screen. “Yeah.”

“Did he record it in a studio? Because it feels like he’ll be seeing these guys today for the first time in a long time.”

Billy’s face lit up. There seemed to be nothing more exciting for him than to be put through some Rhys Harmony trivia contest. “That’s what makes it so special. He recorded it here, as far as I know. There’s a small insulation booth on the ground floor, so that must be where he got it done. Of course, there was very little post-processing, so maybe it sounds a little rough.”

“I didn’t think it sounded rough at all.”

“There is a bit of bleeding from the instrument arrangement from time to time, but that makes it more powerful. You know, authentic.”

Bleeding. Interesting choice of words for a song called *Nothing Cuts Like Love*. “I’m no expert, but I think it sounded fine.”

“So, you liked it.” Billy offered him another face-splitting grin.

“I’m just commenting on the sound quality, as I see it. Do you have any idea why he didn’t use the services of the recording studio, like usual?”

Billy’s face turned pensive. “That wasn’t in the papers, but I suppose it was because Rhys wasn’t exactly in the mood to go out much.”

“So, he lived like a shut-in for the last month or so? When we got here, he was out.”

“And probably for the first time in his month of freedom. Nobody got to him, as Levine made sure no one was to make contact with him. Most of the time, the papers did nothing but speculate.”

“So that was why you didn’t believe me when I told you he hired an escort?”

Billy sighed. “Everybody knows how much he loved Toby.”

“So, he did love me!”

Mason jumped slightly. Toby had the weirdest timing to appear and disappear. “Would you stop that?”

“Ah, sorry,” Billy replied, “I know you like him, and it’s not easy for you to hear how he used to love his boyfriend.”

“Wait a minute, do you like Rhys?” Toby walked close to him and got in his face, like a rooster looking for a fight.

Mason threw him an annoyed look. “I don’t like him.”

Billy chuckled. "Tell that to yourself as many times as you want, Mason. That won't make it less real."

Toby raised one finger and pointed it at him. "You better not try anything with him."

"Because?" Mason knew firsthand how bad an idea was to talk to the ghost with other people present, but his blood, usually cool, was starting to boil.

"Because I'm going to haunt you forever," came the prompt reply.

"What do you mean? It's because it's the truth," Billy said.

Mason rolled his eyes. "I would so love to kick your ass," he said through his teeth.

Toby offered a victorious smile. "Just try it."

"Arnie, you want to be a bad guy? First, you threatened my stash; now, you want to kick my ass," Billy complained. "But you can't fool me."

For the moment, he just needed to give up. "Fine, whatever." That was directed to both other people in the room, regardless of their state of being dead or alive. "I'll make another round of the house, and then we'll get ready to leave."

"Did Rhys say anything about when he wants us ready?"

"No, but we better be. That's our job."

"Got you."

Mason shook his head and walked out. He still needed to check the entire perimeter for any trace of alcohol.

"What are you doing now?" Toby asked, following him right away.

"I need to see if your lovely boyfriend has any booze stashed somewhere."

"He's not an alcoholic," Toby said with conviction.

"And how do you know that? Has your memory come back? If yes, tell me who bashed your head in."

"Now is the moment when you start behaving like an unfeeling bastard or what? I just don't see him as an alcoholic."

"Maybe he got the urge to drink his sanity away only when he was with you."

Toby stopped for a moment, but then he materialized in front of Mason. Mason walked right through him. “What’s gotten into you?”

“Nothing. I’m trying to do my job. I won’t let your boyfriend touch another drop of alcohol again. At least, as long as I’m paid.”

“You’re annoyed because your partner’s teasing got to you.” That was a matter of fact statement for a very much matter of fact issue.

Mason didn’t reply. He continued his tour of the house without saying a word. As an expert in security, he could observe any issues while at it, since that was his job, and nothing else. Definitely, most definitely, his job wasn’t to feel attracted to an impossibly beautiful man with a boatload of problems.

“I understand that you like him. How could you not?” Toby’s voice was bitter now.

“I told you, and I’m going to repeat that until it’s clear to you. I don’t like him.”

“That sounds a lot like denial. The thing is, I can’t stop you from liking him. But don’t you dare make a move while I’m still here.”

“What kind of move will that be?”

“Jump his bones and that. If he was willing to hire an escort, I guess he would do you, too.”

“You have no business being so jealous. Maybe that was an issue when you were alive.”

“Maybe.”

Toby had nothing to worry about. Mason didn’t plan on acting on his attraction toward Rhys. It was a life principle he never broke. Plus, who needed all that emotional baggage?

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“Are you cold?” Mason tried to school his voice into a neutral tone.

Rhys was leaning against him, his thigh pressed against Mason’s. He turned his head and let his eyelids drop. “I’ve been thinking, Mason.”

“All right. I hope you’ve been thinking about getting warmer clothes.”

They were on the backseat of the car, with Billy as the driver, as usual.

Rhys chuckled. Mason could feel his skin turning to goosebumps. “You called yourself the stick. But I want to think of you more like the carrot.”

“Hmm.”

“Yes, I know, it’s not the most suitable comparison, as I’m sure a guy like you must be packing something more substantial than a carrot. Either way, if I’m properly motivated, I’d be willing to eat my veggies.”

Mason looked straight ahead. Rhys was whispering into his ear, probably trying to avoid getting Billy’s attention. He kept his hands on his knees and decided to keep his mouth shut.

“So, here’s the deal. I’ll start doing whatever you think I must do so that I get better or whatever. Eat breakfast, swear off booze, all that jazz. But I want to be rewarded for my good behavior.”

“Hmm.”

“I can see that you agree with me, and that makes me happy. Right now, I’m doing what’s right, going to visit the studio and all that. And here is what I want as my reward.”

Mason remained silent.

“Hold me until we get there.”

There was no teasing in Rhys’s voice. If that was but an act, he was one hell of an actor. To Mason’s ear, that had sounded like a cry for help, not well-crafted seduction. He adjusted his position and put one arm around Rhys, still without looking at him.

Rhys sighed in contentment and put his head on Mason’s chest. Mason didn’t have to be told everything; he placed one short kiss on the crown of Rhys’s head. If Rhys had been a cat, he would have started purring right away.

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“If it isn’t the prodigal son.” A man in his forties, with a potbelly that poured over his belt like an unstoppable force, welcomed them at the reception.

“In person,” Rhys replied. “This is Dirk, the one and only producer we have here,” he explained to Billy and Mason.

“I’ve heard about your having bodyguards with you all the time, but it’s a different thing to see you with them tagging along. What’s the danger, exactly?”

Rhys shrugged. “Ask Levine. He’s the one coming with all these ideas. By the way, these are Billy and Mason.”

Dirk only spared them a short glance. “What do you have for me today? Ready to make some music?”

“And I thought you guys would just be happy to see me. I should have known. There are no party hats in sight.”

“Save that for people who don’t know how important time is.” Dirk walked in front of them and gestured to be followed. “Let’s get you in the live room. Now hit me.”

Rhys placed a small memory stick in Dirk’s open palm. The producer didn’t even stop to look at him.

A door opened in front of them, and a young man who looked no older than nineteen rushed through it. He was short and thin, and something about him made Mason think right away of a cute fluffy animal. It had to be because of his mop of strawberry blond hair, sticking out everywhere. His eyes, a dark brown, were shining, and his mouth was stretched into a big smile. He wore baggy clothes that looked like they belonged to an older brother and a thin leather choker around his neck that made him appear vulnerable, and Mason couldn’t deny it, sexy.

“Rhys, you’re back!”

“Hey, Ary,” Rhys replied and opened his arms.

It looked like nothing else was needed for Ary to run and jump into Rhys’s embrace. Mason observed the scene. So, after all, Rhys had lied when he had said that he had no friends. It looked like Ary was a close acquaintance, at least. And Dirk, as much a dick he was about work and nothing, but work seemed okay.

“Every day, I kept asking Dirk when you plan on coming back. Isn’t it so, Dirk?”

“Yes. You kept pestering me. Don’t you have some coffee to make? These guys might use some.”

“We’re okay,” Mason intervened.

“Ary, go make coffee, now,” Dirk said. “He’s our little runner. That’s the only thing he’s actually good at,” he added and, this time turned toward them.

“I make awesome coffee,” Ary confirmed, seemingly not in the slightest upset over Dirk’s comment.

If Billy had an unknown twin in the world, it had to be little Ary.

“But who are your friends?” Ary asked, still holding Rhys by the arms. His intelligent eyes traveled to Mason and Billy.

“They are my bodyguards.”

“Bodyguards? Has anyone threatened you?” Mason could read a real concern on Ary’s face.

“Levine thinks I need help. And I’m grateful for it,” Rhys added, suspiciously courteous. “They are Billy and Mason.”

Billy waved and grinned. Mason just nodded slightly. Ary examined them for a few moments. His eyes remained set on Mason, longer than expected. Then, suddenly he blushed and bit his bottom lip. "I think I should make that coffee," he said and scurried away, propelled like a bullet from a gun.

"He doesn't have to bother on our account," Mason said.

Dirk waved. "That's his job."

"Yeah, but hurrying off like that --"

Dirk chuckled. "I'm afraid you're our runner's perfect type. If you plan on hanging out around here, expect a little gay boy's crush with all that entails."

Rhys wrapped his arm around his. "Mason is mine, and I'll make it clear if that's needed." Mason couldn't tell if he was joking or not. There could hardly be a competition between Rhys and Ary, but who knew what he was thinking?

"Just keep your catfights out of my studio, and you two can do whatever you want," Dirk said. "Now, get to work. We don't have all day."

Mason turned toward Rhys. "Have you ever fought Ary over a dude or something?" He spoke quietly so that no one could hear them.

Rhys smiled. "Not really."

Hmm. Mason didn't quite know what to make of that answer.



## *Chapter Seven – The Writing On The Wall*

Unlike at the radio station, where they had been left to wait in the hallway, this time, Mason and Billy were pointed toward a relaxation room and told to feel at home. Billy sighed in satisfaction as they both sank into the comfortable sofa. A coffee table was in front of the couch, and Mason had a feeling people working there indulged in the bitter fix with religiosity.

“This is pretty cozy,” Billy commented. “Hey, there’s even a TV. Ah, sorry, you don’t watch TV.” There was both regret and apology in Billy’s voice.

“I don’t own one, and I don’t watch TV at home, but that doesn’t mean that I think it’s the devil or something,” Mason said with the hint of a smile.

“Oh, good.” Billy’s shoulders slumped in relief.

Could it be that Billy was that naïve? Mason had a hard time believing that. The guy seemed so genuinely happy all the time that if he hadn’t known any better, Mason would have thought that he was high on something. But other than his bubbling personality, Billy appeared to be sharp as a tack. The moment Mason had suspected something when seeing Toby’s ghost for the first time, Billy’s demeanor had changed at the drop of a dime. Mason still recalled how fast Billy’s hand had gone for the gun, in one swift motion, showing that its owner was used to reaching for it, without hesitation. He was a professional, by the looks of it, and Mason was happy to have him as his wingman.

“So, what are you waiting for? Go for that remote.”

“Thanks, chief.”

Mason watched Billy walking over the room to pick the remote from the stand on which the TV stood. He didn’t move with difficulty for a person his size, and the look of childish pleasure on his face when he returned with the remote seemed, for one brief second, a little less genuine.

Maybe he was a cynical ass, after all, and never trusted people, even less, strangers. There could be people like Billy. It wasn’t like he had met everyone in the world and could call himself an expert in human nature.

There was a short knock on the door, and then Ary walked in with a tray on which cups – real cups, not the Styrofoam type – lay with steam coming out of them. The aroma wafting from them was refreshing, and Mason, who didn’t usually indulge in any stimulants, felt the need to treat himself to something good.

“Oh, boy, that smells fantastic, Ary!” Billy welcomed the little runner, as Dirk, the producer, had called him.

Ary blushed a little, pleased with the praise. He carefully placed the tray in front of them, on the coffee table. "Sugar, cream?"

"Sure." Billy watched Ary fixing his cup. "A little more sugar."

"No, that's enough," Mason intervened.

Ary's hand stopped in mid-air. "What about you, Mason?"

"I'll take it black."

"Just like your heart," Billy said under his breath.

Ary's eyes moved from Mason to Billy and then back to Mason. "Is that so? Your heart is black, Mason?"

"He promised that he would sniff out my candy stash and throw it all away," Billy explained.

Ary smiled, and from up close, Mason noticed the dimples. Such an adorable kid.

"Ah, that's unforgivable, indeed. Can I hang out with you, guys?" Ary's eyes were pleading.

"Sure," Billy replied. "If that's okay with Mason Black Heart over here."

"I think I like this nickname the most of all you've given me," Mason replied. "Sure thing, you can stick around, Ary."

"Thanks."

Billy moved to make room on the sofa for Ary, but the runner surprised Mason by walking over and sitting on his thigh.

"Am I heavy?" Ary threw Mason a coquettish look over his shoulder.

That was the least problem Mason could think of. Ary wiggled his ass a little, to make himself comfortable. Then, he leaned back and pressed against Mason's shoulder. From that position, Mason could smell his hair, recently washed by the still present shampoo scent, something fruity and pleasant. So, that must be what Dirk had warned him about.

"There are chairs in the room," Mason pointed out. His shoulder could sustain the pressure without a problem, but his hand remained flat on the sofa. What could Ary's game be? Maybe Toby had used to be jealous, but he could have been the cheater in his relationship with Rhys. It was a known fact that cheaters, in general, tended to be the most suspicious people.

"But this is much more comfortable," Ary replied.

"Do you do this with all of Rhys's boyfriends?"

Ary jumped as if stung by a bee. Mason was quick to catch him by the waist and put him down back on his thigh. For a short while, Ary struggled against his hold but had to give up when he realized there was no escape for now. From the corner of his eye, Mason could tell Billy took in the scene with keen eyes. Not a naive, that one. He could read everything pretty well.

“Are you Rhys’s boyfriend?” Ary said through his teeth.

Even pissed off, he still sounded like a kid.

“No, but it looks like you think that.”

Ary wiggled some more. “You’re holding me too tight.”

“You’re the one who said it was comfortable to sit in my lap. You’re not allowed to complain now.” Mason’s voice was steady, but he couldn’t deny that Ary’s little fight lit up a new fire in his veins. Pretty men were his weakness. But Ary was too young for his taste, and there was already a certain someone who could make his blood temperature soar with just one look.

“What do you want to know?”

Mason turned Ary’s face to him. He had to bite back a smile. Ary was puffing his cheeks like an angry hedgehog. “Just a simple answer to what I asked you.”

“No. How is that for an answer?”

“Elaborate.”

“What could I elaborate on ‘no’? And you said you wanted a simple answer.”

“Something longer than one word would be better. What was with you and Toby?”

Ary’s eyes grew wide and then thinned with suspicion. “How do you know about that?”

Mason had no idea what Ary meant by it, but the little hedgehog had to be led on a little to spill the beans. “Answer yourself that. I won’t bother.”

Ary deflated. “I can’t believe Rhys is still mad about that! And nothing happened, I swear!”

“Seeing how he didn’t forget about it, it couldn’t have been nothing,” Mason commented.

“I didn’t mean anything by it! I was just giving Toby a massage.”

“Was it the kind with a happy end?” Mason didn’t want to mince words. Ary was trapped.

“I get it why your partner calls you Black Heart.” Ary crossed his arms and moved his face away from Mason’s grasp. “I don’t like you anymore.”

“All right. It hurts, but I promise that I’ll be strong and won’t cry. So, you were giving Toby a massage. What happened next?”

“Nothing. Rhys came, and he shot me the famous death glare.”

Mason wanted to know what was that, but he needed to strike the iron while hot. “And?” he urged Ary to continue.

“They started fighting, and I made myself scarce.”

“What were they fighting about?”

“What weren’t they fighting about?” Ary snorted for effect.

Mason didn’t quite buy it, but they had an audience, and he couldn’t tell how much trust to place in Billy. He eased the hold on Ary’s waist. “You’re free to go.”

Ary made a sound like he was suffocating in anger. “Do I get to be roughed up, but no loving?”

“Shoo.” Mason let his voice drop to a whisper. “You don’t want the kind of loving I give.”

Ary snickered, but got up, with no hard feelings, by the looks of it. He threw Mason a challenging glance, but, this time, from a fair distance. “Maybe I do.” He cocked his head and smiled.

Mason offered him a crooked grin in reply. He had a feeling he would get to talk to Ary again, maybe alone. There were things left unspoken.

Ary’s phone went off with an incoming message. He huffed as he read it. “Gotta go. Duty calls. Enjoy your coffee.”

He waved friendly at Billy, who waved back, but he winked at Mason, with a promise in his cute deep brown eyes.

The door was barely closed when Billy exploded in a hurried whisper. “What was that, Mason? I think I’ve never kept my breath for so long. Why did you grab Ary like that? And how did you know about that incident? Did Rhys tell you anything? And did you expect Ary not to get mad?”

Mason put one hand up. “Easy there, number one fan. The world won’t end if you don’t know every little thing about Rhys Harmony.”

Billy laughed. “You completely took me by surprise. I thought little Ary would piss his pants or something like that.”

“As you could see, there was no incident of the kind. I just picked a vibe between him and Rhys, and I wanted to know what all was about.”

“I’d say that was beyond the job description.”

“What can I say? I like going the extra mile.” Mason took the cup and brought it to his lips. “Sonic here had something to hide, and I wanted to know what.”

“Sonic?” Billy made a face like he was trying to solve a complicated puzzle. Then, he burst into laughter. “OMG, so spot on. Because he runs all over the place and has that funny face, right?”

“I wouldn’t say funny, but he makes me think of a cute fluffy animal. Sonic was the closest famous hedgehog that came to my mind.”

Billy sighed. “Mason, you go around, breaking hearts, and you don’t care one bit. Rhys better not hear that Ary stood in your lap. He could get jealous, and beautiful people can be tyrannical when that happens.”

“And how would you know that?” Mason teased. “Do you often make your girlfriend jealous?”

Billy looked at him and blinked a few times. “What? You think I can’t?”

“I’m sure you can. This personality of yours, not many girls could resist it. You know that most say that they like a guy with a sense of humor the most.”

Billy grinned. “You shouldn’t believe everything you hear from hack psychologists.”

Mason shrugged. “I’m just telling you like it is. I don’t like people—strangers, even less. But you? I can’t help liking.”

Billy’s eyes grew wide, and then he smiled, a big broad smile splitting his face. “Sorry, man, but I’m taken.”

Mason shook his head. “It looks like I have a knack to like men who can’t like me back. Boyd, you, Rhys.” He intended to make a joke, but he had let out a truth, by accident.

“Rhys likes you,” Billy pointed out.

“No, he doesn’t. There’s no room in his life to like anyone.”

Billy nodded, and his eyes turned serious. “He’s not over Toby.”

Mason grimaced. This ‘getting over’ thing always got on his nerves. “He can’t be.”

“Because no one cared about finding Toby’s killer, right?”

Billy went the same path as Toby with his logic. Mason didn’t want to launch into a conversation that couldn’t lead to anything good. Picking at old wounds wasn’t the type of hobby he liked to indulge in. “Yeah. How come Levine didn’t put more work into it?”

Billy shrugged. "I don't think Toby and Levine saw eye to eye too often."

*Go figure.*

"Was Levine trying to get into Rhys's pants, when Toby was still around?"

Billy appeared uncomfortable to talk about the subject. But Mason was interested in finding things that would most likely take him days, if not more while reading useless garbage published by tabloids. Billy looked like a reliable source.

"I wouldn't know. Let's say that Levine's interest was either sudden or just intensified after Toby died. It could be that he spent a lot of time with Rhys."

"Hmm. So, Levine didn't care much about Rhys before Toby got killed?"

"Levine discovered Rhys. He and Toby were a sideshow for a few hundred at best and just scraping by. It could be that Levine saw Rhys's talent for what it was. I don't know anything else, and not even the tabloids mentioned any kind of improper conduct during that time. Those jackals would have pounced at the opportunity. So, no rumors before that, no."

"Isn't it a bit strange? I mean, Levine strikes me as a guy who always takes what he wants. If Rhys was what he wanted, that could have gone one of two ways. But it looks to me like Rhys doesn't give a damn about Levine Goldman drooling over him, and Levine doesn't give him the boot for not putting out."

Billy scratched his head. "Now, that you put it like this, it does sound strange. But it could be that Levine just got to know Rhys better after Toby died. And, then, you know, he fell in love."

Mason let out a derisive snort. "In love? Levine Goldman? He doesn't strike me as the type."

"Yeah, I guess not. Weird," Billy said with a shrug and had a sip from his cup. "Hmm, this is pure bliss. Ary does know how to make coffee."

And that wasn't the only thing he knew. Mason wanted to know if the little hedgehog had managed to get on Rhys's nerves enough to make him jealous. If Toby could only remember a few bits of what had happened to him, or at least about his life. The thread was all tangled up.

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"Ary, I am so going to box your ears." That was Rhys, coming out of the live room, with a new light in his eyes.

Mason knew as much, even if he wasn't some big shot psychologist. Music made Rhys Harmony come alive. It would be a long process, seeing how sad he still was one year after losing his boyfriend, but Mason could see him getting there. The scars would make something already beautiful, exquisite, and unique, as he knew well.

The little runner was present, too, seemingly anxious to see Rhys on his way out. “Mason held me like this, I couldn’t move,” he protested right away.

Rhys’s magnetic eyes thinned as they traveled to Mason. “Did he, now?”

“What? You didn’t know?” Ary made a surprised face. “Didn’t he tell on me?”

Mason ran one hand over his face to keep hidden a smile. Rhys was teasing Ary, and the fluffy hedgehog couldn’t see a trap if his life depended on it. “I didn’t say anything. I think Rhys just caught you, Ary.”

“Caught him? I think the one who got caught is you, Mason.” Rhys had a small smile on his lips. “What were you doing, holding Ary like that?”

“He’s obviously just making things up to get on your nerves.”

Rhys took Ary by the shoulders and kissed the crown of his head. “He would never do that. Ary can’t lie.”

Mason snorted. “Right.”

Rhys didn’t appear bothered by his distrust. “We go way back. I’d say I know him better than you.” The words were said matter-of-factly, without a hint of anger.

“How way back?”

Ary wrapped his arms around Rhys. “I used to carry Rhys’s and Toby’s stuff when they couldn’t handle everything they needed for their gigs.”

“And you got Ary this job?” Mason asked Rhys directly.

“I promised him that I would find something for him. It’s not ideal, but Ary is bent on working his way up in this industry.”

“That’s right,” Ary agreed. “I didn’t want to be a well-paid assistant who would do nothing all day, except maybe brush Rhys’s hair.”

Mason chuckled. “He clearly needs an assistant for that, yes.”

Rhys shot him a glare. Maybe it wasn’t the famous ‘death glare’, but Mason could tell he was a bit pissed. “I could just cut it and have it done with.”

“No!” Ary protested right away. “Mason, tell him he can’t cut it!”

“I don’t mind. He could try the bald look for all I care.”

“You can’t be serious!” Ary made such a face that Mason had to bit his lips to stifle a grin.

“Bald would be quite a radical change; à la Britney, I’d say,” Rhys commented, seemingly unfazed by Mason’s indifference.

“No, you can’t do that,” Ary said with determination. “I will never let you do that. Your hair is beautiful. How can you even think of doing such a horrible thing?” He touched Rhys’s hair reverently with one hand.

Mason intervened. “Don’t worry, Ary. I will make sure Rhys brushes his hair every morning.”

“And how will you do that?” Rhys offered him one of his sweet smiles that could melt the ice cap. “Will you brush it for me?”

“No. But I can think of some cruel and unusual punishments if you don’t behave.”

“Hmm, you make me in the mood to disobey only so that I can see what those are.”

“Trust me; you don’t want that.”

Ary giggled. “He’s so tough and rough, your bodyguard, Rhys. I love him.”

“Well, sorry, Shorty, but I saw him first.”

Ary puffed his cheeks. “Not fair. And Shorty? You’ve never called me that.”

Rhys shrugged. “I live with two guys who are into crazy nicknames. I thought of trying my hand at it, too.”

“Shorty is nothing special,” Ary said from the tip of his lips. “Everyone knows I’m short.”

“Sonic is much better,” Billy said.

“Sonic?” Ary’s eyes lit up. “Did you come up with that, Billy?”

“No, Mason here did.” Billy, the traitor, pointed at Mason.

Ary’s eyes grew wide. “I love it!”

Rhys huffed, but it was clear he was joking. “It’s like you’re giving everyone nicknames, Mason, except me.”

“You’re easy,” Mason replied. “Nothing short of Angel could fit you.”

Ary broke into laughter and coughed, Billy made an endearing ‘aww’, and Rhys looked at Mason, his lips parted. For a magical moment, the sounds around died down, and Mason stared at Rhys, despite knowing, all too well, that it was dangerous to do so.

“Mason’s so in love.” Billy tore the veil, and all the sounds returned.



Mason smacked Billy playfully upside the head. “Stop talking bullshit, Po.”

“Billy is Po?” Ary sounded so excited that it was a wonder he wasn’t bouncing up and down. “And Mason? Ah, Black Heart, of course.”

“Black Heart?” Rhys asked. “This one is new. I only know him for Arnie and the more common, chief.”

“You guys are so much fun! Do you think I can come live with you, Rhys?” Ary asked, his eyes big and shiny.

“Sorry, poppet,” Rhys caressed his hair, “but you know that I cannot stand competition.”

“Poppet? What are you now? Some old biddy?”

They both spoke in an exaggerated British accent as if they were part of a play. Mason could see an inside joke for what it was worth. Rhys and Ary didn’t just go way back; they were thick as thieves. He felt relief at the thought that Rhys wasn’t, after all, all alone in the world, and he still had a friend in little Ary.

“Ready to go home?” Mason asked.

Rhys caressed Ary’s head and gave him one last kiss on the forehead. “Yes. It looks like I earned my keep for yet another day. According to Dirk, barely, but at least he has a new song to take apart and put together. Please give me your arm, Mason, and let’s go.”

Ary saw them out in the street and embraced them all before finally allowing them to go. Billy was red in the face with delight when Ary finally bid them goodbye.

“So, straight home, or can we stop somewhere for a drink?” Rhys asked with an innocent smile, the moment they were inside the car.

Mason sobered up instantly. “No drinks for you, and I mean it.”

“We could just have juice or something,” Rhys insisted as he wrapped tightly around Mason’s arm as if he didn’t want to lose him. “By the way, I don’t have an alcohol problem.”

“That’s what people with alcohol problems say.” Mason hoped his voice was stern enough to be taken seriously.

Rhys sighed and leaned back into his seat. He closed his eyes, and Mason observed him in silence. It couldn’t be fair to have his restraint put to the test so heavily. Rhys was beautiful, no matter which way you looked at him. Mason took in the closed eyelids, the bluish tint of what had to be sleepless nights, the elegant straight nose, and the lips that had given him that haunting kiss. They were so close; Mason only needed to lean in a little, and he could taste that enticing mouth again.

He stood there, doing nothing. It was everything he wanted, but he wasn't a man to act on an impulse, no matter how right it felt.

"I can feel your eyes on me," Rhys whispered. "Admit it, Mason. You like me."

"I don't deny it. But I'm not in the habit of letting myself used."

Rhys didn't open his eyes. "What do you mean?" Their voices were hushed whispers.

"Me or any other man, it would be the same for you. I'm not risking my reputation for a whim."

Rhys laughed softly. "You have high standards and morals for a bodyguard. So, if you were special to me, you would give in?"

"I don't function on 'what ifs'. This conversation --"

"I will make you my special someone if that's what it takes."

"Don't be flippant. It's not you."

Rhys opened his eyes and examined Mason. "And you know me how? We've barely met."

"See?" Mason patted Rhys's knee. "Don't go around sleeping with strangers."

"Good advice. All the more reasons for me to get to know you. How were you as a child, Mason?"

*Weak. Lost.*

"Just like any other kid. Nothing special."

"I doubt it." Rhys rested his head against Mason's shoulders. His voice turned quieter. "Sometimes, I want to forget. Is it a crime?"

"No. But you don't really want that. You still love him."

Rhys didn't deny it, like before. In the driver's seat, Billy was silent, but that didn't mean he was deaf. "I do."

Mason understood few truths as deep as that.

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"We will go out." Rhys's voice was final.

"I said no drinks," Mason warned.

“And we won’t drink alcohol, and that’s a promise,” Rhys replied. “I ate today, I went to work, so it’s only natural that I unwind a little, too. You won’t send me to sleep so early, right?”

“Okay,” Mason agreed.

“What do you say, Billy?” Rhys turned toward the other bodyguard. “Are you tired?”

“No way. I’m game.”

“Good. Are you coming, Mason?” Rhys stopped for a second on the first step of the stairs leading to the upper floor.

“Where?”

“I need you to brush my hair.” Rhys had a straight face as he said that, but not for long.

Mason looked around. He hadn’t seen Toby for hours. Where could he be? Was he moping around? Had he decided to haunt someone else? Mason felt almost disappointed at that thought.

“Billy can inspect the perimeter or whatever you, guys, need to do. You, Mason, must come with me. I’ll freshen up, and then we’ll go out and have some fun.”

Mason shrugged. Toby would appear, at some point, but hopefully not when he needed to sleep. Ghosts didn’t seem that considerate of living humans’ basic needs. He followed Rhys up the stairs without another word.

Rhys walked into his bedroom and invited Mason in. “I just need to throw some water on my face.”

Mason had an idea why. What he didn’t know was why Rhys wanted him there. He nodded and watched Rhys as he disappeared into the bathroom.

“I’ve been here before.”

It took Mason all his training not to jump at Toby’s voice. The ghost stood in front of the wall covered in quotes. Mason walked over to him. “You must have been. You were Rhys’s boyfriend, after all.”

Toby studied the writings on the wall, as if a vital answer lay there, dormant. “I don’t think it’s because of that.”

Mason stood right behind Toby, trying to guess what words could have drawn his attention. “What do you remember?”

Toby remained silent for a few moments more. “I feel like I’ve been here after I died.”

## *Chapter Eight – The Only Wound That Matters*

“After you died? Are you sure?” Mason whispered and threw an anxious look toward the bathroom door. The sound of water running probably masked whatever it was said in the room, but he didn’t want to risk having Rhys question his sanity.

Toby nodded slowly, his eyes never leaving the wall covered in quotes. “It’s strange, and it feels like it must have happened long before the month I believe I’ve been around, as I told you.”

Mason looked at the wall, too. “Do you see anything you recognize? The chances are you must have stood right here if this is what triggered your memory.”

“It’s not a memory. It’s a feel.” Toby let one hand hover over the wall.

Mason frowned. The words were black on white, with not one ounce of color; at least, that had been what he had thought the first time. All of a sudden, something caught his eye. An oddity. Of all the calligraphic letters, one word stood out. A red line, like a scratch, went underneath. Without overthinking, he asked, “Did you do this?”

Toby looked at the underlined word. “I don’t remember.”

Mason got closer and traced the fading red line. Something of its copperish color made him shiver slightly. “*In*. What’s that supposed to mean?”

Toby remained silent. “It could be nothing. *In*. It’s just a simple word.”

“Not if it’s part of a sentence,” Mason said, and his eyes began to travel over the wall. “*Fist. Your. Clutched. In your clutched fist?*” There seem to be no other words underlined.

“*In your clutched fist?* I have no idea what that means. This color looks like old blood.”

“How would you even know what old blood looks like?” Mason had an ill sensation, and his hand withdrew from the wall. “Show me your palms, Toby.”

Toby opened his hands, his eyes still glued to the wall.

“How come you have no wounds on your hands?”

“Why should I?”

“Rhys got in deep shit with the police after you died because your blood was on his clothes. Apparently, it landed there after you cut your hands in a broken bottle.”

Toby looked at his hands. “I don’t know why there are no traces of that.”

“While the wound on your temple --”

“Maybe that’s the only wound that matters.”

Mason sighed. “I think you came in here after you died and underlined these words with your bloodied fingers.”

“A little bit too goth, don’t you think?”

They were on the point of a big discovery, and Toby cared only about joking.

“Seriously, dude, this could be a major clue,” Mason warned. “Think. What the hell do these words mean? *In your clutched fist?*”

Toby shook his head and looked with dejected eyes at the wall. “Beats me.”

“Ah, dammit, Toby,” Mason said under his breath. “It wouldn’t hurt if you remembered something.”

There was no trace of amusement on Toby’s face when their eyes met. So, maybe it was all nothing but a coping mechanism.

The water stopped running. Mason straightened up. Rhys came out of the bathroom while rubbing his wet hair with a towel. He was naked from the waist up, and Mason didn’t catch himself in time. His hungry eyes traveled over the nicely modeled pecs. Rhys was no gym rat, but he had a bit of meat on his bones where it mattered. Mason could see himself sucking on those rosy nipples and teasing them with tongue and teeth until he would drive their owner mad with lust.

His attraction toward Rhys wasn’t funny anymore.

Toby sighed. “He’s so beautiful. I’ll go around the house, maybe something jogs my memory. Make sure to wipe your mouth, though, bud. You’re drooling.”

Mason turned with an annoyed glare toward Toby, but the ghost was already walking through the wall with quick steps. Was Toby avoiding Rhys on purpose?

“Is there something wrong, Mason?” Rhys’s slightly worried voice took him back.

“Nothing,” Mason replied, a bit too sharply. To keep from staring at Rhys’s naked chest, he turned toward the wall with quotes. “I was reading some of these quotes. Did you write them?”

“No. I just collect them.” Rhys came to stand by his side, without bothering to put something on, much to Mason’s frustration.

Mason pointed at one of the underlined words. The direct approach usually worked. Maybe Toby didn’t remember anything, but Rhys could shed light on hidden corners and that without suspecting anything. “Is there a reason why you underlined this word?”

Rhys's face changed. "I didn't do that."

"Who did?"

Rhys shook his head, and the color drained from his face. "Someone surely did. What the fuck?" he murmured under his breath. He moved closer, and Mason let him figure out the phrase for himself. "*Clutched in your fist?*"

That could be a version, too. A better one.

Rhys touched the wall. "What kind of sick joke could this be?"

Mason sensed the distress growing inside Rhys. He hated himself for putting Rhys in a hot spot with that, but he could be the key to everything. If Toby thought of leaving him a message, there had to be something there.

Rhys moved away from the wall. He rubbed his forehead. "Who the fuck --" He stopped mid-sentence and went for his phone.

Mason followed him with his eyes. "What are you doing?"

"I'm calling Levine to ask him who had access to my house and my bedroom while I was gone."

Mason was so fast to take Rhys's phone from his hand that he surprised even himself. It was just a gut instinct, but he didn't want Levine to know about the secret message Toby had left on the wall for Rhys to see, and no one else.

"What the hell, Mason?" Rhys tried to fight him for the phone. "Someone clearly broke in, with the intention to drive me crazy by fucking gaslighting."

"And I'm in charge of your security. That's for me to figure out."

"But asking Levine --"

"Would only get me in trouble. Your boss doesn't like me, as things stand. I bet he barely waits to fire me."

"But this must have been here before you came --"

"And how do you know that? We got the cameras up and running, and we can check them, but what if it happened sometime shortly before that?"

Rhys's forehead frowned in thought. "Do you care a lot about this job, Mason? You're in charge of a small time singer with serious lost love issues and an alcohol addiction."

Mason grimaced. "I thought you said you didn't have an alcohol problem."

“I don’t. I just described what you think of me.”

“Hey, not fair. I care about you and I want to keep you safe. I can’t do that if I’m fired.” Mason was getting a bit worked up now. He needed to keep Rhys from calling Levine by any means necessary.

Rhys’s face lit up with amusement. “Wow. Was that a small confession?”

“Yes, it was,” Mason admitted.

Rhys came closer. He took the phone from Mason’s hand but only to throw it on the bed. His long arms wrapped around Mason’s neck, and his naked chest pressed against him.

And that he got for playing with fire. If he were in mortal danger, Mason couldn’t break the magic of that moment. From up close, Rhys was even more stunning if that was possible. He was warm and half-naked, and his lips were a promise of sweet water in the desert.

“Don’t call Levine. Let me handle this.”

“Kiss me and I will.”

“There’s no other way?”

Rhys’s lips hovered close to his. “No.”

Mason surrendered. Rhys’s mouth was sweeter than he remembered, and all his rational thinking slipped and slid like a kid on ice, with joy and enthusiasm, but without one ounce of control. There was no regret in him when he caught Rhys by the back of his head to deepen their kiss.

He could only imagine how rough his mouth was on Rhys’s soft lips, but he couldn’t stop. Their tongues battled and danced. There was no memory to compare; it was new and wonderful, and Mason’s heart ached, squeezed between wanting to jump out of his chest and his deep desire to keep himself safe.

He allowed his hands to descend on Rhys’s back, caressing the shoulder blades and follow the spine down to the waist. At the last minute, before losing his sanity completely, Mason managed through sheer iron will, to pull himself from the kiss.

Rhys was panting slightly, and his eyes were moist, hooded by heavy eyelids.

“Sorry, I’m sorry,” Mason mumbled.

Rhys caught Mason’s face into his hands. “What could you be sorry for?”

Mason closed his eyes. He didn’t have in him to face the fact that he liked Rhys much more than he was willing to admit. He felt guilty, too; Rhys still ached for his dead lover, and the said lover

happened to be the ghost haunting Mason presently. It wasn't cheating, but it was, and Mason was no cheater.

"It's been so long since I felt anything like this," Rhys said, his words like gentle raindrops on a roof. "Don't blame me for liking it."

"I don't blame you. I just don't want to take advantage of you. You're still grieving and --"

Rhys moved abruptly away from him. "And what would you know about grieving?"

*More than you know.*

Mason kept silent. It didn't serve anyone to wallow in pain and misery. And the more unfeeling Rhys thought him to be, the better.

"Please feel free to wait for me downstairs." Rhys went to his closet, without sparing Mason another look.

"Don't call Levine," Mason said, his hand on the doorknob.

"I won't. I said that if you kissed me, I wouldn't call him. Let's say the kiss was good enough for me to honor my promise."

Mason didn't say anything else. As much as he wanted to reach for Rhys and hold him in his arms until all the pain was gone, that was not possible. He had plenty on his plate already, such as trying to solve a murder whose victim had chosen to become a ghost and haunt Mason of all people in the world.

Before walking out, a thought struck him. "Those words, do they mean anything?"

Rhys turned, surprised to see him still there. His face closed, his lips in a straight line. "No, not really."

Which meant that they did. Mason needed to find a subtler way to find out what, and that without ending up kissing Rhys and losing his head.

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Billy was in the kitchen, and it looked like he had upbeat music streaming through his headphones because he was swinging his hips with quite a lot of grace, seeing the size of his girth.

Mason watched him in silence for a while. These days, he was starting to get suspicious of his own shadow. Seeing how his shadow was a ghost sometimes, that wasn't that surprising.



Billy turned and dropped his peanut butter sandwich when his eyes landed on Mason. “Hey, man, how long have you been standing there?” Billy took off his airpods and hurried to clean the floor and throw the sandwich in the trashcan.

“Billy, have you noticed some suspicious activity around the property since we got the cameras on?”

Monitoring the surveillance equipment was Billy’s job. However, he needed to check on him, and, right now, he needed to make Rhys believe that he was looking for a possible intruder, although he knew who that was. Dropping hints later in his conversations with Billy, when Rhys would be present, sounded like a plan to make him think that.

Billy was thoughtful for a moment. “No, nothing. Why?”

“Rhys has this idea that someone’s been in his room.”

Billy frowned. “Did they steal anything? What’s missing?”

“It’s nothing like that. More like a feeling.” Mason lied through his teeth. “You know, like when you come home after a long day, and your sleepers are not where you left them in the morning.”

“Did someone use Rhys’s sleepers?”

Mason shook his head. Billy was smarter than that. Now, he was just pulling his leg. “He may seem a little flighty, but Rhys knows what he’s saying.”

Billy smiled. “Look who’s a bigger fan than me. I’ll double my vigilance. But it would help if you told me what Rhys thought it was missing, or moved.”

“He cannot quite tell. Maybe it’s just nerves, him being back home and all, in a house where he must have lived with Toby before. Is the same house, right?”

Billy nodded. “Yeah. I’m on it, chief. Any perp with a desire for pain should be warned. I’m going to spare nothing.” He cracked his knuckles in demonstration. “Now, I’m going to make myself pretty, for our little outing.”

Mason stared after Billy for a few moments. Was Rhys’s address well known by his fanbase? Billy seemed so sure about being the same house where Rhys and Toby had used to live. That was a bit strange.

Or very strange, depending on how you looked at it. Oh, damn, it had to be that suspicious streak at work again.

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A fresh red rim marking Rhys's eyes filled Mason's mind with guilt, the moment the owner of the house stepped outside. He and Billy were waiting at the car, as if both had known by pure gut instinct that Rhys needed to feel alone, from time to time, in his own home. It was just a state of mind, but Mason thought he could read it well.

"Where to?" he asked, as he held the door for Rhys to climb in the backseat.

"There's a small event for indies I'm interested in," Rhys explained. His eyes looked anywhere but at Mason. He gave Billy the address.

Mason hesitated. Maybe he could ride in front with Billy for a change.

"Are you coming?" The question was directed at him, but Rhys had his head turned away from him.

With a shrug, he took his seat next to Rhys and gave Billy the greenlight to move. If Rhys didn't want to punish him for his transgressions from earlier, that was a good sign. With Toby's memory of his former life non-existent, Rhys was the key to most things.

Therefore, it was natural to keep him close. Nothing else to it, but that. Rhys's subtle cologne filled his nostrils; it seemed like he had brushed his hair, too.

"You clean up nicely," he ventured a joke.

For two beats, no answer followed. "Thank you." It was a prim and proper reply, but encouraging, nonetheless. Mason wanted nothing more but to bury his hands again into that mane of spun silk; it hurt to feel like that about an unattainable man.

"Did you two have a fight?" Billy maneuvered the car through a maze of narrow streets as if he had a map built in his brain. So far, Mason had to admit that Po was handier than him as Rhys's employee; he knew his way around the surveillance software and the city much better than Mason.

Where did that leave him? Apparently, in charge of a dead lover's ghost and his mysteries.

"Did you?"

Mason clenched his teeth. Did he have the mind power to summon Toby the moment he thought of him? "No."

Billy stared at him through the rearview mirror. "That sounded like a 'yes'."

"Totally," Toby confirmed. For some reason, he had chosen to ride shotgun this time, and it unnerved Mason to no end that Toby could behave so naturally while no one but him could see him. At least, when he was doing ghost stuff like going through objects, he didn't make Mason feel completely insane.

“And what business would that have with you?”

“Oh, so it was nasty,” Billy commented.

That hadn't been aimed at him, but lately, little Mason could do to control his reactions. Seeing ghosts could do that to a sane person.

“It wasn't nasty,” Rhys intervened. “Nothing happened, Billy. And Mason, stop sitting so stiff over there. I might begin to think that you don't like me.”

There was still tension in his voice, but Rhys made an effort to offer a peaceful hand.

“Rhys can't stand being mad at anyone,” Toby commented.

“How would you know that?” Mason could feel his irritation growing.

“How would I know what?” A hint of laughter could be read in Rhys's voice. “That you don't like me? I don't. But I'd say that you don't kiss me like you don't like me.”

“You two kissed?” Billy threw Mason a wink in the rearview mirror.

Toby just let himself drop on his back through the seat and looked at Mason from below. His head was, sort of, in Mason's lap. “Did you kiss my boyfriend?”

Mason ran one hand over his face. How did he manage to get himself in such situations? There had to be some weakness in him when it came to Rhys Harmony.

“I hope you're not going to deny it now, Mason,” Rhys said, his voice a two-edged blade.

“I don't kiss and tell,” he snapped.

“Oh,” Billy said and snickered. “Feel free to tell, Rhys, if Mason doesn't want to.”

Rhys waved one elegant hand. “Mason is a wonderful kisser. I think I should be on a diet that includes his kisses. They simply take the pain away.”

The blade still cut. Mason had no idea what to make of it all.

Toby still stared at him from that awkward position. “He likes you.”

Mason bit his tongue. This three-way conversation was bound to get messy if he kept at it.

“I don't want to be fine with it,” Toby continued, “but it's not like I want him to cry over me a lifetime.”

Mason sighed and rubbed his eyes with one hand.

“But it looks like it pains him to admit it that he likes me,” Rhys said. “If that’s how it is, I might just fancy myself a man with a masochistic streak.”

Billy laughed. Toby snickered.

“Aren’t you a bunch of comedians?” Mason said and stared out the window. The car was too damned crowded.

Rhys rested one hand on Mason’s knee and squeezed. “I’m just messing with you. I don’t really like you.”

“Geez, thanks,” Mason offered in reply.

“He is messing with you,” Toby confirmed.

Rhys’s hand was so close that if Toby had been there for real, it would have touched him. Mason shook his head.

“Isn’t this the weirdest threesome in the universe?” he murmured.

“Threesome? I like the both of you, but I’m not that much into experimenting,” Billy said with a small laugh.

“I like to think that I’m open-minded, but I’m not into group sex,” Rhys added. He laughed, as well.

At least, it looked like someone was in a good mood.

“Then what about Ary?” Mason regretted the moment the words flew out of his mouth.

Rhys tensed. “What about him?”

Damn, the stone was cast. “You, him, Toby. What’s the story?”

“Who’s Ary?” Toby asked.

“The one you already heard,” Rhys replied, his voice clipped.

“I don’t buy it. They made you jealous.”

Toby let out a surprised sound. “I cheated on Rhys with this Ary guy?”

“It was a misunderstanding.” Rhys moved his hand away. “And how do you know about that anyway?”

“I’m not stupid. I just put two and two together.”

From the driver's seat, Billy took in the scene with curious eyes. For him, they were probably putting on the most exciting reality show.

"Okay, if you're that smart, figure out the whole thing yourself."

Mason cursed under his breath. The whole idea was to get Rhys on his side and help him, albeit unknowingly. Now, he was just digging himself into a hole. "Toby wouldn't cheat on you," he said in one go.

"I wouldn't?" Toby was surprised.

"He's not that kind of man," Mason found himself talking.

"He *wasn't*, you mean," Rhys replied.

Billy's eyes were two question marks in the rearview mirror.

"Yeah," Mason said. "That's what I meant."

"Did you ever meet Toby?" Rhys was genuinely puzzled.

"No, but I read your story in the papers. It must have been true love," Mason said.

"Were you curious? About me and Toby?"

"Yes. Blame me, I don't care."

"I'm not blaming you. I'm surprised. And I don't know what papers you've been reading. Because, as far as I know, according to them, I'm a murderous drunk, and Toby was a violent boyfriend."

"Was he violent? Ever?"

"No way, man, how can you ask that? I could never hit my boyfriend," Toby protested.

Mason made a move as if he wanted to push Toby's head away. The ghost disappeared for a moment only to end up floating in the air, his legs under him like a fakir.

"No. Never," Rhys replied.

"See?" Toby said.

"We just fought verbally. He was never like that." Rhys looked away and covered his eyes.

"That's sad," Toby said with a sigh. "How could I ever tell one single bad word to this guy?"

Mason shook his head. "How was Toby like?"

Rhys turned his head to stare out the window. “He was the only one for me in the whole world.”

Mason ignored the short intake of breath from Toby. Some things needed to be brought to light. Anything that could jog Toby’s memory would help Rhys, too, in a way. Even if it wasn’t closure, or some other stupid psychological term, at least finding Toby’s killer would give him a bit of peace.

“Guys, we’re not all going to cry, right?” Rhys said in a forced, cheerful voice. “God knows I do enough of it on my own. You two are my rock now. I mean it. Let’s just stop talking about these things.”

“Why can’t I remember him?” Toby’s tone was mournful.

Mason kept his hands by his sides. He would reach for Toby, but it was impossible to comfort a ghost with a touch, right?

Rhys’s fingers linked with his. “I can’t believe I managed to make even you sad, Mason. You’re granite.”

“I’m not sad,” Mason denied. “But I understand that it couldn’t have been easy for you this year.”

Rhys’s fingers squeezed. “For the most of it, I was on meds, or talking to people dry as twigs about what I was feeling.”

“And what came out of all that?”

“Let’s say that those conversations didn’t bear fruit.”

Billy laughed at the pun, and Mason smiled, too.

“So, this event, what’s all about?”

“It’s sort of an amateur night. Not so long ago, I used to hop from one to the next, in the search of that big break. Sometimes, I think that it would have been better if I had never had it. We used to be so happy then.”

Mason nodded. Could it be that Toby might have gotten on the bad side of some loan sharks? But the way he had been killed, it hadn’t been that clean. And loan sharks never killed their golden geese. With a lover who earned pretty well, Toby would have been squeezed to the last penny, but not killed.

The hit to the head he had gotten hadn’t appeared to be too precise, either. A random incident seemed more like a logical explanation. Someone might not have liked how Toby looked or something like that. Maybe the perp had asked Toby for his wallet, and in the spur of the moment, the things had gotten out of hand.

“Could it be that Toby was mugged?” he asked, without overthinking.

Rhys tensed again. “No. His wallet, watch, everything, was there. Mason, are you trying to figure out who killed my boyfriend?” He didn’t sound upset, just surprised.

“It remains a mystery, right?”

“Yes, but the police couldn’t find the killer. And, with all the respect I have for you, they are more qualified to deal with such things. And they came up with zilch.”

“Maybe they didn’t look into it enough,” Mason said what he was thinking.

Rhys touched Mason’s cheek. “Let it go, Mason. One deranged person hanging on to the past is enough. There’s nothing in it for you.”

Nothing further from the truth.

“I need people to move on,” Rhys said, and his voice was tired and honest. “Those nice dry twigs at the asylum kept telling me that. So I’m just passing it on. As much as I don’t give a damn about their opinion, I think you would be right to help me do that.”

Mason didn’t want to think of anything, not how nice Rhys smelled, how close he was, and how the feel of his smooth, cool hand on his cheek still lingered. “Are you sure?” He used a playful tone.

Rhys chuckled, his musical laugh causing a small shiver in Mason. “Nothing’s sure, ever. Right? But you’re strong, Mason. Lend me some of that; don’t be a miser.”

“You can have all of it, whatever you think I have.”

“Famous last words, Mason. Be careful.”

Mason met Toby’s eyes. The ghost stared at them, and his face was an expression of utter angst. Mason moved one hand as if to reach him, but Toby moved away and disappeared.

## *Chapter Nine – Eyes And Ears*

The venue definitely had an indie vibe, with its paper lights hanging from the ceiling, and refurbished furniture that looked like it had been saved from some dumpster somewhere. Mason sat gingerly, afraid that the old wood might just give up under his weight. Rhys grinned at him. “What are you so spooked about?”

“Spooked? Just worried that the chair won’t hold me.”

Surprisingly, the table cloth was real cloth, and so were the napkins. The light was insufficient, but maybe that was on purpose. The color of failure wasn’t a pretty one, and the audience seated already at the tables seemed colorful enough not to give a damn about sensitive artists who came there to bare their souls on the small stage located at the back of the room.

“It will hold, don’t worry,” Rhys replied. “When things look cheap, people tend to feel better about themselves. That doesn’t mean that they truly are.”

“How do you know that?”

Rhys leaned closer. “I know the owner. He wouldn’t risk having to collect his patrons from the floor.”

Mason smirked. “Does it mean that we can expect some exquisite cocktails on the menu in exchange?”

“No, the booze is cheap and plenty.”

“For real this time.”

“Yes. Just in case there are still people who don’t already feel better about themselves the moment they walk in. Drink enough, and you’ll gain a new perspective.”

“Let that be nothing but theory. You’re not allowed to drink.”

“All right, Master,” Rhys cooed and put his head on his shoulder.

“Phew, I barely managed to find a place to park the car,” Billy said, as he joined them at the table. “This place is packed. You wouldn’t think it was just amateur night.”

“Every amateur who will sing tonight has family and friends. It’s good for business, actually.”

“Smart idea. So, who’s the owner?”

“If we’re lucky, we’ll see him tonight. This bar is not the only business he runs. The name is Renzo Ora if that rings a bell.”

Mason shrugged.



Billy cut in. "THE Renzo Ora? The guy behind Bucket Of Light, and More Of You?"

"I have no idea what Po's talking about," Mason said. "What are those?"

"Indie groups that got big," Billy supplied the information right away. "Renzo Ora is also a big shot producer."

"Why didn't you lead with that one?" Mason asked, turning toward Rhys.

All he got in return was a shrug.

"Hmm, and how come this Renzo character let you go with Levine Goldman since you were friends with him?" Mason insisted.

"I didn't say that. I just said that I know him," Rhys corrected him.

"That hurts, Rhys my prince," a voice from behind them startled their little group.

Mason turned and noticed a man in his thirties standing so close to them that all his senses went in high alert. How come hadn't he sensed that the guy was standing right there? He was hovering above Rhys, forcing him to throw his head back to make eye contact.

Taking advantage that Rhys and the bar owner had their eyes locked in a silent battle, Mason took his time to look at him. Renzo Ora was dressed in an expensive casual suit, but he wore the sleeves rolled up to the elbows, showing sinewy forearms. In the low light, Mason could make the guy's olive complexion, and the thick platinum bracelet on his left wrist drew attention right away. If Renzo was as successful as Billy and Rhys said he was, it was probably the real deal. No watch, Mason noticed.

Renzo wore his black silk shirt opened a few buttons in front, allowing a bit of skin to show. That was a man who liked to take care of himself and also loved putting on a show. A matching platinum chain shone through the opening. The guy really liked his blink. Heavy, aggressive, probably just like the owner.

The suit hugged him nicely, showing off a lean but strong physique. While examining him, Mason realized why the sense of danger had hit him so sharply earlier. There was predatory grace in how the man leaned over Rhys to tease him. It looked like he could move around without making a sound.

Mason couldn't see his face well, but he noticed that Renzo wore his hair in a fashionable high cut, and a bit of stubble, just as fashionable after dark, covered his face.

"Are you going to blind me with that gaudy thing around your neck?" Rhys asked.

Renzo laughed, and Mason shifted in his chair. It looked like Renzo's game was seduction, at least tonight.

“Do you still wear that cheap thing?” Renzo made a move to sneak one hand inside Rhys’s shirt, but he was pushed away.

“Yes, and I don’t see why you should ask.”

“Of course. A gift from your dead lover.”

Mason grimaced. No more seduction. That was a hit under the belt. Rhys didn’t seem to mind, as he pointed at the free chair at their table. “You’re free to have a drink with us. Although I won’t drink anything alcoholic.”

“Did Levine manage to wean you off booze?” Renzo asked and took the seat.

Mason examined his face. Renzo Ora was an attractive motherfucker. He had the high cheekbones of a fashion model, but his face was too harsh to be that. Dark eyes, fringed by long curled eyelashes, took in Rhys as if he were dessert. At this point, Mason wasn’t sure whether that was something Renzo did as his favorite pastime and with anyone, or if he had a clear interest in Rhys.

A short look at Rhys made Mason curious; his precious charge was holding the pendant on the chain around his neck tightly in his fist. Mason hadn’t thought of that piece of jewelry as cheap. It brought the color of Rhys’s eyes beautifully. Toby had good taste.

He sighed as he remembered how Toby had disappeared just earlier that night. How would it feel to ache for something you couldn’t remember having? Mason could only imagine how it had to feel being in Toby’s shoes. At least, his heartaches and painful memories had shape and substance.

“No, not Levine, but my dear bodyguard right here.”

Renzo looked at Mason, for the first time since he had joined them, and brushed a thumb over his bottom lip, while his eyes turned their hypnotizing gaze on him. “Delicious, but not your type.”

“Oh, really? How would you know that?” Rhys asked and placed his chin in one palm, his elbow on the table.

“Because I’m dark, brooding, and sexy, and you’ve never cared for me.”

Rhys laughed. “You, brooding? I can’t remember anything ever happening to have you brooding. Come on, Renzo, you’re a little sunshine.”

“Are you going to introduce us, or is your dark, brooding, and sexy bodyguard going to stare at me, hoping that I would melt and disappear?”

There was a challenge in Renzo’s eyes, but Mason schooled his face into a neutral demeanor. He didn’t know what Renzo’s deal was, so he wanted to keep from jumping to conclusions.

“Well, since I’ve already told them about you, you don’t need any introduction. For you, here they are, my two lovely bodyguards. Mason Knight, who, obviously, is my knight in shining armor, and Billy Jackson, aka Po, the heart and soul of our little group.”

“Po?” Renzo’s eyes lit with amusement. “Like the cartoon character? Who came up with the idea? Rhys couldn’t have since he doesn’t have this kind of brash humor.”

Billy laughed. “I don’t mind. I love my nickname. It’s great to make your acquaintance, Mr. Ora.” He hurried to offer his hand over the table.

Renzo took it and shook it firmly. “Renzo, please.” He offered his hand to Mason, too.

There was no point in antagonizing the guy who owned the joint. Mason shook his hand, as well.

“You have two strong men here with you. I almost envy you, Rhys my prince.”

“Why would you? They’re not your type, either.”

It was Renzo’s turn to rest his chin against his curled fist and look at Rhys. “What’s my type?”

“Cute and flirty? No, not really.” Rhys appeared to ponder. “Bitchy?”

“Bitchy?” Renzo laughed, throwing his head back. “Where do you get these ideas?”

“Hmm, your last known lover was a model with a taste for expensive clothes, and looking everyone down. Cute? He could be if only he smiled for real, at least once in a lifetime. Flirty? Yes, with the pool boys. As for bitchy --”

“Yes, yes, you made your point,” Renzo stopped him. “So, bodyguards. What’s going on? Why do you suddenly need bodyguards? No offense, guys,” he offered to Billy and Mason. “I’m sure you’re great at what you do.”

“None taken,” Billy replied for both of them.

“Levine’s ideas,” Rhys said.

“Hmm, so after keeping you away from the world for almost a year, he wants to keep an eye on you still. I wonder what you did to warrant this little obsession.” Renzo narrowed his eyes and stared at Rhys.

Rhys shrugged. “Beats me. But if it hadn’t been for him --”

“The truth would have come to light either way. I know you must think that you owe Levine, Rhys, but they couldn’t pin that on you if they wanted it.”

“What makes you say that?” Mason asked.

Renzo was a bit surprised by the question. “The police couldn’t ignore irrefutable evidence.”

“What evidence?”

Rhys touched his knee under the table.

Renzo studied Mason; his eyes were no longer seductive, nor playful. A cold hard light burned in them. “Rhys couldn’t have been the one to commit that horrendous crime. And the police knew.”

“You’re not saying anything,” Mason said, his voice harsh now.

“Mason,” Rhys warned. “What’s with the twenty questions? Are you obsessed with who killed Toby now?” His voice was low and pained.

Renzo quirked an eyebrow and smiled. “It’s all right. What amazes me is how Levine wasn’t more curious to solve this mystery. I can’t give away sensitive information, Mason. I barely know you. But if we get to know each other, maybe I’ll share.”

Rhys sighed and crossed his arms over his chest. “One year after, and everyone is still talking about the same thing.” He looked down, and Mason wondered if he weren’t fighting back fresh tears again.

“Hmm,” Renzo said. “How come you don’t want to learn who took away from you the man you loved?”

Mason froze. That was a direct accusation. Next to him, Billy shifted in his chair.

Rhys continued to look down. Mason wanted so much to see his face right now; he didn’t deserve to be surrounded by insensitive bastards. “What good will it do?” His voice was quiet and strung with pain. “Will it bring Toby back?”

Renzo exchanged a quick look with Mason. “No. But whoever did it, they should pay.”

Rhys grabbed his arms with his hands, hugging himself. “Yeah, they should. But the police didn’t catch them. They must have been very lucky or too smart. What’s left for me to do? Investigate? With what? All I know is how to write stupid songs about --” His voice broke.

“Oh, Rhys.” Billy stood up and hurried by Rhys’s side. His embrace was accepted.

“You knew Toby like no one else,” Renzo continued.

Mason frowned. It looked like tears didn’t impress Renzo.

“What was he hiding? What was he afraid of?” Renzo continued.

“Hey, man, drop it,” Mason intervened.

Rhys was crying for real this time and hiding his head in Billy's embrace.

Renzo sighed. "The key to all this is you, Rhys. You must be."

That was a strange thing to say. Mason observed Renzo again. He watched Rhys, and finally, there was a glimpse of empathy in the dark eyes.

Renzo reached for Rhys and squeezed his shoulder. "Whenever you want to talk about Toby, I'm here, okay? When you're ready. Don't keep it all locked inside you or you'll drown in it. Someone, out there, is free and enjoys his life, while you're here, crying. What's fair in that?"

"What's in it for you?" Mason asked directly.

Renzo turned toward him. The empathy was gone; his smile was feral this time when he looked at Mason. "What's in it for you, Mr. Bodyguard?"

"I'm in charge of Rhys's safety and wellbeing. It's my job."

"That's a bit of stretch. You only need to fend off paparazzi."

"It doesn't look like there's much of that."

"So?"

"So, I need to do my job, paparazzi or not."

"If you're bored, take up a hobby," Renzo offered with a smile.

"I don't have hobbies. My job is what matters." Mason was conscious of how much he was lying through his teeth. It looked like Renzo didn't buy it. What he suspected, Mason could only guess.

Renzo laughed and ran one hand over his face. "I think I like you, Mr. Bodyguard."

"Mason will do."

"All right, Mason. I feel like we'll get to know each other more, soon."

During their little verbal sparring, Rhys had managed, somehow, to get a hold of himself. He wiped his tears and put on a brave face. "I apologize for my outburst."

"There's no need for that," Renzo replied. "I know how fresh that wound still is. Please, forgive me for being a bastard, but you know me, right? I won't leave a stone unturned."

Mason looked from Renzo to Rhys. Rhys nodded quietly.

"I need to tend to other patrons, but please, have fun, and put everything on my tab."

Mason intervened. "Maybe we should just get back home. And you, Mr. Hot Shot Producer, you've done enough."

Renzo was already on his feet. His eyes never leaving Mason, he reached for Rhys with one hand and caressed his cheek. "You should stay. There's nothing like music to heal a broken heart."

"But Rhys --" Mason insisted, pinning Renzo with his eyes.

"I'm fine now, Mason. And I would love to hear some new music. Sometimes, the inspiration runs dry if you're stuck between four walls, with nothing but misery as company. And thank you, Renzo. I don't want people to treat me with gloves. When I'm ready, I'll come to talk to you."

Mason tsked. Talking about annoying interventions. He was the one Rhys was supposed to confide in because, whether he liked it or not, he could see Toby's ghost. What exactly did Renzo have to do with anything?

"That's great to hear. Don't forget that you're my prince," Renzo said and leaned in to place a small peck on Rhys's cheek. "Always. See you around, Mr. Bodyguard. And Po."

"Have a nice evening, Mr. Ora," Billy replied.

"Renzo, please. Enjoy the show."

Mason watched Renzo for a while before he looked back at Rhys. His eyes were already on the stage where a group began performing. He looked calm, and only his eyes shone too much. But there was a newfound peace in them, and Mason felt jealous for no reason.

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"Where is Billy?" Mason asked, once outside.

Rhys looked behind them. "I saw Renzo talking to him. Probably he wants to give Po some pointers about how to take care of me."

"Hmm, so he doesn't like me," Mason said.

"I think you're wrong. Renzo is a good judge of character. He and Toby liked each other so much, it wasn't even funny."

"I thought you said he wasn't a friend."

"Not mine, he wasn't. He wasn't Toby's, either, in the sense that they didn't hang out to drink or anything. They just liked each other. That was all."

Renzo had one arm slung over Billy's shoulders, and he was talking fast, by how his lips moved. Billy appeared to listen with the utmost attention.

"I'm sorry I cried in there," Rhys said, pulling him back.

Mason looked at Rhys. "It's okay. Sorry if I don't offer hugs and nice words. I'm not the type."

Rhys nodded. "I gathered as much. You're made from the good stuff, Mason. I wish I were like you."

"It's not hard. Stop crying."

"Easy for you to say. I can't just forget Toby. He was my heart." His voice was breaking again.

Mason couldn't have that. "I'm not saying that. I know you can't forget him. But get stronger." He took Rhys's face in his palms and looked into his eyes. "I mean it."

Rhys placed his hands over Mason's wrists and caressed them lightly. "When you're this close, I can't think of anything but how you kissed me."

Mason's eyes traveled to Rhys's lips. They were so close; it would only take a heartbeat to sink into that beautiful sensation once more. But, regrets notwithstanding, he let his hands drop.

"You're a good man, Mason Knight."

Rhys's words took him by surprise.

"What do you mean?"

"I know you like me. But you keep the distance because you think it would be wrong."

"It would be wrong."

Rhys sighed. "I know. But I feel like a leaf carried by the current. I would like someone to hold on to."

Mason understood. "Hold on to me."

Rhys offered a strained smile. "As a friend?"

Mason nodded.

"That would be too much to ask of me. I feel drawn to you, and I'm not good at managing desire."

"I'm just a stranger, and you've had a tough time for a while now. It will pass."

"My attraction toward you?" Rhys quirked an eyebrow and watched him, amused.

It was hard to believe they had that conversation. It was Mason's choice to keep the distance, but he was on edge. The promise was more than physical closeness. There was just something about Rhys that made Mason want to delve and drown in him. And that was completely new, surprising, and frightening.

"Yes. I just happen to be close. There's nothing else to it."

Rhys smiled, and Mason felt his heart beating faster. "What happens if it doesn't pass?" He leaned closer and looked Mason in the eyes.

"Stop flirting, you spoiled celebrity," Mason scolded him and moved away as if annoyed.

Rhys hurried by his side and took his arm. "It feels nice to be outside at this hour. While I was locked away, this is what I missed the most, this simple freedom."

The street noises were dying down around them, with the crowd thinning more and more.

"Locked away? You make it sound like you were in jail." Mason didn't put it behind Levine to have held Rhys away from his normal life with a crafted purpose in mind.

"I couldn't leave, so it felt like it. And yes," Rhys sighed like he couldn't hold everything in, "I know that Levine only wants what's good for me, but that kind of attention and care can get suffocating at times."

"Did he visit you there?"

"Yes. He was the only one. Ary wanted to come, too, but I agreed with Levine that it wouldn't do anyone any good to see me fucked up like that."

Mason knew that asking painful questions wasn't that great an idea, but he wanted to know more. Toby was of little help, and Rhys was, as Renzo had put it, the key, at least to deciphering Toby's past life. "Did they let you attend Toby's funeral?"

Rhys shook his head. "No. At the time, I was too mixed up with the police."

Mason said nothing. He could sympathize with Rhys, not being able to say goodbye.

"Stay with me tonight, Mason," Rhys said, wrapping his arm tightly around Mason's. "In my bed. I promise I'll be a good boy and keep my hands to myself."

"It's inappropriate. I'm your bodyguard."

"And you need to make sure that I'm out of harm's way. Correct?"

"Correct."

"I don't like the dark and I can't sleep. Doesn't that harm me?"



Mason smiled. Rhys had no qualms with playing him, but for them both, the game could prove dangerous. "I'm afraid the answer's still 'no'."

"Are you afraid of me, Arnie?" Rhys teased him.

"You could make me lose my job. I'll be in my rights to be afraid of you." Mason looked over to Billy and Renzo, who were just parting their ways. "What could Renzo have to say to Billy?"

Rhys shrugged. "We'll find out from Billy. Now, Mason, are you going to let me go to bed alone and have nightmares?"

"How can you have nightmares if you don't sleep?"

"Ah, you caught me."

Billy walked over to them. "Just let me get the car, and we'll head back home."

"What did Renzo have to say to you?"

"He just wanted to make sure we're taking good care of Rhys."

"That looked like a pretty long conversation to be just that."

"He had many ideas on how we should do our job."

"Really? And what does he know about being a bodyguard?" Mason asked.

Billy shrugged. "Not much, but when someone important like that wants to talk to you, you just listen."

"Don't tell me he bribed you with something."

Billy grinned and took out what looked like concert tickets. "Of course, he did. But I won't be able to enjoy these," he said with a sigh. "I have who to give them to, though. And it's nice to have a trading chip when needed."

"Your trading chip must be time-sensitive," Mason pointed out.

"Not really. This is an all-access type of thing," Billy explained.

"All right. Let's just get home. We all need our sleep."

"Mason sleeps with me tonight," Rhys announced. "Don't tell anyone, okay, Billy?"

Billy watched them and laughed. "Can't a man leave the two of you alone for two minutes. Of course, my lips are sealed."

"I'm not going to sleep with him," Mason protested.

“Yes, you are,” Rhys said like he was talking to a hard-headed child. “I won’t sleep if you don’t.”

“Tough luck. You’ll have a headache tomorrow.”

“Don’t be so hard on me, Mason. I told you it would be only sleeping, nothing else.”

*Unfortunately.*

Mason couldn’t say that out loud. “I’m curious how that will help you.”

“Well, if you’re curious, try it once. You might like it.”

*I’m sure I’ll like it. That’s the issue.*

Billy hadn’t cared to listen to their little argument and was now pulling the car next to them. “Ready to go?”

“I won’t let you go to sleep,” Rhys promised. “If you think Angel is the right nickname for me, you’ll have to think again.”

“I’m shaking in my boots.”

“See? My dark magic is already working.”

Mason shook his head. Why did Rhys have to be so much his type? He was sweet, and a little pushy, and he could knock Mason off his feet with just one kiss. But Mason was no masochist; Rhys would have to sleep alone, no matter how nicely he begged, or how much he threatened.

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Mason placed his watch and phone on the nightstand. He lay on the bed and closed his eyes. Despite his threats, Rhys had gone to sleep like a nice kid, without insisting for Mason to come with him. Mason hadn’t missed the sad look in his eyes as he had gone up the stairs, but even if he knew that Rhys was telling the truth about not liking the dark, he couldn’t risk it.

“Eyes and ears everywhere in this house.”

Mason opened his eyes. He didn’t want to say or show it, but he was relieved Toby was back. He turned on the lamp on the nightstand. “What do you mean? Ah, the surveillance equipment, right? It’s needed.”

Toby shook his head. “Not that. When you were away, a woman came and changed the sheets.”

“The maid, Anita. I suppose that’s the agreement, for her to come when no one is home.”

“She spent a lot of time in Rhys’s room. She checked every inch as if she could read the future in the carpet fibers. And she also left something behind.”

Mason straightened up. “What did she leave behind?”

Toby scratched his head. “A pen. She took it from a pocket on her apron and replaced the one on the nightstand. She appeared to be extra careful to place it in a certain position.”

Mason cursed. “That bastard.”

“Who?”

“Levine Goldman. The maid works for him, and I bet she just did something shady. He wants to spy on Rhys.”

“The producer? I thought he was shady, too, from that conversation with the assholes at the radio station.”

“I’ll have to go to Rhys’s room and remove that thing,” Mason said as he climbed out of bed.

“What do you think it is?”

“Some kind of surveillance equipment. We don’t have a camera inside Rhys’s room, for obvious reasons, such as privacy. But it looks like Levine wants to know what his protégé is doing all the time, which is fucking creepy.”

“All right.”

“Shit. It’s kind of late.”

“Rhys isn’t sleeping,” Toby said. “He just lies on the bed, and I think he’s crying again.” Toby sounded guilty. “Just go.”

“Are you telling me I should go and comfort your boyfriend?”

Toby nodded. “I can’t do it, so sorry, but I’ll use you as proxy.”

Mason grimaced. “Just fucking great.”

“Why are you so mad about?”

Mason wasn’t going to tell Toby that spending time in close quarters with Rhys was bound to lead to X-rated stuff if they weren’t careful.

Toby came closer and inspected Mason with curious eyes. “Man, is this about how Rhys wants to get in your pants?”

More like the other way around, but Mason wasn't particular about details. "Aren't you supposed to be jealous? You shouldn't want me in your boyfriend's bedroom after dark."

Toby sighed. "I don't remember him, or loving him. But I want to protect him, and there's no other way. And, don't worry, I'll watch over the two of you like a hawk. Do you think you'd be able to make out while a ghost stares at you? Like this?" Toby came closer and looked Mason in the eyes.

"Sounds like you might have been an expert cockblocker in your former life," Mason said with an annoyed grunt.

"Hey, what would you do if you were me?"

Mason shrugged. "I wouldn't be an annoying ghost like you, that's for sure."

"Yeah, you would be a stern ghost, I bet. Whoever you chose to haunt, they would be scared shitless."

"Funny thing, you don't look scared."

"Of course. I'm the one doing all the haunting. Now, let's go to Rhys's room so you can check the pen the maid left there. Keep your hands to yourself, and we'll continue to be friends."

"And if I don't?"

"Do I have to say it? I'll haunt you forever, and I'll be a prick about it, too," Toby promised.

There was half a joke in there, but Mason didn't want to take chances. He was getting much too used to being haunted like it was the most natural thing in the world. "Okay. But Rhys might get upset over me barging through the door like that."

"I doubt it. I think he'll be happy to have company."

"You owe me big time," Mason said.

He grabbed a t-shirt and a pair of sweatpants and headed for Rhys's bedroom.

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"Go inside and check if he's sleeping," Mason whispered. "Maybe I can just go, grab the pen, and head back without waking him."

"Okay," Toby whispered back.

"Why are you whispering? No one but me can hear you."

"I don't know. You're the one who's making me."

“Just go and look.”

Toby disappeared through the door, while Mason listened, his ears pricked. He felt like a criminal, sneaking around like that, but there was no alternative. That asshole Levine wasn't entitled to listen to Rhys's crying over his boyfriend. It was such a disgusting invasion of privacy that he wanted to put an end to it as fast as possible.

“He's asleep. The pen is on the nightstand, by the stack of books that's there.”

Mason nodded. He turned the knob, all his muscles tensed and walked inside as if on eggshells. Good thing the door hinges appeared to be well-oiled as there was no sound. He closed it after him so that Rhys didn't wake up because of the draft.

Luckily, Rhys lay on one side, facing away from the nightstand. The lamp by the bedside was on, making things easier for Mason. He noticed the pen right away and moved as fast as possible, without making a sound.

“Why am I keeping my breath?” Toby whispered.

Mason made a small gesture to shut him up. He took the pen and opened it. No surprise there, there was a small electronic mechanism inside. Without hesitation, he tore the wiring that probably connected the small camera installed in the tip. Mason would take it apart later, to see what that was. He screwed in the two parts of the pen.

“What are you doing?”

Toby yelped and ran for the door. The traitor. Mason put on a brave face. Rhys was very much awake and staring at him.

“I needed a pen,” Mason replied and showed the object in his hand.

Rhys blinked a few times, and then, he laughed. “That's the lamest excuse I've heard in my life. Get into bed, Mason.” In one smooth motion, he pulled the duvet.

“I'm really here just for the pen,” Mason said and made the pen disappear into the pocket of his sweatpants.

“Hmm, right. Now, Mason, or I'll get really mad.”

“I'll take my chances.”

“I wouldn't if I were you.”

Mason had a mind to argue some more, but the sadness Rhys didn't always hide shone in his eyes, again. “All right,” he said. “But we'll just sleep.”

With stiff moves, he walked to the other side of the bed and got inside. Rhys wrapped himself around Mason's body instantly. Someone was going to get very little sleep.

## *Chapter Ten – Level Of Attraction*

At least, the annoying ghost had chosen to run away. That didn't mean, however, that there was anything comfortable about that situation. Rhys had draped one leg over Mason's midsection, obviously on purpose, and his thigh pressed against a certain anatomical part that had a mind of its own.

"You're not sleeping," Rhys cooed.

"Not if you're going to suffocate me, or talk all the time."

Rhys laughed, and Mason felt goosebumps everywhere. Rhys's body was warm, and it would take Mason little to relax and let go, damn the consequences. The arm on his chest wasn't heavy, but it kept him from breathing. And Rhys's smell was everywhere, a sweet fragrance that wasn't just cologne. Mason was sure Rhys was sweet everywhere, and only his job and a certain ghost were keeping him from tasting every inch on that body just to test his theory.

Rhys didn't appear to have the same hang-ups as him. Mason felt something moist and warm on his cheek. He tried to pull away. "What are you? A dog?"

A low, sexy chuckle followed. "You're into puppy play? I can be whatever you want me to be."

"No, I'm definitely not into puppy play."

"What are you into?"

"Hmm, I don't know. Keeping my job?"

"You came into my bedroom. Why?"

Mason knew he couldn't tell the truth, nor keep it up that he had come there for a pen in the middle of the night. He opted for half a truth. "I wanted to make sure you were okay. That you were sleeping."

"So, you care about me?"

"A lot." Mason bit his tongue. What was with him, saying everything that crossed his mind? It had to be because he was haunted. There was no other explanation.

"Ah, and that could be a problem," Rhys said. "It must be because you care too much that you don't want to fuck me."

Mason remained unmoved. No, he was no longer breathing even. Rhys pressed his thigh higher, making him grunt. Officially, he was in hell, a hell that smelled heavenly, and made his body remember that some of its needs had been grossly neglected lately.

“Hmm, that must be painful,” Rhys teased.

At least, he wasn't the only one with the same problem. Mason could feel something hard digging into his side, and that could only mean that Rhys was a bit too happy to see him.

He tried to reason. “It's a natural reaction. It doesn't mean anything.”

Finally, he could breathe, as Rhys moved his arm away. Nope, too soon. Rhys placed his hand on top of Mason's crotch, squeezing lightly. “If you're so sure that it doesn't mean anything, then all that happens here is just the same. I told you I'd be up for some meaningless sex.”

Mason couldn't completely argue against that, but Rhys didn't have to worry about a ghost looking over his shoulder while fooling around. No, under no circumstances, he could –

Rhys snuck one hand under the elastic band of the sweatpants and grabbed Mason's erection.

“Rhys,” he called in a strained voice.

“Oh, Mason, how can you keep such a magnificent thing away from me?”

He could feel the hot breath on his cheek, but all his determination was melting like ice in the sun. Rhys moved his hand slowly, making things worse. Mason searched his mind for anything that could save him, but it was a blank canvas. All that mattered, and he could picture right now was Rhys touching him.

“I'm not asking you to give your heart to me,” Rhys whispered into his ear. “Just this. I've been missing it like crazy.”

Where was that damned cockblocker when he needed him? It looked like Toby didn't care about his promise to stop him from fooling around with Rhys. And now, he was left with no alternatives.

“I'm sure many would --”

“No. I can't just be with anyone,” Rhys said. “It's you I choose.”

There wasn't much arguing when Rhys was so determined. Mason didn't protest when he caught his lips and kissed him. It wasn't legal for a human being to taste so good. Mason buried one hand in Rhys's hair and deepened the kiss. His entire body yearned for that touch, for that kiss, and no one could stop him now.

Actually, there was someone. Mason tried to pull his head away to look around the room, but Rhys straddled him quickly and pressed his entire body against his.

If Toby were there, he would stop them. He would surely do it.



Mason closed his eyes, and their lips melded. There was no end or beginning to either of them as they kissed like that. Had kisses ever been crazy like this? The lovers he had before paled in comparison. Maybe because Mason had never felt so strongly about them, not like he felt about the damaged beautiful man in his arms tonight.

Rhys provoked him with his tongue, and Mason fought back, not to win, but to make himself known, that he was there. When they finally let go of each other's lips, they were both breathing hard.

"I can't," Mason whispered, hoping that they would stop if not for anything else but for that verbal denial.

"Your body says otherwise," Rhys said back, his voice low and breathless. "I just need a bit of closeness. I won't take much from you, I promise."

It was like a vampire was saying that he only wanted a bit of blood. But Mason knew that he needed to hold Rhys close like he hardly could remember ever needing anything.

What he had to do was to become the one in control. He surprised Rhys by rolling him on his back and ending on top. Mason fumbled with Rhys's pajama bottoms, but he managed to get inside and hold his hard cock.

Rhys hissed and closed his eyes.

"If this is what you need, I'll give it to you," Mason said, his voice ragged and beyond recognition.

As little as he had given them, his lovers had always praised him for his abilities in the bedroom. It wasn't much, indeed, if he could spare a little for Rhys right now. He straightened up, straddling Rhys's thighs and keeping him subdued under his weight.

For the time being, he let go of the hard pulsing thing in his hand to open Rhys's shirt and caress the smooth chest, warm marble under his fingers. Then he leaned in and began kissing everywhere, as his body moved lower and lower.

Rhys held his head with both hands and began mumbling softly. There wasn't much need for foreplay, but Mason wanted to have something to hold on to for the times when he would be alone and in much need to let go of his pent-up desire.

He played with the bellybutton, but only in passing, eliciting a small laugh from Rhys, and then went for the prize. Rhys cursed loudly when Mason took him in his mouth. The slightly salty taste made Mason's desire to give everything he had all the more maddening.

Rhys's cock was only average in size, so Mason had no trouble taking it all the way in. He had to hold Rhys down, as the lithe body was trembling under that assault, and Mason didn't want to

make a fool of himself by choking. He knew too well that it had been a while since he had done that.

He used all the tricks he knew. As he withdrew slowly, he flicked his tongue over the length and played with the glans more. Precum was served as the main course, as it seemed, and Mason lapped at it, before descending and depthroating again. Rhys was incoherent at this point, and he alternated between caressing Mason's head and trying to pull his hair out.

"Mason, I --"

That was no moment to stop. He increased the pressure on Rhys's thighs with his hands to prevent him from slipping away, and, with one last flick of the tongue, he sent Rhys over the edge.

The sounds Rhys made in the throes of orgasm were ambrosia on his senses. Mason didn't let go until he was sure the last drop was squeezed. Rhys threw one arm over his eyes. "You're so crazy," he said softly.

Mason placed one last kiss on Rhys's spent cock, making him shiver. "But I suppose you'll be able to sleep now."

And that will allow him to leave and take care of business.

"Come here," Rhys said and opened his arms.

Mason wasn't sure what Rhys thought of tasting himself from another guy's mouth, but he obeyed. The kiss that followed was, surprisingly, just as passionate as before. Could it be that Rhys wanted seconds, so fast?

After their lips parted, Rhys looked at him with loving eyes. "My turn."

Mason had a mind to protest, but Rhys pushed him on his back and went straight for his crotch. He didn't say a thing as Rhys pushed down his sweatpants and went, hungrily, for his cock that was just as hard as it had been from the moment Rhys had taken him in his arms.

Rhys didn't look to have the same penchant for depthroating as Mason, but he was surely enthusiastic about the job at hand. A naughty tongue played around Mason's glans, and the sounds Rhys was making were enough to make him want to burst.

"Oh, and it's so tasty, too," Rhys said between slurps.

"You don't have to," Mason protested meekly.

"I'm hungry," Rhys replied. "You can't take it away from me now."

Mason grunted when Rhys changed his position and dug one elbow into his stomach by accident.

“Sorry, sorry, it’s been so long,” Rhys said, and then fell silent as his mouth swallowed the head and began licking it like crazy again.

Mason didn’t even need too much. Rhys began helping himself with one hand, building pressure. Mason caressed the blond head bobbing up and down, giving him pleasure. That wasn’t in the books and wasn’t supposed to happen, but he couldn’t find it in himself to have regrets.

Rhys was clearly no deepthroater, but the combined action of his hand, lips, and tongue, was enough. Mason warned him in a strangled voice, but Rhys kept his mouth on him, moving his tongue over the head as it exploded, making the sensations increase tenfold.

“Wow, I guess it’s been a while for you, too,” Rhys said as he moved away.

“Sorry about that.”

“Nothing to be sorry about.” Rhys licked his lips and then smacked them in a gesture of complete satisfaction. “I guess now I’m ready to sleep.”

Mason couldn’t agree more, but Rhys planted himself over Mason and pulled the duvet.

“You know, that’s a bit uncomfortable.”

“Why? Are you too hot?”

“Yes,” Mason lied.

“Live with it.”

Ah, damn, Angel was too good a nickname for Rhys, after all.

“Your chest is the best pillow I’ve had in years,” Rhys said with a sigh. “And if you wake up and you need to pee or anything, just pinch my butt.”

“Why should I do that?”

“I might not be able to wake up otherwise.”

Mason wanted to roll his eyes, but there was no point. “Can you get the light?”

There was no hesitation as Rhys reached for the lamp.

“I thought you were scared of the dark.”

“Not if you’re here.” Rhys caressed Mason’s chest, one hand snuck under the t-shirt. “Thank you, Mason. You have no idea how much good it did me.”

“Same here,” Mason replied.

Rhys exhaled, and soon his breathing became even. There was no choice for him but to sleep there. He would wake up later and go back to his room.

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The sun through the windows woke him up. Mason blinked. Had he just slept in? He never slept in, but it was clear that it was way past his usual waking hour. He tried to move, but he was still immobilized under Rhys's weight.

"There's a lot we need to talk about."

Toby didn't look upset at all at finding Mason and Rhys like that. Mason struggled to remove himself from Rhys's hold, but eventually, he managed to free the half of his body that had been claimed so completely last night.

He followed Toby out of the room, making sure not to make a sound. Rhys appeared to sleep soundly and didn't move at all.

"Where have you been all night?" Mason whispered, searching with his eyes for Billy. It could be a real problem if his partner saw him talking to himself, like a deranged person.

"Billy is in the surveillance room," Toby informed him. "He spends an awful lot of time watching those screens."

"That's his job. Okay, let's go to my room."

He waited until the door was closed behind them.

"Your partner was watching some news on Levine Goldman late, last night," Toby began.

"He's the kind who likes to stay well informed," Mason said with a shrug. He couldn't find something to do with his hands, and he started pacing the room.

"Are you a little nervous?" Toby asked.

Mason ran one hand through his hair. "I've slept with your boyfriend last night," he blurted out. "I mean, we blew each other and --"

"Yeah, it was pretty hot," Toby interrupted him.

Mason stopped. "You must be kidding me. Did you stay there and watch us?"

"I came back to the room, and you two were like this." Toby clasped his hands together to make a point. "I wanted to enlist you for a secret operation, but then I saw you were busy. Since you couldn't travel as fast as me anyway, I thought about doing some investigating on my own."

Mason pinched the bridge of his nose. “You were supposed to stop me from touching your boyfriend.”

Toby shrugged. “Rhys looked happy while kissing you. And, for the record, I didn’t see anything beyond that kiss. I’m not some kind of perverted ghost. Also, I don’t think I can get a hard-on anymore.”

“You must be the funniest ghost there is.” Mason bit back a smile.

Toby pointed the finger at him. “That doesn’t mean that you get to jump him all the time. Last night, you had to be sacrificed because you got caught.”

“You ran away like a traitor,” Mason said. “And because you didn’t stop me, I made a mistake.”

“That’s not on me, man. Rhys looks like the kind of guy you can’t say ‘no’ to. And I forgive you.”

“It won’t happen again,” Mason said quickly. “Now, spit it out. What did you find out?”

“I watched the program Billy had on, and realized that it was some kind of live event. I went there and then followed Levine home.”

“All right. Are you going to keep me on my toes, or are you going to tell me what you found out already?”

“Chill. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Unfortunately,” Mason quipped.

“Hmm. You like to hit under the belt, don’t you? And hey, stop interrupting me. A man can’t say a thing because you keep talking.”

Mason made an exasperated gesture for Toby to continue.

“So, I follow him home. And the moment he’s there – man, this dude lives in a fucking palace --”

“Of course he does. He’s a billionaire or something. Go on.”

“Anyway, the moment he’s there, he goes to a room that looks like an office, and starts talking on the phone. But not on the phone he had with him, but on one that he apparently keeps locked in his desk.”

“Billionaires,” Mason said with a grimace. “Who knows why the hell they do what they do? Who did he call?”

Toby shrugged. "I couldn't see. And you know that I cannot intervene in the physical world in any way. What he said was creepy as fuck, though."

"All right, I'm ready to be shocked. What did he say?"

"He said," Toby paused for dramatic effect, "the following words: 'how long until you bring me that man's head on a platter?' Creepy, right?"

Mason moved his weight from one foot to another. He thought Levine was a scumbag, but he needed to keep his head and avoid jumping to conclusions. "It could be just a way of saying. Like maybe he wants to take off the market some rival or something like that."

"And having him wacked would achieve that," Toby continued.

"All right, what else?"

Toby hesitated, and his face changed. "He also said, 'don't worry about that talentless artist, I have my eyes on him.' And that was all."

"Talentless artist?"

"Yes."

Mason watched Toby for a couple of seconds. "You think he was talking about Rhys."

"Yes."

"But Levine is a producer. He must know hundreds of artists."

Toby grimaced.

Mason frowned. "What aren't you saying? What else did he say?"

With a sigh, Toby finally replied, "He said something about Rhys being a prissy, um, homosexual."

"That wasn't the word he used," Mason concluded for himself.

Toby nodded and added nothing.

"Funny coming from a guy who's practically trying to get into the said prissy artist's pants."

"Levine wants to fuck Rhys?" Toby seemed surprised.

"I suppose many want," Mason said quickly. "He gave me the impression that he's really into Rhys."

"Could it be just an act? Why would he do that?"

“I don’t know. It looks like Rhys might have something he wants.”

They both fell silent, deep in thought.

“Somehow, I don’t think he’s after Rhys’s ass,” Toby spoke first.

“That’s what I think, too. And that brings us to a serious puzzling question. What could a man who has everything want from another way below his wealth status? If he were after Rhys because of some sexual interest, that would have made sense.”

“But it’s not that, right? Somehow, the idea of Levine Goldman pawning Rhys gives me the willies,” Toby said.

“So, what else? It must have cost Levine a pretty penny to keep Rhys at that clinic for almost a year.”

“There is something he wants.”

“And whatever it is, Rhys doesn’t give it to him, whether because he doesn’t want or --”

“He doesn’t know,” Toby completed the sentence. “Hey, look at us, sleuthing together like Bonny and Clyde.”

“Bonny and Clyde weren’t detectives,” Mason corrected him.

Toby waved. “Unimportant.”

“How come you remember stuff like Bonny and Clyde, but you don’t remember anything about your life?” Mason questioned.

“Beats me. There’s a lot of stuff in my brain, that’s for sure. What are we going to do about Levine? The guy’s a creep and a shady motherfucker.”

“Yeah, and that maid he hired, too. What could Levine want from Rhys?”

“And who’s the guy he wants wacked?” Toby asked, just as rhetorically.

“Stop jumping to conclusions. It may not be anything extreme like that.”

Mason’s phone pinged with an incoming message. “It looks like Billy wants to know if I woke up. Damn, how am I going to face Rhys today?”

“You mean, after you had his cock in your mouth, and yours in his?”

Mason really didn’t want to recall that down to the last visual detail. “Yeah,” he admitted. “I’m going to talk to Billy. If Anita did anything else that could qualify as shady, maybe he saw it on the cameras.”

“I think she must have known that you didn’t put a camera inside Rhys’s bedroom.”

“I suppose. You go sniff around Levine Goldman’s house, now that you know where he lives.”

“Hey, man, I’m not a dog.”

“Shoo already. You’re a sleuthing dog.”

“How’s that better?”

“You get a shiny badge or something.”

Toby grinned. “Admit it. You like all this investigating thing. And you like the guy for whom you’re doing all this.”

“You’re wrong. I don’t like you at all,” Mason joked.

“I was talking about Rhys.”

So, Toby wanted to tease him over that. It was little Mason could do about it. “I’m doing this for you, Mr. Ghost.”

“Nah,” Toby said and shook his head. “You’re head over heels, and you don’t even know it.”

Mason wanted to protest against that, but Toby was already out of the room. He wasn’t head over heels. There was just an abnormal level of attraction between him and Rhys. Nothing more than that.

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Mason went to the kitchen after he took a short shower and changed into his usual suit. A new workday started, and he needed to look and act the part. He supposed Billy was already there, stuffing his face with unhealthy stuff, and Mason had to stop him before it was too late.

He stopped in the door when he noticed who was in the kitchen. Wearing low cut tight jeans that hugged his hips and left little to the imagination, Rhys was there, apparently getting handy with the kitchen appliances. He had a short top on, which left his midsection completely bare, and Mason caught himself staring. He would have found that outfit weird on any other guy, but Rhys just wore it well. Mason took a couple of moments to look at Rhys, or, better said, at his ass that moved rhythmically to a happy tune on the radio.

All right, that was enough gawking for one day. Billy wasn’t in sight, most probably driven away by the smell of healthy food. There was plenty of green stuff on the kitchen counter for a salad, and it looked like Rhys was really into it. Mason knew that he needed to point out the lack of protein in that breakfast choice, but it was better if he remained silent.



He could go and fetch Billy from wherever he was, and then when in full formation, he could pretend that last night hadn't happened. The moment he thought about it, a particular friend of his got twitchy. He adjusted the front of his pants and then pulled at the collar of his shirt. It was too damned tight. Despite his determination to remain unnoticed, he cleared his throat, suddenly dry.

"Hey," Rhys called cheerfully and began walking toward him.

Mason could feel his breath hitching in his chest. It wasn't the collar. He got caught, again, and there was no one to come to the rescue. Rhys looked good, his hair brushed, and his face lit up with good mood. A look at his mouth was enough for Mason to lose all rational thinking. Toby's words about certain bits in certain things came to mind, and he shook his head as if a fly was trying to get into his ear.

"You're not dreaming," Rhys said and took his hand. "I'm really cooking. But I feel like something's missing."

"Yeah, something filling," Mason commented while trying to ignore the warmth of Rhys's hand. "Like meat."

"Ah, I'm completely useless, right?" Rhys complained.

"Not at all. Let me check the fridge." Any excuse was good enough to pretend nothing had happened the previous night.

As he took in the contents of the fridge, Rhys embraced him from behind and kissed him on the neck. "I was a bit disappointed to see you gone this morning, but I suppose you're an early riser."

"There's stuff in here for some sandwiches," Mason said, not really knowing what he was talking about. All his mind could register was how Rhys held him and how his lips felt against his neck.

"Take everything to the table. We'll figure something out."

Thank God for small mercies. Rhys let go of him to take some of the ingredients from the fridge.

"Are you guys cooking breakfast?"

And thank God for Po and his timely entrance.

"I strategically waited until you cooked, so that I could just waltz in and eat," Billy continued. He took place at the table. "How did you two sleep?"

"Each one in his own bed," Mason said loudly.

Rhys quirked an eyebrow, and then, his lips twitched. “Yes, eventually,” he said quietly.

“What did you say, Rhys?” Billy asked.

Mason wasn’t fooled one bit. Billy’s intelligent eyes were scanning the both of them and probably read the whole truth. “Let’s eat. What’s on today’s schedule?”

Rhys began talking as he placed plates in front of everyone. Mason’s ears perked up when he heard where they needed to be that evening. “A dinner party?”

“At Levine’s house, yes,” Rhys confirmed.

“What am I going to wear?” Billy started complaining.

“Your usual suit,” Mason replied promptly. “As I will.”

“Levine tells me I should you leave you guys at home, you know, give you some time off,” Rhys said. “And now, that I think of, I’ve been selfish enough. You two can have the evening off. I suppose Billy wants to see his girlfriend, and you, Mason,” he stopped for a second, “you’re not allowed to see any girlfriend or boyfriend. Otherwise, you’re free to do what you want, as long as you make sure it’s not too strenuous and you have some energy left for the night.”

“We’ll come with you,” Mason said promptly. “I mean, I will. Billy can go see his girlfriend.”

It would be good to leave Billy behind, as that was a golden opportunity for him to inspect Levine’s house and maybe find something that could put him on the right path.

“No way,” Billy replied. “My girlfriend lives in another county, and I talk to her every night for hours.”

When was he doing that? According to Toby, he spent his time watching the cameras and watching the latest news on Levine Goldman. Maybe he could do more things than one at the same time.

That meant he needed to be crafty enough to get rid of Billy and investigate Levine’s office on his own.

“I don’t think Levine will be too crazy to see me with the two of you in tow,” Rhys said.

“No way I’m letting you go alone,” Mason said abruptly.

Rhys blinked a couple of times, and then he grinned. He leaned against Mason and brushed his shoulder against his. “Aren’t you possessive?” His voice was playful.

Maybe Rhys didn’t like to be suffocated. That was an excellent opportunity to push Rhys away at a safe distance.

“Yeah, I’m possessive,” Mason replied. “The guys I’ve been with always complain about that.”

Rhys shrugged. “Their loss.” A small pause followed. “My gain.”

“So, should I wear the same suit?” Billy intervened.

He grinned, too, and Mason wanted to wipe that smile off his face. Apparently, everyone in the room was making fun of him.

“I can take you both shopping,” Rhys offered. “Although I might feel tempted to sneak into the dressing room with Mason and scandalize the salespeople with my moans.”

Mason swallowed a lump in his throat and choked. Rhys patted him on the back.

“Here, some water.”

“What did you two do last night?” Billy asked, probably the curiosity getting the better of him.

“Nothing,” Mason forced the word out.

Rhys snorted. “If that’s what nothing looks like in your book, I’m looking forward to finding out what something means.”

“O.M.F.G! You hooked up!”

Mason didn’t need Billy to put a label on what had happened between him and Rhys. “We didn’t!” He hoped his indignation was evident.

“We totally did,” Rhys said. “But maybe Mason doesn’t like terms like hooking up. Actually, I’m not sure what we did since I’ve never done it before. All my life, I’ve only been with Toby. Until now.”

“And yet, you were ready to hire an escort to show you a good time,” Mason said, wanting to punish Rhys a little for giving them away like that.

Rhys shrugged. “Good thing that fell through. I got a pretty awesome deal instead. Ah, I must have been hooked from that first kiss. So, I’m hooked on Mason or something.”

“What first kiss?” Billy asked.

Mason couldn’t stand being ignored like that. “Hey, enough with the questioning.”

“All right, chief.” Billy put his hands up in surrender. “Just so you know, I’m on your side. My lips are sealed.”

“They better be,” Mason said and exhaled. “My ass is on the line.”

Rhys wrapped his arm around Mason's. "Don't worry, Mason. I wouldn't allow anything to happen to your ass."

Now that was reassuring. Mason shook his head. What the hell did he get himself into?

## *Chapter Eleven – Tin Soldiers*

Mason needed Toby and fast. Once he reached Levine's place, he needed to be both surreptitious and quick about his intentions, and that meant that he had to have an idea about the layout of the house and any possible obstacles.

Rhys had locked himself in that room with the keyboard, after announcing him and Billy that he felt inspired. Billy was in the surveillance room again, and Mason recalled what Toby had said about his partner spending too much time watching the cameras.

For a moment, he froze. Who said that Levine didn't hire more than one person to watch Rhys for his creepy, hidden reasons? Boyd usually worked with people who knew and didn't hire people coming from the street, but it was worth looking into it. He took out his phone.

"Boyd, listen, I need to ask you something." Mason looked around his room, feeling odd without apparent reason. Surveillance equipment could be hidden everywhere, and now he blamed himself for letting Billy in charge of installing some of it. If Billy worked for Levine, things were bad. But if that was the case, what the hell he, Mason, was doing mixed up in all that?

"Hello to you, too," Boyd replied, but he sounded like he was in a good mood.

"Hi, man. Sorry, just there's a lot of on my mind."

"All is well down there, at the Harmony mansion?"

For a moment, Mason couldn't understand what Boyd meant by that, and then he remembered Rhys's artistic moniker. "Yeah, yeah. Boyd, how did you happen to hire Billy for this job?"

There was a short pause on the other end that wasn't lost on Mason.

"Why do you want to know?"

"I know he's not one of your regular contacts," Mason replied. Now Boyd had something to hide? What the hell was going on?

"He's not, but he came highly recommended."

"By whom?"

"Did anything happen, Mason? You sound worried."

"My best friend is lying to me. Of course I sound worried."

Boyd laughed. "You have nothing to worry about. Not about me, and not about Billy, either. He's not from around here, and it was an uncle of mine who recommended him. I wanted to give him an easy job at first, and I thought he would have plenty to learn from you."

“Any more of that buttering and I might think of myself as toast,” Mason said.

“The kid is new to the city. And I really owe my uncle. He helped me with money when all I had was a dream and empty pockets.”

Mason sighed. Was he reading too much into everything these days? Boyd sounded relaxed and his usual self, so he might have imagined that hesitation from before.

“Hey, Mason, if you think this job is not for you, I’ll have something lined up for you soon. Just give me a couple --”

“No,” Mason refused. “The job is fine.”

“Sorry if Billy is a bit annoying.”

“He’s not that annoying. We get along fine.”

“Good, good, that’s good to hear. Do you need anything else, Mason? You can ask me anything, whatever it is.”

“Thanks, man. Sorry about bothering you.”

“Don’t sweat it. Have an awesome day.”

“You, too.”

Mason rubbed his chin in thought after finishing his conversation with Boyd. Taken with his questions about Billy, he had forgotten to ask Boyd why he had seemed to be in such a good mood. Now, he wouldn’t call back just for that.

Billy was benign, as it seemed. That was reassuring, but not completely. Someone could mess up with his equipment, although by how much time he spent there, Billy wouldn’t allow anyone to do that.

He knew what he needed to do next. Billy might have noticed something on his cameras if Anita had done anything suspicious.

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Billy was, as usual, in semi-dark, and he was inspecting the screens in front of him.

“Hey, man.”

Billy looked up and offered him a bright smile. How could anyone suspect a face like that? Mason shook his head.

“What’s up, chief?”

“I was wondering if you noticed anything weird. You know, on the cameras.”

Billy linked his hands together. “What do you mean?”

“I noticed that I got new sheets, you know, like it was magic or something,” Mason said.

“The maid was here yesterday while we were away with Rhys.”

“Yeah, it makes sense. Do you happen to have the records of her being here?”

“Sure.” Billy waved at him to come to join him behind the desk. “What do you want to know? If she enchanted your pillows with dark magic?”

“I’ve never had anyone come over to clean for me. It feels a little weird to have a stranger go through my underwear.”

Billy laughed. “I feel for you, man. I prefer the laundromat. Just imagining some old lady commenting on the state of my undies is enough to give me the creeps.”

Mason watched as Billy typed something on his keyboard.

“Here it is, from the time she came. I should warn you that it’s pretty boring to watch someone dusting and cleaning.”

“Did you watch everything?”

“Of course. Even if it’s boring, it’s my duty to watch every second of what the cameras caught when we’re not here.”

Mason nodded. He watched Anita as she went from room to room, doing nothing out of the ordinary. What she had done in Rhys’s bedroom was probably the only thing of the type, but Mason wanted to be sure.

“Hey, what’s she doing?” Billy asked.

Mason stared at the screen. Anita was in the kitchen, and she took something out of her pocket. It was a bottle of medicine by the looks of it, and she held it up for a moment. Then, she put it back and took another, which she placed inside one of the kitchen drawers.

“Isn’t that a bit odd of a place for putting medicine?” Billy asked.

“Yeah. Rhys must keep his in the bathroom cabinet.”

“Do you think the old lady is peddling Adderall or something, and she hides it here?”

Mason shook his head. “I have no idea. But it’s weird, right? I should check.”

“Good idea. But come back, and tell me what that is. It’s nothing I love more than a mystery.”

Mason felt his gears turning slowly. “Was being a bodyguard your boyhood dream, Billy?”

“Not really. I wanted to become a detective, but, you know, not enough brain,” Billy said, and pointed at his head.

“You seem pretty quick to me,” Mason replied.

“Yeah, but I don’t think that’s enough to get accepted in that line of work. I wasn’t a studious kid, unfortunately.”

“That’s too bad, then. Off I go.”

Mason hurried out the door, curious as hell about what Anita must have hidden inside the kitchen drawer.

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“Hey,” Rhys called for him.

Lost in thought, Mason had failed to notice the owner of the house walking toward him. He didn’t have time to say anything in reply as Rhys crowded him into a wall and placed his lips on him. For a couple of seconds, Mason let the sensation of having his mouth plundered by the prettiest thief he had ever seen wash over him.

With regret, he took Rhys by the shoulders and pushed him gently away. He needed to avoid looking in those dreamy eyes, and he would be fine. But he was too close and, when he looked down, he noticed Rhys’s moist lips and his stomach began doing somersaults. Great. If he only weren’t so stupidly crazy about Rhys’s kisses, he could see about his job.

Rhys didn’t take his silent protests seriously, and, with a small laugh, he attacked him again. This time, he snuck both hands under Mason’s shirt, after pulling it from his pants.

“You have no idea, Mason,” Rhys whispered, “what you’re doing to me.”

*That should be my line.*

“Rhys,” Mason tried to sound stern, “let’s behave a little.”

Rhys giggled and leaned into him, brushing his nose against Mason’s cheek. “I don’t want to behave. I’ve been nothing but good for far too long.”

“You? Good?” Mason said with a small snort.

“What? I’m not?” There was a hint at coquetry that made Mason smile despite his decision to be stern and cold.



Rhys teased Mason's jawline with small bites, laughing softly. "Right now, your opinion of me is all that matters."

"Billy would be so hurt to hear that. He's your number one fan."

"Billy loves me. It's you keeping me on needles and pins."

"How do I do that?" Mason managed to avoid another heated kiss at the last moment.

"By teasing me. I know how good you really are, and now that I had a taste of you, I'm hungry for more. Plus, if you're handy with this as you are with your mouth," Rhys put one hand on Mason's crotch, "I'm dying to know you better."

"Rhys, I'm working," Mason complained. He couldn't say 'no' to Rhys, and they both treaded on thin ice, albeit unknowingly by one of them.

"Yeah, you're working for me." Rhys reached for the belt. "And, as your lord and master, I order you to please me."

Mason caught Rhys's hands, struggling to protect his virtue to no avail. "What if Billy walks in on us? He'll have the shock of his life."

Rhys stopped. "All right, good point. You win. But don't think you can avoid me forever. I used to hate the nightfall, but now I can barely wait for it to come. You'll sleep with me."

Mason had a mind to protest, but he was on a mission and couldn't risk having a tough conversation that would surely have him as the loser.

He nodded, and Rhys caught his chin and kissed him deeply. Other people didn't like pushy partners, but Mason liked it best when he knew he was wanted. No matter how fleeting the attraction between them, he wanted more of whatever Rhys wished to give him to the last drop.

"Let me hear you," Rhys whispered seductively.

"I'll sleep with you," Mason said like a soldier saluting his superior.

Rhys chuckled and caressed Mason's face. "I love your determination. Make sure to lose none of it when you come knocking on my door tonight."

Mason watched Rhys walking away, and waved at him when Rhys threw one look over his shoulder. It was nice to watch him go, as it was to watch him come, pun intended.

He shook his head as soon as Rhys was out of sight. The thing he needed most was concentration, and it felt like it was the only one he couldn't have. Mason hurried to the kitchen and went to the drawer where he had seen Anita hiding that suspicious bottle of medicine.

To his surprise, the bottle didn't have any label on it. Mason opened it and noticed around ten tablets inside. They were as nondescript as the bottle. Without one moment of hesitation, Mason took it with him and went back to Billy.

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“What took you so long?”

Mason could swear there was a hint of laughter in Billy's voice. “Just got detained a little.”

Billy snickered. “I happened to have seen what, or better said, who detained you.” He pointed at one of the screens.

Mason blanched. “Fuck. If Levine learns about this --”

“He won't,” Billy said. “Now, did you get it? What is it?”

Mason took the bottle from his pocket and placed it on the desk. “Something that has no name.”

Billy was pensive as he took the bottle and looked at its content. He poured a couple of tablets into his palm and observed them.

“Ever seen anything like it?”

“The problem is not that it's unique, whatever this thing is, but that it looks like many other things.”

“Yeah, you're right. Do you know any chemists?” Mason asked, knowing that Billy couldn't have many acquaintances, being new to the city and all.

“Yes. I mean, I know a lab where I can send one of these.”

How come Billy knew of such things? Mason chose not to overthink things. He had plenty on his mind, like where Toby was and why he didn't come back already. “That's great. Just for the record, Rhys's bedroom is not on any of these cameras, right?” He pointed at the screens.

Billy grinned. “I wouldn't spy on you two. Don't worry about a thing; the personal rooms, not only Rhys's, aren't watched.”

Mason scratched his head. “Are we doing our work as we should? I mean, I know that it wouldn't be ethical to stare at people taking a shower --”

Billy stopped him. “You and Rhys have nothing to be ashamed of, I bet, but I sure as hell don't want video evidence of the embarrassing things I do in the shower. And by that I mean singing out of tune,” he added quickly. “There are cameras only in the hallways, the kitchen, the balcony upstairs and all around the perimeter.”

“Good.”

“Mason, do you have a specific reason to worry about Rhys’s safety?” Billy asked him, suddenly grave and taking him off-guard.

“No, not at all.” In a way, it was the truth, and it wasn’t. He was supposed to investigate who had killed Toby, but there were plenty of strange things happening around that made him think that Rhys wasn’t completely safe. “I mean, we two got hired, which gives plenty to think about, but otherwise than the regular level of alertness, I can’t say that anything blipped on my radar.”

“Except that creepy maid, Anita.”

“Let’s not jump to conclusions. Take those pills to the lab you talked about, and then we can see what’s what.”

“Will do. Now, can you tell me what’s going on between you and Rhys?” Billy’s voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper.

“Are you from the gossip channel? Nothing’s going on.”

Billy snickered. “That kiss in the hallway left me, standing here by myself, breathless. I’ve thought you two felt attracted to each other from the start, but this is beyond my expectations. There’s only one thing I want.”

“Just one? You already keep my job in your hands, and Rhys’s reputation.”

“Don’t worry about any of them. And whatever these cameras catch, no one sees anything I don’t want them to. It’s a promise.”

“Anita doesn’t have access here, right?”

Billy shook his head. “She knows it, too. She didn’t try the door, even, as I noticed. Plus, trust me, Mason, if anyone touched anything around here, I’d know.”

“Okay. I trust you with this. What’s the thing you said you wanted?”

“Ah, right. Don’t forget to invite me to the wedding.”

“Wedding? What wedding?”

“Yours, obviously,” Billy replied.

“I don’t plan on anything of the kind for the next fifty years or so.”

“Really? Does Rhys know?”

“What does Rhys --” Mason stopped and dropped both hands in surrender. “You’re going to tease me forever, aren’t you?”

“Just until you two get hitched officially. After that, I’ll stop.”

“That’s reassuring, but nothing like that will happen. Men like Rhys Harmony aren’t for guys like me.”

“I have no idea what you mean by that.”

“He’s courted by a billionaire,” Mason pointed out.

“A guy he detests,” Billy replied.

Mason paused. “I wouldn’t go that far.”

“Right, right. Rhys just doesn’t like Levine that way. He has respect and gratitude toward him, but nothing else.” Billy used an appeasing tone while saying that. “And you have all that Levine doesn’t have, and at this point, it’s all that Rhys needs.”

“Damn, you’re way too invested in your favorite artist’s life. Don’t hold your breath. The moment Rhys sees someone else he likes, he’ll forget all about me. I’m just convenient, and he hasn’t been out to meet new people for almost a year. It’s natural that --”

“How many guys have you had in your bed, Mason?”

Mason took a couple of moments to think. “Hmm, I can’t really give an exact number --”

“O.M.G., you’re a playboy! If you can’t recall how many, that’s a sign. So, the problem is you, not Rhys.”

Now that wasn’t true. Mason had a mind to protest, but then he stopped. If Billy wanted to live vicariously through what he imagined the glamorous life of celebrities to be, it was his choice.

It wasn’t his business whether Rhys wanted a wedding ever in his life or not, or who the groom could be.

“Get ready for tonight. According to my research, it’s a high brow affair through and through,” Billy warned him.

“Just people eating and gossiping. Of course, they’ll eat oysters and whatnot, and probably talk about their jets and bank accounts, but otherwise, it can’t be anything special,” Mason joked.

“Hmm, then I’ll probably have to eat at home. I don’t want to starve.”

“That’s a good point, Po. But no candy. I’ll fix something.”

“Thanks, Arnie. You’re awesome.” Billy offered him a fist bump, and Mason responded in kind, with a shrug.

So, it was going to be a dinner like no other. Mason had served as a bodyguard for people who well off on more than one occasion, but he had never seen a billionaire’s home until that moment. Anyway, he wouldn’t be there to gawk at the lives the rich were living, but to conduct a bit of investigative work.

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“I thought you disappeared for good,” Mason scolded Toby the moment the ghost materialized in his bathroom, right behind him.

At this point, nothing could surprise him. If suddenly, he could see flying piglets out the window, he would treat it like a regular thing. He was busy with his tie, and already in a bit of a hurry. Even if he wore the same suit, he debated a lot which tie to use.

“What’s the occasion?”

Mason exchanged a court look in the mirror with Toby. “We’re going to Levine’s place. It would have helped if you got here earlier so that I know what I’m looking for.”

“I’m coming with you. I can show you around.”

“Yeah, and I can only hope that no one notices that I’m talking to myself.”

“I’ll make sure not to ask questions.”

“That’s strangely assuring. Billy will be there, too, and it won’t be easy to get rid of him.”

“Just tell him you have diarrhea or something, and then pretend you’re looking for the bathroom for half an hour.”

“Thanks for the idea. It’s frigging brilliant,” Mason said in a terse tone. “Now, shoot. Anything interesting you can tell me?”

“The dude didn’t come home until I left. And I notice that the personnel got busy with some preparations.”

“For the dinner function tonight,” Mason confirmed. “Is this tie straight already?”

Toby gave him a critical look as he turned. “Maybe a little to the right. No, the other right.”

With a frustrated grunt, Mason took his tie off. He had refused Rhys off the bat on the offer of new clothes, but now it irked him that he would be in the same suit when facing Levine Goldman again. That asshole probably had hundreds of suits.

“Go for the black one,” Toby said.

“Why am I taking style advice from a ghost?” Mason wondered.

“Because all your ties look exactly the same, and you’re fretting over nothing. Rhys likes you, either way.”

Mason took one tie and wrapped it around his neck, a bit too tightly. “It’s not him I worry about.”

“That douche is not your rival.”

“I know.”

“You don’t. You behave like you don’t. Chill, bro. Just focus on what’s important.”

Mason nodded. “Thanks.”

It wasn’t his habit to worry about what to wear, but after the reality that he would be in the company of obscenely wealthy people had hit him, he had started to feel a bit out of place. Rhys would be out, in his world, and then he would see Mason for what he was, just a bodyguard in an old suit.

Why was he overthinking this? If Rhys wanted someone else, he was free to choose. And if he didn’t choose Mason, no one would suffer. With that decision in mind, he automatically tied his tie and went out of the room with Toby in tow.

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Rhys wore all white, like the first day when they had met, and just like that time, Mason felt his heart skipping a bit when he looked at him. He wore white well. Maybe he had a twisted vision of angels, but he thought that a pair of wings was the only thing to make Rhys complete. The good sleep from the previous night showed, and the dark bags under his eyes were gone. He had pulled his hair back in a simple, but stylish ponytail, and he looked amazing. Mason’s hand on the handrail tensed. Rhys smiled at him as he walked down the stairs, and Mason did his best not to beam back.

“Rhys, you look fantastic!” Billy was the first to speak his mind.

“Thanks, Billy. At least someone noticed that I spent around two hours getting ready.” Rhys threw Mason a pointed look.

Mason congratulated himself for keeping a straight face. Rhys could show up with his hair a bird’s nest, clothes in disarray, and his usual messed up self, and Mason would still feel that now familiar squeeze in his chest. He gallantly offered his arm, as he moved away from the handrail,

and Rhys took it. They looked at each other, and, for a moment, he feared and hoped at the same time that Rhys would kiss him in front of Billy.

Instead, he got a smile as big as the sun, and he was grateful for it. There was new light shining in Rhys, and Mason felt its warmth.

“Did you tell Levine we’re coming with you?” Billy asked, pulling them back to reality. “By the way, you two better keep away from each other, or you’ll cause some serious jealousies when we’ll get there.”

Rhys snickered and let his hand slip from Mason’s arm. “If it were for me, I would keep glued to Mason all the time, but I don’t Levine to catch a whiff of what’s going between us since it would be Mason’s job on the line. And yes, I told him, and, needless to say, he wasn’t very pleased.”

“I suppose that’s putting it lightly, right?” Mason asked.

Rhys’s lips twisted in a grimace. “I owe Levine a lot. So, although I’m on your side, I need to play nice, and you’ll have to do that, too. He’s overbearing, I know, and --”

“Don’t worry about a thing, Rhys,” Billy intervened. “We won’t ever do anything to reflect badly on you.”

Rhys bit his bottom lip, drawing Mason’s eyes to it. “Sometimes, I wish I weren’t such a fuckup. Then I wouldn’t be in debt to people like Levine, and I would be free.” There was longing and sadness in his voice as he spoke, and Mason wondered again what could have happened for Rhys’s and Toby’s lives to become twisted by fate like that. “I apologize in advance for anything Levine might do.” A small, mirthful laugh, followed. “He calls you my tin soldiers, which is strange since he chose you.”

“Not exactly,” Billy explained. “Boyd chose both me and Mason because he trusts us. Levine didn’t have a hand in that.”

“Strange of him,” Rhys commented as they walked toward the door. “He never leaves anything to chance.”

“Hmm, so he likes to play with people?” Mason asked.

“Play is a word that would make you think he enjoys something. No, it’s all about control.”

“Well, maybe he thinks we’re insignificant, hence calling us your tin soldiers,” Billy said.

“Yes,” Rhys admitted, although he looked distracted now. “I just wonder if he also sees me as some paper ballerina.”

## *Chapter Twelve – Safe*

Was attraction a tangible thing? Mason's mind was a swirl of thoughts, none of each making any sense. He didn't dare to look at Rhys, not even for one second, afraid that what his heart held true would burst through. With a sigh, he adjusted his position on the backseat, aware that Billy could spy on them to his heart's content on the rearview mirror. Rhys placed a hand on his knee. Despite his determination to keep it together, Mason stared at the elegant long fingers. Rhys Harmony was beautiful, delicate. And also, not for him, as he needed to recall and remind himself over and over.

"Don't tell me you're nervous, Arnie," Rhys teased him. He moved and kept his face close to Mason's, blowing warm air on his cheek. "It's nothing but a boring dinner. I promise that I'll come up with something so that we can all leave early. I like this as little as you if not less." The hand on Mason's knee squeezed. "I have something important to look forward to, after all."

Damn. Between a rock and a hard place. If he escaped unburned tonight, it would be a miracle. Mason closed his eyes. Rhys stole a quick kiss, taking him by surprise. "There is no way I would forget. You're mine."

"Yours?" Mason needed to put some distance between them. "Like a toy?" The soft press of Rhys's lips on his was fading already, but its memory was stubborn.

"No. Nothing like that." There was a note of determination present, suddenly. "All my life, I've been one man's only."

"You're still his." It was lame to hang on to Toby's memory to push Rhys away, but he had to keep things real. Whatever was happening to them, Mason had no reason to believe that it would be anything but fleeting. With each minute, each turn of the car wheels, they were closer to a place that was much more familiar to Rhys than it would ever be to the likes of him.

"That's no reason for you to feel insecure," Rhys replied as if he had just read his thoughts. "I'll always be his."

That was surprisingly honest. Mason appreciated it. "We're almost there." He had said the words matter-of-factly. Billy was pulling the car through the massive metal gates guarding a gigantic property. Toby had been right. Levine Goldman lived in a palace. The driveway was crowded by expensive vehicles, and the limousine they were in appeared shabby by comparison.

Rhys straightened Mason's tie and kept his hand there for a moment. "I won't give you away. Levine has a knack for taking enjoyment out of everything I do. That's why I got good at hiding. Very good."

Mason didn't miss the playful note at the end. Levine was a dangerous man, and Rhys had no idea. That made his mission difficult in more ways than one. If he failed, Rhys would remain



alone and exposed to who knew what risks. And that, that was something Mason couldn't live with.

Maybe it was better for Rhys to remain unknowing of whatever shady business Levine ran in his spare time. The less he knew, the better. With that thought in mind, Mason strengthened his resolve. "I suppose Billy and I will have to mingle with the help."

Rhys grimaced. "Unfortunately for me. I'm sure I'd have a lot more fun with you two than with this whole party." He gestured at the crowd of well-dressed people rushing up the grand marble staircase.

"Try to have fun," Mason said and squeezed Rhys's hand for a moment.

"For you, I'll try." Rhys offered him a broad smile.

A short pang gripped his chest. Maybe he would have fun, and Mason's prophecies would all come to life. Regardless of that, Mason had a mission at hand, and he would commit to it; after all, he didn't want to remain stuck with a ghost haunting him, neither with dreams of keeping the man sitting so close right now.

"I'll make sure you two have everything you need. The food at these parties is pretty great."

"Oh, no, really?" Billy sounded disappointed. "And I stuffed myself at home because Arnie said so."

"You had a healthy early dinner," Mason intervened. "We couldn't know about the food." Great. Now he sounded like a complete idiot.

"That roasted chicken was pretty great," Billy said. "You're a great homecook, Arnie. But I think there is still enough room." He patted his belly in demonstration.

Mason shook his head and hid a smile. "Po, just hurry and keep the door for Rhys. If you do your job well, maybe I'll let you stuff your face again."

Billy snickered. "That's good motivation."

"You know, guys, I feel pretty guilty for letting you come with me tonight. This isn't me, this world." Rhys looked out the car window.

Mason chose not to say anything. There was nostalgia in those words. But the world kept pushing and pushing, and no one could return to what they had before. Only forward one could walk, with no other way out but through.

"We're here because we care," Billy offered courteously and hurried out of the car.

That was their cue. Mason got out, as well, and waited for Rhys to walk in front. He stopped Billy in time from walking side by side with Rhys. As the protocol required, he fell in step, but slightly behind Rhys, and made a small sign for Billy to follow his example.

“Can you believe this place?” Billy expressed his wonder.

By force of habit, Mason looked around, scanning the other guests for signs of ill intent. He had no time to admire Levine’s palace. If possible, he hoped to avoid the man the entire evening.

“You, guys, are finally here.” Toby greeted him, materializing from the crowd.

Mason set his eyes on him. Toby grinned and shrugged. Then, he imitated pulling a zipper over his mouth. What did you know? Ghosts could be trained, too.

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Just as some guests left their coats at the door, in the arms of dutiful servants who appeared to have no other purpose but that, Billy and Mason remained behind. Rhys offered them an apologetic look over his shoulder as he was soon approached by people who expressed, in the same well crafted, empty words, their delight at seeing him again.

A servant came and guided Billy and Mason to an area assigned to various types of personnel. Even that was opulent, way beyond the means of the people gathered there. Most were professional chauffeurs, Mason noticed. He and Billy seemed to be the only bodyguards; apparently, Levine’s guests didn’t need security. They thought they were safe.

With a small grimace, Mason observed the lavish buffet offered to the hired help. Impressed by their surroundings, those present engaged in whispered conversation. The double doors opened into a large hallway, and they could observe how the rich partied, but from a safe distance.

Mason allowed his eyes to wander, searching for a certain someone. Rhys was leaning, allowing Levine to kiss both his cheeks. From that distance, he couldn’t read Rhys’s face, and a pang of jealousy punished him for his curiosity. There was a sizeable group of sycophants around the host and his special guest. Rhys moved away from Levine, although the master of the house still held one hand on his arm. From where he was, Mason observed the scene with keen eyes. It could be a trick of the light projected downward by large crystal chandeliers, but Levine’s hand hooked into Rhys appeared like a twisted gnarly tree branch, a contrast against the white fabric. If the decor changed into an evil forest, all of a sudden, Mason wouldn’t be surprised.

“Mason, you have to try this. It’s to die for,” Billy interrupted his train of thought.

Reluctantly, he moved his eyes away from Rhys. For tonight, Rhys had to fend off for himself to the best of his abilities. Mason needed to work on a different front. He shook his head, denying the delicious-looking canapés pushed under his eyes by Billy. “You can have it all. And feel free to mingle. Don’t let me stop you enjoy your evening at the palace.” He was aware of the

insincere smile stretching his lips. As soon as possible, he needed to make himself scarce, and that without Billy noticing.

“I don’t know anyone here. But I know you, partner,” Billy said playfully and pressed one fist into Mason’s bicep.

“I’m afraid I’m not good company tonight.”

Billy looked over to the large room housing the guests. “Levine might be into Rhys, but it’s not the other way around. You have nothing to worry about.”

Billy had guessed right, but that didn’t mean that Mason was willing to let him know it. “It’s not that,” he said somewhat aggressively. Billy threw him a curious look. Mason needed to make sure Billy couldn’t guess he intended to carry a little bit of exploration of the place. “It’s just my stomach,” he added, cursing at himself for opting for Toby’s stupid idea. “I’ll go look for a bathroom in this place.” He began walking right at that moment, to prevent Billy from trying to help.

Toby gestured for him from a corner of the room, and he walked in that direction.

“I’ll go ahead to check and you follow,” Toby said.

Without a word, Mason moved behind the ghost. There was a slim chance of finding evidence of conspicuous activity just lying around, but it was worth trying. He was shooting darts in the dark, and there was no way of knowing where they would land. For now, it was all he had.

He walked after Toby through a side door into a long hallway. The plush carpet muffled his steps, and the air was cooler. Wall lights illuminated the hall, and mirrors and small statues were adorning it. It felt like walking through a museum, only that there were no paintings on the walls, only reflections of his own. Mason could read tension and worry in his eyes as he glanced at one of them, and then decided against doing it again. Dwelling on feelings was useless; unless it was some gut instinct warning him of dangers ahead, Mason didn’t need them.

Toby peaked from behind a corner. “All clear.”

Mason hurried. With so many personnel moving to and fro, it was a far shot to reach Levine’s study without stumbling over someone. He and Toby needed to act quickly.

The place was a labyrinth. Mason was thankful for having his own Ariadne’s thread guiding him through that dangerous maze. The mirrors were soon replaced by old paintings of people who must have lived centuries ago by headdresses and attire. Their dead eyes followed him. A small shiver coursed down his spine, ice-cold, but Mason looked ahead and followed Toby without paying any mind to the lifeless guardians.

Finally, they were out in a larger enclosure, and Toby gestured for him to approach a door. It looked like he needed to punch in a code to go through. With his eyes, Mason asked Toby. The ghost leaned in and whispered a four-digit code.

There was no hesitation, and no way back. If he got caught now, Rhys would be on his own. The only solace would be Billy remaining behind to take care of him, but Mason couldn't hope that Levine would keep half of the bodyguard team, given how his trust was being trampled right now.

Mason didn't have time for moral dilemmas. Levine was a scumbag, and if he weren't at fault at all, that would be for the best. Given his wealth and position, he was a redoubtable adversary. Mason could deal with smaller challenges.

He was in. Making sure not to make any noise, he closed the door behind him and began to scan the room. He ignored the obvious lavishness of the room and headed to the desk. A first tentative let him know that the drawer indicated by Toby was under lock and key.

"Sorry, I have no idea how you could open it," Toby said. "The asshole must have the key."

"No sweat. You stay on watch. I'll see what I can find."

Toby nodded and disappeared. Mason began methodically, taking the folders on the desk one by one, browsing through them, and placing them back the way they were. They appeared to be business-related, and while it was strange for Levine to have so many official documents in hard copies lying around, they didn't seem suspicious. Plus, Mason had no idea what he was looking for.

"Shit, man. He's coming," Toby warned him.

Mason felt a flush of ice down his back. His eyes scanned the room for a proper hiding place. He opted to sneak behind the heavy curtain and squeeze in so that his shoes couldn't be seen. *Damn it, Toby, what part of being on watch didn't you get?* He kept silent, despite his sudden frustration.

The door opened, and Mason heard feminine giggles. Toby stuck his head through the curtain. Mason grimaced. Good thing he had years of training by his side or a situation like that would have made him give himself away.

"The scumbag is with some chick," Toby stated the obvious.

Mason held his breath and listened.

"Oh, Levine, you naughty," a woman's voice teased. "Do you want a blowjob in your oval office?"

“I’d like to think this place puts the presidential office to shame,” Levine replied in a haughty tone.

*Flexing your money much, asshole? You must be compensating for something.* Mason hoped Levine would get his blowjob fast so that he could get away from that place, even empty-handed.

“It certainly does,” the woman confirmed in a flattering tone.

It looked like Levine wasn’t keen on conversation, as the sounds that followed left little room for imagination.

“Damn, this girl is like a vacuum cleaner. I suppose that’s why it’s called a job,” Toby commented. “You gotta make it blow, and work hard at it, too.”

Mason grimaced. He could do without the visuals. The noises were self-explanatory. He let a controlled exhale escape as a grunt announced that Levine was done. Good. It hadn’t taken him long.

“Levine, what’s with the rumors?” It appeared as if the woman was busy with the cleanup by the slurping sounds Mason could still hear. “Are you fucking Rhys Harmony?”

“And if I am?” Levine sounded as cold as a fish. This guy probably thought that getting blowjobs was a chore, and he seemed impatient to get it over with.

The woman laughed. “Nothing. Just that I wouldn’t mind a threesome. I could share this with him. Gay guys are awesome at giving head, or so I’ve heard. Plus, he’s so beautiful. I’d love to kiss him.”

“That won’t happen,” Levine said, and his voice carried a sort of finality.

It looked like the woman got the hint, eventually. A rustling of clothes announced that Levine was pulling up his pants.

“You’re so not fun.” The woman seemed miffed, and for all the right reasons. Sucking off that dead fish couldn’t have been pleasant.

“But this is.”

Mason had a hunch what that could be.

“He’s paying her,” Toby let him know.

“Yes, it is,” the woman replied, this time appeased. “But let me know if you ever change your mind. I’d fuck Rhys Harmony, given the chance,” she added.

“No one gets to fuck him,” Levine said in the same cold voice.

“Wow, so possessive.” The woman laughed, but it appeared as she was the one ready to get out of there. “Well, I’ll head back. Coming?”

“Don’t be absurd, dear. I can’t be seen around you. You have a reputation.”

The woman fell silent, and Mason could read the room, even without seeing anything.

“Man, she’s pissed.” Toby confirmed his guess.

“Right,” the woman said tersely. “Let me give you some advice, Levine dear.” Each of her words was sharp like a knife. “It’s a bit too late to play the coming out card. No one would believe you.”

The immediate reply was a harsh laugh. “I plan nothing of the kind.”

“Really? Then what business do you have fucking a beautiful gay boy?”

“He’s twenty-eight, so hardly a boy. And dear,” Levine’s voice dropped to a sugary note, “when you’re me, you can fuck whoever the fuck you want. Also, you can fuck over whoever you want. All clear?”

Mason could read a threat when he heard it. Apparently, the woman could, too.

“No need to get your panties in a twist,” she replied and forced out a laugh. “Thank you for this. And you know where to find me.”

“Sure.”

Mason heard the door opening and closing but didn’t move. Levine must have stayed behind, as implied from the earlier conversation. That meant that he needed to double his vigilance. Levine couldn’t catch a whiff of him being there, or all would be over.

Toby supplied him with information on what was going on. “He’s sitting at his desk. I think he’s going to call someone, on that hidden phone.”

“Where do we stand?” Levine asked in a commandeering tone, without wasting any time to greet the person he was calling. “Still nothing? It’s impossible. Flamboyant sissies like him -- that’s not your concern. I want results.”

Mason frowned. He had heard that phrase before, spoken by the same scumbag. That first time when he had met Levine. But what could be so important that Levine had had to take a call on an insecure line, that time? By what Mason could recall, the scumbag had talked on his mobile phone, the one he carried with him. Unless sometimes he took the secret phone with him.

It was difficult to remember details.

“Man, don’t breathe,” Toby warned him. “He’s staring right at the spot where you’re standing right now.”

Now that was just fucking great. Toby couldn’t help him if anything happened.

“Oh, fuck, he’s standing.” Toby’s voice was alarmed.

Mason braced for impact. No reasonable explanation would save him. Calmly, he raised both arms and placed his hands less than an inch away from the heavy curtain. Where wits failed, muscles had to do. He could only hope that the curtain would come undone as he needed for what he had in mind.

“Don’t tell me to fucking calm down,” Levine hissed.

“Phew, he turned away,” Toby said.

Mason closed his eyes for a second and focused on his breathing.

“Well, that means that I’ll have to fuck the truth out of him, right?” Levine’s voice was full of disdain. “Oh, don’t worry. He knows it. It has to be locked in his messed up brain. You’re doubting my abilities? He’s gagging for a cock in his life. A daddy, too.” Levine laughed. “His real one used to beat the shit out of him and lock him in the basement. I am a god, compared to that. His savior.”

A tick in his jaw warned Mason that he got a bit too worked up over that conversation. There was no doubt Levine was talking about Rhys. All those painful details were needed, too. It could be that was why Rhys couldn’t stand the dark. How old had he been when mistreated that badly? Mason ordered his heart to stop hurting. There was no time for that. Now he had all the more reason to remain unseen by Levine and do everything in his power to protect Rhys.

It appeared that the conversation was over. Mason heard Levine opening and closing the desk drawer and then walking out of the room. He waited, his heart beating wildly. Now wasn’t the moment for a mistake.

“The coast is clear,” Toby announced him.

“Are you sure?” Mason whispered. “Check again. I almost got caught.”

Toby said nothing but returned after a few seconds. “No one in sight. He went back to the party.”

Mason felt out a breath and then began moving. His leg muscles cramped from how tense he had been.

“Do you think he was talking about Rhys?” Toby asked.

Mason nodded gravely.

“What truth does he want to fuck out of Rhys?”

Mason shrugged. That was the crucial question.

“You have to warn Rhys about this creep.”

Didn't he know it? Of course, that was on the first order of business, only that he needed to do it cleverly so that Rhys wouldn't become suspicious of him, instead. After all, Mason couldn't tell him that he was paired with Toby and running a crazy investigation of their own. At some point, the entire thing had turned from trying to figure out who had killed Toby into protecting Rhys. Regardless of how Toby couldn't remember Rhys, Mason had a hunch that they were in accord over this.

“We have to find out what this guy wants from Rhys.”

“We?” Mason couldn't stop as he walked back to the room he had come from. The paintings, the mirrors, flew by him. “I'm the only one putting my ass on the line here.”

“If I had one still, I'd put it, too,” Toby replied. “For Rhys.”

It was just like he had thought. Mason was sure Toby must have loved Rhys very much. It didn't matter that the memories weren't there anymore, or just hidden somewhere deep inside. Toby knew what was right.

“Are you all right, chief?” Billy appeared next to him, the moment he set foot in the room.

“You've been gone a lot.”

Mason looked at Billy with suffering eyes. “I got it pretty bad.”

Billy looked genuinely worried, and Mason felt guilty, but there was no helping it. “We could go home. Rhys won't mind.”

“And leave him, here, alone?” Mason protested right away.

Billy smiled. “It might not have been my boyhood dream to become a bodyguard, Mason, but I'm starting to think that it could have been yours.”

All he had ever wanted was to be strong, capable of protecting himself against his world. But Billy was right, and Mason couldn't deny it. The people he cared for, he wanted to hold them in his arms away from harm, for all eternity. Even if it was an impossible dream, it was his, and no one could take it away.

“I heard someone saying that we're going to hear Rhys sing,” Billy informed him. “Everyone is quite excited. Let's go closer and watch.”



Mason couldn't deny Billy the pleasure of dragging him close to the opened doors. He couldn't see Rhys, but a small announcement silenced the large room. Then, musical notes from a piano broke the quiet. Low keys were struck, and the tune reminded of a background for a scary movie.

He leaned against the door. Rhys's deep velvety voice followed the rhythm imposed by the piano keys.

*At my door, at night,*

*A sudden strange voice*

*Reminds me of a fright*

*And of all the noise*

*That I should remember*

*Words that were once said*

*Words hot like ember*

*Words meaning the end.*

Mason exchanged a small look with Billy. He reined in a little frisson at the last moment. Rhys's voice was a macabre whisper, nocturnal and nightmare-induced. Levine's strange conversation from earlier rushed to his mind. Could it be that whatever the scumbag wanted to find out, Rhys was aware?

*Nightmare creatures dance,*

*They twirl and laugh,*

*But I'm on the fence*

*I have it rough*

*Because giving in*

*To them of all evils*

*Would truly mean*

*The end of all dreams*

*Of happiness, I glean.*

Rhys's fingers must have hit the piano keys harder and harder, because the harmonious sounds become a discordance, a mess of anguished noises. The guests began murmuring. Suddenly, the

music stopped. The announcer from earlier mumbled something about that being an interesting piece and encouraged the audience to offer its applauses and appreciation.

Mason moved along with Billy. He didn't care what Levine would think about his intervening again to rescue Rhys. Walking on a thin rope was his life, after all. "Please, allow us to go through." He carved himself a path through the sea of expensively dressed bodies, earning curious looks and disdainful comments. Rhys sat at the piano, his face buried in his hands, unmoving. None of the people who had greeted him upon his arrival hurried by his side. Mason didn't hesitate. He scooped Rhys in his arms and walked back with him, this time the guests making way for them to pass through.

What worried him was how rigid Rhys was. He didn't seem surprised by Mason's actions, but it was like he couldn't register anything happening around him.

Levine Goldman walked in front of Mason, cutting his exit. "What do you think you're doing?" The words were hissed at him, and Levine's eyes spoke of thunder and other punishments.

"My job, sir." Mason wasn't impressed.

"Put him down. You're causing a scene."

"He needs to rest." Mason stood his ground. "What the hell do you keep giving him?" He said the last words in a low whisper.

Levine quirked an eyebrow. "Never tired of eavesdropping?"

For a second, Mason felt his blood freezing in his veins. But no, Levine was talking about the conversation he had had on the phone with Rhys after that radio show fiasco.

"It's my job to take care of him. Please, sir, allow me to do my job."

The people around stared and kept murmuring. Levine threw one look around, and his face turned to stone, only to display a fake smile one second later. "Go on," he said to Mason and turned toward his guests. "Yes, he is still not used to such outings," he explained as he offered his arm gallantly to a woman in her fifties buried in furs.

Mason gestured for Billy to walk in front. "Let's hit the road, Billy."

Toby was by his side, too, but Mason kept his mouth shut. He was well aware that there were still eyes on them, curious and judging. What they all needed was to get out of there.

"Mason?" Rhys's voice was faint. "What happened?"

"Don't worry. You're with me," Mason said and held him close.

Rhys let his head against his shoulder and put his arms around Mason's neck. "Then I'm safe."

Mason wished that was true. He would fight to make it true, damned be all consequences.

### *Chapter Thirteen - Darkness*

There was a weight burdening each of the occupants of the car on their way back. Billy exchanged worried looks with Mason in the rearview mirror at every stop. The street lights moved like translucent streaks as they rode toward their destination.

“Should we take Rhys to a hospital?” Billy asked quietly. “I’m out of my depth here, chief.”

“No hospital,” Rhys replied.

The golden head rested against Mason’s shoulder, and long delicate fingers wrapped around a rough hand. They didn’t belong together and, yet, there they were. Mason’s throat was sandpaper dry. All he had thought, in that rush, had been to save Rhys, regardless of the danger, invisible or not. Now, his confidence was shaken. Levine hadn’t appeared concerned by Rhys’s condition, so he must have seen that happening before. But if Rhys was the person Levine had talked about on the phone with his mysterious acquaintance - more like partner in crime - there was a possibility that he didn’t care much about what happened to Rhys, anyway.

Unless, of course, that interfered with his plans. Mason pursed his lips. “Are you sure, Rhys?” he asked. “You scared us in there.”

“Freaked us out completely,” Billy let out, much louder than earlier.

“I’m sorry, guys,” Rhys mumbled.

He didn’t seem quite himself.

“Has this happened to you before?” Mason asked. He moved his thumb, caressing Rhys’s hand.

“I guess.” Another whispered breath.

“You guess?” Mason frowned. “You don’t know for sure?”

“They told me it would happen. It’s something about the side effects of the meds I’m weaning myself off after they pumped me with everything they could.”

Another look at Billy told him he wasn’t the only one doubting that theory. It looked more like something that could be induced by medication, not by letting go of it.

He continued to caress the hand he held. “That song you performed, was it a new piece?”

“No. I’ve never sung it in front of an audience, but it’s not new. It’s been in my head for some time.”

“For how long?” Mason insisted.

“It came to me while I was away.” Rhys didn’t name the place where he had been locked up. “They give you something for everything there. Something to put you to sleep, something to make you wake up, something to calm you down, something to help you eat. Nothing’s beyond them. You become a little puppet while they take care of you. But nothing worked against the darkness.”

Mason recalled what Levine had said about Rhys’s dad. “Did they force you to sleep with the lights off?”

Rhys didn’t offer a reply, but one wasn’t needed. “I kept telling them, but, honest to God, I think that made them happy. It just gave them the opportunity to try their fancy drug cocktails on little old me.”

That rehab facility hadn’t been a happy place. Mason realized, that moment, how strong Rhys must have been to return to the real world, with his mind almost in one piece. Except for the episode from earlier, he had been functional, despite the natural sadness that came with the territory.

“What happens when it’s dark?” he asked. He trusted Billy not to let a word of this out.

Rhys sighed and ran one hand over his face. “I know it’s just my mind playing tricks on me.” He sounded defensive.

To reassure him, Mason squeezed his hand. “Feel free to tell it like it is. Billy and I, here, we’re no doctors.”

“Nightmares,” Rhys said and stopped. “Hands trying to grab me, cold, something happening right outside my field of vision, noises --” He paused again.

Mason had more questions, but he could tell Rhys was exhausted. Some things he wanted to ask in private. Maybe Rhys wasn’t completely comfortable to talk about all that in front of Billy. “I’ll sleep in your room tonight if that’s fine by you.”

“Of course, you’ll sleep with me,” Rhys said matter-of-factly. “It’s what we agreed, right?”

Mason rested his head against Rhys’s. “Yes.”

“Good. I was afraid you would want to run away.”

That had been before understanding the danger that loomed on the horizon. Not that Mason had it all figured out; Toby would come in handy for finding out more about Levine and his intentions toward Rhys.

“Billy, this is serious,” he said in a grave tone. “It should remain between us.”

“You can trust me with your life, Mason. No need to ask,” Billy replied, no longer boisterous and playful like always. “I’m taking my job seriously. And I believe in you.”

Those last few words were accompanied by a short, intense look Billy exchanged with him in the rearview mirror. Mason pondered over them for a moment; it had to be because Boyd must have told Billy to pay attention and learn from him. Nothing more to see there.

Rhys shifted and groaned as he adjusted his position. Mason scooted toward the door and pulled Rhys with his head in his lap. He let his fingers move slowly through the golden hair. “We’re on watch. You can sleep a little if you want.”

“Okay,” Rhys mumbled in reply.

Soon, his steady breathing let Mason know that his advice had been taken to heart. He continued to caress Rhys’s hair as his mind began moving its gears. What did Levine want from Rhys? He had so many questions he needed to ask Rhys, but all in due time. First, they needed to trust each other, regardless of secret motivations and whatnot. This was already beyond Mason not wanting to be haunted forever by Rhys’s dead lover.

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Mason took a quick shower downstairs, in his room, while Rhys went upstairs to get ready for bed. Before following him there, Mason wanted to have a word with Billy. As expected, his partner was watching the cameras, rewinding the recordings for the time they had been away. For a moment, he wondered at Billy’s capacity to work so tirelessly. Maybe eating candy all day had its perks, after all. Not for one second had Billy looked like he needed rest. He was more than what met the eye, that was certain.

“We are in a delicate position here,” Mason started as soon as he was inside the surveillance room.

Billy wasn’t surprised to see him there. “I guess you can say that again, chief.” He scratched his head in thought. “But I can see where your loyalties stand, and that’s the same place mine are.”

Mason didn’t need Billy to elaborate on that. It was crystal clear. “Our pay comes from Levine’s pocket.”

Billy shrugged. “And? Tonight, he showed that he doesn’t give a damn about Rhys. Which is weird, no matter which way you look at it, right? I mean, he went the extra mile to keep Rhys out of jail, when the odds were stacked against him. Then, he put Rhys in rehab to get over the alcohol addiction and who knows what else. And now, he hired us to keep an eye on him and protect him. So how come he was so dead fish cold tonight?”

Mason nodded shortly. While Billy couldn’t know about the secret conversations Levine had on the phone with that mysterious partner, his logic was infallible. “Aren’t we getting ahead of

ourselves? I mean, you're a diehard fan, and I --" He stopped, unsure of the proper words to use to complete that sentence.

"You like him," Billy supplied it right away. "Let me ask you something, Mason. How many times has your gut instinct saved you so far?"

Mason threw Billy a surprised look. But his question made perfect sense. "Countless times."

"So, what does it say now? Whose side should we be on? Levine's or Rhys's?"

"You already know the answer."

Billy offered a curt nod. "Then there you have it, chief." The playful tone was back. "We're the good guys here."

"That's a bit boastful of you, Po," Mason teased in turn. "The question is: if we are the good guys, who are the baddies?"

A crooked smile appeared and faded quickly on Billy's face. "That's our job to find out. It wouldn't be a cool story if we didn't fight and win against some bad guys, right?"

Mason shook his head in mirth. "So it's a story, huh? Like a childhood fairytale?"

Billy snickered. "Not really. I'm sure some parts of it are pretty X-rated. Or, at least, that's Rhys hopes for, waiting for you upstairs."

Mason coughed and looked away. Billy had seen plenty already, but that was no reason for him to let it all show.

"I'm holding the fort. You go and help him dream some nice dreams. He deserves it," Billy said in a soothing voice.

Mason bid Billy goodnight and left the surveillance room. Despite his determination from earlier, his steps became a tad hesitant as he walked up the stairs.

"Man, that was weird, right?" Toby said from his left. "I mean, poor Rhys ... Wait, are you going to his room?"

"He needs me." Mason was aware of how defensive he sounded.

"He does," Toby said. "I wish I could be the one to hold him right now." He disappeared from Mason's side to appear on top of the stairs, his head turned toward Rhys's bedroom.

The hesitation in Mason's steps grew heavier. "Have you remembered anything? From the times you two were together?"

Toby shook his head slowly. “No, nothing. And I’d feel sad about it if I still knew how that feels.”

“I think you still know how that feels,” Mason insisted. He spoke quietly, hoping that no one else in the house could hear him talking to himself like a lunatic. No matter how much Billy liked him and Rhys depended on him, that kind of thing would make them change their mind about him.

Toby’s eyes were sad when Mason walked past him.

“You should come and stay with him tonight,” Mason said.

Toby didn’t reply for a moment. “I need to keep an eye on Levine, see what he’s up to.”

“Toby, I think that even an evil bastard like him sleeps at night. Give it a rest. And we should focus, somehow, on finding out who killed you. I know you must care a lot about Rhys even if you don’t remember --”

“Just shut up, man,” Toby murmured. His face was away from Mason, so it wasn’t possible to read what he was really thinking. “You’re flesh and blood, okay? So go in there and hold him like I cannot.”

“Toby.” Mason moved without thinking, but his hand, as usual, met nothing but air where he wanted to offer a comforting touch. Toby disappeared without another word.

In front of the bedroom door, Mason exhaled. What was he getting himself into? No matter how often he asked himself that, he couldn’t say that a satisfactory answer was to be found. He had walked on steady ground for years, and now everything was shaking. He cared again, and there was no way out. No matter what Rhys needed, he would offer everything, put his life on the line if need be. The thought alone should have scared him out of his wits, but his hand was steady when he knocked.

There was no reply. Mason knocked again, new alertness making his pulse soar. He pushed the door open, without hesitation. The bedroom was empty, but the shower was running. Mason let out a breath. He needed to chill a little, or he was bound to dull his senses over dangers that weren’t there. As long as Levine needed something from Rhys, Mason could assume that the scumbag wouldn’t harm his so-called protégé.

He sat on the bed, attuned to the sounds made by Rhys washing behind the bathroom door. For nightwear, he had opted for a t-shirt and shorts, and now he felt strangely underdressed. Dark dangers lurked, but that wasn’t bothering him right now. There were also sweet dangers that threatened the inner core of Mason’s well-crafted self-protection. The shower stopped, and Mason tensed. A blow dryer started, giving him a small reprieve, but it lasted little.



The door opened, and Rhys walked into the room, completely naked. The ceiling lights in the bedroom were on, so Mason stared, incapable of looking any other way, at the chest carved in marble that had drawn his attention before. There was a statuesque beauty to admire in Rhys's body that could only be the outcome of amazing genes. It didn't appear that Rhys cared a lot about eating, so it was a wonder he hadn't become too skinny for his height. One aspect Mason noted briefly was how well-groomed Rhys kept himself.

"You might think I'm vain," Rhys said softly, taking him by surprise. He let his hands traveled down his chest and abdomen, in a gesture that Mason could only interpret as erotic. "But Toby liked my body like this, so I think I go through the motions still, just to ... keep him happy." The last words were a whisper.

Mason said nothing. He couldn't help it. As Rhys moved around, he took in the slender hips, the long legs, the shapely buttocks as he turned and dimmed the lights. On purpose, he tried to look away from Rhys's sex, but it was all in vain. Rhys stopped in front of him, so he couldn't miss it. That was the only part where Rhys appeared to let his body hair grow. It was only a tad darker than the one on his head. From that distance, Mason could sense the smell of clean skin and the same thing that had tormented him since he had met Rhys Harmony. There was a subtle sweet scent that drew him in, playing with his sanity. He moved his head away, cursing himself for acting so irrationally around this man.

"Am I a burden?" Rhys asked suddenly. "You can't bear to look at me."

"You're mistaken about the reason," Mason replied.

"It's all right. You're my bodyguard, and you've already outdone yourself. Maybe it's for the better if I don't impose --"

Mason stood up abruptly. Since Rhys was a bit taller, it was challenging to dominate him with his eyes, but Mason had other methods to make that beautiful, sad mouth stop spouting all those self-deprecating things. He buried both hands in Rhys's hair and pulled him close. There was no resistance, only a small gasp before Mason covered Rhys's lips with his. It didn't matter that it was pure insanity. It didn't matter because it was the only right thing to do.

Mason took the reins. It could be a small reprieve from the darkness. As he deepened the kiss, Rhys embraced him. Mason shaped the shoulder blades, and then the spine, with both hands, letting them go lower until they found purchase in firm buttocks that molded against his palms as if they were made to be touched like that.

He took Rhys to the bed, climbing on top of him, kissing him all the time, to stop him from saying anything, from thinking about nightmares and strangers wanting to hurt him. Rhys had told him that he was safe in his arms. Now, Mason wanted nothing but to prove it.

He didn't bother to undress, but pressed his body against Rhys, connecting everywhere. Long legs and arms wrapped around him, creating a cocoon to keep them both away from the world. It was maybe not ideal, but just moving in unison like that while their mouths never let go was enough for an assurance.

"Take me, Mason," Rhys begged in a strangled voice. "Make me yours tonight."

Words like that were enough to destroy the last shred of sanity he had left. If that were the last night on earth for him as he knew it, it would be fine.

"Forgive me," Mason whispered, and he moved just enough to free himself from his shorts.

Rhys wet two fingers, sucking them into his mouth, all the time holding eye contact with Mason. He writhed as he used his own saliva to prepare himself. Mason pushed himself up, hovering above Rhys, not wanting to break the gaze that held them together.

"Come, please," Rhys said in a breathless whisper and put one hand on Mason's hip to guide him.

It couldn't be enough. Mason wanted to deny himself, the soaring desire, but Rhys grabbed his cock for a short moment, and his worries disappeared.

"Please," Rhys whispered.

Mason pushed himself back, kneeling in front of an image that took his breath away. Rhys lay in front of him, his legs parted, ready for taking. He had thrown one arm over his forehead, a simple gesture that made his lean chest muscles stretch. His abdomen was rising and falling with each breath. He held his other hand over his sex, cupping the balls and pulling them up in a gesture of surrender.

Mason cursed under his breath. He couldn't continue like this. Rhys looked at him, his eyes at half-mast, moist and begging, his lips parted and allowing a rosy tongue to flick over them now and then. He grabbed Rhys's legs and pushed them up. He kissed the long fingers hiding the beautiful sex underneath and moved his lips lower. That was a thing to savor. Rhys adjusted his position to offer him easy access.

Mason used everything he knew. He bit the inside of Rhys's thighs gently, so smooth and inviting, and then he delved into the main course. His tongue pressed and teased, helping the tiny hole open slightly.

Come hell or high water, Rhys was his tonight, and none of the Levines of the world would come between them in these moments of brief happiness. Mason knew teasing could only do this much, so he used his hands, rough and hard, to help Rhys open up.

Rhys murmured soft words, but no matter how they appeared to lack any sense, Mason knew what they meant, to the letter.

“Come here,” Rhys whispered.

Mason stopped, not understanding.

“I want you in my mouth, just a little.”

Mason moved and straddled Rhys’s chest. The sight of his cock being quickly grabbed by soft lips made him groan. If Rhys wanted it to end fast, he only had to keep it up like that.

Rhys’s beautiful blues were innocent enough when their owner looked up, but Mason wasn’t easy to fool. He ran one hand through Rhys’s hair. “I won’t mind it,” he cooed. “But what about your other little hungry hole?” Rhys let Mason’s cock slide from his mouth in an instant. Mason grinned and caressed the beautiful lips that looked so good wrapped around his cock. “Thank you.”

Mason needed to control himself a little. Back in position, he was trapped again by Rhys’s arms and legs. This time, he went for the prize. Any delay, and they would both start losing it for real. The lost look in Rhys’s eyes spoke of a desire as maddening as his.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” he chanted softly as he used his entire body to push forward and invade the other’s body.

“Don’t be,” Rhys said back. “I want you. All of you.”

Mason didn’t have to be told twice. They shared the tremble that went like a short-circuit through both their bodies when Mason sheathed himself into Rhys’s body. From there on out, it would be their story. Rhys dug his fingers into Mason’s back, as they began moving in the rhythm that must have been familiar to both, from other times, and other lovers. Tonight, they were one, and the only one for the other, and nothing could destroy that.

“You’re so beautiful,” Mason whispered into Rhys’s ear while showering with kisses every little patch of skin his lips found.

“You’re everything I need,” Rhys said kindly.

Mason squeezed his eyes shut. How many times had he fucked only because there was a need demanding it? Tonight, it was about need, but it wasn’t all. Or it was a different type of need, one that went deeper, stronger, all-conquering, like an unstoppable force.

He could go ahead and say it was nothing but a physical attraction like no other, but as his mind, his soul, and his heart let themselves dragged into the torrent of sensations washing over him, he knew he was a liar of the worst kind.

“Come inside me, Mason,” Rhys demanded in the same sweet, breathless voice like before. “Make me feel whole.”

It wasn't only about giving. That was a simple truth Mason knew well. Guilt could come later, guilt about taking what wasn't his to take. He obeyed the whispered command, as he pushed his tongue into Rhys's mouth, to deepen the connection that came with the fleeting penetration, in a useless effort to prove through a physical gesture what should have been conveyed in other ways.

They stood embraced. Too lost in what he felt, Mason realized, too late, that he had been an inconsiderate lover. He moved to touch Rhys's cock, eliciting a small shiver from the other. His fingers met wetness.

“I don't think I could do it once more so fast,” Rhys said.

Mason brought his fingers to Rhys's mouth and moved them slowly over the arched lips.

“You're a bit of a perv, Mason,” Rhys scolded him playfully.

“What's perverted about this?” Mason didn't let the comment bother him. He dipped his fingers again in the mess on Rhys's abdomen and continued his work of art.

“I don't know,” Rhys replied. He didn't move his head away. “Maybe it's the way you do it.”

“Hmm,” Mason offered instead of a reply. He leaned in to steal a quick kiss and then licked Rhys's lips. “Double sweet. Just as I thought.”

Rhys licked his lips, too. “I don't think it's sweet. It must be your imagination.”

Mason rubbed his nose against Rhys's cheek. “No, it's not.”

He rolled over to lie on his back. Was the guilt late for a showoff? Why didn't he feel anything like that?

Rhys moved to place his head on Mason's chest. He used one hand to caress Mason's pecs, brushing over the nipples in an affectionate gesture, not one calculated to incite arousal. “Do you regret it?”

“I'm still in your bed, right?” Mason said.

“I'm sorry. I'm a bother, always asking for confirmations.”

Mason wrapped one arm around Rhys and held him. “If it helps, it was fantastic.” After sex, the words no longer came easy to him. As his blood chilled, he remembered that he wasn't there to get his rocks off.

Rhys laughed. “It was.”

“Can I ask you something, Rhys?”

“Sure.” Rhys yawned and threw one leg over Mason’s body, caging him.

“What’s with you and the dark? I mean, did anything happen to, you know, dislike it so much?” Mason didn’t miss the tension in Rhys’s shoulders, so he embraced him tightly.

“It’s all in the past,” Rhys replied.

“Did Toby chase away the nightmares?” Mason felt selfish for asking. It served no purpose but his own reassurance to ask that.

“Yes.” Rhys didn’t elaborate.

Mason hated himself for pressing forward, but he needed to do it if he was ever to find Toby’s killer. “He was your other half, right?”

Rhys sighed. “Yes, he was.”

“So why were you guys fighting so much?”

“People who love each other fight from time to time.”

Rhys was slipping from his hands, and Mason hated that he had the diplomatic abilities of a brick. “Not like that.”

“How would you know?” Rhys became defensive.

Mason was well aware that he was one second away from being thrown out the door, with a figurative boot in his ass.

“I suppose I could tell you,” Rhys added. “It doesn’t matter anyway.”

Mason waited, his ears perked up.

“He wanted me to give up on music and break all ties with everyone I knew. To move away.”

Mason could feel his eyebrows shooting up in surprise. That was completely different from what the tabloids had said. “Why?” he asked the only logical question that came to his mind.

“He refused to say, no matter how many times I asked. I suppose I got what I wanted,” Rhys said, a new kind of bitterness creeping in his voice. “I have my music, but I don’t have Toby anymore. If I had only listened to him, he would still be alive and mine. So, you see, Mason, no punishment is too little. If the darkness wants me, I should just give in already.”

“No,” Mason said with determination and pulled Rhys to him in a protective gesture. “You shouldn’t. What happened to Toby, it wasn’t your fault.”

“What do you know, Mason?” Rhys started to struggle a little against his hold.

“Just this. That I won’t let you punish yourself anymore.”

“Really?” Rhys sounded incredulous. “Because you’re my bodyguard?”

It wasn’t lost on Mason what those words meant. He wasn’t anything else, just as he should have known. He set his jaw. “Yeah, because of that,” he said in a hard voice.

The warmth from before still lingered, but their bodies were strangers now, just as they were. Mason released his hold, and Rhys moved away. He could tell by the rustling noises that Rhys was wrapping himself in a blanket. He looked only to be met by a turned back. What business did he truly have to get in this emotional mess?

There was no simple answer to that. Mason moved without overthinking and draped his body over Rhys.

A small sigh followed. “I’m sorry, Mason. You didn’t deserve that. You would be better if you didn’t get involved with me. I’m nothing but a cluster fuck.”

“And? If you think that this is enough to make me stay away, you’re wrong.”

To his surprise, Rhys laughed softly. “Because I’m a good lay?”

Mason smiled. “Well, that’s a pretty strong reason, don’t you think?”

Rhys relaxed in his arms. “Then I can live with it. Just let me get the lights.”

“I don’t mind sleeping with them on,” Mason said.

“I told you, Mason. When you’re around, I’m safe.”

Mason allowed Rhys to get out of the bed and turn off the lights. They found each other in the dark, and Rhys carefully wrapped the blanket around both of them. Mason smiled against the small kiss pressed against his lips.

He still didn’t feel guilty.

## *Chapter Fourteen – Fresh Coat Of Pain*

Mason was surprised to find the place next to him empty when he opened his eyes at the same usual time in the morning. A simple check told him that the other side of the bed was still slightly warm, a sign that its occupant had left it minutes ago. There was no shower running, this time. Mason was on his feet in an instant. He checked the bathroom after knocking shortly, but Rhys wasn't there.

He drew one long breath and released it slowly. Rhys could be downstairs making breakfast. It wasn't like him to sleep so soundly; Mason cursed himself. He should have been able to tell when Rhys had gotten up from the bed.

He didn't waste any time and hurried out of the room. Maybe he was overly sensitive when it came to the man he was hired to protect, but his sudden absence hurt Mason in ways he had a hard time making sense.

Billy was right about his gut instinct saving his ass many times before. But Mason could do without another special friend he had, subdued anxiety related to everything and everyone he cared about. Right now, that little fellow was running the show, and Mason didn't like it.

He first checked the first floor, where another bedroom, untouched, was. Was it something intended for guests? Mason threw a cursory look around the room, but nothing was out of place. He continued with what looked like a painting room, and one that served as some sort of home gym. By how things were just stuffed in there, Mason could only assume that the equipment was new, and no one had used it until now.

At a steady pace, he went downstairs and checked the kitchen, the isolation room, and was about to knock on Billy's door when his partner walked out of his bedroom, his hair a bird's nest. Mason would have appreciated the comical effect, but there was no time for that. "Billy, have you seen Rhys?"

Billy rubbed his face. "No. I just woke up."

"He's not anywhere in the house."

Billy straightened up and walked past Mason.

"Where are you going?"

"Checking the cameras," Billy replied.

It couldn't be that efficient, but Mason followed. He stopped for a second to grab his phone from his room and started calling Rhys. There was no answer.

"He left about fifteen minutes ago," Billy announced.

“He left? On his own?”

Billy threw him a brief look. “He’s not jailed here. He can come and go as he pleases.”

Mason wasn’t happy with that. As long as Levine had hidden interests in Rhys that sounded sinister, to say the least, Mason wanted to have his eyes on him all the time. “Let me see.”

Rhys walked through one of the hallways surveilled by the cameras. He was casually dressed in a light sweater and cargo pants. He didn’t look like someone who wanted to go for a run, but it couldn’t be some official meeting he needed to attend that early in the morning.

Mason pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes. “What the hell, Rhys?” he murmured to himself.

“You two didn’t fight last night, I hope,” Billy said.

“Far from it,” Mason offered.

Billy quirked an eyebrow and then smiled. He opened his mouth.

Mason frowned. “We don’t have time for your twenty questions.”

“I didn’t even ask one!” Billy protested.

“What are we going to do now? If only we put one of those apps on Rhys’s phone --”

“Yeah, if only,” Billy interrupted him. He showed his phone to Mason, moving it from side to side like he was performing a hypnotizing number.

“Give me that.” Mason grabbed it and stared at the screen. “We need to follow him.”

“Hmm, I usually agree with you, chief, but are we going to stalk Rhys? He might just want to be alone a little.”

“That’s not a luxury he can afford right now,” Mason said through his teeth.

Damn. He had made a terrible mistake. It wasn’t wise to let his heart run the show; one wrong step and Rhys could be in grave danger. Mason stared at the screen while he made up his mind. There would be no more mistakes from now on.

Billy observed him for a moment. “Is there something you’re not telling me? I doubt Rhys is going to get smashed so early in the morning. I mean, we’re here mostly because we need to keep him from doing something to hurt himself, right?”

“You are annoyingly relaxed, Po. Who’s the senior here, huh? If I say we need to follow him, we do.”



“All right, chief, your call. But I won’t be the one put in the doghouse,” Billy said with a small shrug.

That was a risk he was willing to take. Mason changed into his suit in record time, and, to his relief, Billy was also ready when he went out of his room. He needed to make a few things clear with Rhys, such as no wandering on his own, and that from bodyguard to the person in need of protection.

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It looked like Rhys had taken a ride, probably a cab, and now stopped at his destination. Billy had the phone mounted on the dashboard so that both could see it.

“What’s there?” Mason tapped on the phone screen to zoom in.

Billy sighed. “It’s a cemetery.”

Mason looked out the window at the scenery moving by. They were on the outskirts of the city, which meant that the cemetery was new. Freshly dug graves were hardly a sight he could agree with so early in the day. Rhys had gone to see Toby. After the night they had spent together, guilt must have still chosen its victim. Mason wished it had been him its target, not that he was spared right now. He knew precisely what punishment he deserved.

As chilling as the thought was, it brought clarity. They had no business fooling around, not with wounds still so bone-deep. Last night, after all, had been a mistake, and he needed to get it through his thick skull that things were what they were.

It had to be a liberating thought, too. With no distractions, Mason could finally focus on what mattered most to protect Rhys from whatever plans Levine had with him. He could do that better if he kept his distance, both physical and emotional. His shoulders dropped under the weight of that decision.

“What do you think he’s doing there?” Billy asked, stopping his train of thought.

“He must have gone to see the grave,” Mason replied and schooled his face into neutral.

“I don’t think he has ever been here,” Billy commented.

“How can you know that? He’s been out of rehab for more than a month now, right?”

“I don’t think Levine let him.”

Mason stared at Billy’s profile. “You asked me if I’m not keeping something from you. I think that should be my line. How on earth did that kind of information land in your lap?”

“It was in the papers.” Billy didn’t seem fazed one bit. “Levine declared, loud and clear, that it wouldn’t do Rhys any good to have anything to do with his former lover.”

“When was that? And former lover? Were those his words?”

“It was relatively recent. Someone must have remembered Rhys or caught whiff that he was barely out of rehab. And that reporter asked Levine a series of questions. Let’s just say that Levine dropped plenty of hints that Rhys is in his care now and there is a growing bond between them.”

“So that’s what she meant about the rumors,” Mason said.

“She? Who?”

Mason pursed his lips. He really needed to keep himself in check. “Some young girl at the party last night. She kept telling some other girl that Rhys and Levine are together.”

Billy appeared to process the information for a bit. “Yeah, I guess it’s pretty much gossip fodder right now. But when Levine gave that interview, it was a surprise. I mean, Levine Goldman might have no wife or children, at least not the kind paparazzi have found about so far, but he didn’t use to be known for relationships with men.”

“Yeah, pretty weird. That Renzo dude also said something,” Mason said, happy to push the conversation away from his slip of the tongue.

Billy nodded. “Yeah. Quite the surprise for everyone. Just like what Levine said about Rhys being better without Toby.”

“Shit.” Mason sighed and moved his head to the sides in an effort to make himself more comfortable. It was not possible while hearing about Levine’s web of deceit. “Does Rhys know?”

“I don’t think so. But I guess that Levine must have told him not to visit Toby’s resting place.”

“So, Rhys is going against his will now.”

“It must be. But can you blame him?”

“No. It’s not my place anyway. But he shouldn’t be there alone, right now.”

“Chief, we know where he is now. Can’t we give him some space? I don’t think he’ll be too happy to see us there.”

“We’re hired to take care of him, not to make him happy.” Mason looked ahead. He could already see the cemetery gates.

“He’ll hate us for it,” Billy added.

“You just stay in the car. I’ll take all the blame. But Rhys Harmony is not allowed to do whatever the hell he pleases while he’s in our care.”

Billy remained silent. Mason appreciated it. That was one less problem for him to worry about.

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Billy didn’t say anything when he got out of the car without one look back. Mason walked through the cemetery gates and scanned the surroundings. Few people were there at that hour, so it couldn’t be that hard to spot Rhys in that sea of tombstones.

He walked purposefully, aware of what it waited ahead. Rhys was knelt in front of a tombstone, at the end of a long path, his back to the world. Mason stopped a few feet away. Rhys didn’t notice him. He spoke in a low voice, and it was hard to make the words, but one could easily guess them.

“You could have told me you wanted to come here today,” he said loudly.

Rhys looked at him over one shoulder. His eyes were red-rimmed and tired. “What are you doing here?”

Mason put his hands in his pockets. “My job. Nothing else.” If it was an unfeeling bastard he had to play to be taken seriously, so be it.

Rhys stood up. “How did you know where I was?”

None of them moved. It was better to keep the distance from now on. “It doesn’t matter. It’s part of my job.”

“So you followed me.”

“If this is how you want to put it, yes.”

Rhys frowned and crossed his arms over his chest. “I don’t get you, Mason.”

“And I don’t get you,” Mason replied. “But it’s fine. You don’t have to like me. I’ll do my job regardless of your attitude toward me.”

“Attitude?” Rhys stared at him in surprise.

Mason looked around, mimicking boredom. “You’re here now, after you spent last night with me. I guess that says it all.”

Rhys blanched as if he had just been slapped. “You’re different from last night.”

To pretend he didn't hurt inside like hell was a feat of strength. "Well, the light of day usually makes things look a little different."

Rhys didn't say a word. "You're a scumbag, too? Is this what you're trying to say? Funny how you don't look at me while letting your mouth run like that."

Mason turned his eyes and pierced through Rhys's soul if the way he took one small step back was any indication.

It was for a good cause, and good causes trampled everything else. If he was incapable of watching after Rhys, while his dick dealt the cards, then his dick had to be put in place. After all, it wasn't that big a sacrifice, right?

"All right." Rhys put his arms around himself and looked away. "I'll remember to put in a special request each time I must get out of the house."

"Don't play the spoilt celebrity with me, Rhys." Mason hope his hard voice was enough to let the other know that they weren't playing.

"Don't say my name in that commandeering tone. You're light years away of ordering me around." Rhys pushed past him, ramming his shoulder hard into Mason on his way out.

That should have pissed him off. That should have made him grab Rhys, shake him, and tell him that he was in danger. Mason kept silent. The contact of their bodies, while brief and the result of Rhys's annoyance with him, had made him happy for one moment. That was another thing he needed to keep in check.

Without a word, he followed Rhys. Apparently, there was no need to point out the obvious. With hard steps, Rhys headed straight to the car. Behind the wheel, Billy made himself little in a comical effort to become invisible. Mason hurried. When he had told Rhys not to play the role of a spoilt celebrity, he had meant every word, and that implied that Billy shouldn't be at the receiving end of his wrath.

But Rhys just got inside the car, placed his crossed hands in his lap, and stared ahead, his chin high. Mason climbed next to him and observed him for a while. It wasn't hard to notice fresh tears hanging from the copper blond eyelashes. Unfortunately, he was the cause, or maybe, he was just flattering himself.

"Go ahead, jailers," Rhys said in a trembling voice. "Take me whatever I need to be."

"Billy has no hand in this. I forced him to drive us here," Mason said.

"Billy, you may take us back," Rhys said, this time a tad appeased. It was evident that he was ignoring Mason on purpose.

“Sure thing, Rhys,” Billy replied. A small exchange in the rearview mirror made Mason cringe. That was one hell of an ‘I told you so’ look. If even someone as good-natured as Po looked at him like that, it had to mean that he was bad.

Nonsense. There were more important things at play. “Step on it, Billy,” he ordered and tapped his palm a couple of times on the back of the chair.

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To his relief, Rhys chose to lock himself in the isolation room and make music. There was a camera installed there, unlike the many bedrooms of the house, so after watching him for a few minutes on the monitor, Mason decided that he could see about other pressing matters.

Was Toby still following Levine? He didn’t like it when his favorite ghost went into radio silence like that. Was it a good sign? A bad one? Was he on to something? Mason had just had an idea, so he needed to make sure Billy was on it.

“I might have to go out for a bit,” he told his partner.

“Do you need to blow some steam?” His words were met with a smirk.

Sometimes, Mason really thought Billy could be a bit too smart for his own good. “Why would I need that?” He used a gruff tone on purpose.

Billy didn’t waver under his pointed look. “I wasn’t there, but Rhys must have given you a piece of his mind.”

Mason shrugged. “I just made a few things clear. It’s in his best interest to understand that he cannot just walk out of the house without telling anyone where he’s going.”

“Hmm, I don’t quite think that was the main topic the conversation. Don’t back down now, Mason. It might get ugly.”

The warning wasn’t missed, but admitting to his transgressions wouldn’t be of any help. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. I’m a bodyguard, and so are you. We’re here to do our job. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Billy shook his head and put on the face of a displeased granny upon seeing her grandkids splashing mud on their barely washed clothes. “Wrong move, Arnie, wrong move.”

It was hard to keep his head straight between Rhys’s disappointment, Billy’s scolding, and ... where the hell was Toby?

“Missed me?”

Mason suppressed a curse with difficulty when Toby stuck his head through the wall, close to his right shoulder. They needed to have a small conversation about ghost-appearing etiquette. Heads sticking through walls were a no-go.

“What are you looking at, Mason?”

Billy’s question drew him back to the sane world. “Nothing. I was just thinking. Listen, just keep an eye on Rhys. Don’t let him do anything stupid, all right?”

“He would wring your neck if he heard you talking like that,” Billy pointed out.

“Let him try,” Mason said and turned on his heels. “I’ll be back in a couple of hours.”

“Sure thing. Just don’t get smashed, okay?”

Mason threw Billy a curt look. “Do I look like a guy who gets smashed?”

Billy shrugged. “You gotta blow steam somehow, Arnie. Even a guy like you has to.”

Yeah. He had done that plenty the night before, and that had only gone to prove that he was stupid to let temptations make a mess of him. With his chin, he pointed at Toby to follow him.

“What did I miss?” Toby asked as soon as they were out of the surveillance room.

“Nothing much,” Mason replied through his teeth. “Rhys went to see your grave.”

“I hate that place.”

Mason stopped and turned toward Toby. “Do you know where it is?”

“Yeah. Only that I can’t get near. It’s like a force field around it or something.”

Mason sighed. “Are you taking me for a fool? Come on. Spit out the truth.”

Toby made a disgusted face and pretended to shake. “Okay, it’s not a force field. But when I get near, well, it scares the bejesus outta me.”

“Unfortunately for you, what I have in mind might scare you even more.” Mason stopped in his room shortly to change his shirt. As he dressed up, he looked at Toby. “Well, what news do you have? You’ve been on Levine’s tail for hours.”

“Where are we going?” Toby ignored his question, which caused a new bout of irritation in Mason.

“Somewhere your memory should get a well-deserved jog.”

“Are you pissed at me?”

“No. Why would you say that?”

“Because you act like you’re majorly pissed at me.”

Mason put on his suit jacket and buttoned it up. “Jeez, I don’t know. Getting haunted and all that can do that to a guy.”

Toby narrowed his eyes. “You slept with Rhys, didn’t you?”

Fuck. He was supposed to be the pissed one, not some ghost who couldn’t remember the guy who was still hurting over him. He chose to remain silent.

“You did,” Toby said matter-of-factly. He followed Mason closely. “So are you pissed? I should be pissed.”

“Oh, really? Who told me to go and hold him?” Mason stopped in front of the door. He needed to control his face before everyone else ended up thinking him a complete nutcase.

“Aren’t you tired of hearing your own voice?”

“That’s what I should ask you,” Mason whispered.

“All right, spit it out, buddy. What the hell happened? And tell me where we’re going already. This suspense is literally killing me.”

“That wouldn’t be a first for you, right?”

Toby gasped and put one hand over his face in a theatrical pose. “Are you ghost-shaming me now?”

Mason had to bite hard on the inside of one cheek to keep from laughing. All right, so he was getting a bit worked up, and since no one else understood him, maybe it was high time to get out of his head a little. “We’re going to the place where you were murdered,” he offered in a normal voice.

Toby rubbed his arms and made a down face. “Do we have to?”

“We have nothing,” Mason explained and walked out of the room. “Except the breakthrough of finding out who you are, we haven’t made any progress.”

“There was that writing on the wall,” Toby pointed out.

“Which could mean nothing. We don’t know what it is. If it’s a clue, beats me what the hell it’s supposed to mean.”

“We also know that Levine has some disgusting plans with Rhys.”

“Again. It’s unrelated. Did you get anything from your stalking him?”

Toby shook his head with a gloomy look on his face. “Except the fact that he likes to fuck over his business partners, not much.”

“Well, I can’t say I’m surprised. Let’s focus on your case, for now. Rhys is safe here, with Billy, and we won’t be away for long.”

“Oh, Mason, did you just include me in the team?”

“What?” Mason wasn’t sure what Toby meant by that.

“You said ‘we won’t be away for long’. So we’re like partners now! I’d fist bump you if I could.”

Mason sighed. “Well, it looks like Rhys’s type was childish and immature, after all.”

“Ah, ah, do I sense a little bit of envy? Come on, man, you’re the guy sleeping with him. You can’t hold it against him that he, um --” Toby stopped as if he couldn’t remember what he wanted to say.

Mason ran one hand through his hair. “He still loves you. I know.”

“Right,” Toby admitted. “Not that I want to get between you two or anything.”

“It’s only because you can’t. Trust me, if you remembered how it used to be between the two of you, you’d want to kick my ass into tomorrow.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Mason shook his head. He was talking way too much. It wasn’t hard to see how easy to love Rhys was; he knew that already.

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It hadn’t taken him too much digging to learn the name of the club where Toby had gone partying for the last time in his life. Or maybe it hadn’t been that much partying, after all.

“We’re here,” he told Toby as soon as he was out of the cab.

The ghost was already in front of the club, and it appeared that he was carefully examining the name hanging on top of the entrance. Most probably, at night, the single word was neon-lit, but right now, it gave that odd impression of night places lying dormant like beasts during the day. It didn’t look like it was open either. The personnel and usual patrons could still be asleep, seeing how it was before lunchtime.



Something in the way Toby stared at the entrance made Mason slow down and look around carefully. “What is it, Toby? Do you recognize something?”

Just like the club, the street they were on was deserted, and the silence unnerved him. It was just a sensation, something in the air.

“I do,” Toby said shortly.

Mason rein in the sentiment of triumph. His hunch had been right, as it seemed.

“But not from when I died,” Toby added.

“From when then?” There was no point in feeling disappointed. Their investigation was frozen in place, anyway.

“Levine wants to buy this place.”

Mason rubbed his forehead. Why would Levine want that? Was the fact that his protégé’s lover had been killed there not enough of a deterrent to prevent him from including the place on his list of investments?

“Did you hear it while you were stalking him?”

Toby nodded. “Yeah. He was pissed, too. He said something like,” he appeared to struggle to remember, “wanting to put his hands already on that dump Dreamland ...” He was making an effort to remember more. “Ah,” he exclaimed. “He said he wanted to buy it from that freaking piece of work --”

“Piece of work?” Mason echoed Toby’s words. “Who’s the owner of this dump, then?”

“That would be me,” a voice replied from his back.

Mason made a one-eighty in a heartbeat, only to come face to face with one of his most recent acquaintances. “Hello, Mr. Ora.”

“Renzo, please.” Renzo Ora was fashionably dressed in a navy blue suit, a bit more conservative than his outfit the night Mason had met him, but no less expensive. “Would you care to step inside my humble dump, Mr. Bodyguard?”

“Mason will do.”

“All right, Mason. Coming?” Renzo punched in a code and pushed the heavy door open.

Mason stared into the darkness inside. Did these people have something against windows? Without hesitation, he stepped inside. Renzo followed him with his dark eyes and smiled broadly as Mason walked by him. “I think I like you very much, Mason Knight.”

“Don’t jump to conclusions. You don’t know me.”

“Then let’s correct that.”

Mason wasn’t entirely sure he was in accord over that, but this time, he needed to go with the flow. He had plenty of questions, and it couldn’t hurt if Renzo had some answers.

## *Chapter Fifteen – The Jack Of Spades*

Mason walked straight ahead and winced when his knee connected with some piece of furniture.

“Watch your step,” Renzo called from behind.

The hint of laughter in his host’s voice wasn’t lost on Mason.

“It would help if you let some light in. What are you, a vampire?” Mason felt rightfully irritated.

“Those are merely rumors. But of course, as an obliging host, I suppose I could turn on a light or two.”

To Mason’s dismay, Renzo didn’t bother to allow some natural light in. Instead, a pair of vintage-looking table lights flicked open at his right. A dark red cloth covered the table they sat on. The entire scene seemed taken from a B-rated movie with tarot readers and denizens of the night. He shook his head and sighed.

“Please, take a seat, Mason. I’ll go fix us some refreshments.”

“There’s no need to --”

It looked like his host didn’t care about his refusal. He was lost somewhere in the darkness, and Mason blinked as he tried to adjust his eyes. With a shrug, he sat at the strange table and felt the cloth with his hands. It could be genuine velvet, but seeing how he wasn’t a member of the high class to know of such luxury, it could be just a cheap fabric cleverly impersonating a nobler one. The armchair on which he sat appeared covered in the same material. It was comfortable, too, so maybe calling the place a dump wasn’t a fair shot. But of course, Mason didn’t have the same taste and nose for the finer things in life as Levine.

Renzo returned with two tumblers filled with whiskey.

“I don’t drink.” Mason hoped that his curt manners would have Renzo cut to the chase. Although he was there with questions, it unnerved him that the club owner had materialized by his side as soon as he had gotten there. Now it felt that the tables had turned, and not in his favor.

Renzo sat across from him, lounging in his armchair. There was something sensual, yet dangerous in how he moved his arms, adjusting his cuffs, only to let his hands rest, one out of view, and one on the table. The fake candles on the table reflected in his dark eyes. If Mason hadn’t known any better, he would have thought Renzo Ora was getting ready to hypnotize him or start a conjuring session.

Speaking of which, Mason wasn’t sure if Toby had followed him inside.

“I’m here. This dude is weird,” Toby said as if he could read his mind.

Coming from a ghost, it seemed like a lot. But Toby had been friends with this guy, so it was worth a shot to try getting out of him some valuable information. He also needed to let Toby know Renzo Ora had been close to him, in one way or another.

“You used to be friends with Toby,” he started.

The forward statement took Renzo by surprise. And he wasn’t the only one. “Was I friends with this dude? And I died in his club?”

Mason tensed, his eyes trained on Renzo, and paid no mind to Toby’s surprise.

“I liked Toby.” Renzo angled his head, and a small, wistful smile appeared and faded quickly on his lips. “He was smart, witty even. Also, the kind of guy that was easy to have around.”

“If he was that easygoing, how come he fought with his boyfriend so much?”

“Hey, if the guy says I was easygoing, that clearly means that I wasn’t an asshole.” Toby was quick to grab at straws, but Mason was there for answers.

Renzo’s eyes moved slowly over him, but he didn’t flinch. The whiskey glass remained untouched on the table. They were two shooters, happening upon each other by accident, now evaluating whether they should be friends or foes.

The standoff didn’t last long. “Toby had a terrible secret to guard.”

“What secret?” Mason said the words along with Toby.

Renzo adjusted his position and crossed his legs. “That’s something I would like very much to know.”

“I think you know more than you let on, Mr. Ora.” Mason was curt and formal on purpose. He couldn’t hope to get anything out of befriending this man of dubious nature. They didn’t know each other; it was true. But it was futile to try. He couldn’t show his cards, and his opponent appeared to be playing for himself.

“How many times are we going to go over this? Should I call you Mr. Bodyguard, too?”

“You intend to mock me. I don’t.”

Renzo placed one index finger over his lips, and his eyes narrowed. “You’re Toby’s opposite. So unlike Rhys’s type.”

Mason couldn’t allow his questions to be dodged. There was no need for him to be reminded that. It had been clear from the get-go—no point to dwell over things that couldn’t be changed. “I don’t need to be my employer’s type. I’m his bodyguard, not a companion or a friend.”

A quirk of an eyebrow let him know that his denial didn't help. "And in what quality are you here?"

"As Rhys Harmony's bodyguard."

"I see. Did he ask you to look into Toby's death? Rhys was quite adamant when I last saw him, about your staying clear of anything regarding the topic." Renzo picked his glass, raised it in mock salute, and took a sip.

"Whoever killed Toby is still out there. Rhys might not think himself in danger, but I like to have all my bases covered."

"You're the kind of guy who really goes the extra mile. Hmm."

"What do you know of Toby's secret?" Mason changed tack. He didn't have time to go round and round with Renzo Ora.

"Only that it was terrible, and it scared him out of his wits."

"And he told you none of it. How come you know he had a secret then?"

Renzo appeared to ponder over his answer. "No one changes overnight."

"He asked Rhys to give up on music and run away with him who knows where. Did you know that?"

The dark eyes settled on him. "You know, this feels like an interrogation."

"And? Do you have anything to hide?" Mason didn't waver under Renzo's stare.

"Do you play cards, Mason? Any type of game?"

Mason shook his head. Indulging Renzo seemed tedious, but he could do that if it meant finding something about Toby. It was worth the trouble.

"But you must have heard of the expression 'poker face'."

"Yeah. Like everyone else. What's this got to do with Toby?"

"He had none."

"A poker face? What do you mean?" Mason stood still, although his fingers now itched for the drink in front of him. Renzo's manner of holding a conversation was unnerving, to say the least.

"It means that I noticed he was troubled. Rhys noticed he was troubled. A lot of people did."

Mason frowned.

“Please, have a sip. I promise it’s not poisoned,” Renzo said in a courteous tone.

He said nothing but took the glass. “You’re trying to tell me that his killer noticed, too.”

A short move of the head confirmed his theory.

“Then Toby’s secret must have been in regards to someone else, right?”

“That’s the logical thing to infer, isn’t it?”

Mason drank and enjoyed shortly the burn traveling down his throat. “What other logical things do you infer, Mr. Ora?”

“This rather feels like an imbalanced conversation. I will reply to your questions, but, in turn, you have to promise that you will answer mine. As truthfully as you can.”

Mason offered a small shrug. “Sure.”

“Don’t be so quick to agree to everything he says,” Toby warned. “I don’t trust this dude, as much as he pretends he used to be my friend. He’s kind of shifty.”

Mason agreed but couldn’t tell Toby that right now. Instead, he braced himself for whatever half-truths Renzo was willing to let go of.

“Toby must have known his killer,” Renzo said.

“So you don’t think it was something random?”

“No. He was scared for a reason. He didn’t want to talk about it, although I tried --”

“Maybe he was scared of you.”

Renzo smiled, and then, he started laughing. “Have I said that I liked you, Mason Knight?”

“Yeah. Repeatedly. It gets a little old after a while.”

“I didn’t kill Toby. Every crime needs a reason.”

“Maybe he found out you mix your whiskey with water or something.”

“Should I gather that the drink isn’t to your standards?” Renzo pointed at his glass.

“Far from it. It’s exquisite, and, I suppose, expensive. Kind of wasted on me. It was just a figure of speech. You strike me as a powerful man, Mr. Ora.”

“Why? Because I own a few clubs and I have an ear for great music?”

“Don’t play yourself down. You don’t look like the modest type to me.”

That remark earned him another laugh from his host. “That’s true. Well, Mason, it happens that I am, how should I say this? – a moderately powerful man. I’m looking forward to be more, but my area of interest is related only to the topics I mentioned: clubs and music.”

“Is there any rivalry between you and Levine Goldman?”

“The music industry can be a harsh mistress.”

“How about a straight answer?”

“I thought I just gave it to you. Of course we’re rivals, me and good ol’ Levine.”

“Because of Rhys?”

“No. Rhys signed with Levine long before I got to know him and Toby.”

“So what’s the rivalry about, then?”

Renzo relaxed in his armchair and observed Mason for a bit before speaking again. “Not all poker players play for money. Did you know that?”

Mason shrugged. “I can’t say that I did. But I don’t care for games based on luck. Whoever counts on the whims of fate like that is nothing but a fool.”

“I love it how you never mince words. Dealing cards can have meaning, and of another type than the one people who thirst for profit look for. It’s about running predictions, finding order in chaos.”

“I’d say it’s all a bunch of bull.”

“Of course. You don’t believe in luck, and therefore, luck has no rules for you.”

Mason stared at Renzo. What was the man hinting at again?

“Any other questions?”

“Yeah. How come you knew I would be here?” Mason asked directly.

“I didn’t. It’s just that this particular property has given me a fair share of headaches lately.”

“Besides Toby being murdered in the alley behind it?”

“After that,” Renzo explained, “someone has broken in a total of five times. It has always happened during the day, and it’s why I keep an eye on it. Satisfied?”

Mason nodded curtly. “What did they take?”

Renzo leaned over the table and looked him in the eyes. “Well, that’s the strangest thing. Nothing.”

“Has it happened before?”

“No. The place is, after all, a dump,” Renzo replied with the hint of a smile.

“Sorry about that. I’m no critic,” Mason offered.

“Right.” There was something dry in Renzo’s voice as he said that.

“So someone keeps breaking in, but doesn’t take anything?”

“Precisely. Which becomes a tad annoying, as you may imagine. Whoever does this, it’s a pro, too. No cameras catch anything, and they inexplicably skip frames, and it is only now that I’m considering to hire flesh and blood security.”

“What’s your educated guess?” Mason asked.

“Are you willing to listen to my theory? Here it is. Toby gets killed in the back alley, as you know it, but there’s no murder weapon. The police come, check all the patrons here, and, you guessed it, no one has any suspicious looking object on them.”

“They arrested Rhys.”

“Because of the blood on his clothes. Yes. But they were quite thorough when they checked all the people who were here at the time Toby was killed.”

“Wait, weren’t they already home, in their beds, when Toby’s body got discovered?”

“Man, this is getting weirder and weirder,” Toby complained.

Mason was so focused on Renzo’s words that he wanted to slap a certain ghost upside the head. Too bad, he had no material body.

“No. The papers must have said something else, but Toby’s body was still warm when someone stumbled over him.”

“Who was that someone?”

“One of the cleaning people who work the night shift just to take broken glass and whatnot to the trashcans in the back.”

“But the police must have taken some time --”

“Not quite. They were prompt.”



“Are you trying to say that the killer was here, inside the club? That he let himself frisked by the police? And that he hid the murder weapon somewhere around and now he’s trying to recuperate it?”

Renzo began clapping his hands. “Quite a good theory, isn’t it?”

“But it’s just a theory. You must know your property, Mr. Ora. Can’t you find the murder weapon if what you say it’s true?”

“Would that I could. Right?” Renzo offered. “I personally supervised my personnel ransacking the place so that I could find that damned murder weapon. Nothing came out.”

Mason pressed his fingers against his temples. Something was missing from the picture, and he couldn’t pinpoint what.

“Even if the killer was here, maybe he threw the weapon somewhere. Or maybe he snuck out of the club before the police got to the murder scene.”

Renzo shrugged. “Everything’s possible. But why the mysterious burglaries that never end up with anything being taken?”

“That’s strange, all right. But shouldn’t the killer know where he hid the weapon? Why come again and again?”

“I’m as intrigued by all these as you are. Maybe he lost the murder weapon somewhere inside my club? Or someone changed its location by accident?”

Mason could sense that he was being led on, but he wasn’t sure where to and to what end. “Things as you tell them don’t make a lot of sense right now.”

“I suppose.”

For a few moments, it was nothing but silence between them.

Mason was the first to break it. “Were there many people inside the club that night?”

“Three hundred and eighty-four.”

Mason cursed under his breath. “The police must have taken all their details, right? Even so, such a big number --”

Renzo smiled and put one finger up. “But let’s not forget about the theory according to which Toby knew his killer.”

“Right. Of course. Besides Rhys, who else was here who knew him? I suppose they were with a group, right?”

Renzo nodded and reached for his pocket. "This is the list of names."

Mason took the piece of paper and stared at it. He didn't recognize any names until his eyes rested on one. "Ary Whitaker?"

"Ah, the little mouse. Have you met him?" Renzo didn't blink as he waited for an answer.

"The runner at the recording studio, right? Yes, I did. He appears to be Rhys's only real friend right now." He had no idea why he let that slip. Talking to Renzo was engaging, and he didn't realize when he had become willing to volunteer information.

"That breaks my heart." Renzo placed a demonstrative hand over his chest. "I cannot fathom why Rhys wouldn't see me as a friend."

"I have some ideas," Toby said, but Mason ignored him.

"Maybe he has his reasons," Mason said roughly.

"Ah, don't be like that," Renzo teased. "I walk the straight and narrow. I'm like the jack of spades, but on your side."

"I don't think I get the reference. And shouldn't you see yourself as the king of spades, at least?"

Renzo grinned. "I told you, Mason. I'm not that influential. I represent ambition and intelligence, and maybe," he allowed a second of suspension before continuing, "my purpose is to dethrone the king."

"The king being Levine?" Mason asked directly. All this roundabout way of talking started to become annoying.

Renzo ignored him. "Do you have any other questions?" Mason shook his head, so he continued. "Now it's my turn to ask you a few things."

"Go ahead."

"Who were you talking to in front of my club, earlier?"

Mason tensed right away. "To myself."

"Hmm, and yet it appeared as if you were talking to someone. Could it be that someone sent you here?"

Ah, so Renzo thought he was talking on the phone or something along those lines. But, in a way, to admit to that lie would put Mason in a serious situation. "Nobody owns me. As I said, I was talking to myself."

"Are you a lonely man?"

The question took Mason by surprise. “I don’t see what relevance would such a thing have, under the circumstances.”

“You’re calling him Toby.” In the same manner Mason had already gotten used to, Renzo started another conversation thread.

“And how should I call him? The dead guy?”

“Hey, man, not funny,” Toby complained. “I might be dead, but I’m sensitive about it.”

“You didn’t know him, so you could call him Rhys’s boyfriend, Tobias Davis, or even, yes, the dead guy. To my ears, it sounds like you call him as you would a friend.”

“Am I a friend to you, Mason?” Toby intervened, visibly excited.

“It’s the easiest way to refer to him,” Mason replied. He felt more and more irritated. “Any other things you want to know?”

“In a hurry? All right. Have you fucked Rhys already?”

Mason set his jaw hard. “It’s not in my job description.”

“Hmm. And yet, he wants you. Don’t let sexual frustration get in the way.”

“You’re wrong. There’s no such thing.”

“Ah. So, at least, you want to.”

Mason grimaced. “Anything else?” Two could play that game.

“Yes. When I told you not to let frustration get in the way, I was talking about Rhys's. You have my blessing to give it to him hard. If you don’t, I’ll feel obliged --”

“Don’t talk about him like this,” Mason said through his teeth.

Renzo grinned. “Ah, so you did sleep with him,” he said with satisfaction.

“Mr. Ora, you might want to brush a little those so called gentleman skills.” Mason was one breath away from taking a shot at breaking Renzo’s perfect nose.

“Don’t take it to heart, Mr. Bodyguard. Sometimes, I’m rude on purpose to determine the others to be honest. Don’t worry your pretty head. As I said, I’m on your side. And leaving aside my naturally flirtatious manner, I have nothing but Rhys’s wellbeing in mind.”

Mason shook his head. He had no poker face, either. It had taken Renzo very little to find out about him and Rhys. “Do you suspect Ary?”

“I thought we were done with the questions. But the little mouse? Do you think he has it in him?”

Mason hadn't thought of that for one moment, but now he understood where Renzo had wanted to bring him with all his leading on. “No, frankly I don't.”

“Don't hurry to discard him as a suspect.” Renzo was watching his every move like a hawk.

“He's too --” Mason didn't know what terms to use to describe Ary. No, he couldn't see him as someone turning murderous. Plus, he didn't look strong enough for something like that.

“Short?” Renzo completed his sentence. “Well, according to the police report, and here I am, divulging to you an important piece of information I came about with much patience and pain, Toby was hit and killed by someone shorter than him.”

Mason watched Renzo, looking for any signs of a bluff. But either the guy had a perfect poker face, or he was telling the truth. “That's why they had to let Rhys go,” he said matter-of-factly.

Renzo nodded in agreement. “So, you see, Mason, no one can be above suspicion.”

“Not even you?” Mason jabbed on purpose.

“I prefer legal means to get rid of any competition I may have,” Renzo explained and offered a magnanimous smile. “And Toby, as I told you, was a friend. Plus, I hope you noticed how tall I am.”

So full of himself. But the s.o.b. was attractive, and he knew it.

“Rhys told me you two just liked each other, but you weren't close.”

“Of course. That was because Rhys tended to get jealous easily.”

Mason's ears perked up. First, everyone had thought Toby was jealous; now Renzo offered a different version. Rhys, jealous? “Why would he? Toby was a pretty good looking guy --”

“Wow, thank you,” Toby commented.

“-- but it's not like anyone couldn't see that Rhys was the more beautiful. It would make more sense if Toby was the jealous one.”

“Maybe jealousy is a strong word,” Renzo admitted. “Rhys had bouts of insecurity that could drive anyone mad. Except for Toby. His entire world was Rhys.”

“And Rhys forbade you two to hang out?” Mason expressed his disbelief.

“No, nothing like that. But a love like they had,” Renzo said and began rubbing his bottom lip with one thumb, “it was strange and special. When they were together, you could tell that they

didn't need anyone in the whole wide world. There were days, after Rhys finished recording an album, when they disappeared together, maybe locked themselves in their house, and cut contact with everyone else. And they emerged from wherever they were during that time, their eyes shining, holding hands, and staring into each other's eyes as if they had just met and fallen in love. It was like a honeymoon over and over again. They didn't need many friends, as you can imagine."

Mason said nothing. Dead lovers were tough competition. What had he expected to hear?

"It sounds like we used to be madly in love," Toby said quietly.

Yes, that was the truth. And Rhys still loved Toby with all his heart, so it didn't matter what his body wanted. It was a good thing to hear it loud and clear like that.

Renzo stood up, a sign that Mason's visit was over. He followed his host's example without another word.

"I hope that, given our intel exchange, you won't be a stranger, Mason. And get as close to Rhys as possible. It might be that Toby had left some traces behind that could lead us to his killer." Renzo placed one hand on his shoulder as they walked out of the club.

After a short debate with himself, Mason decided to keep from shaking off the touch. There was something comforting in how Renzo held his hand there, but it could be a false sense of security. Mason was a bit annoyed at how at war he was with himself when it came to this man. Without a doubt, he was charismatic, but it wasn't like Mason to fall for cheap, politician-like, charms.

The light outside hurt his eyes, so he had to blink a few times to adjust his vision. Renzo didn't appear affected. "Were you ever interested in Rhys?" Mason addressed his last question.

"As in him as an artist, or a man?"

"Both."

"No. Feel free to court him, Mr. Bodyguard."

"I'm surprised you didn't tell me to go ahead and fuck him hard," Mason said tersely.

Renzo laughed and squeezed his shoulder. "That, too. I know he must need it."

Mason wanted to ask how he could know such a thing, but his phone rang.

"See you around, Mason," Renzo said and walked away from him as he answered.

Billy's voice came through. "Mason, hey, where are you?"

He straightened up. "Is it Rhys? Is he okay?"

“Yes. But I’m hungry, and if you’re not here to make lunch, I might opt for some unhealthy stuff.”

Mason breathed out, relieved. “Did he come out of the isolation room?”

“Not yet. He might be on a roll, creating and stuff. But I’m sure you can lure him out with a steak or something.”

“Are you sure you’re not the one in the mood for steak?”

“Hey, it’s a healthy choice, right? Come home, Mason,” Billy said fondly. “He misses you already.”

Mason didn’t reply to that. As a number one fan, Billy must have known how deep and unique the connection between Rhys and Toby had been. His decision was taken. He would help Toby and protect Rhys, but that without getting involved more than needed. There was no room for him. He was no one else but a passerby who had to play his role as a secondary character, and nothing else.

## *Chapter Sixteen – Mr. Lonely*

Toby was silent on their way back. Mason appreciated it, once, because he didn't care for Uber drivers thinking him insane for talking to himself, and second because there was not much to talk about. If he needed any confirmation that Rhys still loved Toby and would do so till the end of time, all he had to do was to replay in his head the conversation he had just had with Renzo Ora.

Not that he could ever ask Rhys to give up on the memory of a lover who had been, genuinely, his half. No, he could never be that kind of selfish bastard. And to what end? What could he offer? Conversations with former lovers flooded his mind. He had been called uncaring, cold, unfeeling ... The list was long. His armor was thick, and a beautiful man with a dead lover might have managed to pierce it, but that wasn't enough.

For a while, he had let his guard down. Rhys had needed him; Mason had just needed to get off. It couldn't be a fair trade, and it had to stop, whatever the hell he thought he was doing.

"I have to go check on the little mouse, then," Toby said curtly.

Mason couldn't begin to imagine what could be on the ghost's mind right now. He just nodded.

"Give me the address to that recording studio."

Mason pretended to check something on his phone and typed down the address to show it to Toby.

"Don't feel down, Mason," Toby said. "He'll have to forget about me, eventually. I have a pretty good feeling that I won't be coming back from the grave."

"He will never forget you," Mason said under his breath, eyeing the driver carefully.

"You tell him that he needs to," Toby said with determination.

"Don't count on me for it."

The car stopped. Mason offered Toby a strained look. He was met by melancholic eyes. Even if he couldn't recall his love for Rhys, at least, Toby could surely understand the magnitude of the feelings they had shared while together. After all, he was no stupid ghost.

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"Finally, home," Billy welcomed him.

"Yes. But you should learn to cook for yourself. You can't depend on takeaway all your life," Mason scolded him.

Billy grinned at him. “But I can depend on you for it. And you’re the one who keeps telling me that I should eat healthy. Just keep pushing my bike, dad, until I can ride by myself.”

Mason shook his head in mirth. “Just let me change into something more comfortable, and I’ll start. You’ll have to get Rhys out of that room, though.”

“So you don’t plan on talking to him,” Billy said in a motherly tone. “No problem. Leave it to me. By the time I’m through with you two, there will be nothing but rainbows and sunshines in this house.”

“And unicorns,” Mason said dryly. “Don’t forget about those.”

Billy snickered in reply. “Rhys will understand that you only care about keeping him safe. Once he sees that, there will be nothing but smooth sailing from that point on.”

“It’s good to have dreams,” Mason offered again. “Off you go, now. I don’t like people staring at me while I cook.” That wasn’t true, and Billy must have known it, but he understood the message, and that was all that mattered.

For the moment, Mason wanted to be alone with his own thoughts. He didn’t like Renzo’s theory about Ary, but it wasn’t wise to discard any possibility at the moment. Hopefully, Toby would get to learn more once he started stalking him.

He changed into a t-shirt and a pair of tracksuit pants and headed over to the kitchen. Cooking had always proved a respite, allowing him to meditate on the ebb and flow of life as he knew it. A lifetime ago, someone had taught him all he knew, and memories like those were as palpable as the food in front of him. It wasn’t true that people left nothing behind once they were gone. His hands moved fluidly as he prepared the steaks and the side dish, and his mind followed the events of the last days.

What did he know so far? Renzo Ora could have a bone to pick with Levine Goldman, but that rivalry must have run for quite some time, seeing how Levine was a big shot, and Renzo, according to the little info he had from Billy and Rhys, wasn’t exactly a newcomer to the scene. Mason discarded that tidbit of information. He needed to focus on what mattered, and that was finding out who had taken Toby’s life and left Rhys to fight with unhappiness and desperation on his own.

The knife in his hand hit the wood of the cutting board. *Ary better not be the culprit.* Mason couldn’t see himself hurting that boy; he couldn’t fathom him being the one behind Toby’s murder. Even if it had been nothing but an accident, that kind of thing couldn’t be forgiven. He recalled the short conversation he had had with Ary, playing it again and again in his head. No, as much as he looked into it, he couldn’t believe Ary to be the one he wanted to strangle with his bare hands right now.



Or was it Renzo trying to send him off on a wild goose chase? That fell more in sync with his gut instinct, but Mason didn't plan on jumping to conclusions. If Renzo was the killer, what business would he have, trying to get Rhys on board with finding the person who murdered Toby? He would do better to let sleeping dogs lie. Rhys was hurt enough, and he tried to forget.

How had Rhys been before all that tragedy in his life? Mason tried to picture a happy person, someone with nothing but love in his eyes, with an adoring boyfriend by his side. And yet, something of what Renzo had let on about Rhys and his insecurities didn't sit well with him. He seemed a complicated man, and given his background or what Mason had managed to learn from eavesdropping on Levine, that wasn't surprising. Nonetheless, Renzo had talked about it as if it had to be a nuisance.

Regardless of that, Mason needed to focus on nothing but his role in the drama he was living through no fault of his own. Yeah, he deserved the last penny, for having to disentangle the mystery of a murder that had taken place one year ago and fight off the intense desire he felt toward the man he was working for. Yet, it wasn't about money.

The nuisance Renzo was talking about was Mason's kryptonite. He wanted someone to depend on him like that. It gave him a sense of security that went deeper than anything that had to do with romantic feelings and sexual arousal. All the rough edges on which his soul hurt itself when he wasn't careful enough could be smoothen out by someone like that.

He couldn't allow himself to dream of such things because that someone was in love already, and not with him. It wasn't him Rhys wanted; it wasn't him Rhys needed.

Lost in his own mind, he wiped his hands on a kitchen towel. The sizzling of the steaks in the pan and the low hum of the vegetables steaming were the only sounds creating the acoustic background of his thoughts. He didn't notice when someone walked into the room.

"I suppose I owe you an apology."

Mason turned on his heels. "You suppose?"

Rhys walked toward him but stopped a couple of feet away. "I owe you an apology," he said, this time with more conviction.

Had there ever been a time when those beautiful blue eyes hadn't been filled with sadness? Mason hoped so. Life was, after all, a collection of moments of ups and downs. With all his heart, he hoped that Rhys had been happy with Toby during their time together.

"You're right. I should have told you about my wanting to go see Toby." Rhys followed an invisible line on the counter with his fingers, his eyes down. "You have a job to do, and you don't need me to make it more complicated than it is."

Mason steeled his resolve. As much as Billy wanted to see rainbows and unicorns, and Rhys wished to make peace with him, that didn't mean that he could allow the situation to go back to how it had been before. "I'm glad we're finally seeing eye to eye."

Rhys took another step toward him. Mason pretended to be busy with the cooktop, to avoid the non-verbal apology the other probably wanted to offer.

It looked like his determination to stay clear of any involvement hadn't been obvious enough. Rhys embraced him from behind and placed his cheek against the back of his neck. "I'm sorry, Mason. I promise it won't happen again."

"All right. You don't have to grovel."

The tender hands pressing against his chest stilled and then moved away.

"I understand. You're still mad. I will be good from now on." There was something in that anxious tone that made Mason want to turn and hold Rhys. He could recognize it, too, and hated himself briefly. But he decided against it.

Rhys's departing steps interrupted his debate with himself. All he had to offer was that. Good words and promises had never offered anyone anything. He would see the mystery surrounding Toby's death to the end, and then he would be out of Rhys's life.

Was that what he truly desired?

*Are you a lonely man?* Renzo's words came to mind. Maybe he was, but changing that was impossible.

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Billy filled the silence with happy banter, but there was no one to banter with, and Mason felt gradually more and more uncomfortable with his partner's efforts. Rhys offered a few laughs and replies, but his voice was strained, and his laughter forced, and Mason felt bad for him, too.

"Will you two cut it out already?" he said.

There was instant silence.

Mason sighed. "I just want to be able to do my job in peace. Rhys, just don't go anywhere without telling us where you are. We are here for your protection. You can count on us for everything."

There was no reply, and Mason didn't risk to look at either of his companions. "That is all," he added. "Now enjoy your meal, and don't worry about a thing. That's what I'm in charge of." The last bit was directed at Rhys, and no one else.

The rest of the meal was spent in silence.

“I’ll do the dishes,” Rhys announced, and he got up.

Mason didn’t stop him. Billy, the traitor, claimed he had something to do and made himself scarce. Great; that left him in the room with the one person he didn’t want to be near right now, for no other reason than he couldn’t trust himself.

He looked at Rhys, taking in the slumped shoulders, the bent head. For a moment, he squeezed his eyes shut, and then, with a small curse under his breath, he got to his feet. Without a word, he took Rhys by the shoulders and turned him. He pulled him tight into his arms and held him close. “Don’t cry,” he ordered. “Just don’t, okay?”

“I’m not crying,” came the muffled reply. “I realized that you don’t like it.”

“I’m not a good man,” Mason said. “I’m always looking at the bottom line. I do things for my own gain. I don’t care about others, unless I have to.”

“You’re doing your best. And I think you’re the kindest man I know, Mason,” Rhys replied.

“Then you must have known some pretty shitty people in your life.”

Rhys snickered and hid his head into the crook of Mason’s shoulder. “Yeah, maybe.”

Good. The crisis was averted, for now. Mason sighed in relief.

“I’ve been thinking,” Rhys started. “About what Renzo said, that I should do something to find out who took Toby’s life.”

“That’s dangerous,” Mason said. His lips set in a straight line.

“Even if it is so, Renzo is right. How can I go on with my life, while that person is still out there, enjoying theirs, and Toby’s resting in the ground?”

Mason’s fingers curled against Rhys’s back. Although he wanted his cooperation so that he could learn more about Toby, having Rhys getting involved wasn’t supposed to be in the cards. “You leave that to me. Although it would help if you could tell me more about Toby’s last days.”

“Are you secretly a detective, Mason?” Rhys pulled away, but only so that he could look into his eyes. “I thought of going to the police again.”

“And do what? Have them reopen the case? On what basis?” Mason was rough on purpose, but he knew there was plenty of truth in what he was saying.

Rhys chewed on his bottom lip. “Toby has no one but me. There was no one to insist that they looked properly into it at the time.”

“And? Where you two married to have any legal claim? Don’t count on the law to take kindly to you, especially since you were a suspect.”

“Then I should hire a private investigator. By myself, I wouldn’t know what to do.”

“But I do,” Mason interrupted him, earning a curious look in turn. “And I have a feeling Levine wouldn’t approve of your spending money on having Toby’s death investigated,” he added quickly. “I doubt you can keep it a secret from him.”

Rhys cocked his head and observed him. “I ... yes, you’re right. How can I help then?”

“I’ll think of something,” Mason said. He had plenty of ideas what, but, for now, he needed to make sure that Rhys didn’t misinterpret his goodwill for something else. He let his arms drop.

It looked like his message went through. Rhys mimicked his move, and now they just stood facing each other, communicating without words.

Mason was the first to look away. “I want to keep you safe. That is all.”

“I know. You’ve done more than anyone else.”

“Levine spared you from spending time in jail.” It had to be said, and Mason needed to establish where Rhys’s loyalties stood when it came to the scumbag.

“It’s true. And put me in another.”

“Still.”

“Yes, still. Levine didn’t like Toby. He kept telling me that he was holding me back, not wanting to hear and understand that Toby was the reason I was able to move forward.”

Mason took a look at Rhys and brushed his hair out of his eyes. “I know you love him.”

Rhys looked back. “Thank you, Mason. For doing this. But there’s something else you want to say to me, isn’t it?”

He nodded slowly.

“You don’t have to. I understand. I’m still grateful. You pulled me out of the darkness and it wasn’t your job to do so. I’m nothing but a stranger to you. One day, I’ll have more to offer, and, if I’m lucky, you’ll still be within reach.”

Mason caressed the smooth cheeks and contoured the lips and chin with his thumbs. *If you ever want me.*

Rhys took one of his hands and placed a small, soft kiss inside his palm. “Whenever you’re ready, ask me about Toby.”

Not right now. Right now, he couldn't.

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"I have no intention to go tip-toeing around you, so here's the thing," Mason said, as soon as he was with Billy in the surveillance room. "I intend to find out who killed Tobias Davis."

Billy observed him for a moment. "How is that news?" He reached for a bag of chips on his desk, but a sigh from Mason stopped him. "I thought you were already on it."

"How did you ... Forget it. The thing is, as much as I might like to close my eyes and pretend to be nothing but a dumb bodyguard, I can't. I don't buy it that Levine hired us to keep Rhys from hurting himself. He doesn't look like he's ready to take to the bottle again. He is a mess because of some weird medicine Levine is feeding him. As I see it, the danger is somewhere else. And it has to be about Toby's killer."

Mason could read Billy's body language, even in the semi-dark.

"Why didn't Levine say it was about that the first time he hired us?"

"That's what I want to know," Mason replied firmly.

"Just don't ask him directly, please," Billy said.

"I don't intent to, but why are you telling me this?"

A shrug was the short answer. "You're the kind of guy who takes the bull by the horns, chief. But you can't grab the horns if it's not a bull you're dealing with."

"You're trying to tell me that it's a different animal I have to face?" Mason didn't suppress a smirk. How was it that Billy could read so much into the situation? It was assuring, in a way.

"Could be. A snake comes to mind."

"Ah, don't be mean," Mason teased.

"Me, mean?" Billy pointed at himself like he couldn't believe such an accusation had just been directed at him. "I'm just telling it like it is."

"All right, Po. Then let me see about this. Whoever killed Toby is out there. And they might try something nasty with Rhys, too."

"Care to tell me more?"

"At the right moment. I wouldn't want to put you in any danger. If anything happens, I prefer to bear all the responsibility."

“If you say so, chief. I’m with you, either way.”

“Funny. I thought you would be all over me to let you in what I’m doing.”

Billy put his hands up in surrender. “I know all about boundaries and how important they are. How are things between you and Rhys?”

“And here goes all you said about boundaries just one second ago.” Mason sighed exaggeratedly. “Nothing’s going on between us.”

“Hmm. But you surely did it last night.”

“Which was a mistake and both Rhys and I decided that it shouldn’t happen again.” That was not exactly what they had talked about, but it was close enough. Having Billy involved, with all his good intentions, was not advised.

“How disappointing.” It was Billy’s turn to let out a dramatic sigh. “Now there’s not going to be a wedding, right?”

“Were you planning to eat the entire cake? Why were you fixated on this wedding idea?”

Billy shrugged. “I don’t know. I just could hear the wedding bells ring is all.”

“Take your mind off of it. Don’t do like me. When you have a job to do, do it. Don’t get involved and keep it in your pants,” Mason warned.

“Yes, dad. Although I already love you and Rhys both.”

Mason shook his head in mirth. That was Po, and nothing could change him. “Let’s say I can live with that.”

Billy called for him while he had his hand on the doorknob. “If you need anything to help you in your investigation, you can count on me.”

“Okay,” Mason agreed. “How long until you get the results for those pills?”

“I should get them soon. I might have them tomorrow.”

“That’s good. I have a feeling they won’t be Advil.”

“That’s what my gut tells me, too.” Billy patted his belly. “It’s a good gut.”

“Just take care not to let it grow too big,” Mason teased him in turn.

That had been a satisfactory conversation. With one less thing to worry about, he could see about the most important stuff.

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He had chilled enough to face Rhys again, so he decided that it was no moment like the present to continue with what he needed to find out. His hand hesitated for a moment before knocking on the bedroom door. It felt like an eternity had passed since he had been there. No, for no reason, he would think of what had happened there the night before.

Rhys invited him in. When he walked inside, Mason noticed the papers and old photos spread on the bed. His legs tucked under him, Rhys was picking them and then placing them in an order that probably made sense to him.

“Is this a good moment for us to talk?” He could only congratulate himself for the neutral tone of his voice.

“Yes, please come. These are things I have left from Toby. I thought that they might help.” Rhys talked to him but didn’t look at him.

This would be harder than he had initially thought. Carefully, he sat across from Rhys on the bed and looked at the various things spread between them.

“You know that we were childhood friends, right?” Rhys began. He picked one of the photos and handed it to Mason. He noticed right away the two kids of around ten years of age against the backdrop of a house. They both wore face-splitting grins and hand-me-downs. Still, Mason could read, even in that photo, a certain melancholy on Rhys’s face. His eyes were angled, watching his friend, while Toby was valiantly staring right into the camera’s objective.

“Who took this picture?” Mason asked.

“We convinced another kid from our neighborhood to take it for us. He had one of those old cameras.”

“A Polaroid?”

“Yes, that. Anyway, I have no idea where we should start. I know you told me that you would be interested in learning about Toby’s last days, but it feels unfair. He was much more than what he showed during those last days.”

Mason could tell Rhys what he had found from Renzo, but just like with Billy, he didn’t want him involved more than it was necessary. He would settle things with Renzo later. “Feel free to tell me what matters.”

It was easier to take in the memories spread on the coverlet than look at Rhys.

“We grew up together. Toby’s folks passed away before he hit eighteen. Mine, well, I only had my dad. He might still be alive, but I don’t care enough to find out.”

Mason waited, but Rhys didn't elaborate.

"We decided to come here and strike it big. Toby believed in me so much." A short pause followed. "We met Ary, and he began coming to gigs with us. We didn't have enough equipment to require a third person, but a friend, that we needed both."

Mason recalled what Renzo had told him about how Rhys and Toby hadn't really needed anyone else in their lives.

"All right, maybe it was more Toby than me who needed someone else to talk to, besides me. When I make music, I'm not the most interesting companion, I must say. I was glad for Ary joining our little group."

And yet, there had been those jealousies, Mason pondered. Could it be that Rhys didn't see things like that?

"When I signed with Levine's company, we were so happy. We kind of threw a party for three." Rhys's voice turned wistful. "Ary, he --"

Mason took a look at Rhys. "He what?"

"He drank the most of all of us. And he kept asking me if I wanted to share Toby with him. I got a little mad. Maybe I drank too much, too."

"Was the alcohol a problem back then?" Mincing words would serve no one.

Rhys offered him a slanted look. "I got drunk only a couple of times in my life before ... you know, before Toby and I started fighting, two weeks before his death." He said the last words quickly as if he was afraid that they would physically hurt him if he kept them inside.

"All right."

"Feel free not to trust me. I can't really ask you that you do."

"I trust you," Mason said gruffly. "Go on."

"I found Ary a job at the recording studio. We were no longer as close as we used to. I also felt that there was some truth in what Ary had said back then. *In vino veritas*, as they say."

"So you were jealous of him."

"Yes, I was," Rhys admitted. "Call me old-fashioned, but as much as we were friends, I couldn't see myself in a threesome."

"What was Toby's stance on all that?"



“He laughed it off. He was a bit cocky, my Toby.” Rhys smiled for a moment. “When I reminded him of Ary’s words, he brushed them off, told me I shouldn’t sweat it. But I could say that he felt flattered.”

“Did you two fight over that?”

Rhys shook his head. “The only conflict I had was with Ary. Toby and I, we never fought. He always knew how to shut me up with a kiss.” Another smile flew over his face.

“Until you did,” Mason reminded him.

“Yes. It was so strange.” Rhys stared at the memorabilia in front of him. “It was like he was a different person. I asked him what was wrong, and, for the first time in our life together, he lied to me.”

The terrible secret. It seemed that Toby hadn’t shared it with Rhys, either. They were advancing at a snail’s pace. “How was he? How did it all start?”

Rhys pressed two fingers against his mouth and stared at the ceiling. It took Mason all his restraint not to reach for the slender neck and caress it. He could picture his rough hand wrapping around, his thumb brushing over a bobbing Adam’s apple, as its owner’s breath would grow deep and erotic.

He looked away.

“It was after I had a small performance at Levine’s house. It was one of those parties, like you witnessed.”

“Was Toby with you there?”

“Yes. He accompanied me everywhere.”

“And? What happened that night?”

“On our way back, Toby was distraught. I didn’t notice at first, to my shame. I kept talking about the notes I missed. Suddenly, I realized that I was talking to myself. Toby threw me such a strange look when I tried to draw his attention that I think my breathe stopped for a moment. Only one time I had seen before that look on his face.”

Mason fought the dryness in his throat. “When?”

Rhys looked at him with dull, pained eyes. “When he received the news that his parents were killed in a fire.”

“What did he say? Can you recall his words?” He expected painful, but not so many shades.

“He told me he just felt under the weather. I insisted, and he snapped at me. I insisted more, and then we started fighting for real. I tried to keep it low, for the sake of the driver’s ears --”

“Who drove you around?”

“Someone Levine had designated for the task. Neither I or Toby cared about driving much.”

“I suppose you tried to reason with him once you got home.”

“Yes. But he got madder and madder. He told me that I couldn’t understand his position.”

“What did he mean by that?”

Rhys sighed. “I made the money. Toby no longer had a role, well, that was what he thought, since everything regarding concerts, and whatnot, was handled by Levine’s company. But he had never complained about such a lack of purpose until that moment. It came as a shock for me.”

There was another pause.

“Was then that he asked you to give up on music and move away?”

Rhys nodded. “Yes, the first time. It would turn to countless times over the next days. I ... didn’t handle it well. I thought he was jealous of my success,” he added quietly.

There were many layers to that story. Mason needed to unravel them slowly. For now, they could take a small break from the pain. “What do the underline words mean?” He pointed at the wall.

Rhys turned his head in that direction. “That. It’s something from a long time ago. But who could know about it, save for me and Toby?” The last question was rhetorical.

Mason knew the answer to that one, but he had to keep silent.

Rhys returned to the memorabilia on the bed and took a small locket on a piece of rough string. He offered it to Mason. “This is what it must be about.”

## *Chapter Seventeen - Halfhearted Love*

Mason took the locket from Rhys's hand and turned it on both sides. It was solid silver, and it had a flowery pattern engraved on its face, so the fact that the string was just a piece of rope was striking. "What's the story here?"

Rhys took it from his hand and opened it. A small curl of chestnut hair was trapped inside. "I don't remember ever sleeping well. Toby took it from his mother's old case and gave it to me. We were sixteen, and he stole it. For me. He told me to hold it clutched in my fist and sleep would come."

"How come you two fell in love?"

"I can't remember. We grew into our love as we grew up."

"And by the time he gave you this --"

Rhys smiled. "Are you trying to find out when was the first time we slept together, Mason?"

That had been as subtle as an elephant casually strutting through a china store. "You don't have to answer."

"We were already boyfriends."

There was no point in insisting on the topic. "And did it help? Did you sleep better?"

"Yes. Or maybe it was the power of suggestion. Knowing that part of Toby was so close to me had a soothing effect on me, that's for sure."

Mason took the pendant and stared at it some more. What kind of clue was that? Why was that important in the context of Toby's death? Or maybe it had been nothing but Toby wanting to offer his boyfriend solace by reminding him of that old gift? He extracted the small curl of hair and inspected the inside of the locket. There was nothing out of the ordinary. He placed the hair back and handed the pendant to Rhys. That was a dead-end, but he needed to rein in his disappointment.

"Did you manage to get something out of Toby, about his strange behavior?"

Rhys's eyes darkened. "A series of things that weren't pretty. I tried to ignore them, thinking that he was just hurt and upset. But I didn't acquiesce to his request, to drop everything and leave. I began to behave like a selfish bastard, too. And now --"

"We've been over this," Mason warned. "It's not your fault. You didn't kill Toby."

Rhys appeared to fight a bit with his emotions. He clasped his hands together. “I don’t understand why he didn’t trust me enough to confide in me. He could have told me he was unhappy. But not for one moment ... Or maybe I was just blind.”

“The hurtful things he told you, do you remember them?”

Rhys nodded and looked down at his hands. “In detail. He accused me of throwing myself at Levine, although he knew well that it wasn’t true. Then he told me he would have been better without me. In my foolishness and anger, I told him to leave if that was what he felt. But then he turned apologetic and told me he loved me more than anything, that he wouldn’t bear the thought of something happening to me.”

“What could happen to you? Were you in any danger? Did anyone threaten you? You know, disturbed fans and all that?”

Rhys let out a humorless laugh. “I’m still an indie songwriter and singer, even if Levine’s company handles the bills. I don’t have that kind of fans and fame. So, Toby’s sudden concern was surprising, to say the least. It was as if he wanted to protect me and hurt me at the same time. It was quite ... painful.”

“Did he seem scared?” Mason asked directly, remembering Renzo’s words.

“Yes, that, too. But it was anger, too. Mostly anger. I couldn’t understand. I still don’t, as I look back. Toby was happier than me when Levine contacted us to sign a contract. And it wasn’t like he had nothing to do. I wouldn’t have trusted anyone else with the design for my posters, or album covers. That was all him.”

Mason rubbed his forehead. “And it was all of a sudden? Right after you sang at Levine’s house?”

Rhys nodded. “You know what’s the most horrible thing, Mason?” His voice was vibrant and low. “As I was coming to my senses in that bathroom stall at the club, I was thinking of telling him that I wanted to do everything to make him happy. And yes, even if that meant that I would never make music again. Too late. Right?”

Mason pursed his lips. “Let’s not lose the focus here. Someone must have been after Toby.”

Rhys’s eyes grew wide as he stared back at him. “You mean, you think it wasn’t random? That it was ... what? ... premeditated? Who could want to hurt Toby? Everyone liked him.”

“Except Levine,” Mason said.

Rhys’s face turned into a frown. “Levine spared a couple of minutes a week to talk to me, when he didn’t want me to perform to one of his parties. I don’t want to sound flippant, but the fact that he wasn’t crazy about Toby couldn’t have been high on his list.”

“And then he was suddenly interested in you,” Mason added.

“Yes,” Rhys admitted. “He helped me even against my will.”

“Are you trying to tell me that you would have been okay with taking the rap for Toby’s murder?”

“No, not like that. But I didn’t try to defend myself, either. Anyway, I didn’t want to be an ungrateful scum. I still don’t. As much as Levine might not seem like a good person to you, he did help me.”

“But why?” Mason insisted.

“It was probably because he didn’t want such a horrendous event to be tied to his company and brand. I understand that he didn’t necessarily do it because of the kindness of his heart. Even so, I’m indebted to him.”

“What about his obvious interest in you?”

Rhys looked away. He seemed uncomfortable. “I don’t understand it. He didn’t try anything overt ... I mean --”

“He kept his hands to himself,” Mason concluded.

Rhys nodded. “As of my knowledge, he has never been in a relationship with a man. Maybe I’m just misreading the situation.”

“Am I misreading it, too?” Mason asked, somewhat aggressively.

Rhys looked at him for a moment, and then, to Mason’s surprise, he blushed.

“What? What is it?”

“Nothing,” Rhys hurried to say and shook his head vigorously.

Mason sighed. So far, he hadn’t found out anything. And Rhys was blushing for no reason. He looked around the room in an effort to find a thing to focus on, other than the person in front of him. “I think this is it.” He stood up. “I might bother you with other questions again.”

“This conversation was one-sided. I would like to know more about you, too.”

Mason turned away. “There’s nothing interesting about me.”

“Do you know what the most painful thing was, that Toby said to me?” Rhys’s quiet and pained voice arrested him before he had a chance to run away.

“What?”

“He told me that he cheated on me. With Ary. But it must have been a lie.”

Mason set his jaw hard. Could it be that Toby had been an asshole, after all? He was nowhere near the truth. But Ary’s name came round and round in conversations lately. Was the little mouse capable of fooling everyone with his pretense of innocence?

“Yeah. It must have been,” he offered Rhys, but his words were hollow, even to his ears.

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There wasn’t much to do when Rhys didn’t need to go out. Mason was performing his second set of push-ups when he noticed that there was someone in the room with him. He observed Toby’s shoes as he continued until he finished his set. The fact that the ghost was silent couldn’t be a good sign.

“Have you checked on Ary?” he asked as he stood up.

Toby averted his eyes. “I did.”

“And?” Mason grabbed a towel and started wiping off the sweat from his face and chest. “Why did you find out?”

“That kid spends a hell lot of time crying.”

Mason stopped. “Crying? Where was he? At the studio?”

“I was there first, but then I followed him home. I’ve never seen someone going from being cheerful and ready to put a smile on everyone’s faces to downright despair so fast. The moment the door closed behind his back, he dropped to his knees right there and started crying.”

“Was there something that could cause such a thing? I don’t know ... Did his boss yell at him or something?”

Toby shook his head. “That didn’t seem like the kind of crying someone would do if they just got yelled at. It was ... heart-wrenching.”

Mason ran one hand over his face. “What else did he do?”

Toby moved from one foot to another. He grimaced, and it looked like he was hesitating to talk.

“Come on, man. How am I supposed to get rid of you if you don’t tell me everything so that I can solve your murder?” Mason had never been good at making jokes. He still sucked, apparently.

“Fuck, this is hard.” Toby began to pace the room slowly. He appeared to be lost in thought and engaged in a battle with himself. “He eventually pulled himself together, but only to drag himself

to his bedroom. He didn't eat anything. Didn't even undress. He threw himself on the bed and then pulled out his phone."

"Who did he call?"

"Nobody. He just looked through some pictures, and began to cry again, just not as hard as before."

"Who was in those pictures?" Mason could feel his gut clenching with dread.

"He was. With Rhys and me," Toby said in one go. He stared at the empty wall, and there were clouds and thunders in his eyes.

"He might be missing you, just like Rhys."

"Yes, just like Rhys," Toby said, and his voice turned into a whisper.

"What do you mean?" Mason needed proper confirmation.

"He ..." Toby choked for a moment, "he kept saying 'I'm sorry'."

"Fuck." Mason smacked the back of a chair with the towel.

"That is just so fucked up," Toby whispered. "He can't be ... right? The one who --"

"Killed you?" Mason pinched the bridge of his nose. "Let's not jump to conclusions." He didn't want to do that, either, but it was one thing his logic kept telling him, and another what his heart considered right.

"I left after he fell asleep."

"I got Rhys on board with helping me find out who killed you," Mason said, intent on changing the topic, for now. Things needed to be handled carefully.

"Are you getting him involved? Why?"

"Because you can't help, and he can," Mason replied curtly. "We need to find out what happened to you during those last days," he added, in a slightly appeased tone. "You can't remember anything, and Rhys knew you better than anyone."

"You don't look too happy. I told you, man, I have nothing against you two --"

"There's no such thing as 'us two'," Mason said gruffly. "I sleep with men. I don't romance them or tell them stupid lies."

"Damn. What the hell did he tell you about me?" Toby appeared to be deaf to the meaning of his words.

“He sort of confirmed what we learned from Renzo. Two weeks before your death, you turned into a mess.” Mason waited to make sure he had all of Toby’s attention. “You kept telling him that he should give up on making music and move away. Apparently, your sudden change occurred after you two were at a party at Levine’s house. You began complaining about how you felt like a kept man.”

“He made the money, clearly,” Toby said as he looked around. “So I used to laze around, all day long? And suddenly, that got on my nerves.”

“Rhys thinks you were lying. And you handled the covers for his albums and everything design related. It wasn’t like you had no role in Rhys’s career.”

Toby sighed. “What else did he tell you?”

It was Mason’s turn to hesitate. “Some pretty nasty stuff,” he said.

“All right. Out with them,” Toby ordered. He crossed his arms over his chest and stared at Mason.

“You two kept fighting. You threw ugly things at him, like how he must have slept with Levine -”

“He didn’t. That can’t be true.”

“It isn’t,” Mason confirmed. “But that wasn’t the only lie. You told him that you would have been better without him. Also, that you slept with Ary.” It was time to rip off the Band-Aid.

“What?” Toby appeared utterly flummoxed at that. “No.” He shook his head and looked down. “It can’t be true. I couldn’t be such a bastard.”

“He doesn’t believe it, either.”

Toby drew one long breath. “That’s good, I guess.”

“He also made it clear about the words on the wall,” Mason added. “I’m afraid that’s a dead end, though. You gave him a locket with a curl of your hair when you were sixteen. You told him to keep it clutched in his fist while trying to fall asleep. It helped, too, according to him.”

Mason wondered briefly if it helped to tell Toby how he lost his parents, but he decided against it.

“That can’t be all,” Toby said quietly. “It should have meaning beyond that.”

“Maybe you just tried to comfort him, after you died, to remind him of that old gift.”

Toby shook his head. “It’s a different vibe I got from that. Like it had ... meaning.”



“And it does. Just that it was your farewell, and nothing else,” Mason said, as much as he hated to contradict Toby.

“Then it should have been love, not pain,” Toby added.

“Look, Toby, you heard Renzo. You loved Rhys. Madly. Those last two weeks, those close to you can vouch that you weren’t yourself. The thing is ... what the hell did you find out at that party that scared you so?”

“Things don’t add up,” Toby agreed. “You’re right. I must have found out something. But what?”

“I don’t know if Levine is keen on inviting us again to one of his fancy parties. I’m afraid you’ll have to go there on your own.”

Toby nodded. “Rhys ... how is he?”

“In love with you,” Mason replied simply. “Just as much as he used to be when you were alive.”

“That doesn’t mean that he shouldn’t be in love again. With someone else.”

Mason turned away, despite knowing that ignoring a ghost wasn’t as easy as ignoring people who were flesh and blood. “I don’t have anything to offer. I’m not going to get him hooked on some half-assed so-called love. He doesn’t need that. And sex? Well, I guess he can get that anywhere he likes.”

“Why would you judge yourself so harshly?”

“I’m not. I’m realistic.”

He tensed as he expected Toby to insist on the topic. What he heard took him by surprise.

“Now all loves are the same. I may be a ghost, but I’m sure of it.”

It was impolite of Toby to leave him with such words of wisdom without elaborating further, but Mason was relieved. He didn’t want or need to justify himself. Rhys was someone who loved completely. There was no room for someone else once he had given his heart.

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“I will have to go out, but without you two,” Rhys announced. Before Mason had time to protest, he added, “Levine’s chauffeur will be here shortly. He’ll take me back, too, so there’s no need for you two to move.”

“It’s not about need,” Mason reminded him.

Rhys kept touching the pendant resting on his chest as if he tried to draw power from it. “I know it well, Mason. But Levine told me clearly that he wants to see me alone. He didn’t even allow me to insist much. Seeing how I want to keep you as my faithful bodyguards, I didn’t want to antagonize him. At all times, I will be in the company of people who don’t plan on hurting me, so I think it’s not a big deal.”

Mason didn’t like it one bit, but it was true that no solid argument for the presence of two bodyguards could be brought. With the evidence starting to gather against Ary, there was no point in acting overly protective when Rhys needed to visit his producer.

“Where will you be?”

“At his house,” Rhys replied promptly. “I will try to be back home as fast as I can.”

For a second, Mason felt struck by how vulnerable Rhys looked as he said those words. He noticed the dark suit briefly. Rhys’s shirt was buttoned up, and his entire attire appeared conservative, and not only in contrast with his usual clothes. Could it be an unconscious choice or a much-weighed one, seeing how they had both agreed that Levine had a distinct interest in his protégé, interest that went well beyond a normal relationship between an artist and his producer?

Only remembering how Levine had talked about Rhys that day at the party made Mason grind his teeth. That scumbag better not think this was some kind of booty call.

“Keep me on speed dial,” Mason ordered.

That earned him a small surprised look from Rhys. “Of course. You and Billy both are.” He pressed his hands on his hair, pulled back into a ponytail. It appeared that he didn’t want to draw attention to himself at all, like a woman afraid of being sexually harassed by her boss.

“Anything happens, call,” he added.

Rhys nodded on his way out. Mason needed to think of a way to follow him without Billy noticing.

“Chief, are you smelling something fishy here?” Billy had remained silent during their exchange.

“It might be your bag of chips. Are you trying some weird flavor?” Mason tried to downplay the earlier conversation.

“Come on, I’m not like that. But seriously, it’s ... what ... almost ten o’clock? Who keeps meetings so late in the evening?”

“They don’t have to be too formal, right? After all, Levine had been Rhys’s jailer for quite some time,” Mason said with a hint of sarcasm.

“I knew you didn’t like it,” Billy said. “How about we follow Rhys?”

“Seriously? I thought you were all about not stalking him. We know where he will be.”

“Yeah. But now I feel like we need to make sure.”

Mason didn’t need to be told twice. He was already convinced, and Billy had proven a dependable companion so far.

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The taillights of the car in front of them signaled a left turn.

“Well, that’s weird,” Billy commented.

“What is?” Mason was busy turning the information he had on all sides and had let Billy in charge of following Levine’s chauffeur without being noticed.

“Unless they suddenly planned on taking the scenic route, that’s not the right way to Levine’s house.”

Mason tensed. “He’s a billionaire. He probably has more than one place he calls home.”

“Without a doubt. But still, don’t you find it a bit weird?”

“Let’s just follow them. Whatever the destination is, we’ll find out.” For the moment, there was not much else to do.

The vistas changed, and Mason took in the waterfront spreading at their left. One could only guess the waves crashing against the shore. The road was heavily illuminated, but that made the rest of the landscape appear drowned in darkness.

“It looks like they must head over to Levine’s beach house.”

“Strange time to go for a swim,” Mason commented dryly. “Do you know anything about this property?”

“No. I’m just assuming things, at this point,” Billy said.

Mason nodded. They had to allow more distance between them to avoid detection. At that hour, the traffic was light in that part of the city.

It appeared that Billy’s assumption was correct. They soon noticed the car in front of them turning left once more, only to stop in a driveway behind a coquet beach house.

“This weirdly has the air of an illicit affair,” Billy pointed out.

Mason had to agree. There was only one light on, and it didn't look like Levine had other people over. They stopped at a fair distance. "What now?" he murmured to himself.

"Now we keep an eye on the house and we wait. Chips?" Billy offered him the bag.

Mason replied with a crooked look. "No, thanks."

Billy sniffed the bag and then decided against stuffing his face. He began fiddling with the radio until Mason stopped him.

"You can step out of the car and walk around if you have too much energy," Mason advised him. "This is what you get for eating so many sweets."

"Nah. I'll rather stay here and annoy you."

Mason chuckle and shook his head. "I might smack you upside the head if you fidget too much."

"Damn. But it's hard to keep still," Billy complained.

"You're so like a kid. Do you want me to tell you a story so that you can take a nap and stop getting on my nerves?"

"Yeah. Tell me a story. I'd like the one about how you plan to get together with Rhys and live happily ever after."

"So, you're into fantasy?"

"Come on, chief, give me something. I can tell you're at war with yourself when it comes to Rhys. Tell me, what do you like the most about him?"

*His smile, when he's not sad. His lips when he kisses me.* Mason shook his head. "If you ever decide to stop being a bodyguard, make sure you don't opt for a career in offering romantic advice. You might end up starving."

Billy's laughter was carefree and sonorous. A bit infectious, too, because Mason felt like following his example.

"You're tough on me, chief, but that's why I like you. Hey, is that Rhys?"

Mason took in the slender silhouette rushing out of the house. He put one hand on the door handle, but Billy stopped him.

Rhys was out of the driveway and well into the street when someone else rushed after him. Mason exchanged an intrigued look with Billy. Levine was dressed in something that could rival with Hugh Hefner's famous bathrobe.

Slowly, Billy rolled out the window. The evening breeze carried angry shouts.

“I made you! Don’t you dare to walk away from me!”

“You have no right to talk about him like this!”

Rhys didn’t stop for one second, which made Levine hurry after him, most probably in his sleepers.

“Rhys, stop right this moment! You spoilt child!”

Rhys did stop and turned toward Levine. “I’m not your child! You have no children, thank God, because otherwise, I could have only hoped that you wouldn’t have behaved toward them as you just did toward me!”

Levine said something, but this time, in a subdued voice, so Billy and Mason couldn’t hear him. He appeared suddenly appeased. Rhys looked tensed by how he kept his body and moved away when Levine tried to reach him. A few replies followed, and then Rhys began walking again.

“At least, let Fred take you home!” Levine called after him.

“I’d rather walk,” Rhys replied.

For a couple of seconds, Levine waited, but then he turned on his heels and headed back into the house.

Mason waited until the door closed after the scumbag. Billy stopped him again. “He’ll reach us soon,” he explained.

Rhys could call himself a cab, Mason realized, but it looked like he was lost in thought and truly in the mood to act on his earlier promise. He looked down, and his shoulders were rigid. What the hell had Levine done to him? Whatever it had been, Rhys didn’t appear to have allowed it, making Mason feel relieved.

Billy patted his arm to draw his attention. “Let’s go, chief.”

They got out of the car at the same time. The noise drew Rhys’s attention, and he looked straight at them. The bitter grimace on his face dissolved. “What are you guys doing here?”

“Protecting you, what else?” Mason said gruffly.

“We can’t leave this noble duty to anyone else,” Billy said courteously and hurried to hold the door for Rhys.

“Thank you, Billy,” Rhys said and caressed Billy’s cheek. “You’re such a sweetheart.”

“Mason, too,” Billy said.

Rhys stopped for a moment and smiled fondly at Mason. “He’s not. He’s a tough guy and I like him to the moon and back for it.”

Mason didn’t have to be told to climb in the back. He looked straight ahead and said nothing as a familiar arm wrapped around his, and Rhys rested his head against his shoulder. Knowing he couldn’t be seen, as Billy was just taking his place behind the wheel, he allowed himself a small smile.

## *Chapter Eighteen - It's All About The Money?*

“So, did you two follow me?” Rhys asked, as soon as Billy kicked the engine into gear.

“There was nothing interesting on TV,” Billy joked. “And Mason doesn’t like watching TV anyway.”

“How much did you hear?”

Mason didn’t need to be told what that was about. “Did Levine trash-talked Toby?”

Rhys sighed. “I’m afraid I’ll have to find another producer.”

“Good,” Mason said curtly. “Did he try anything with you?”

There was a small shiver coming from Rhys, but Mason couldn’t say whether it was in fear or disgust. “I’m not that easy to bully, regardless of what you may think when you look at me.”

“I wouldn’t dream of thinking anything like that,” Mason assured him. That was good. As much as he wanted to protect Rhys with everything he had, there could be situations when it wasn’t possible for him to do so.

There was a short silence. Mason still wanted to know. “What did he say to you that you stormed out of the house like that?”

Rhys shifted his position and let his head rest against the backseat. “He ... ugh, how can I put this? He sort of offered to become my boyfriend.”

Billy’s snicker took them both by surprise.

“Hey, this is no laughing matter,” Mason warned. “Rhys got sexually harassed --”

Rhys put one hand on his knee. “No, it wasn’t like that. I wouldn’t allow it, to begin with. And let Billy laugh. After all, it is a bit laughable that Levine suddenly fancies himself interested in me.”

“I’d rather call it disgusting and weird.”

Rhys exhaled. “That, too, maybe. If it were genuine ... But, no, everything seemed so rehearsed that I feel like throwing up even now. He told me that he could be my daddy.”

Billy snickered again. Rhys followed his example. Mason was getting a bit irritated. “You two shouldn’t take things so lightly. And it’s still harassment, the way I see it,” he added in a vexed tone.

“I’m sorry,” Rhys apologize. “I think it’s a nervous reaction. The thing is that my real father was such a bastard that I can’t even think of calling a man ‘daddy’ without feeling like I wanted to

crawl out of my skin even if I loved him with all my heart. Mason, I hope you're not into this fetish."

"Stop joking. Tell me everything he said and did to you."

Rhys caressed his knee. "What good would that do? I need to reassess my situation. I'm not good at legalese and I'll have to see what I can do about the contract I signed with Levine's company. And, of course, I don't know what he will do about you two."

"It doesn't matter," Mason said through his teeth. "He hired us for you, and I intend to do my job, even if I cannot stand the scumbag."

"I do have some money, and I can always give up on that house which is way too big for me," Rhys continued.

"Where does that leave us?" Billy asked the question that was on Mason's mind, too.

"If you want, you can continue to work for me," Rhys said. "I'll have to evaluate the situation of my finances so that I know what I can pay you, but --"

"You don't have to pay me," Mason said harshly.

"You don't want to be my bodyguard anymore?"

"I'll protect you for free."

Rhys reached for Mason's hand. "You need the money. Everybody does. Don't you agree, Billy?"

"I'm with Arnie on this one. I'll stand by your side as much as needed, regardless the pay."

"Guys," Rhys said gently. "How come I stumbled over the most loyal two people in the world? And you don't have to worry about a thing. I'll do my best to pay you so that you don't have to come to regret your decision. Although, I'll warn you. It will be boring, and you're free of contract the moment you want to get out of it. Truth be told, I have no idea why I needed two bodyguards in the first place, but if I can help two friends --"

"You need us," Mason said with finality.

Rhys touched his chin and made eye contact. "Did you find something about who killed Toby, Mason?"

He shook his head. Outing Ary as the prime suspect was not something that he could blurt out like that. In his heart, he was still unconvinced that Ary was the culprit, damned be all the circumstantial evidence pointing in his direction. Plus, he couldn't explain how he knew what he knew.



“All right. You two are the best friends someone could have. I’m grateful to have you by my side.” Rhys turned his head to stare out the window. Mason kept from touching him. There had been more to that conversation with Levine, but pressing the matter couldn’t be of help right now.

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“So, Rhys is giving the asshole the boot?” Toby sat in the corner of the room, his legs crossed.

“No other reasonable choice. He seems to be on top of the situation.”

“Isn’t it weird that Levine suddenly upped the ante?”

Mason nodded. “Weird as fuck. And we both know that dude’s not gay.”

“Whatever he hoped to get out of this, he miscalculated. Rhys pushed him away, so, I guess the logical thing is some retaliation from his part, right?”

“I’m thinking the same thing.” Rhys hadn’t teased him or invited him to join him in the bedroom, and there was no point in feeling disappointed. After all, he had been the one to deny their relationship, as incipient as it was. He should have been happy.

“He can squeeze Rhys with money, I’m sure.”

“I expect that. But Rhys should be protected. After all, he has his own money, I suppose.”

“Yet, Levine hired you and paid you from his pocket, right?”

“As far as I know.”

“That dude is so creepy. I was back at his palace tonight, but he didn’t come at all. I had no idea he tried to lure Rhys to another house to seduce him.”

“According to Rhys, there wasn’t much seducing involved. His stay was short.”

“What exactly happened?”

“Rhys won’t talk about details. Just that Levine offered to be his daddy. I don’t know if he meant it as a sugar daddy or something else. Rhys just turned him down. Also, Levine must have said something pretty nasty about you because Rhys was upset. Because of that only, he’ll call off any business engagements he has with Levine.”

“I can’t remember him, and yet I feel that I love him,” Toby said softly.

There wasn’t anything that could be added. Mason understood it well.

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“What? What do you mean?” Rhys was talking on the phone and pacing the kitchen. “All of it? He can’t do that now, can he?”

Mason was surprised to see Rhys there. By the straight line of his lips, he could tell that wasn’t a pleasant conversation.

Rhys finished and threw the phone on the table, as his lips pursed into a frustrated grimace. “It appears that, somehow, Levine has access to my accounts. I must have signed some stupid clause while I was in that hospice. I can’t remember doing it, but it looks like I’m less than a child when it comes to my business and finances. Daddy just fucked me over.”

He sounded rightfully disgusted.

“That your lawyer?” Mason asked.

Rhys nodded. “I think he’s on Levine’s payroll, too.”

“You weren’t quite yourself when you were institutionalized. How could he take advantage of you like that?”

“He could. That’s all that matters. And he thought about it. Just a good ol’ scheme of catch 22. On the grounds that he needed to take care of me, he turned me into his puppet so that he could make sure I would never disobey him. I couldn’t think for myself --”

“But then your signature on whatever you signed can’t be valid, right?”

“Probably I was right on the brink of losing my mind,” Rhys said sarcastically. “Levine swooped in and managed to save me from myself. Too bad it wasn’t me I should have been aware of, right?”

“What does this mean?”

Rhys ran his hands through his hair. “It means that I’m a little puppet who needs to sing - oh, the irony - as he’s told. Damn.” He looked down, his shoulders slumped in defeat. “It looks like I have to talk to him again. I can bet he’s suddenly busy, but let’s see.” He grabbed his phone again. After letting it ring for quite a while, he tsked in displeasure. “Just as I thought. He has me trapped.”

Mason observed Rhys with keen eyes. It wasn’t the first time he had the occasion to take in his physical beauty. For a second, he let himself daydream of touching the high cheekbones and painting the arched bow of his upper lip with daring fingers. But a sense of duty brought him back to his senses immediately.

“Don’t stay here. Come with me to my place.”

The sudden proposal took Rhys by surprise. “Are you expecting me to freeload on you? But I’m your employer.”

“You have no money. That scumbag tied you up like the fucker he is.”

“Wow. I didn’t know you felt so strongly about Levine.” A small ghost of a smile lit up Rhys’s face. “I can’t come with you, Mason. The situation is complicated enough as it is. And you have no reason to get involved in this mess I’m in.”

Mason curled his hands into fists. “Do you have any friends you could stay with until this clears?”

“I suppose I could ask Ary --”

“No.”

The sudden reaction made Rhys quirk an eyebrow. “Don’t play with me, Mason,” he teased. “If you want me so badly, just say so.”

“It’s for your protection,” Mason said stubbornly. “Ary can’t offer you that.”

“I suppose. But I can’t pay you, and this can’t be anything else but a complication --”

“You’re coming with me,” Mason said abruptly. “You can’t allow that scumbag to control you. You’ll pay me when you have the money.”

Rhys appeared a tad disconcerted by Mason’s determination. “If you’re so adamant. In a couple of days, tops, you’ll discover it was a mistake. When that happens, just tell me, and I’ll be out of your hair in a second.”

Mason knew all too well that couldn’t happen; he didn’t have it in him to let it happen. He would let Rhys go only after he was safe. “We’ll see. One more thing. Those weird drugs Levine keeps giving you. Flush them down the toilet.”

The answer was a small smile from Rhys. “I already did. If I’m fucked up, at least I want to be my real fucked up self.”

“Good.” Mason relaxed an inch. “Grab your things and let’s go.”

“Right now?”

“No moment like the present.” Mason couldn’t stand the thought of spending another moment under that roof, with Levine’s shadow looming over them.

He gestured with his chin for Rhys to follow his example. He still needed to rope Billy in the entire change of plans. It was too bad that Po couldn't be part of their plans, but maybe it was all for the better. After all, Mason was used to working alone.

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Billy didn't appear surprised. "I'll pack my things in a jiffy."

"Boyd can find you work, I'm sure," Mason offered.

A short nod was the answer. "Hey, do you want to learn about those unmarked pills? I got the results."

Mason waited. "Well? Spit it out."

Billy scratched his head. "It's weird shit. Ketamine."

"That's a drug, right?"

"Known for causing hallucinations, among other things."

Mason pondered for a couple of seconds. "Did Levine put his maid up to drug Rhys? But if that was so, why didn't she place them in his room? She could switch any medicine with those, and no one could have known."

"I should have." Rhys's intervention took them both by surprise. They were talking in the hallway, so they didn't notice they had company. "I might have gotten drunk plenty of times while fighting with Toby, but I've never done drugs."

"Too bad that you threw away those pills Levine gave you. Those weird things you've been experiencing lately could be because of some shit like that."

Rhys's face darkened. "What the hell did I get myself in?" The question was directed to himself, but Mason had a few ideas about what was going on. Whatever Levine wanted to obtain from Rhys, by any means necessary, had to be pretty important, if drugs, forced confinement, and betrayal of such magnitude were part of the game. Mason wanted only a chance to be alone in the same room with the scumbag; he had the means to make him talk.

"Is this all you're taking with you?" Mason pointed at the carryall in Rhys's hand.

"I don't want to impose and take up a lot of room. I won't sit with my arms crossed. I will start working on solving my situation right away."

"You're leaving that keyboard behind." Mason pointed vaguely in the direction of the isolation room. "How are you going to make music?"

“Music is in my head,” Rhys said and tapped his index finger against his temple. “I had so little when I came here with Toby. And still, we made it happen. I guess whatever I did once to succeed, I can do again.” There was a short silence. Mason didn’t have to be told who was missing from that picture.

He needed to let Toby know of their new plans, but he had been away for a while now. “Just wait for me to pack my stuff, too.”

When he walked into his bedroom, he found Toby standing by the window.

“It’s been a major change of plans,” he explained shortly as he began to pack. “Levine is squeezing Rhys for all he has, as you suspected. The scumbag cut Rhys’s access to his accounts. I take him to live with me, for now.” There was no reaction from Toby. Mason frowned. “Where have you been?”

Toby turned, and Mason felt a pang in his chest. There was an immense sadness in his eyes that sucked in even the light in the room. “Ary used to love me,” he said. “Rhys, too.”

“What do you mean? Of course he loved you both. You were his friend, just like Rhys.”

“No, not like that. Or, better said, not only like that.”

“You better not tell me there was some weird threesome happening between the three of you.” Mason recalled Rhys’s words pretty clearly. A lie was enough to make the entire edifice of his feelings come crashing down.

“I don’t think so. Ary keeps a diary, and he left it open at an earlier entry. I read about how he met us ... and fell in love with us.”

Mason sighed. “With both of you? That sounds complicated like hell.”

Toby let out a small scoff. “You’re telling me? It looks like I somewhat encouraged him, too. He wrote in his diary that he was truly happy that I was interested in him. As far as I could read, nothing happened, though. But he tortured himself over wanting me and Rhys both. I don’t know how he could feel so strongly for two people at the same time.”

“Still. Didn’t he feel guilty over wanting you, his friend’s boyfriend?”

“He must have felt that, too. Mostly, what I read was regret over falling in love with two people, a couple even. It sounds so strange, right?”

Mason shrugged. “I don’t pass judgements. If he killed you by accident, it explains the crying.”

“I don’t think he did it. I refuse.” Toby began pacing the room.

“Things are what they are. We need to get our hands on that diary. There could be clues in there about what happened that night.”

“He’s not the killer.” Toby stopped in the middle of the room. “You don’t believe it either.”

“It’s not about what I believe, but about the truth. That’s what we need to find out. We need to break into Ary’s home and grab that diary.”

Toby remained silent. Mason needed to make sure they were on the same page. “Toby?”

There was a soft knock on the door, and Rhys entered. “Were you talking to someone, Mason?” His eyes were curious. “I could have sworn --”

“Just to myself.” Mason could have said he was on the phone, but the item in question was on a table at the opposite corner of the room.

Rhys studied him for a moment. “Billy is ready, too. Sorry to bother you. I might be a bit too impatient to leave this house.”

Mason grabbed his luggage. He didn’t have many things, but he wasn’t leaving anything behind like Rhys was. “Let’s go.”

He followed Rhys out of the room, aware that Toby was following them, too.

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Rhys’s phone rang as they were in the car. Mason leaned in to listen to the conversation. He wasn’t surprised when he heard the caller’s voice.

“Yes.” Rhys had a proper, even cold tone as he spoke.

“What do you think you’re doing?” It looked like Levine was royally pissed.

“I was informed by my lawyer that I am the rightful owner of ... that’s right, nothing. So seeing that nothing is in my name, I decided to move out and identify some means to support myself.”

“You have plenty in your name,” was Levine’s terse reply. “All you need to do is to stop behaving so erratically. Maybe you need to be institutionalized again.”

“I must contradict you here.” Mason could tell Rhys was struggling to keep a civil tone. “I am fine. Especially since I threw away the sleeping pills you gave me.”

“Are you so intent on destroying everything I’ve given you?” Levine boomed.

“What is this everything you believe you’ve offered me? We signed a contract. Do you treat all the artists who sign with your company like you’re treating me now? You obtained a signature from me while I wasn’t aware of anything happening around me.”

“I kept your fairy ass out of jail,” Levine hissed into the phone. “You wouldn’t have lasted one week in there. A pretty boy like you --”

“I wasn’t guilty,” Rhys said stubbornly.

Mason grabbed his shoulders to show his support.

“And? Since when such things matter?” Levine’s voice was like a slithering snake in the grass. “The police are happy when they have someone to nail. If it weren’t for my influence --”

“I intend to pay my debt back to you. Oh, wait. You have the exclusive rights to my accounts, while I don’t. There, here you go. Take everything. Will that be enough? If not, feel free to tell me the price.”

“Damn it! It’s not about money!”

Rhys exchanged a brief look with Mason. “It’s not? Then what is about? You certainly behaved like my jailer if you thought of preventing me from using my money. Of course, it was for my own good, right? But I’ve been out for more than a month, and you haven’t thought for a moment to revert the situation to how it was before.”

“I care about you, Rhys.” It sounded like it pained Levine to lie at this point.

“No. Please, don’t insult me. All you care is your company, your name up there in shiny letters. I don’t hold it against you. Have everything you think you gave me, the money, the house, which I had only because I signed with you. It should cover the damage.”

“That’s no more than peanuts for me,” Levine hissed again.

Once the snake was out, there was no way of shoving it back in the bag.

“I’m sorry that I didn’t make more money,” Rhys said. “Just name your price for helping me, and we’re done.”

“No. We’re not. Can I know where you’re going?”

Rhys exchanged a small look with Mason and received a shake of the head. “No. You cannot.”

“I will find out.”

“I can’t stop you. But I hope what I hear is not a threat.”

There was a small pause. “No, it’s not. But know this, Rhys. You’re mine. You belong to me.”

Yeah, totally not a threat.

Rhys didn't say goodbye and interrupted the conversation. Mason took the phone from his hands. "Do you have the phone numbers saved in the cloud?" he inquired.

Rhys nodded. With calm moves, Mason put down the window and threw Rhys's phone.

"Hey," Rhys protested for a moment and then stopped. "Ah, so that he doesn't track me, right?"

"It's a little thing we can do and he can find out where you are, anyway, but let's not make it too easy for him, okay?"

Rhys nodded in agreement. Mason took his hand and caressed it. It was absolute madness, what he was willing to do for the man sitting next to him. He would go to war with someone like Levine Goldman, and yet, the thought caused no anxiety to rise in the pit of his stomach. His hand was still, and he was completely calm; maybe that was what sailors felt before an impending storm.

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"I know it's not much," Mason said once they were inside his small apartment.

A thin layer of dust had decorated all the furniture in his absence. Mason wasn't the kind to hire someone to deal with such stuff, even when working. His footprint was minimal, in his home, as well as in the world. Until now, that hadn't struck him as odd.

Rhys took in his surroundings and then turned and smiled. "It's great."

"You don't have to lie now," Mason retorted, but he felt like smiling, too.

His rented apartment was suddenly on par with far more luxurious accommodations with Rhys in it. It had to be that golden hair that could light up a room. Mason's mind flew momentarily to a speck of fantasy, Rhys singing, filling the place with music.

"I'm wanted here. Things like this are in short supply in the world," Rhys replied simply.

"Do you ever miss your home?" Mason couldn't say what it had suddenly seemed important to ask such an intimate question.

Rhys's eyes glided over him and rested on a corner of a room. "Home is a complicated term, isn't it?" There was no humor in his voice. "If we're talking about the place I grew up in, that wasn't a real home."

"And did you have one here? With Toby?"

Rhys cocked his head and threw him a sidelong glance. "For a while. Can I ask you something, Mason? And will you promise to offer me a truthful answer?"



Mason shrugged, even as he tensed on the inside.

“Is Toby’s shadow too big between us?”

If he only knew. Mason sighed. “How about we get you settled?”

“No answer, then.”

None that Mason could have explained or be proud of. Sometimes, it was easy to pretend nothing could touch him. He moved at the same time with Rhys, and they ended up bumping into each other. The place was way too cramped.

“Sorry.” Rhys moved out of the way. “I guess I should allow the host to show me around.”

“Yes, presenting you the entire apartment might take a while,” Mason joked.

To his relief, Rhys smiled. They would bump into each other a lot, but Mason had a hunch that getting out of such situations with a lame joke couldn’t work every time.

## *Chapter Nineteen – The Truth Will Set You Free*

“I will take the couch,” Rhys declared.

Mason examined the respective furniture piece with wary eyes. Unless it could stretch about two feet more in length, it was unlikely that it could serve as a sleeping arrangement. “No. I will.”

“You’re kidding me, right? I mean, the whole sense of the expression ‘crushing on a friend’s couch’ would be lost if I wasn’t the one to sleep here.”

“There is no way you could fit in it. You would sleep badly, or not at all,” Mason explained as if his guest was a hard-headed child.

“And that means that you should be the one to sleep badly?”

Mason pinched the bridge of his nose. That was heading fast toward something he couldn’t avoid. Also, he had an inkling that it was the kind of debate that would have Rhys as the winner, without a doubt. “My bed is a double,” he said, somewhat reluctantly.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Rhys replied, taking him by surprise.

“Yes, it is.”

“No, it’s not. We’re not doing this. I don’t want to jump you unless you want me to jump you, in which case --”

“We’re adults. How hard can it be to sleep in the same bed without touching each other?”

“You’re overestimating me if you think I won’t be tempted,” Rhys said, crossing his arms over his chest.

And he wouldn’t be the only one.

“It’s settled,” Rhys concluded. “The couch is mine.” To illustrate those words, he plumped down on the sofa and offered Mason a broad smile, as if he had just been invited to spend the night at the Ritz.

“Fine. If you’re so stubborn.” Mason pretended to be unaffected, but, truth be told, now he was starting to regret telling Rhys off on the grounds that he was still in love with his dead boyfriend. Things would have been much simpler if he had just owned to his desire. Or much more complicated. It was hard to take a pick. “Are you hungry?” He decided to change the topic of conversation.

Rhys nodded. “I’ll help you cook.”

So now, Rhys would end up bumping into him in his small kitchen. That was just great.

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Apparently, it wasn't as challenging as he had feared. Rhys was nimble and capable of graceful choreographies, as he helped Mason by peeling potatoes and carrots and assisting him with all the preparation tasks involved. The moment he had explained to his guest what recipe they would prepare, he had only had to open his mouth to ask something that Rhys had been at his station, acting as an experienced kitchen assistant.

It was quiet, but comfortable, as they sat at the small table to eat. Mason watched for a while, captivated by Rhys's small, efficient moves as he ate.

"Is there something wrong?" Rhys asked.

Mason blinked, so suddenly awakened from his reverie. "No. Everything's fine. Let's eat."

"I'm halfway through." There was a small note of a smile there. "I can't believe I feel so famished while my life is completely upside down."

"I'm glad to see you eating," Mason admitted. "And enjoying my cooking."

Rhys took another full fork to his mouth, his eyes never leaving Mason. He liked pretty men just like the next gay guy, but Mason wanted to believe that he wasn't that shallow. With a clarity that was sudden and overwhelming like a summer storm, he realized the precise moment he had fallen in love with Rhys Harmony. It must have been that fateful moment when he had reluctantly taken the earbuds from Billy's hand and listened to Rhys singing for the first time in his life.

As much as he loved being prepared for anything, his guard hadn't been held high enough then. The throaty voice of the man currently sitting across from him had sneaked under, or maybe it had just gone through, treating that so-called defense as nothing more but a low hedgerow.

"Do I have something on my face?"

Mason frowned, trying to rein control at least over what he could let show at the moment. "No." His reply was curt but harsher than he had intended. He stole a quick look at Rhys, but it appeared that he was no good at fooling him, just as he wasn't at fooling himself.

"I trust you, Mason," Rhys said quietly.

"Not to poison your food?"

Rhys laughed and looked away for a moment. "You're eating it yourself. No, it's not about that. It's about the serious stuff. And it's strange because a long time ago I promised myself that I wouldn't trust anyone save for Toby."

"And yourself."

“That’s debatable.” Rhys shook his head as he looked down. “You know, it was pretty easy for Levine to convince me I wasn’t all right in the head. I mean, I made it easy for him to do so. But, in a way, the experience helped, I like to believe. I outsourced my insecurities for a long time, using Toby as the one for me to lean on.”

“You were a couple. That comes with the territory.”

The slight shake of the head was almost imperceptible this time. “I’m afraid that it made Toby distrustful of me.”

“Distrustful?”

“I ... don’t know how to put it. He must have thought me too weak to handle whatever trouble he had before he ...”

Mason nodded shortly. “There’s no time machine. We could all use one once in a while. So, stop beating yourself over what ifs. We need to focus on the task at hand.”

Rhys looked around as if he now barely discovered the place. “If only I knew where to look.”

“Rhys, about Ary.” Without divulging the theory according to which Rhys’s only remaining friend in the world might be a murderer, Mason needed to breach the topic.

“What about him?” Rhys went back to his plate. He appeared to be really hungry, unlike Mason, who had too many things on his mind to think about food properly.

“What was with him and Toby? I just got this vibe --”

“I told you. It was that strange drunken confession.”

“Besides that, did he do anything else?”

Rhys sighed. “Look. Ary is a sweet kid. He wouldn’t hurt a fly. But he did like my boyfriend a little too much for my comfort. I must have said some unpleasant things to him. Frankly, if he had hated me for it, I wouldn’t have blamed him. But it’s all water under the bridge.”

“You said that he asked you whether you would be okay sharing Toby. Didn’t that include you, as well?”

Rhys cocked his head to one side and gave Mason a long pointed look. “What are you trying to say, Mason? I wasn’t tempted for one bit. I’m one guy’s man.”

And it was clear as day who that man was, and Mason needed to pinch or slap himself just to remember that.

“What I mean is what if Ary liked you, too. You know, that way.”

Rhys blinked a couple of times in confusion. Then his eyes grew wide, and he let out a small laugh. “As far as I know, Ary is a virgin. To jump directly into a threesome seems a little, I don’t know, over the top, don’t you think?”

The little mouse, a virgin? He hadn’t behaved like one when planting himself in Mason’s lap, trying to seduce him.

“Oh, damn, sorry about that,” Rhys added. “Please keep this to yourself. Ary is a bit sensitive about the topic. He’s a scaredy-cat when it comes to sex. Promise me you’re not going to tell anyone about this.”

“Sure. Not my business,” Mason offered. He couldn’t tell if Rhys was incredibly naïve, or indeed, Ary had no experience of the kind.

“But why are you asking me about Ary?” Rhys stared at him, waiting for an answer.

He needed to come up with a lie, and one that sounded convincing enough.

“We have nothing at the moment. So, I was thinking whether Ary might have had a jealous boyfriend at the time, someone who didn’t appreciate his interest in Toby.”

“No, he didn’t. Ary confides in me, so I would have known about such a guy.”

“All right. It was worth a shot.”

“I see. But if it wasn’t a random attack, who could have gotten close enough to Toby to do that to him?” Rhys was talking to himself, but Mason understood his logic. “It could have still been random, right?” This time, he turned his attention to Mason.

“Yes, but unlikely. Only around ten percent of all murders are committed by total strangers. Also, since it was so late at night when it happened, the chances of someone just passing by, with murder on their minds, should have been slim. Do you have any clue why Toby went out of the club?”

Rhys offered a dejected sigh. “We fought. I suppose he wanted to get some air.”

A new idea struck Mason. Where would someone go for a bit of privacy when in a packed club? And why the need? “Do you happen to have Toby’s phone, Rhys?”

After a short silence, Rhys nodded. “The police sent me his personal effects. The phone was among them, but it’s broken. Must have been damaged.”

“Do you still have it?”

Rhys stood up and returned after a short while with a smartphone in his hand. “I never go anywhere without those few things that belonged to him. But this thing doesn’t boot or anything. And the screen is smashed.”

Mason took it and stared at the broken screen. Indeed, it appeared to be dead. If there was anything worthy of their investigative efforts in there, he knew just the person for the job. “Listen, do you think you would be okay here? I need to take this to an expert.”

Rhys watched him for a few moments, without blinking. “No way you’re leaving me behind, Mason. I want to know and I want to get involved.”

“You might be tired,” Mason offered a lame excuse.

“Ugh, you sound like Levine now. But,” Rhys cocked his head and offered him a sly smile, “are you sure you want to leave me all alone here? Without protection?”

Mason sighed. Well, Rhys had a point, although it was clear he wasn’t scared of being left alone. Somehow, he needed to design a way to let Rhys know only of things that couldn’t put him in danger.

“I know exactly what you’re thinking,” Rhys added, as the silence stretched. “You’re thinking that I’m sure to do something stupid and hurt myself while you’re not watching, like setting myself on fire because I have no idea how to use the cooktop.”

Rhys was pulling his leg.

“And, of course, because of domestic accidents that just wait for you to walk out the door to happen, you can’t leave me behind.”

Of course. It was completely logical. Mason felt a small smile changing his face. The look in Rhys’s eyes told him that it was visible, too. “I fly solo,” he explained.

“Not anymore,” Rhys replied and stood up. “Who’s this expert you want to talk to?”

“It’s actually Billy,” Mason said with some reluctance. If he could keep a secret, he wasn’t so sure about Po. Rhys would only have to beg for a second or so, and Billy would spill everything.

And there was no way of telling what horrible or hurtful things could be found on that phone. He would figure out something. Right now, he was saddled with another partner, and this one, he had to admit it, was the prettiest of the bunch.

“Can Billy hack into a broken phone?”

“I hope so. He’s pretty good with computers, so either he can, or he has friends that could help us. I mean, it’s a starting point.”

“Then let’s go,” Rhys said. “For the record, I know how to use a cooktop and I won’t set the kitchen on fire by accident.”

“So you lied to me?” Mason smirked as he said the words and stood up, as well.

Rhys stopped an inch from him and stared into his eyes. “Are you going to punish me for it?”

Not in a million years. “I’m not the type.”

“Thought so. Under this rough exterior, there’s a nice guy.”

Rhys leaned in for a second, and Mason wondered if a kiss would follow. But his breathing stopped for nothing.

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Billy’s rented apartment was a mess. Better said, it was a mess of cables and technical equipment, and Mason wondered if he and Rhys hadn’t just landed in an illegal surveillance van driven by a criminal. But no, they were inside a concrete building, and the person welcoming them with a goofy smile could hardly be called a digital gangster.

“So, I don’t have to ask you about your hobbies,” Mason said as he threw a look around.

“Come in, guys. I’m glad to see you again so soon. Ugh, I know that this looks like a lot, but I didn’t have time to unpack when uncle Boyd found me the job that got me working for you, Rhys.”

Uncle Boyd, huh? Mason wanted to shake his head but thought against it. “Are you trying to tell me that there’s even more of this? In boxes?”

Billy snickered. “No. I just didn’t unpack my clothes and coffee machine.”

“Good. You got me scared for a moment.” Mason didn’t know a lot about equipment, but he knew one thing; whatever he was looking at right now, it couldn’t be cheap. A prickling sensation bit the back of his neck. He grimaced but didn’t reach for it; the invisible insect crawling up his spine would be left alone, for now.

“You said you have Toby’s phone?” Billy made a gesture for them to follow him into a so-called living room. Miraculously, there was a sofa free of any objects, and he and Rhys took a seat.

Mason reached into his pocket and took out the phone. Billy opened his palm, and, for one moment, Mason looked him straight in the eyes. There was nothing nefarious to read in them.

Billy took the phone and stared at it for a moment, as he tried to boot it. For silent minutes, he fiddled with it. “It looks like a goner.”

Mason felt rightfully deflated. “So there’s nothing you can do about it?”

“I didn’t say that,” Billy replied, as good-naturedly as ever. “Leave it to me. If there’s anything here, I will find it. But, of course, I’ll have to bring in the heavy guns.”

“The heavy guns? What is this, then? The darts club?”

Billy laughed. “Don’t let yourself impressed by these antiquities, chief. They are just leftovers I got from a friend. But I know some people that will let me use their much up-to-date machines.”

Mason nodded. “You know that we must be extra discreet about this. We have no idea who we’re dealing with.”

“Leave it to me,” Billy said. “I will be extra careful. And I know how to wipe my traces and leave everything behind squeaky clean.”

That was a good skill to have, particularly in this day and age, Mason admitted to himself. Yet, how come Po had gotten this good? He claimed not to have the brains for a real detective career, but he appeared to be pretty well equipped for it in Mason's eyes.

The problem was, Mason didn’t know any experts, and he doubted that trying to hire someone online for the job worked like in the movies. It could be possible that Levine already had people watching their every move, and at least, Billy appeared to be a friend.

The path of the least evil was all he could take right now. And looking at Billy, he couldn’t picture the word ‘evil’, as much as he tried. “Then I guess we should be going.”

“What? Is this all? I mean, we’re not getting to look over Billy’s shoulder while he’s running numbers on the screen like in Mr. Robot? You know, biting our nails? Drinking absurd amounts of coffee?”

Mason placed one hand on Rhys’s shoulder. “No. We let Billy work on it since he needs to move for this task anyway. Plus, I don’t think any amount of nail biting and coffee drinking would help.”

“Hell, guys, I would have loved for you to stick around some more, but I’m afraid I still need to do that unpacking I was telling you about.”

“Sure thing,” Mason replied. “Just give me a call as soon as you have something.”

“Will do,” Billy confirmed.

On their way down, Rhys offered Mason a small smile. “So, sleuthing is not as glamorous as they show it in movies, right?”



“I guess so. But I’m glad you’re --” Mason stopped before saying something foolish. What did he want to say? Rhys was what? Okay with it? Not a nervous mess? They were investigating his boyfriend’s murder, after all.

“I’m safe when I’m with you,” Rhys said.

The elevator doors opened in front of them. Mason walked in front and kept the door for Rhys. Their eyes met for the briefest of moments, and Mason read in them all that wasn’t said in words; the sadness, but also a glimmer of hope.

Maybe Toby was right, after all. Everyone could use closure, even if it couldn’t bring back the dead.

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“Man, I wish I could still taste food.”

Mason didn’t turn and continued to stir into the pot on the cooktop. As he didn’t need any help from Rhys, he had let him take a nap on the sofa, with the TV on.

“It looks good.” Toby walked right through him, and for a moment, Mason stared at the back of his head.

“You know, ghosts shouldn’t be allowed to do that to people. It’s a bit unnerving, just thinking of you going through my intestines like this.”

Toby withdrew. “Rhys sleeps like an angel in the other room.”

“And I’m glad he does. We need to be much more careful from now on. This isn’t a big house, so I won’t be able to talk to you as freely as before.” He turned to get a confirmation from his friend, the ghost.

Toby nodded. “He’s safe here, with you.” Words were sometimes echoes of others.

“Levine is royally pissed. I don’t know how long it’ll take for someone to come knocking down my door. But I’m sure it won’t be Avon calling.”

“We’re kind of free floating right now, aren’t we?”

“We have one direction,” Mason reminded him. “We need to know what Ary wrote in his diary about the night you died. In case he wrote something, of course.”

There was silence from the other.

“Toby?” Mason could only hope that his reproachful voice was enough to draw attention. “We need to know.”

“Yes, and there are like a million ways to do so,” came the reply.

“Really? What ways are those? Toby, I’m serious. You might be protecting a murderer.”

“He didn’t kill me.”

“And if he didn’t, that’s great. But we can’t afford being sentimental.” Mason shifted his weight from one foot to another and worked his neck. “Look, I like the kid, too. But that doesn’t make me blind. Maybe he saw something that night. And maybe he’s scared. And maybe, just maybe, he left something for us to find in that diary of his.”

Toby threw him a look as if he was half-convinced. “What are you going to do about him?” He gestured with his chin toward the small living room.

“I’ll have to get Billy to babysit him for a bit. I would get Boyd on it, but there are already enough people involved. It’s too late today, anyway. By now, Ary must be back from the studio, right?”

“He’s home,” Toby confirmed.

“Were you there today?”

Toby nodded. “I’m looking for evidence. He couldn’t have killed me.”

“You heard Renzo.”

“About a short guy offing me? Yeah, I was with you.” There was a bit of defiance in Toby’s voice as he said that. “What about it? A lot of people are short. Like Levine.”

Mason grimaced. “What reason could he have? He’s a scumbag and an annoyance, but I don’t want to jump to what looks like the most obvious conclusion only because I don’t like the guy.”

“And what reason could Ary have?” Toby countered. “He was my friend.”

“Yes, and he wanted to be more than that. He even made Rhys uncomfortable about it, too.”

Toby looked away. “I feel like I wronged him somehow.”

“And even if you did, that wasn’t a reason for him to take a swing at you with a baseball bat or something like that.”

“He didn’t,” Toby said stubbornly.

“Shouldn’t you be more concerned with your boyfriend and the pain he goes through and he’ll continue to go through until the end of fucking time?” Mason surprised both Toby and himself.

Toby's eyes filled with more hurt and guilt. "I don't even dare to look at him. What if I used to be a cheater?"

"Let's not work with what ifs." Mason willed himself to calm down. After all, he didn't need his angry words to be carried out to a sleeping Rhys in the next room. "Let's see the facts. You know, the truth."

"Even if it hurts?"

"Yeah. Sorry for serving you this old cliché, Toby, but I guess the truth will set you free. Isn't that what you're looking for?"

Toby looked down. "It's a bit scary when you think about it, right? After we uncover the truth, I'll disappear, right? For good."

"No one came back from that to tell the rest of us, schmucks, how it really is. Maybe it's rivers of wine and mountains of gingerbread, and you spend all eternity getting tipsy and abnormally fat."

To his relief, Toby raised his eyes and laughed. "Well, if that helps, maybe I'll come back and tell you how it is."

Mason waved. "I think I can live without knowing."

"What if it's really cool? Wouldn't you like to know?"

"I'm the kind of guy who loves surprises. Especially if they're pleasant."

There was a short silence between them.

Mason was the first to speak. "I'm not sleeping with Rhys. I mean, I'm trying."

"You don't have to try so hard."

"Shouldn't you be more possessive of the man who loves you?"

"I don't have a body. Hell, I don't even have a tiny tooth to call my own. Do I look like someone who could claim others as his?"

"Well, you don't look bad," Mason offered.

"Ah, what are you trying to say?" Toby teased and batted his eyelashes while fanning his face as if it was hot in the room all of a sudden, and he could feel it. "That I'm handsome? C'mon, Mason, say it."

"Hey, I just wanted to cheer you up. I have no intention to shower you in compliments. Take what you can."

“C’mon, Mason, don’t be like that,” Toby advanced toward him, making his hands into claws, with a naughty expression on his face. “I’ll tickle you.”

“Ha, just try it.”

“I’ll go through your intestines again,” Toby warned.

Mason rolled his eyes. “All right. You’re handsome.”

“What’s that? I didn’t hear you.”

“You’re handsome,” Mason said in a slightly higher tone.

“Louder and with more conviction.”

“Aren’t you pushing your luck?”

“Hey, it’s all I got. What’s a poor ghost to do? Tell me I’m beautiful.”

“Seriously? All right, you’re beautiful.”

“Now that I’m cute and misunderstood.”

“Were you this annoying when you were alive? I bet the ‘misunderstood’ part was true, then. All right, here we go. I’ll tell you, but this is the last time you hear me about this.” Mason cleared his voice.

“Don’t forget to say it like you mean it.”

Mason stood straight like an actor on a stage. “You are really handsome. I think you’re among the most handsome men I know. And you’re cute, yes, you are really cute. Of course, that also means you’re misunderstood --”

“Mason!”

Taken with Toby’s antics, Mason had missed the kitchen door opening. He froze as he looked at Rhys, who stood there with a panicked expression on his face. Hell, had he heard him talk to Toby?

“I think the food is burning!”

Mason turned at the cooktop, suddenly aware of the acrid smell. In an instant, he was next to it, turning off the knob. “Oh, damn.” He looked dejectedly inside the pot. If it were only himself, he could save some, but not when he had guests.

Well, at least, it was just a bit of burnt food. Rhys must have been alerted by the smell. He hadn’t heard anything, and that was a cause for relief.

“What were you doing talking like that?”

Of course. Burnt food was the least of his problems.

## *Chapter Twenty – Moments In Time*

Mason began rubbing the back of his head and grimaced. Now, what the hell could he say in his defense? He didn't believe for one moment that confessing to having have talked to Toby all this time was the wise decision. So, a lie had to do as much as he hated it.

"It's hard for me to admit --" he started, but his tongue became cloyed with guilt.

Rhys's eyes were on him; Mason didn't have to look to know. Ah, damn it, why did it have to be so hard? He had promised himself to be honest in all his dealings, and he had told Rhys he wouldn't lie to him.

"Even if it's hard, you should try it," Rhys said in a gentle voice.

Mason read compassion in those words right away. That had to mean that Rhys already thought he knew what was going on.

Therefore, the easiest way out was to ask. "What do you think I was doing?" His voice was tense.

Rhys came closer and put his hands on Mason's shoulders. "It sounded to me like you were giving yourself a pep talk."

A pep talk! That was genius. Mason grabbed at the straw being handed out on a silver platter with the benevolence of someone who truly cared. "Yeah, I felt like I needed one." For the sake of all that was holy, he hoped Rhys couldn't see through his charade. He was no good at this.

"Why?" Rhys rubbed his shoulders, and it felt so nice that Mason could feel his body relax.

"Because you're here," he blurted out, and this time, it was half a truth.

"And? Mason, you're granite. Don't tell me I impress you."

Rhys leaned in closer, his voice gaining a teasing quality that could make a stronger man falter.

He only needed to move his head, and their lips would touch. From that moment onward, there would be no turning back. Mason could feel the pleasant fragrance Rhys wore, and a brief look to the side convinced him that those lips were as soft and ripe for the taking as he remembered.

Damn all the temptations he was put through. Sinners needed forgiveness, too, or more so, compared to everyone else. He crossed that line, filled in that distance, and kissed Rhys with all his heart. The little voice inside his head condemning him for this cheap trick was ordered to silence.

As expected, Rhys responded, his lips parting and receiving Mason's tongue deep inside his mouth. They both knew what a thirst for affection could mean, and quenching it meant there was only one way.

He lifted Rhys from the floor without difficulty, and lean limbs wrapped around him like vines around a tree. Good thing his apartment was so small; shortly, they were in the bedroom, and soon on the bed.

Rhys caressed his face and searched his eyes. "Aren't we searching for trouble?"

"Maybe, yeah," Mason admitted. "But it's the only thing we're good at, aren't we?" He didn't have to lie, after all.

"You think so, too?" A small grin told him that he would be forgiven, regardless of his trespassing.

That he could inhale the smell of Rhys's skin was all he wanted at that moment in time. It wasn't true that time never sat still; maybe it continued to flow for the outside world, like an unstoppable river. The pay for the stolen time would come later, but those were worries for another time.

"I have a weakness for you," Rhys confessed and covered Mason's mouth with his.

He, as opposed to everyone else. Confessions like that didn't come often. Mason moved his hands over the lithe body under him, freeing it from all the clothes getting in the way. He pressed his lips against Rhys's throat and bit and licked. From there, it was easy to go lower and feast himself on the chest carved in marble and the small pebbles made of lust.

The way Rhys arched his body off the bed and his nipples turned to warm stone in Mason's mouth was maddening. It was like he almost wanted to keep it all in but couldn't handle it. Mason adored the fact that he was the reason for that loss of control.

Rhys laughed and made him roll on the bed as he tried to get Mason out of his clothes, too. He laughed, but his eyes were moist, and his hands were feverish as they touched everywhere.

If there was a boundary between affection and lust, Mason couldn't see it. He wanted nothing else but to squeeze Rhys in his arms so hard it hurt, but he also dreamed of nothing else but to be able to keep him safe, protected from all the evils of the world.

He was swimming against the current, and that he knew it well. Nothing mattered, but those stolen moments in time he could now claim for himself and Rhys.

"Seeing how you just showed me a vulnerable side of you, would you be okay with me on top?" Rhys asked breathlessly.

Mason steadied his slender hips, and they were already humping each other, skin against skin, capable of producing something akin to electricity. "I would," he admitted.

"Anything here I could use for, you know?" Rhys asked.

Mason pressed one finger against the soft lips and used one hand to search blindly for what he had just been asked. Rhys smiled against his finger.

"Let me," Mason ordered.

Blue eyes flashed with amusement. "The point of having someone else on top for a change --"

"I know, but I don't trust you. And I like to feel you," he offered a confession of his own.

His fingers had to be rough against that pale skin. He had said no lies about his desire to feel Rhys in every way, so when he felt the rising heat and the way it gave in as he prodded forward, he knew everything he had ever wanted was in his arms.

Rhys moaned softly. "So tough and kind ... how can you be both, Mason?"

"You won't find me kind forever."

Rhys glued their bodies together, seemingly not bothered by having his behind scissored to allow entrance. "Then I'll take what I can."

Fair enough. Mason kissed Rhys again to distract him for what he was about to do and positioned himself for entering. He had worried Rhys would be impatient, and he was now guilty of that.

Rhys arched his body away from him and took matters into his own hands. He adjusted himself and helped Mason delve again into the heat of his body. "Let me take charge," he said with a small smile.

If he could take a picture and frame it, that would be everything, Mason thought. It wasn't just the outer beauty that made Rhys so irresistible. His eyes were shining, letting his soul bare, and that was beautiful, too.

Mason raised his arms so that he could bury his hands in Rhys's hair. It was a measure to help him impose a rhythm, and soon they found it. Rhys's strong thighs kept his hips in place, but Mason liked to fight against the pressure. It took the edge a little and helped him gain in stamina what he lost in sensation.

He straightened himself into a sitting position and pulled Rhys's body to him. They moved and slammed against each other, as their voices became hoarse with too much want. It was easy for them to kiss, too, and Mason took advantage of every moment, knowing how much each of them would mean, later on.



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“I know it must be a selfish question, but do you always fuck like this?”

Neither of them smoked, but Mason felt that watching blue swirls of wasted nicotine floating toward the ceiling would make the moment complete. They were both on their backs, which was as good an excuse as any to avoid looking at each other. Still, their silence was comfortable, so time as they know it, could wait at the door, patient as a dog, and mean like one, too.

“I don’t always fuck like this,” he offered in all honesty.

“Hmm, does that make me special?” The teasing was back in that mellifluous voice, and Mason smiled to nothing and no one in particular.

“You know it does. It doesn’t make you cute to ask for confirmations, though.”

“Cute, huh? I don’t care too much about it, though.”

“You don’t? What kind of celebrity are you?”

“I’m not a celebrity at all. When fame came, I didn’t know what to make of it. Toby, though --”

Mason grimaced. It wasn’t the fact that Rhys was mentioning Toby, but that hesitation that was opening the door for the real flow of time to slip in. He pushed himself up.

“I’m sorry, Mason.”

“Don’t be.” He wasn’t curt on purpose. “We shouldn’t forget what we’ve gathered together for.”

“Your lovers might find it so easy to break up with you, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know. Never asked.” That was well aimed.

There was movement behind him, and he wasn’t surprised when warm arms wrapped around him. “Maybe you should start. A change can be nice, sometimes.”

“Are you teasing me?” Mason placed his hands over Rhys’s arms and caressed them.

“No. I talk about Toby because, for the most part of my life, he was it. Not in it, but it.”

Mason nodded. “I have nothing against that. You should know. And we’re just fucking, right?”

“Hmm,” Rhys purred and moved his lips over Mason’s ear, “so, we’re like two dudes, in an extraordinary situation, and they can’t find any other outlet to release the tension but fuck?”

A shrug could be the safest reply. “Yeah, kind of.”

Rhys laughed right into his ear. “Sounds like the synopsis for a B-rated movie.”

“Then we might just star in one, right now.”

“Yeah. We would look great on the poster.”

“You would. I don’t know if I’d be included.”

“Why wouldn’t you? You’re the main character.”

“I’m the main character? Aren’t you?”

“Mmm ... nope. You see, I was floating without a purpose and then, you walked in, and the movie all started to make sense. That’s the main protagonist for you.”

“You’re just pandering to my insecurities.”

“I would never,” Rhys promised. He moved so that they could sit side by side. “You’re keeping to yourself a lot, Mason. How many times do we have to fuck for you to start telling me things about yourself?”

“What kind of things?”

“You could start with your childhood.”

“That far back? That would make a pretty boring movie.”

“I’m sure it wouldn’t.”

Mason could feel his heart closing up. But maybe telling Rhys a few truths about himself would erase the fact that he had lied to him earlier. Or only the guilt. It could work.

“I didn’t know my parents,” he started. “All my early memories are nothing but crowded rooms, fights, and being moved from one place to another, like a broken piece of furniture.”

Rhys placed one sympathetic arm around his shoulders.

“You don’t have to feel bad about me,” Mason said, but the arm didn’t move, and he didn’t want it moved, either. “It made me tough. But I had one respite in that kind of life, and it changed everything.”

Rhys waited for him to continue without saying a word.

“An old lady took me in, and then, I guess, I started to feel happy. She was like the grandmother I’ve never had. And she gave me my name. The one I had before didn’t matter.”

“How old were you?”

“Around nine. She was quite the character.” Mason laughed at the memory. “We lived in a rundown house, but she made it feel like a palace. Too bad it wasn’t meant to last.” He paused, the emotions from a long time ago, rough against the inside of his chest.

“What happened?” Rhys asked gently.

“She had some family left. Strange people who sometimes came, a man and a woman, asking for money. She always said that she didn’t want any trouble, so she gave them everything she had. Even as a nine-year-old, I thought it was unjust. So, one day, I tried to tell those scumbags to beat it. As you can guess, I was nothing like I’m today. They beat the living crap out of me.”

He paused. Was it all right to admit to his mistakes? Would he be judged? He liked to think that he would be forgiven. “The old lady, she came home, and found me bloody, with them towering over me. As gentle as she always was, she got mad. And then --” The words stuck in his throat for a moment. “The man, he pushed her. And she hit her head and just remained there, her eyes still open.”

“Oh god,” Rhys barely managed.

“I think they were drunk because the next moment, instead of caring for her, they began searching the house for money. I was forgotten, for some reason only their alcohol-addled brains could know.”

“And what did you do?”

Mason could feel his face turning into a mask. “I snuck out of the house and called the cops on them. The policewoman I talked to told me to stay put, but I didn’t. Right then, I thought of nothing else than how fucking unjust this stupid world is. I was given one chance, and I blew it. So, maybe it was fair. I knew that I couldn’t go back to being tossed around, from one foster home to another. I ran. I ran and ran, and never looked back.”

Rhys embraced him and held him close. He began kissing his head, with unhidden affection. “You grew up tough. You made it, Mason.”

“I suppose I did.” He wasn’t the kind to cry. But he wasn’t the kind to speak about his past, so there he was.

“And you had that old lady who cared about you, even if for a little while. Remember her as she was.”

“I guess that’s good advice,” Mason said, trying hard to find his footing again. “For such a long time, I could only remember her face when she died.”

Rhys nudged him gently. “Don’t think of that. Tell me something about her. Something quirky and fun, as you told me she was when alive.”

Mason smiled at the memories now. “She put nutmeg in cherry jam.”

“Mmm, yummy.”

“And we had our own dancing club on Thursdays.”

“That sounds cool.”

The next words flew from Mason’s mouth without him being aware of them and their meaning. “And she believed in ghosts.”

“Wow, really?”

Mason remained frozen. She had believed in ghosts. Was that why he –

“Mason?” Rhys grabbed his cheek gently. “What is it? Now you look like you’ve just seen a ghost.”

If only he knew. Mason shook his head. “It’s nothing. Come on. We should go out to eat. I compromised dinner.”

Rhys held him down. “This is not the only one time you tell me about your past, okay? I want to know you.”

“Why?”

“Isn’t it clear? I want to know everything about you. Because I want you.”

Mason didn’t have a suitable retort to that and didn’t get a chance to find one because his phone rang.

Billy’s voice, on the other end, was strange. “Guys, when you can, drop by. I found some things.”

He didn’t need to add any details. So Billy had managed to break in Toby’s phone.

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They had lost their appetite, so in less than one hour, they were at Billy’s. The silence had stretched between them, and neither appeared in the mood to take guesses at Billy’s findings. A touch of bleak was already contaminating the aftermath of their earlier sexual congress, but it was a herald of the future that couldn’t be kept at bay.

Billy welcomed them, and his serious face left nothing of his usual cheerfulness show. Mason read embarrassment and pity in the way he moved as he invited them inside.

“Do you guys want some coffee? Tea?”

Mason put one hand on Billy's shoulder and leaned in enough so that he could whisper, "It's not a social call. Out with it if you can."

Billy nodded. "At least, sit down."

The small apartment was less of a mess than earlier, a sign that Billy had been busy with putting an order in that chaos, after all. And with that on his hands, he had still found the time to deal with Toby's phone. Quite the boy scout, Mason thought and looked around, not knowing exactly what he was expecting to see.

"What did you find?" Rhys's question was direct, and Mason admired him for it.

Billy hesitated for a moment. "Maybe I should start with what I didn't find. Was there a micro SD card in Toby's phone?"

Rhys nodded. "It should have been. I admit that I didn't even look for it. I kept Toby's phone as a memento, not as something usable."

"The card is missing," Billy explained. "But not the SIM, so --"

"Somebody must have taken it," Mason concluded.

"I should ask the police about it, right?" Rhys said.

"No." Mason stared at Billy, and the same knowing look was reflected at him.

"Right. They don't care." Rhys remained pensive. "Toby used it to store our selfies and small videos, as far as I know."

"Any compromising ones?" Billy asked, and his question was addressed in a flat tone.

"Compromising in what sense? We weren't the type to make sex videos," Rhys replied.

"I'm not talking about that. Anything sensitive, I don't know. We're just shooting in the dark at this point."

"Not that I know of," Rhys offered. "So the memory card is missing. What else did you find out?"

"Toby called some people that night."

"Who?" Mason asked, bracing for uncomfortable truths.

"Levine Goldman."

Rhys exchanged a quick look with Mason.

“And Renzo Ora.”

“Renzo?” Rhys was surprised. “But he never told me he spoke to Toby that night.”

“His calls weren’t answered by what I can tell.”

“We’ll have to pay Mr. Ora a visit,” Mason said in a cutting voice. “What about Levine?”

“There was a conversation for sure. Only that questioning him about it might be tricky, seeing how neither of us is any longer in his graces,” Billy explained.

“We never were,” Mason said.

“I will ask him,” Rhys intervened. “He owes me an explanation if Toby talked to him that night.”

“Let’s not bet on that. Was there anything else?” Mason ignored the pointed look he got from Rhys. He couldn’t let him go back to that asshole.

“There was.” Billy hesitated for a moment and looked away. When his eyes set on his guests, they were moist.

A sinking feeling in his gut told him that whatever Billy had found was bound to be painful.

“Let me show you.”

They followed Billy to another room with a computer on the desk.

“Toby was writing a message, but he never had the chance to send it,” Billy said in an apologetic, pained voice as if he was guilty in some way for the reason that had happened. “It was addressed to you, Rhys.”

He made a gesture for Rhys to sit in front of the computer.

Mason stood behind, aware that the respective message hadn’t been addressed to more than one pair of eyes. He examined Rhys’s face with anxious eyes. A mist of sadness covered his beautiful features.

Rhys rubbed the back of his neck and cleared his throat. To Mason’s surprise, he began reading.

“I know we’ve been fighting lately. So I’m going to tell you everything as soon we get home. I have something to trade for our safety, and it’s going to be okay. I know I don’t make a lot of sense right now. Just know this, Rhys. I love you. I haven’t said it lately, but I’ll say it again and again. I love you. I love you. I love ...”

A small sob escaped Rhys’s lips. “This is how it ends. He must have been killed while still typing this message,” he said in a weak voice he had a hard time controlling.

Everyone in the room was silent. Mason and Billy allowed Rhys a few moments to compose himself.

When Rhys lifted his head and looked at them, there was a new kind of determination shining in his eyes. “We need to talk to Renzo.”

“Then let’s go. Call him to see where he is,” Mason replied. He knew Renzo wasn’t telling him anything, and he couldn’t trust that man, at least not entirely.

“I’m coming with you, guys.”

“Me, too.”

Mason was no longer surprised by Toby’s sudden appearances. He stole a quick look at him to see if he had been present while Rhys had read his last message. By how hollow his eyes were, he must have been.

“Billy, I should tell you,” Mason addressed his former partner. “You don’t have to put yourself in a hot spot. You’ve helped us a lot already. Renzo, like Levine, is a powerful man in this city, and going against him, as we plan to do that, could get you in trouble. If you want to sit this one out, it’s fine. Don’t you think so, Rhys?”

“Guys, I told you I’m in. All the way. What would Kung Fu Panda do in this kind of situation? I’m telling you,” Billy said with a grin that sucked in some of the gloomy air in the room, “that guy would never desert his friends. And that guy, according to you, chief, is me.”

Mason put his palms up in defeat. “I suppose that this is what I get for giving you that nickname.”

Billy’s grin grew broader. “Let’s go, gang. We’re going to get to the bottom of this, without a doubt. I’ll drive.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way. It’s like nothing changed, right?”

Billy nodded. “As I told you. We’re on the same team. The one with the good guys.”

Rhys stood up and embraced Billy shortly, much to the other’s pleasant surprise. He wrapped his hand around Mason’s arm. “Whatever the truth is, I’ll face it.”

No other words were needed. They had a mission on their hands.

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“He’s waiting for us at Dreamland,” Rhys explained as he slipped his phone back into the back pocket of his jeans.

Mason placed one hand on his knee. "Are you okay with that?"

Rhys pursed his lips and nodded, but his eyes were distant, avoiding contact. "If it's about finding out who hurt Toby and took him away from me, I'm okay."

"That asshole could have said something the last time we were there," Toby said, and Mason exchanged a small look with him.

Funny how being accompanied by a ghost now and then no longer seemed out of the ordinary. If Aimee Knight were still alive, she would believe him, for sure, no questions asked.

It was not the right time to take a trip down the memory lane and remember Aimee and how good she had been to him. There had been something otherworldly about her, or maybe that was just the dust of memories making it all appear as looked at through a smudged lens.

"Strange," Rhys murmured.

"What?" Mason asked.

"Renzo wasn't surprised by my phone call. I'd say that he was even expecting it."

"Did he say that?"

"Not directly. But he did say that he would be glad to talk to us, without asking what we want."

"Maybe he thinks we just want to hang out," Mason offered.

Rhys shook his head slowly, and he appeared lost in thought. "Renzo, as charming as anyone might see him, always calculates his moves. He must know something."

"And we need to know what," Mason agreed.

"We're here, guys. Ready to rumble?"

As Mason stepped out, a nagging sensation at the back of his brain startled him. Again, there was something he was missing, and he couldn't tell what it was.

Billy opened the door to the club and held it for them. "Coming?"

Faint music poured into the street from inside. It was almost dark, so the regular schedule must have started already. Mason took Rhys's hand and held it tightly as they walked in.



## *Chapter Twenty-One – Hands On The Table*

The place was a much livelier version of the one Mason had known from his previous visit. It wasn't a disco for kids to sweat their hearts out on the dancefloor and had instead a hip, vaguely classy vibe.

Rhys wrapped his arm around his tightly. "I hope he doesn't expect us to search for him all over the place."

Nervous jitters were explainable. The last time Rhys had been here, his boyfriend, the love of his life, had been killed. Mason could tell that the happy laughter that could be heard from groups of expensively dressed patrons and the cheerful lights were a mockery for him.

"Ah, my dear guests." Renzo moved through the throng of bodies as he descended a flight of stairs that led to the better tables.

Yes, he carried himself like he owned the place, which was true down to a tee. Mason observed him with wary eyes. Rhys left his side suddenly and stopped in front of Renzo. "How could you?" His voice was strung, and Mason noticed his tightly close fists, kept by his sides.

"Let's take this to my office," Renzo offered smoothly and raised one arm to point the way.

"Toby --" Rhys started again.

Mason placed a hand on his shoulder. "We will hear what Mr. Ora has to say for himself."

Renzo sighed dramatically. "I see there's no love lost for me in your little group. Please, gentlemen, I promise I will reply to your concerns to the best of my abilities."

Mason had his doubts but kept his mouth shut. One strategy was to let Renzo Ora talk, without interruptions. Maybe he would slip by accident, although it appeared that the man left little if anything to chance. Not a hair astray on his head, one could quickly notice from a single look.

Renzo buttoned his suit jacket; the courteous smile on his lips appeared genuine. But who was to tell that he hadn't perfected a poker face no one could rival?

They left the central area, and soon they followed Renzo down a large corridor with intriguing exhibits encased in glass cages displayed on both sides. Mason observed them in passing; they seemed to be artifacts related to casino games and not only.

Toby stopped, and Mason watched him silently. "This dude keeps a museum in the hallway? And what the hell are these?" He pointed out at one of the cages.

"What are these?" Mason asked, knowing that Toby would start pestering him with useless questions if he didn't do something about it.

Rhys threw him a sharp look. “Renzo’s collecting old, useless things.”

“That hurts, Rhys my prince,” Renzo replied. He stopped and approached Mason, who was looking at the case in which an arrangement that appeared close to a part of a pool table, complete with a pair of cue sticks crossing each other, laid. “For instance, this piece was inspired by the way French nobles used to play pool at the end of the seventeenth century.”

Certainly, the cue sticks were nothing like Mason knew. For a moment, he stared at the curved head of one stick. In the milky red lights, the brass appeared stained, old. He had questions, but Rhys took his hand.

“So, these are only replicates?” he asked but followed Rhys dutifully.

“I wouldn’t keep antiquities in the hallway, as eccentric as people believe me to be. Yes, they are replicates. As you can see, Mason, I am a fan of games of skill.”

“I thought you were a big fan of Lady Luck.”

Renzo chuckled. “Careful there, Mason. Rhys might believe we have gotten chummy without his knowledge.”

Of course. These days, he had a loose tongue and an even looser mind.

“Please, come in.” Renzo opened the door to his office at the end of the hallway.

It was as opulent as expected but appointed with much better taste than what he had seen at Levine’s house. In a style competition, Renzo would win against his declared rival, but Mason suspected the battlefield lay somewhere else.

They all took place on a long leather sofa. Billy had been quiet all the time, but he whistled as he looked around and rubbed his palm against the luxurious fabric. “You have excellent taste, Mr. Ora,” he said.

“Thank you,” Renzo replied and smiled.

“We’re not here to exchange pleasantries,” Mason intervened abruptly.

“Why did Toby call you the night he died?” Rhys’s voice was wrought with pain. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

Renzo was the only one standing. He walked to the small bar that came with the room, and, without a word, he proceeded to fill glasses and handed them one by one, with a focused expression on his face.

The silence was stretching.

“Toby didn’t talk to me that night. I was, let’s say, a bit indisposed at the time. I couldn’t answer my phone.”

“You were busy fucking someone,” Rhys said.

Renzo met his crude remark with a sly smile. “If only. I’m afraid nothing came out of it, and when I say ‘came’, I mean it.”

“Just cut the crap already, Renzo,” Rhys said bitterly. “Why was Toby so keen on talking to you that night?”

“Well.” Renzo leaned against his desk and took a sip from his glass. “That’s something I would very much like to find out. He told me some strange things, not that night, but right before.”

“What strange things?”

Renzo looked at Mason as he replied. His eyes were hypnotic. “That I should skip town.”

“With him?” Rhys revolted.

“No, not with him, my lovely prince. He thought, for some reason, that I was in danger, but wouldn’t say why.”

Mason exchanged a brief look with Billy. His partner’s face was impenetrable.

“Danger? What sort?” Rhys continued his interrogation.

“I pressed him for details. He resisted, as much as I insisted. I could tell he was scared to talk ... I wish I could have picked up that night. Unfortunately, I left my suit jacket with my phone in it here while I had to attend to other business. I called afterward, but of course, it was too late.”

Renzo’s sadness as he said the last words couldn’t be staged. If it was, then Renzo Ora was deserving of an Oscar. Mason scrutinized his face and body language and came up empty.

Rhys appeared to be on a different mind track. “Where were you, Renzo, when Toby was killed?”

“Right here, obviously.” Renzo didn’t look offended at the direct accusation.

“In this room?”

“In the club.”

“Any people who can vouch for you?”

“Detective Harmony, you are too sexy for the job,” Renzo teased. “Perps might end up imagining crimes just so that you squeeze the truth out of them.”

“Renzo,” Rhys warned.

“Fine,” Renzo replied. “About a dozen after four AM.”

“And earlier?”

Toby could have died earlier, Mason thought, so Rhys’s question was legit.

“Earlier,” Renzo said slowly and frowned for a second. “You will have to ask your good friend, the little mouse, about that.”

“Ary?” Rhys asked, visibly surprised. “What could he ... What did you do to him?” His eyes narrowed. Mason could tell he was suspecting the club owner of unsavory things.

Renzo put up his hands. “Nothing, I swear on my boy scout’s honor.”

“You’ve never been a boy scout,” Rhys replied.

“Must you remind me?” Renzo rolled his eyes. “Fine. Since you’re all here, and I’m the willing subject of an interrogation, I will put my cards on the table.”

Mason observed Renzo as he stood up, placed one hand behind his back, and began pacing the room.

“Let’s say that I was just monitoring the action in my club when I noticed Ary talking to Toby. By that time, you must have locked yourself in the bathroom, Rhys, too tired with your boyfriend’s penchant for yelling at you.”

“I was dead drunk,” Rhys said tersely.

Renzo grimaced, but his face became smooth again in the blink of an eye. “Naturally, I wanted nothing of another jealousy scene in my club since I had no idea you wouldn’t come out of there until much later.”

“So?” Rhys scowled.

“So, I decided to entice the little mouse with a small bait, to defuse the situation. I left my office in quite a hurry --”

“Wait, how did you know Ary was talking to Toby?” Mason intervened.

Renzo walked to a wall and opened what appeared to be built-in double doors. Mason quirked an eyebrow at the dozen of screens that flickered in front of them. Various areas of the club were monitored by cameras and fed directly there. “I dislike shady business in my club,” he explained.

“So you saw them talking? On these screens?”

Renzo nodded. "I left my phone here, as I told you, and hurried to talk to the little mouse. By the time I got there, Toby had already left."

"What did you talk to Ary about?" Rhys asked.

Renzo smiled again. "That's the kind of thing a gentlemen never talks about."

"It's the kind of situation that should waive such obligations," Mason pointed out.

"I don't see how my teasing of an innocent would have any relevance to the investigation you three appear to be leading."

Rhys set his jaw hard. "You didn't," he hissed. "Ary --"

Renzo chose to placate him with another disarming smile and a raised hand. "He left here with his cherry intact, cross my heart. Much to my chagrin if I may add."

"Ha! So the only reason you don't want to talk about it is that you were given the boot," Rhys said.

Renzo became serious again. "Unfortunately, Rhys, what I'm about to tell you ... Let's say that it cannot make you happy." He let out a short breath. "Ary still hurried after Toby. It must have been something I said," he added as an apology.

"Hurried after Toby?" Rhys said each word slowly.

Mason knew what Renzo was hinting at. He didn't like it, but he couldn't deny that Renzo had a point. "The cameras," he gestured at the wall of screens, "did they catch anything odd?"

"I had to hand the recordings to the police. Of course, I have copies. But nothing out of the ordinary appeared in them, as far as I can tell. And I watched them over and over."

"Is Ary in them after the presumed conversation with Toby?"

"Yes. Shortly. He appeared rather shaken."

"What do the cameras cover?" Mason asked.

"Only the club floor. I'm not some pervert," Renzo retorted.

"This area, is it also covered?"

Renzo raised his eyebrows. "No. I care about my privacy. I hope you didn't want to peruse my failed attempt to seduce the little mouse."

"You tried that, here?" Rhys asked, a bit louder.

“No. Unfortunately, we didn’t get this far and had our little conversation in a less, let’s say, suitable place. And that was why I failed to hear Toby calling.”

Everyone fell silent. Mason could tell Rhys was ruminating over Renzo’s words.

“Ary wouldn’t,” Rhys whispered. “No, I refuse.”

Mason took him by the shoulders. “These details are only circumstantial. We don’t know anything for sure. Let’s not jump to conclusions.”

Rhys bit his lips and shook his head. It was easy to notice fresh tears hanging from his eyelashes. “Ary might have been the last person to see Toby alive.”

“We don’t know that, either,” Mason said.

“Can we see those recordings?” Billy asked.

They all needed a voice of reason. Renzo gestured for them to join them. With the help of a remote control, he took them through the chain of events he had explained earlier.

There wasn’t much to glean from those recordings. Renzo had been quite accurate in his descriptions.

“How come the police never suspected him?” Mason wondered out loud.

“What are you saying, Mason? Are we really --” Rhys protested.

“I’m only looking at facts. It looks to me like they only cared to pin it on you and, when they couldn’t, they just dropped it.”

“Crappy job, that’s what they did,” Billy concluded.

“We’ll have to talk to Ary,” Rhys said.

His eyes were dry again. Mason took his hand and held it. “It’s late now. Let’s see about it tomorrow.”

Rhys pursed his lips. “I would be in my rights to wake him up. Why does everyone keep lying to me?”

Mason felt his heart growing small. He was one of the liars, too. Still, he hardened and turned toward Renzo. “Why couldn’t you say anything about all these, earlier?”

“Who would have listened? I imperiously asked Rhys to see me so that we could talk. As I recall, I haven’t been graced with a visit until now. Must I remind you that?”

Mason waved, irritated by the somewhat logical reasoning behind Renzo's words. He couldn't admit, in front of Rhys, that they had met behind his back. "Still."

"As much as that may surprise you, I tried to investigate on my own. So it's my turn. Did Toby tell you anything about the reason he was so scared? Why did he believe I should skip town?"

Rhys shook his head. "I have no idea. He was very evasive and anxious. He wanted us to leave ... So I suppose you weren't the only one he believed to be in danger."

"I guess that settles it," Renzo concluded affably. "Who is going to shake the little mouse?"

"I'll do it," Rhys decided.

"We." Mason took his hand and held it.

Renzo let out a low chuckle. "I see someone took my advice."

Mason pretended not to hear. Rhys was caught up in his own ruminations to catch that, which, for the moment, was a relief.

"Gentlemen, I enjoy your company a lot, but I have a club to run."

Billy stood up. "Sure thing, Mr. Ora," he said vivaciously. "It's time for us to be out of your hair."

"My door is always open," Renzo offered.

Mason followed Billy's example and helped Rhys to his feet. All clues led to Ary. He hoped the boy was innocent, but even if he weren't the one to end Toby's life, something must have scared him good about that night. And Mason planned on finding out.

It would be better to leave Rhys out of it. Mason wanted to get his hands on Ary's diary first, maybe glean some essential details first. After all, Ary could deny any involvement, regardless of how much he was pressed. They needed more than just his word.

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Mason rubbed Rhys's back gently. They were back at his shabby apartment, and everything about it reminded him that whatever they had, it was ephemeral. "I know you must be very upset. But Ary ... Let's keep our hopes high."

Rhys nodded, but without looking at him. "Mason, love me," he said brusquely and turned toward him.

It was as simple as opening his arms to receive the blond head that buried in the crook of his shoulder and that warm body that was his, at least tonight. "You sure you're not tired?"

The reply was a pair of lips that covered his with restlessness and fear. Mason knew all about that, so he crushed Rhys's mouth and forced it open. The slight resistance wasn't for play, but just as true, desire shone through, ready for taking.

Their bodies fit so well. Mason had never been particular about the way his lovers looked, how the scent of their skin tickled his nostrils, or how his hands fit around a wrist, a waist, an offered throat.

Beyond this, he would turn into someone else, someone different, but he welcomed the change, with the truth and pain that would most likely come with it. He inhaled as he rubbed his face against Rhys's shoulder and bit hard, wanting a chunk of the person trembling in his arms, something to remind him later of it all. A short gasp warned him he had gone too far, so he pushed Rhys on his back and straddled him.

"I'm yours." Open arms accompanied the simple declaration.

Mason spared few moments to undress and get his lover naked. With hurry, he buried himself deep into the welcoming heat, eliciting soft moans and curses from lips he loved to kiss. They both hurried, he realized, but it wasn't for the sake of having it done and then forgotten.

One time wasn't enough. He remained there, inside, until he got hard again while hearing not one word of protest from the other. They kissed and kissed as their desire for one another soared again.

Later, as they laid together, with no desire to move or talk, Mason thought about the following day and what would bring. He held Rhys tightly until he heard his breathing deepening and becoming steady.

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Mason watched Rhys a while and covered him with the blanket. He didn't stir in his sleep. Their clothes lay everywhere, a reminder of the night before. Mason picked Rhys's clothes and placed them on a chair. Something stabbed at his foot, and he winced.

When he looked down, he noticed Rhys's pendant. The chain must have broken while they had been busy tearing into one another. The stone appeared to not sit right in its metal frame. That would need repairs. Mason placed it on the nightstand, knowing Rhys would want to see it when he woke up.

It was early, but Ary left early for the studio, as Toby had told him on their way back last night. He would be in and out, and Rhys, being so deep in sleep, wouldn't even know of his absence. He could always invent something on the spot, such as having gone for groceries.



With one last look at the sleeping body on the bed, Mason walked out of the room, careful not to make a sound. Rhys was so beautiful in his sleep, he wanted to stop and kiss him, but it could wake him up.

He decided against it. There were more pressing matters to deal with.

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No one had to know that Mason Knight was a bit of an expert in breaking and entering. His life on the streets had taught him many things, some less honest than others. He wasn't proud of what he was doing, but it was the only way.

"He left five minutes ago."

"Damn, Toby, warn a guy before popping up like this," Mason whispered.

"Like how? Pat you on the shoulder?"

"Nice one. No, but you could have joined me earlier."

"What can I say? I like to make an entrance."

"What a diva," Mason said with mirth. "Now, where's the diary?"

"He keeps it under his pillow."

"All right, let's see."

Mason wasted no time. His phone at the ready for taking pictures, he began turning the pages.

"I feel ashamed about this," Toby said.

"I know. But it's for a good cause. And I'm going to forget everything else written here, the moment I find out what I'm looking for."

Toby shook his head. "Once you do a bad deed, you cannot undo it. And karma is a bitch."

Mason offered a non-committal grunt. "Speaking from experience?"

"If I knew the answer, I'd give it to you."

Mason began taking pictures of the pages. Fortunately, Ary didn't seem keen on writing every day in his diary, so it didn't take him long to have it all stored on his phone. "All done here. Let's hit the road."

He didn't want to be there one moment longer than needed. So he was relieved once out the door and breathed in the chilly air of the first days of fall as he walked down the street. A few times,

he turned, suddenly aware of eyes watching him. But nothing appeared to be out of the ordinary, no matter how many times he turned and looked.

He climbed into an Uber to head home. Toby sat by his side and watched over his shoulder as he began to scroll through the pages of Ary's diary. The good thing was that the pages didn't appear to be filled with an adolescent's usual drivel, and that made things easier. The little mouse was neat, dating his entries and writing them in a rounded, easy to read calligraphy that was tale-telling of the keeper's personality.

There was the page Toby had spoken about.

These guys are dreamy! I know I'm gushing like a fanboy, but I have a feeling Rhys is going to be a star. Toby's so handsome, too. I've been in this city for a while but never got close to a gay couple before. I have a feeling I can learn a lot from them. Maybe what love is?

Ary wasn't exactly a twelve-year-old writing about their crush, but he did draw a small heart next to that.

Mason continued reading.

This shouldn't be happening. I feel so guilty. It's so strange that I feel like this. But I just can't help it. Today, Toby ruffled my hair and called me 'kid', like Humphrey Bogart in Casablanca. We watch old movies together sometimes. It's so much fun!

That explained the acting Rhys and Ary had performed when they had met at the studio. The trio must have had their good times.

I must be out of my mind. Seriously, I should be past the age of a schoolboy crush. But I cannot get them out of my head. Either of them. Am I normal? What does this make me?

Mason could sense Ary's anxiety through the pages. He had short entries, most of the time, except a few in which he struggled with his developing feelings for Toby and Rhys. Toby was right about one thing. It was a sacrilege what he was doing. He hoped for forgiveness, in another world, which, by Toby's presence, had to exist.

He browsed quickly through the entries that weren't relevant. There was a blank page, which he must have taken a picture of in his hurry, and then ... Mason sighed, and Toby let out a small sound that told him they were getting somewhere.

My knees are still shaking ... What am I going to do? I can't go to the police! I thought they would take me in for questioning! But they just frisked me and moved on. Why did I feel relieved? What I've done ...

I hid it well. At least, that I know. No one would ever think of that. I stayed clear of those cameras, too. Everyone knows where they are. I can't believe I could think of that in a moment like that.

Why am I even writing this here?

His blood ... It was everywhere. Oh, Toby! Why ...

Please forgive me, Rhys, Toby. I just can't. I don't even know why I did what I did.

I can't. I'm afraid. They took Rhys in. They think ...

If they find him guilty, I need to step forward.

I'm so afraid.

I don't know why I'm writing this. If anyone finds it ... But I don't know. I need to tell someone, or I'll go insane.

Oh, Toby, why?

The discoloration of some letters was a clear indication that tears had fallen on the page. Mason breathed out through the nose. Was that an admission of guilt? He wasn't sure. Ary didn't clarify that many things with that entry.

And what was that he could be talking about? Hiding it?

"The murder weapon," Toby said, confirming his suspicions.

But Renzo had said that he had turned the place upside down. By what Ary was saying in his diary, it couldn't have been thrown in some garbage can, either. But why had he hidden it if he weren't the killer?

They needed to talk to Ary. But, first, he needed to see Rhys. He wanted to make sure he was okay, now that they were getting close to the truth.

"Have you checked on Rhys after I left?" Mason asked Toby once they were out of the car.

"He was sleeping. I left after some time, to catch you at Ary's."

"All right. I've been gone less than an hour." Why did he feel the need to justify himself?

He let himself in his apartment while making as little noise as possible. After their night together, it wouldn't have been that surprising to find Rhys still sleeping.

The bedroom was empty, and Rhys's clothes were gone, too.

“Rhys,” Mason called, louder and louder, as he moved through the apartment.

“He must have gone to see Ary by himself,” Toby concluded for him.

“Yeah,” Mason replied.

He would have felt disappointment, but there was something else bothering him—a sixth sense telling him that he needed to find Rhys and quickly.

## *Chapter Twenty-Two – A Little Mouse In A Too Big House*

His calls to Rhys's phone went unanswered. Was Rhys upset about being left alone? Or did he think that Mason could have gone by himself to see Ary?

"We're going to the studio," Mason said firmly.

Toby was on his heels. "Why do I have a nasty feeling that I shouldn't have left Rhys alone?" he murmured.

He wasn't the only one to think that, but it didn't serve to act all paranoid now. Rhys must have left by himself to question Ary about that awful night; it was the only logical thing to believe. As for why he didn't pick up, there could be plenty of explanations, too.

So why was his heart in his throat as he walked out of his building?

He wasn't even three steps out into the street when his phone went off. Hurriedly, he pulled the phone out of his suit jacket, hoping to hear Rhys's melodic voice on the other end.

Instead, a strange metallic voice began, "Mason Knight, we have something you want."

"Who is this?" Whoever the caller was, he was using a voice modifier of sorts.

"Don't waste precious time for both of us. You, too, have something we want."

"Where is Rhys?" Mason felt the muscles in his legs stiffening.

"Don't insult our intelligence by expecting an answer."

Mason stopped, no longer capable of walking. By his side, Toby was getting restless, asking questions, but he just tuned him out, too afraid of missing one word of the conversation with the mysterious caller. "What do you want?" he asked directly.

"That's more like it." The metallic voice didn't change its pattern, but Mason could swear he could read satisfaction in it. "It's not much. Just a certain small object that got lost, somehow."

Mason instantly knew what that was. "I don't have it." His heart was in his throat, but his voice was blunt.

"Ah. Now, now, this is no way to start a negotiation. The person concerned doesn't have it on him. He must have given it to you."

"You're wrong," Mason said, his blood curdling to a stop in his veins. "You should ask the police where that is. They had it for a long time."

“It appears that we need to educate you, Mason Knight.” Something was irking in how the caller used his name. And how he was talking in the name of another or others. “The police never had it.”

“I don’t have it, either.”

There was a pause on the other end. “That complicates the situation, then. Find the object, or you’ll never see the person in question again.”

“Wait,” Mason shouted, but the line went dead.

“What is going on?” Toby jerked his immaterial body around, in an acute state of agitation. “Where is Rhys? Who has him?”

“I have no idea,” Mason mumbled.

“How can you not?”

Mason no longer cared that people on the street looked at him like he was some sort of lunatic talking to himself. “Whoever that was, it could be a pro. Which means that he was hired by someone else.”

Toby ran his hands through his hair and pulled at it. There was no way he could feel pain. “I shouldn’t have left Rhys alone,” he said. “I had already told you where Ary lives. I failed him.”

“We failed him,” Mason said through his teeth. “Why do I get the feeling that it’s that asshole Levine Goldman behind all this?”

Usually, he wasn’t the type to let out what he was thinking. But, this time, the thought hit him with impossible clarity. Rhys disappearing the moment Mason had left him alone. Renzo’s words about being in danger and Toby’s warnings. A pro calling to stall him from searching aimlessly. Only a master of strategy and means could be behind all that.

“What if it’s just a prank?” Toby interrupted his train of thought.

“A prank?”

“Yeah. How did that guy on the phone sound?”

“Like a machine,” Mason replied. “He evidently used specialized software for that.”

“And? By what I heard during these weeks being a ghost, it looks like everyone has access to advanced technology.”

Mason stopped. It annoyed him that Toby could be right. He set his jaw hard. “You forget one thing that applies to any crime. What would be the motive?”

Toby's shoulders slumped in defeat. It was easy to tell that he was trying to stay hopeful. "I know," he said suddenly. "I'll go and check that asshole's palace for signs of Rhys."

"He's a rich asshole. He could keep Rhys anywhere. And don't take everything I say like it's set in stone. I could be wrong. We still have no idea why Levine would be involved. There's a lack of motive here, too."

Toby grimaced. "The asshole tried to seduce Rhys, although he's not into men. He's hiding something."

Mason ran his hands over his face and looked around. For a long time, he hadn't felt as confused and lost as he was now. It wouldn't serve to remain stuck like that. A decision formed in his mind. "Toby, you go search Levine's place. I will go see Ary. If there is something he knows, now it's a good time for him to spill the beans."

"On it," Toby said shortly. "Hey, man, you okay?"

It was a tad funny to have a ghost worrying over him like that. "Don't worry about me," he said automatically.

"Too late." Toby smiled and made a move as if he wanted to punch Mason's arm in a friendly gesture.

"Just go. We don't have time to lose."

It was just as funny to feel moved by that simple thing, too.

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Dirk, the producer, came to talk to him, as Mason argued with an assistant at the door he hadn't seen the last time he had been there.

"It's all right," Dirk said, and the assistant immediately backed down. "You're one of Rhys's bodyguards, right?"

Someone didn't appear to have been brought up to date about the changes. Mason nodded shortly. "I'm here to see Ary."

"He's not here."

"What do you mean, he's not here?" Mason could feel his temper flaring and didn't have the means to stop it. "Didn't he come to work today?"

"He did. Then he got a phone call and left in a big hurry."

"A phone call? From whom?"

Dirk examined him with curious eyes. “Funny that you don’t know. By what I could tell, it was Rhys calling. What, he ran away on you or something? Celebrities,” he added with a shrug. “Who knows what goes through their heads?”

Mason pinched the bridge of his nose hard. So Rhys had managed to call Ary before being kidnapped? And where had Ary hurried off to?

“Did he say where he was going?”

Dirk shook his head. “I asked. But I didn’t even manage to warn him that he’d get fired if he took off like that, he was that fast. Kind of the thing that makes him such a good runner.”

“Thanks,” Mason said curtly.

“You’re welcome. Hey, if you see Rhys, tell him that I’m still waiting for a new piece. He promised.”

“Sure thing,” Mason replied, now eager to leave.

He had no clue what to do next, but he had no time for idle chatter. He bid Dirk farewell and was out in the street again.

Could it be that Rhys had asked Ary to meet him somewhere? But where? He paced the sidewalk, unsure of what direction to take.

Not a good time for indecision. If there was one person capable of pulling strings and powerful enough to go against Levine Goldman, his name was already known to Mason.

He stared at the phone for a while; although he hadn’t cared at the time, Renzo had insisted that both he and Billy had his contact details the first time they had met. Now, they came in handy.

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“Do you prefer this place in particular?” Mason asked Renzo, the moment he was invited to step inside Dreamland.

There was little light inside the club during the day, as he had noticed the first time he had seen Renzo alone.

“I told you. Something irks me about it, so I like to keep an eye on it. Plus, as you learned the last time you were here, I am directly interested in clarifying this situation. Are you telling me that someone kidnapped Rhys?”

Mason was well aware that he couldn’t keep things hidden if he wanted Renzo’s help. As shortly as possible, he explained the missing micro SD card and some other details he had kept hidden,



the main exception being that he could see Toby's ghost and communicate with him. Now wasn't the time to be put in a straitjacket.

They were in Renzo's office, and the flickering lights of the screens gave the room an unnatural feel. As he explained the situation, Renzo's eyes moved to them once in a while. Suddenly, he straightened up, and a sly smile appeared on his face. "Well, well, well."

Mason stopped and stared at the screens, too, until he noticed movement in one of them.

"If it isn't a little mouse in a too big house for him," Renzo commented.

They stood up at the same time. When they reached the door, Renzo placed one finger against his lips and then opened the door slowly.

Hunched over one of the exhibits in the large hallway, Ary was busy fiddling with something, unaware that he was being watched and about to be caught in the act. Mason didn't have time to react. Renzo moved stealthily, but fast, his steps muffled by the thick rug.

He caught Ary's arm as he lifted the lid from the exhibit in front of him.

"You little thief!"

Ary screamed and let go of the object in his hands.

The glass fell and caught a corner, breaking into little pieces.

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Ary was shaking, even after taking two sips from the whiskey tumbler in his hand, at Renzo's insistence. He had been pushed into a chair, and Renzo was towering over him like an inquisitor bent on getting the truth out of his victim. Mason watched everything, without saying a word. There were so many things he wanted to ask, but he was scared Ary would clam up if he jumped into that interrogation, too. They didn't have time for that. Rhys's life could be at stake.

Mason let that thought slide; if he started to worry, really worry, he would be lost. And Rhys needed him, wits and all in their rightful places, not broken into a million little pieces.

"So," Renzo began. "Care to enlighten us what were you doing, little mouse?"

Ary shot Renzo a dirty look over the glass he held with both hands as if his life depended on it. "My name is Ary."

Renzo waved as if that detail didn't concern him. "What were you trying to steal?"

Ary pursed his lips and stared down stubbornly. Renzo grabbed his chin and forced him to look up. Mason blinked a few times; there was something in how Ary opened his lips slightly and licked them, and how Renzo's fingers softened their grip.

"Ary, please," he intervened, hoping his voice wasn't already over the edge.

"I--" Ary started and swallowed hard.

Mason exchanged a quick look with the boy's tormentor, and Renzo stepped away.

Ary looked down and started sobbing.

Renzo's voice was no longer as harsh as earlier. "Just talk. How did you gain access in the hallway here right now?"

Ary seemed to calm down a fraction. "I saw you punching in the code that night."

Nobody in the room had to ask what night that was.

"Congrats on your attention to detail," Renzo replied, rather vexed. "I would have thought my security measures to be unbreakable."

"Who doesn't change a password once in a while?" Ary shot back at him.

That animosity hid something else.

"Apparently, me," Renzo said with a sigh. "Now, tell me, what did you want with that exhibit?"

Ary looked down again. "That cue stick ... the one underneath," he spoke so softly Mason had to lean forward to hear him, "that killed Toby."

Renzo let out a curse and hurried into the hallway. He came back into the room with the respective object held by the end of its handle wrapped gingerly in an expensive handkerchief. "This was used to kill Toby?" he asked.

Ary stole a brief look at the cue stick and nodded.

"Ha, go figure. Now let's not waste any more time. Why did you whack Toby with my seventeenth century billiard mace, Ary?"

So that was how that thing was called. Mason could feel his fingers turning numb from digging his nails into the leather sofa on which he sat with much difficulty.

"I didn't!" Ary protested.

"It doesn't serve to be a liar. You've been caught already," Renzo chided him. "I bet your fingerprints are all over it."

Ary bit his bottom lip hard. “Yeah. That’s the problem. But I didn’t kill Toby. And that’s not yours.”

Renzo placed the billiard mace on his desk and observed it for a few moments. Mason stood up, no longer capable of standing still. His stomach sank as he noticed the few dark stains on the curved end. It could have been why Toby had been drawn to look at that when they had been there the last time. Now he knew why those stains had stood up to him, but that didn’t make him feel any better. It was a good thing that he had let Toby go check on Levine’s place.

“It’s not mine,” Renzo admitted, with something akin to surprise in his voice.

“How do you know?” Mason asked.

“I like to be able to identify the things I own, especially when they are deemed to have a value of sorts,” Renzo explained without giving away much. “As far as I can tell, indeed, this doesn’t belong to me. Plus, it’s a slightly different model.”

Mason turned toward Ary. “Ary, Rhys is missing,” he said. It was getting harder to control his voice. So many things were at stake now.

“I know. I mean, I heard him on the phone --” Ary stopped and sobbed again. “I knew they must be coming after me, too and --”

Mason was next to Ary in a heartbeat. He caught his arm, reining in hard his temptation to shake him. “What do you mean, you heard him?”

“And who are they?” Renzo added. “Speak up, little mouse. As you can see, no one here is in the mood to play.”

Ary made himself little into the chair. Mason had managed to make the whiskey spill from his glass, so he let go of the boy’s arm, embarrassed by his rashness. Renzo took the glass from Ary’s hand and put it on the table.

“He called me this morning because he wanted us to talk about Toby. I had a hunch he knew something more than before and I was just about to ask him when I heard him ... Something happened, and there was a muffled sound like people struggling, and the phone went dead. I tried to call again, but Rhys didn’t answer.”

Mason nodded. That confirmed his fears, but there was no point in denying them. He let out a deep exhale. “Ary, please tell us what happened that night.”

“I didn’t kill Toby,” Ary said and sobbed again.

“We believe you,” Mason replied.

“We do?” Renzo seemed surprised.

Mason looked curtly at him. "If Ary is the one behind Toby's murder, who kidnapped Rhys and to what end? Things don't add up."

Renzo nodded one time, brusquely. "The little mouse still needs to confess to what he was doing that night."

Ary wiped his eyes with the back of his sleeve cuffs. "I went to talk to Toby ... I suspected him to have gone outside, to get a bit of fresh air --"

"What did you want to talk to him about?"

Mason wished silently for Renzo to shut the fuck up for a moment. That wasn't relevant.

Ary rubbed his closed fists together. He looked even smaller and more vulnerable than usual, drowned in his large clothes. "I wanted to ask him why he was fighting with Rhys so much."

"So that you could sweep in and steal Toby from Rhys?"

Why the hell did Renzo sound like a scorned lover? Someone had to tell the guy he sucked as an interrogator.

"No." Ary scowled. "I had already decided that there was no room for me between them. I wanted them to make up and things to be the same again. They were yelling at each other, and I was losing them both."

Like a kid, helpless while watching his parents tearing their family apart.

"Ary, what happened when you went after Toby?" Mason placed a sympathetic hand on Ary's shoulder. "We need to know. It's important. Rhys --" he swallowed his words, not wanting to let his worries speak for himself.

Ary looked down and fidgeted. "I didn't see him at first. I almost stepped on him, and I thought he had passed out, but ... he wasn't moving. I checked on him and then I saw ... the blood. I reached for his neck, to see if he had a pulse ... my mom used to be a nurse ... and I froze when there was nothing. I was about to pull my phone to call for an ambulance, but ... I heard a noise ... it was a car engine. And I saw a car at the end of the alley."

Silence followed.

"Did you recognize the car, Ary?" Mason asked, measuring his words carefully.

Ary nodded. "It was an expensive limo. Not the kind you see everywhere."

As the boy's lips moved, Mason didn't even need to hear the words because he knew he was right. It felt as if he had been right all along, but it was a different thing to have a confirmation of all his suspicions.

“That son of a bitch,” Renzo said with disgust.

Mason rubbed his forehead. Even knowing that Levine must have been at the murder scene that night wasn't enough; that feeling that he was missing something came back in full force.

“Are you sure it was Levine's car?”

Ary nodded. “It felt as if that car was leaving in a hurry. Then I noticed the ... stick thing.”

“I'm willing to bet that Levine's fingerprints are all over it,” Renzo said.

“But why would he leave such evidence behind?” Mason murmured.

“Beats me,” Renzo said. “We need to have the murder weapon checked for fingerprints.”

“You cannot go to the police with it,” Ary said. He began to fidget again. “I grabbed it, so my fingerprints are there, too.”

“You don't worry about that, little mouse,” Renzo replied. “I have my ways that don't involve the police.”

“How did you manage to hide it here?” Mason asked.

“Ah, yes, and what the hell happened to my vintage piece?”

“You tell everyone they are replicas,” Ary said petulantly.

“Some are,” Renzo replied and shrugged.

Ary stared at his closed fists. They were so small; Mason felt pity.

“I took it inside. I knew now that someone must have killed Toby. I was scared ... because I knew where I had seen that kind of thing before. So I stayed clear of the cameras and walked into the hallway here, expecting one of the cue sticks to be missing. But they were both here. It took me a second to decide to replace one of them ... The one I took, I just threw it in one of the bins the cleaners use. And I picked it with my wrapped sleeve, like this,” he explained.

“That is just great,” Renzo commented, but without a bite.

“The police frisked everyone,” Mason tried to stay on track. “Could it be that they didn't find that particular object thrown by Ary? And how about them checking this area?”

“They weren't allowed here,” Renzo said promptly. “Strangely enough, they didn't insist.”

Mason ran his hands through his hair. “They just thought someone would have it.”

“I suppose,” Renzo confirmed.

“Ary, please forgive me for asking this, but why did you hide it?”

Ary trembled and wrapped his arms around himself. “I knew it was important. They took Rhys in, and I thought I should take it to the police. But then I would have had to talk about what I saw ... And my fingerprints had to be everywhere ... So I was relieved when they let Rhys go. I just wanted to forget about it.”

“Did you try to break in and steal it before today?” Renzo asked.

Ary shook his head. “No, this is the first time I’ve stepped foot in here since that night. And only because I thought the people who took Rhys must be after me, too.” He looked drained as he said the last words.

Mason pondered for a few moments. “If Levine is involved, he’ll make another move soon. Whoever called me, he will call again.”

“Who called you?” Ary asked. His teeth were clattering now, after the rush of adrenaline from earlier.

“We don’t know right now. Renzo, do you think you could take care of Ary?”

“I don’t want to stay here,” Ary protested.

“We won’t be cooped up in here all day,” Renzo said. “You’ll come with me to my house.”

“I don’t want to.” Ary pouted like a child.

“Ary,” Mason said gently, “you’re safe with Renzo. If anyone catches whiff of what you did, you could be in real danger.” He didn’t want to make Ary feel more scared than he already was, but there was no other reasonable choice.

“You’ll come with me, little mouse, and that’s final,” Renzo said. “I can offer you five different types of cheese.”

“Carefully placed into a trap?” Ary shot back.

Mason would have laughed if he hadn’t been overwrought with worry.

“What will you do?” Renzo asked and stared at him with questioning eyes.

“I will try to find the missing card from Toby’s phone. The caller was sure Rhys should have it. As I already told you, he was also confident that the police hadn’t found it.”

“Toby must have hidden it,” Renzo confirmed his guesses. “But where will you search for it?”

“I don’t know yet. I’ll have to think.”

“You could do the thinking at my house. You’re invited.”

“No. I don’t want whoever is behind this to become suddenly shy about contacting me. I’m not sure what good I did, if any, by coming here.”

“Don’t be hard on yourself,” Renzo told him. “Keep in touch. I’ll see about the fingerprints in the meantime. And if that fucker calls --”

“I know, I know,” Mason said in a hurry. “And he will call again,” he added with conviction.

There was one thing Renzo and no one else had any idea about. His trump card was a ghost, and as weird as that sounded, Toby was his best bet in figuring out how to save Rhys. After all, who else could go through walls and have eyes everywhere?

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He was barely back at his apartment when Toby startled him, like usual, without any introductions.

“He has Rhys, Mason.”

He turned on his heels. “At his house?”

Toby nodded gravely. “He keeps him in a room on the uppermost floor. I think he ... drugged him or something. There was an IV drip stuck in Rhys’s arm, and he looked dead to the world.”

Mason felt the rush of adrenaline coursing through his veins, but tightened his hands into fists to rein it in. What could he do? Rush into Levine’s house? He had a hunch he wouldn’t be allowed to cross the threshold, let alone investigate the place. Even more, he would be removed by force if Levine so decided.

Being rash was no strategy.

“Is there someone there with him?”

“That maid, Anita,” Toby confirmed. “She sat by the bed with a book in her hand as if she was taking care of a sick person. The whole thing gives me the willies, Mason. That room looks like it belongs in a hospital or a hospice.”

“We need to figure out a way to get inside,” Mason said, his lips set in a straight line.

He began pacing the room, thoughts curled like snakes inside his mind. Toby followed him with his eyes but said nothing.

“He has no reason to harm him,” Toby said in a meek voice.

“Not before getting what he wants.” Mason laid on the bed and stared at the ceiling. To think straight, he needed to clear his head.

He touched the place on his right where Rhys had slept that morning, safe and sound. No bigger failure on his part existed. All his promises had been empty, nothing but words.

As he moved his head, Mason noticed Rhys’s pendant he had left on the nightstand that morning. He reached for it, in a futile hope that something of its owner lingered with it. He wrapped the chain around his fist and held the pendant tightly until he felt the stone coming undone from its socket.

Now he had gone and ruined it completely. He opened his palm, and his eyes grew wide.

“Clutched in your fist,” he murmured, his entire body overcome by a dark, deep chill.



### *Chapter Twenty-Three – Dark Chills*

“We need to look at it.”

“I know,” Mason replied.

His hands trembled slightly as he inserted the card into his phone. Flicking through the folders, his frown deepened. If that were a loose end ...

“For Rhys,” he read out loud.

That had to be it. He dreaded what he would find, but there was no other choice but to move forward. Both he and Toby held their breath as he clicked on the single video file present in the folder.

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“So you say that it had to be him,” Toby said in a toneless voice.

“His car was there. Ary saw it. He must have known you had evidence on him.”

“What are we going to do? Do you want to take this to Renzo?”

That was the logical thing to do, but Mason was beyond logical at this point. That was the kind of thing people killed for; one mistake, no matter how small, could make the tables turn, and not in their favor. Especially Rhys’s. He was the one in real danger.

He was still pondering over it when his phone rang.

“Mason Knight, have you thought about our generous offer?”

Mason set his jaw hard.

“Ah, a little thing. Dare to contact a certain unsavory character you met with today, and the deal is off,” the metallic voice continued. “Don’t try anything stupid; we will know.”

So he had been followed. It shouldn’t have come as a big surprise, but Mason could feel his heart beating slower. “All right,” he replied.

“Good. We want to know that you can play nice.”

Mason held the micro SD card in his palm, staring at it.

“Now, about the object in question --” the caller started.

“I’m taking it to Mr. Goldman directly.”

“What are you doing?!” Toby began gesticulating, but Mason paid him no mind.

His decision was taken. Like always, there was no one else he could depend on in his life. Everyone else could go on and forgive him or fuck off.

The silence stretched at the other end. It appeared that he had managed to take the caller by surprise.

“How intuitive of you.” The voice sounded peeved now. “But the answer is ‘no’.”

“Then you and your boss will watch this broadcast all over the six o’clock news today.”

“And you become a dead man. We could arrange for that in a matter of minutes, actually.”

“Will you be faster than me hitting ‘send’?”

Toby was groaning and yelling at him, but Mason turned his back. Which served little since Toby could go through him as he saw fit.

“Ah, so we’ve come to a mutual assured destruction type of situation.”

“I won’t hesitate,” Mason said in a fierce voice. “Killing me won’t stop the ball from rolling.”

“Are you willing to go that far for this person?”

“As far as needed,” Mason confirmed.

“Well, if you’re so keen. But how are we to know you didn’t keep copies or already send the sensitive content to media outlets?”

“How am I to know Rhys isn’t dead already?”

“We could arrange a small broadcast.”

“Which could be faked.”

“Hard to argue with, aren’t you?”

“You have my word. Instead, you’ll return Rhys to me safe and sound. With the promise that he’ll be forever safe from you.”

“Are you asking nothing for yourself? We could sweeten the deal.”

“Not interested.”

“All right. When do you plan to visit?”

Mason couldn’t be sure he wasn’t talking to Levine Goldman right now, but his gut instinct told him that he wouldn’t dirty his hands, not even for a phone call. Some random minion was out of

the question. The only reasonable guess was simple; the person appearing in Toby's short video alongside Levine had to be the caller.

"I'm leaving right now."

"Excellent decision, Mason Knight."

The dark glee in the metallic voice was unmistakable.

"What are you doing, Mason?"

Toby followed him around the apartment.

"It's the only way. We have no time," Mason explained grimly. "We can't contact Renzo. We have no help. It's only me and you."

"And I have no physical body. We're hardly the dream team."

Mason fiddled with his phone. "We have insurance. Levine will play nice."

"Don't bet on it. He could just go ahead and terminate you."

"Terminate. I bet that's a term he'd like to use."

"Yeah. Weird that I used it," Toby murmured. "But you know it's true. You might get killed, Mason."

"I'll blackmail Levine into letting Rhys go. We'll see what follows next."

"Quite the optimist. But this feels wrong."

"Do you have a better idea? Any wrong step I take, it's Rhys's head on the line. Do you think I'd ever be able to live with that if anything happens to him?"

"Fuck," Toby moaned and covered his face.

"We don't have time to dwell on it. I have a ticking bomb on my hands, and I intend to use it. Levine knows what's at stake, and he may be evil, but he's not stupid. I'll have time to take Rhys out of there and move him someplace safe."

"You sound like you have everything figured out."

Yeah. He sounded like that.

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Levine's estate seemed deserted. Mason had been left inside by automatic doors opening in front of him. It appeared as if no personnel were present, and the same dark chill from before was ice on his back.

"It looks like we have to let ourselves in," Mason commented and pushed open the heavy door, opening like a black mouth in front of him.

His phone rang, and Mason listened to the instructions without saying a word. He knew his way to Levine's office but pretended he was only hearing about that for the first time.

The heavy adornments on the walls overwhelmed him while he walked down the hallway; a person suffering from claustrophobia would have stopped by now. Good thing he didn't fear cramped places; the only thing he feared was failing to get Rhys out of there alive.

He knocked on the door and was invited in by a harsh 'come in'. It was a safe bet that Levine couldn't be in the best of moods. Mason schooled his face into a mask as he stepped inside.

"It is rather grating to act so polite when you come here to threaten me," Levine said in a sour voice.

"I didn't start this," Mason replied.

"Do you have it?"

Mason showed the micro SD card for a moment and then made it disappear back into his pocket.

"Then let's end this quickly. Hand over the item." Levine was sitting behind his desk and made no move to invite Mason to sit.

"Only after Rhys is out of here."

Levine's eyebrows shot up in surprise.

"Yes, I know he's here," Mason said boldly. It was time to bluff, and that called for surprising his adversary with information Levine couldn't suspect the manner by which he had come to have it.

Levine frowned for a second. "The item," he said through his teeth.

Mason frowned, too. "No. Free Rhys right now."

"Or else?"

"Or else, certain information will be released to the general public in less than half an hour."

"Oh. Are you a whizz kid, Mr. Knight?"

“No. But it’s the twenty-first century. Everyone has access to technology.” Toby was right about that. “Scheduling an online post to go live at a chosen point in the future is a piece of cake.”

“Fair enough.” Levine consulted his watch with seemingly bored eyes. “He’s sleeping quite soundly. I’m afraid we’ll have to wait a little for him to come to his senses.” He made a bit of a show while talking on an internal line. Mason suspected the creepy maid had to be on the other end.

“Why did you kill Tobias Davis, Mr. Goldman?” Mason asked all of a sudden.

“Mason, what are you asking?” Toby hissed at him. “He could order for Rhys to be murdered with a flick of the wrist!”

He was there for more than one reason. A certain ghost needed to find his peace, too.

Piercing grey eyes sat on his face. Then, amusement made them light up with malice. “That lowlife? I didn’t kill him.”

“He had evidence of you ordering someone to be murdered. Therefore, you had a strong reason to make him disappear.”

“Ah, of course. Reason.” Levine leaned back into his chair and observed Mason while his lips twitched. It was as if he was trying hard to keep in a good joke, waiting for the right moment to say it. “But me and the fellow in question had reached an understanding. He was dumb as a brick, but he knew not to push it with me.”

Mason blinked a couple of times. “You cannot deny it, Mr. Goldman.”

“I can,” Levine leaned forward and smiled, “because it’s nothing but the truth.” He turned slightly in his chair and looked to one side as if he was suddenly deep in thought. “I am a man of means, Mr. Knight. I do not have any reason to dirty my hands. Can you even suspect why I hired you and that blob of fat to be Rhys’s bodyguards?”

Mason felt the ground under his feet swaying slightly. “Boyd,” he said without thinking.

Levine threw him another amused look. “I could have my fun and pretend your friend, the agent, was involved, but ... I truly want you to understand the genius of all my actions.”

“Why the hell is he telling you all this, Mason?” Toby became agitated again. “I don’t like where this is going.”

Mason didn’t like it either, but he had no choice on the matter. “Please go on, sir,” he said in a steady voice.

“Cocky, aren’t you?” Levine sighed theatrically. “Such a shame, really. But let’s get back to what I was saying. Ah, right. Mr. Lamartine was over the moon when I contacted him. He was a

tiny bit suspicious that I would enlist the services of someone who, by my standards, is as good as invisible, but I put those thoughts to rest when I told him it was only for a trifle thing that would be paid well and require little effort.”

Mason shifted his weight from one foot to another. At least, Boyd wasn't some traitor; he couldn't put any value on Levine's words, but he had a hunch why the scumbag was suddenly honest. The ball was in his court, but Mason had his eyes on it. He wouldn't allow himself surprised by some left-field move.

“You see, I knew the little pansy had his late boyfriend's memorabilia with him, and that the item of interest had to be in his care.”

“Little pansy? The fucking asshole.” Toby was moving around Levine, more and more agitated.

“You could call him Rhys,” Mason said sourly.

Levine offered a sugary smile. “In love, Mr. Knight? How quaint. I've seen Rhys at his low; you would change your mind if you knew what I know.”

“No, I wouldn't.”

“Hmm. You've truly been a bigger headache than expected. Nonetheless, I am the type of man who enjoys a challenge. I live for the worthy occasions that break the same-old, same-old rhythm of everyday routine.”

“Why did you hire me and Billy?” Mason asked directly. How long did that maid need to wake up Rhys?

“Right, back on topic. Well, I needed to prove to everyone that I did everything I could when Rhys suddenly turned up suicidal and successful at it, too.”

“If only I could strangle this asshole a little,” Toby complained as he moved, immaterial and helpless, in and out Levine's body.

Mason could feel a muscle in his jaw tick so hard that it almost took the entire cheek with it.

“You see,” Levine continued, grinning and obviously enjoying the torment he was putting his guest through, “I hired bodyguards for poor little Rhys because he had a tendency of hurting himself. Who else to know that better than me, his guardian and protector, who tried to convince him to remain in the good care of doctors and nurses?”

“But you let him out,” Mason pointed out.

“Yes, but it had to appear that it had all come from him, and I couldn't keep someone in specialized care against his will. However, worried as I was,” Levine's eyes flashed, “I took it upon me to hire people who would watch over Rhys without his noticing too much. If I had gone

all the way and hired the best specialists, Rhys would have just protested against it. Therefore, I was both caring and delicate about his feelings.”

Mason could feel his stomach revolting. Good thing he hadn’t had anything to eat all day. The satisfaction in the eyes of that bird of prey was unmistakable.

“In the event that Rhys finally decided to end it all for lack of a purpose in life and, of course, weakness of character, I couldn’t have been blamed. You and that fatso, however, would have taken the rap for it. Also, you two were ideal for my plan B.”

“Plan B?” Mason’s throat was dry like sandpaper.

“Yes. Anita told me Rhys was no longer keen on taking the pills the good doctors at the clinic had prescribed for him, and that was bound to make things a bit difficult.”

“Why place the ketamine, though?”

Levine hid his surprise well.

“Anita hid it in the kitchen,” Mason explained.

“Anita likes to go beyond the call of duty,” Levine said. “She’s been with this family for a long time.”

“So enlisting her help in your murderous activities is part of her job description?”

A flash of anger lit up Levine’s face, but only for a moment. “As I said, she’s an excellent servant. But you keep interrupting me, and I bet that you will find my plan B a feat of genius, indeed.”

“Not only a servant, I bet,” Toby said. “This asshole treats her like she’s his long forgotten mother or something.”

Levine’s self-assurance was vomit-inducing. Mason doubted he could admire anything in the disgusting creature posing as a human in front of him.

“There could be problems with declaring Rhys’s suicidal so easily. Plus, I like things to be a bit more dramatic. I wanted blood,” Levine said brightly as if he had just said he would love to go for ice cream. “Therefore, I needed a pair of stupid bodyguards who could be killed easily.”

“Killed?” Mason’s frown deepened.

“Yes,” Levine said with glee. “Once Anita located the missing item, I could move with the plan. No longer needing Rhys, I could just eliminate him.”

“Why not keep him in a hospice?”

“Too expensive,” Levine said with a shrug.

Expensive. That was everything other people’s lives were to that waste of space.

“Did you want to kill him, too?” Mason asked.

“Have someone do it, yes. It would have been a burglary gone wrong, something like that. Unfortunate, sad, but well, that’s life. And I would have been stunned with the news, devastated even. Saying to anyone listening – oh, everyone would have listened – how I should have thought of hiring better bodyguards if I suspected, for one moment, for such a horrible thing to happen.”

“You don’t care about anyone but you,” Mason said with bitterness. “But how come you’re alone now, Mr. Goldman? Where’s that associate of yours?”

A phone rang somewhere. Mason experienced a sudden sinking feeling on the inside when Levine reached for the locked drawer where the hidden phone had to be. The smile stretching on the scumbag’s face told him that his bluff didn’t work.

“Oh, it’s all settled? That’s great news,” Levine said with a smirk.

He moved so fast that Mason didn’t even have time to freeze in place. One moment, and he was staring at the black barrel of a gun pointing at him.

“Oh, shit,” Toby shouted. “The fucker has a gun!”

Levine stood up and laughed, holding the weapon. “My associate just informed him that there’s nothing I should fear from your little play with twenty-first century technology. So, let’s come to the point for which we gathered here today. Hand over that item, Mr. Knight.”

“Toby, go to Rhys now,” Mason hissed.

“Toby? Who are you talking to?” Levine wondered. “Have you lost your mind so quickly? That’s rather disappointing. Come on, be a doll. Give me that thing.”

Toby had rushed out, but Mason couldn’t see an opening if it killed him, as ironic as that sounded. He needed to stall for time until something came to mind. “There is something you don’t know, Mr. Goldman. The murder weapon, it’s no longer lost.”

“What murder weapon?” Levine quirked an eyebrow. “Are we still talking about that mongrel? Tobias?”

“Yes. Your fingerprints must be on it,” Mason continued. “I can tell you where it is, but only if you let me and Rhys leave.”



Levine began laughing, first slowly, then louder and louder. It took him a minute to get his bearings. “Ah, I already told you. I didn’t kill that piece of shit. But, thank you for letting me know. I’ll deal with that on my own time. Now, don’t test my patience.”

“You can’t outrun your fate, Mr. Goldman. Kill me, do what you want, but the truth will still come to light. It’s game over.”

“Oh, really? Who’s keeping score? Ah, wait.” Levine looked for a moment at the gun in his hand. “I think that’s me.” He straightened his arm, pointing at Mason again.

Mason closed his eyes. “You’ll have to come take it from me.” If he managed to get Levine close enough, he could try something foolish and dangerous, with minor chances of success.

“Oh, playing tough? Like I would risk my neck by getting close to you. No problem, I’ll take it from your corpse. So, game over, Mr. Knight.”

“With the risk of sounding trite, that should be my line. Game over, Mr. Goldman.”

The first thing Mason noticed was how Levine’s self-assured arrogance fell from his face. The second, how familiar that voice sounded.

“Hands up, Mr. Goldman.” Billy emerged from behind the curtains, following his stretched arm that must have had the cold barrel of a weapon resting against the back of Levine’s head.

Levine obeyed. “This is ridiculous. Who is this?”

Billy removed the gun from Levine’s hand and put it into his pocket. “That would be the fatso, Mr. Goldman.”

The surprise on Levine’s face was matched only by that on Mason’s.

Billy winked at him. “Howdy, partner? How’s it going?” With ease, he grabbed Levine’s hands, pulled back, and slapped a pair of cuffs on them.

Mason was lost for words.

“Stop this nonsense right now,” Levine revolted. “Who do you think you are?”

Billy deftly brought Levine’s to his knees, forced him on one side, and tied his feet together, too.

“What do you want? Who are you?” Levine was in a frenzy now that he must have realized that Billy wasn’t joking.

“This guy talks too much,” Billy said with a shrug and produced a gag from his pocket.

“Don’t you dare!” Levine struggled, but Billy appeared to be an expert in gagging his victim and reducing him to complete silence.

“Isn’t this better?” Billy said and stood up.

“I think Anita is poisoning Rhys!” Toby rushed into the room that very moment. “What the hell is happening here?”

Mason jerked his head into Toby’s direction without thinking. “What? What’s she doing?”

“What’s wrong, Mason?” Billy asked.

“We need to save Rhys,” Mason said.

“Do you know where he is?” Billy followed him into the hallway. “I tried to search the place --”

Mason rushed up the stairs, following Toby.

“Oh, Toby found him,” Billy said matter-of-factly, as he kept up with Mason like he didn’t weigh his value as an awesome person in solid gold.

Mason stopped for a moment, opened his mouth, but nothing came out.

Billy pushed him from behind. “No time to explain, I know. Let’s get to Rhys. What is Toby saying?”

Mason began running again. “Anita is poisoning him as we speak.”

The air was burning in his lungs as he reached the landing. Billy’s heavy breathing let him know someone had his back.

They burst into the room. Anita was holding the IV drip and towering over Rhys, with one hand on his chest.

Never in his life, Mason would have thought himself capable of hitting a woman. It looked like he didn’t have to start anyway because Billy was faster than him.

Anita dropped the IV drip with a startled cry. Mason had been right to give Billy that nickname. With a move worthy of the best martial arts aficionados, Billy had kicked her arm so hard that she was now on the floor, nursing it and bawling.

Mason hurried to Rhys and shook him. He pulled the needle out of his arm. Were they too late? Had all been in vain? “No,” he said with determination as he felt Rhys’s neck. “No, you can’t die.”

Billy was busy twisting Anita’s arm. “What did you give him? How much?”

“I didn’t!” The woman was squirming on the floor. “Didn’t get the chance!”

“Why isn’t he waking up?”

“He’s on sleeping drugs!” Anita howled.

Mason brought his face close to Rhys’s mouth, and the faint breathing caressed his skin. He shook him some more, and Rhys opened his eyes, only to let them roll in his head.

“Rhys, Rhys,” Mason called for him and grabbed his face. He slapped him with all the gentleness he could muster.

“What’s going on?” Rhys mumbled. “Hey, stop it ... my head hurts ...”

Mason exhaled and even let out a small laugh. “Oh, God, you’re alive.” He hugged Rhys tightly and ignored the water in his eyes.

“I’m not God,” Rhys replied in the same sluggish manner. “You must be mistaking me for someone else.”

Mason had many things to say, maybe even that Rhys was like his own personal deity or anyone else he wanted to be. Anything he wanted. Everything.

Billy hurried to the bed, leaving Anita be for a moment. He pushed Mason firmly away and began checking Rhys with hurried hands. “Phew, I think we’re fine.”

A banshee’s shriek made Mason’s hair stand on end. He turned just in time to block Anita’s raised hands holding a knife. Did that woman ever stop? He grabbed her hands and tried to keep her at bay while she yelled and tried to bite him. The crisp white bonnet had fallen, and wisps of grey hair surrounded her head like a dirtied halo.

“Let me kill that dog,” she bawled.

Mason shook her, forcing her to drop the knife. For a moment, his eyes met hers, crazed and bloodshot. Nothing of the measured, cold maid he had met before was left in them. “Let me put him to sleep,” she said in a sing-song voice, “just let me.”

She turned limp and Mason, taken by surprise, felt her wrists slipping from his hands. With renewed force and a shriek, she hurried for the bed.

Billy slugged her in the face. This time, when she fell to the ground, she remained there, crumpled, a pile of bones and starched maid clothes.

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Mason carried Rhys into his arms. “You’re not coming?” he asked Billy.

A bit earlier, he had given his former partner the micro SD card. Apparently, Po knew much better what to do with it, and Mason wanted it out of his hands anyway.

His partner shrugged and smiled. "I have a lot of work to do. Getting a billionaire to confess to his crimes is not enough. The real chores begin now."

"So, see you around?" Mason had other priorities, but he wanted to ask Billy a few questions.

"We'll meet a little later. After all, you are instrumental to the disgraceful fall of Levine Goldman. The police will want to have a word with you." Billy winked at him. "Don't worry. I'll be there."

"Are you with the police? A true detective?"

Billy shook his head. "Let's talk a bit later, okay, chief?"

"Okay, Po. And thanks for today. You saved my ass. And Rhys, too. I cannot thank you enough."

"Don't mention it. Or mention it. I have a few ideas about what to ask in return."

"Will it cost me everything? Because there's no problem if it does," Mason added.

"No. Very little." Billy offered him another big bright smile. "You won't even feel it."

"If you say so." Mason couldn't stop smiling either.

"Is Toby still here?" Billy asked in a low voice.

Rhys was still mostly out and couldn't hear their conversation.

Mason looked around. "I don't see him."

"When you do, tell him 'good job' from me."

"Will do," Mason promised.

He took Rhys and put him gently inside the car Billy had let them use. It was parked outside. Mason took one look around before climbing behind the wheel.

And then he saw it. A dark vehicle that slowed down in front of Levine's estate and took off suddenly. Mason tried to see the driver's face, but the only thing he could notice was a pair of leather gloves manning the wheel. Sirens could be heard in the distance.

## *Chapter Twenty-Four – It's Over Now*

Mason woke up from his fitful sleep and held Rhys close. Exhausted from the earlier events, he had fallen asleep on the bed, in his suit, and with his precious charge in his arms, determined never to let go. There had been no complaints from the other who clearly needed to sleep off the drugs that had been injected in his system.

On and off, Mason had awakened, only to listen to Rhys's steady breathing. He placed a soft kiss on the parted lips. They were safe, he tried to tell himself, but his worried mind didn't seem to care about reassurance.

"He looks so peaceful in your arms."

Mason turned slightly to face Toby. The ghost stood close to the bed, looking at them.

"You know, you are a bit creepy, standing there like that," he made a lame attempt at a joke. His voice was low but raspy.

"I could have hovered over you while having sex."

Mason let out a small chuckle. "How are you? Do you remember more now?"

Toby shook his head. "No, man. That asshole must have said the truth. He didn't kill me."

"I doubt he didn't have anything with it, though. He could order someone to do it."

"Yeah. It looks like I'm still here."

"Renzo has the murder weapon. That mystery will be solved, too."

"Let's hope so." Toby hovered in the air and looked at Rhys.

"Hey, you're getting creepier," Mason joked.

"I like looking at him while he sleeps. I feel suddenly warm," Toby said.

"I know," Mason confirmed. Toby loved Rhys even if he didn't remember anything yet.

They stood there in silence. It seemed so uncanny that only earlier, they had been in the toughest situation in their lives, especially Rhys.

"Toby, did you notice a black car when we were at Levine?" Mason asked.

"A black car? I don't think so."

"That asshole in the video you took, the one talking to Levine, he's still out there." Mason held Rhys close and pressed one cheek against his forehead.

“Yeah.”

“He could be still after Rhys.”

“Billy must be on his case,” Toby said.

“Does Billy know about him? I mean, of course, he must have seen the video by now, but --”

“Yeah. I stayed behind a little and watched him. When he looked at the video, he said something like ‘so, we meet again’. By the way, he’s working for Renzo.”

“Renzo? He’s not with the police, then?”

Toby shook his head. “No, but the dude has friends in all the high places. The detective who came with the police crew seemed happy to see him.”

“Po played us nicely,” Mason said with mirth.

“Po? Do you mean Billy? Where is he?” Rhys mumbled as he opened his eyes and blinked a few times. “Is he here?”

Toby dematerialized in the blink of an eye.

“No. He had business with the police.”

“The police? What happened?” Rhys struggled to straighten up, and Mason helped him. “Why is my head pounding like this?”

“You were drugged and kidnapped. Not sure in which order,” Mason offered.

Rhys touched his forehead gingerly. “Oh, damn, I remember something now, but not all. What the hell happened?”

Mason embraced him from behind. “You’re safe now.” He exhaled and then inhaled the scent of golden hair. “Levine was behind it all.”

“Doesn’t that man know how to take a ‘no’?” Rhys revolted and then groaned. He grabbed his head in his hands and began massaging his temples. “He didn’t force himself on me, right?”

Mason rubbed his shoulders. “No. And he didn’t have any interest in you of the kind. He kept you as a bargaining chip.”

“For what?”

Mason sighed. “I found the micro SD card missing from Toby’s phone. It was hidden inside your pendant, the one you wore around your neck. I broke it by accident ... I’m sorry.”

Rhys remained silent for a moment and then turned slowly. “Mason, what was on that card?” he asked quietly.

“I’ll show you.” Mason grabbed his phone from the nightstand.

The angle was skewed, and one could easily tell that the video had been recorded without the knowledge of those involved. Mason had recognized Levine’s office from the first time he had seen the video. Toby must have stayed hidden behind one of the lavish armchairs in the room.

“I don’t understand what takes you so long.” That was Levine’s voice, loud and clear. “How hard can you be to whack a flamboyant pansy like Renzo Ora?”

The other person in the room was standing, but his back was turned so that no one could see his face.

“I strongly advise against using names while talking about such delicate issues.”

If he focused enough, Mason could almost recognize the metallic voice on the phone in the human one he was hearing. But that had to be his imagination playing tricks on him, and nothing else.

“This is my house, my office. I’ll do as I please. So far, Mr. X, you’ve done nothing but cost me money.” Levine’s words were loaded with disdain.

“Killing a prominent figure like the person in question is not something to treat lightly. I’m not your butcher, Mr. Money Bags.”

If Mason hadn’t known any better, he would have thought Levine was through with that guy after being insulted like that.

“Fine. We’ll do it your way. He’s already bragging that he’s number one in the entertainment industry. So make sure to bring me his head on a silver platter.”

Mason had heard that particular demand before.

“I hope you don’t mean it literally.”

“I would, but you’re apparently keen on getting on my nerves. Just do it, make sure he’s dead, and you’ll be rewarded.”

The video stopped there.

Rhys’s eyes grew wide. “Oh my God,” he murmured. “Did Levine murder Toby over this? Did Renzo know?”

Mason took his hand. “We don’t know for sure. Things are crazy complicated. Levine says he didn’t kill Toby, but that doesn’t mean that he didn’t hire someone else to do it.”

“This person?” Rhys pointed at the man on the screen, whose face was hidden since all the time, he had been with his back to Toby’s phone while the secret video had been recorded.

“That guy must be a pro,” Mason explained. “And whoever killed Toby, he was quite reckless. He left the murder weapon behind --”

“Murder weapon?” Rhys exclaimed. “How long have I been asleep? A decade? How come all these things came to life so quickly?”

“Ary hid it,” Mason explained.

“Ary? Did he see who murdered Toby, then?”

“No, and he was afraid, too, because he touched the billiard mace used to kill Toby,” Mason said.

Rhys pressed his index fingers against his temples, hard. “Billiard mace? A cue stick? But that’s hardly --”

“We don’t know all the details now. But whoever killed Toby seemed to have done so while going through a lapse in judgement --” Mason stopped, the thread of his thoughts untangling like Ariadne’s. “Rhys, I know it’s a lot to ask from you, but do you think you can stand? We need to go to the police. I have a suspicion about Toby’s killer, and they’re the only ones who can test it.”

“Of course,” Rhys replied. “Billy’s with the police right now? I thought I heard you talking ... Wait,” Rhys rubbed his temples harder, “who were you talking to, Mason? I heard you in my sleep --”

Saved by the bell. Mason’s phone rang, and he grabbed it like a lifeline. “Hi, Billy. Yes, we’re coming in right now. Rhys appears to be well enough. Also, I think I know who killed Toby.”

He stood up and cut the conversation. “We’ll have to give statements about what happened,” he said hurriedly, hoping that Rhys would forget about what he had just asked.

“My statement will be disappointingly short,” Rhys commented, “but I’ll do everything I can to help.”

“Let’s go, then. Tonight, we’ll order in, and then you’ll get to sleep properly.”

Rhys stood and swayed slightly. Mason caught him, and their eyes met. “Thank you, Mason. For doing this. For saving me.”



“I couldn’t have lived with myself if I hadn’t done my best,” Mason replied in a soft voice.

Rhys kissed him. It was a chaste kiss, with no heat, but full of love. Mason knew he would have to come clean eventually. But that moment could wait a little, and he could pretend that things would be okay.

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At the police station, Mason had to be reassured several times that Rhys would be in safe hands when they were taken to give their statements separately. His interview went better than expected, in the sense that the questions were straightforward, and the detective in charge already seemed to know everything. That had to be Billy’s hand in everything regarding the case.

Nonetheless, he felt relieved when he walked out of the room.

“Do you have a moment, Mason?” Billy was standing in front of another interrogation room, leaning casually against the doorjamb. “Don’t worry about Rhys. He’s fine. His statement takes longer because there’s old history he has to talk about.”

“All right,” Mason said curtly. He knew he could trust Billy, but he was anxious to see Rhys again. He couldn’t bear, in a scary physical sense, to be away from him for too long.

Billy gestured for him to follow, but not inside the room, as he expected, but outside. They walked out into an interior courtyard. Mason observed in silence as Billy pulled at his collar and then rummaged through his pockets. From there, he produced a pair of cigarettes and a lighter.

Mason shook his head. “You’re smoking on top of everything, Mr. Private Eye?”

Billy chuckled and took a deep inhale through the cancer stick. His hair was mussed, and he seemed somewhat older, but not in a bad way. Certainly, Mason could still see Po in him, but now he discovered a deeper layer, and it astonished him that he had been so easily fooled for so long.

“Actually, this is my actual vice. I had to gain thirty pounds for this job, and I swear to dear God, if I see another candy wrap in my life, I’ll consider moving to Antarctica.”

“Why? No candies there?”

“Nope. I checked. Only popsicles.”

Mason laughed. It felt good after so long.

“Did Toby tell you Renzo hired me?”

“Yes. He must have been as curious about you as me. You must be one hell of a private investigator.”

“I prefer the term problem solver,” Billy explained.

“About Toby,” Mason started. It felt weird but comforting to talk to someone about his seeing ghosts and whatnot. “How could you tell? You don’t see him or anything, right? And I hope you’re not laying some trap to catch me and take me to a place where the only clothes I’ll get will be a straitjacket.”

Billy offered him a huge grin. “Nah. Would that be a way for me to treat my partner?”

“It’s weird as fuck, isn’t it?”

“You being able to see Toby’s ghost? Yeah, it is. But trust me, in my job, I’ve seen plenty of weird shit. So, don’t sweat it.”

“Did you tell anyone else about this? Renzo --”

“No,” Billy said and put his mind at ease. “While I like to think of myself as completely open-minded, I doubt others would have the same outlook on life and all it entails. I prefer to err on the side of caution.”

“Thanks. But how did you realize I could see Toby?”

“Well, let’s say that I had more cameras than you thought installed all over the house at Rhys’s place.”

“You son of a ...” Mason stopped and shook his head. “How come Toby didn’t catch you watching those cameras?”

“Ah, I wasn’t watching them on the screens in the surveillance room, but only on my phone. And those had sound; I listened to them on my earbuds. Anyone looking over my shoulder would have seen me playing some mind numbing mobile game.”

“I’ll be damned,” Mason whispered.

“I won’t get into the technical stuff. Know that it’s cutting edge and let’s leave it at that.”

“If you say so. Then you heard me talking to Toby.”

“Yes, and it made me curious. I knew everything about you, Mason, and you didn’t strike me as the type who would go crazy all of a sudden. I listened carefully, and trust me, the half dialogue I kept hearing was frustrating as hell.”

Mason ran one hand over his face. He had been cursed with an interesting life, whether he liked it or not. “Billy, about Boyd. Wait, is your name even Billy?”

“No, but maybe I’ll tell you my real name one day. I have conditions for that.”

“Really? Like what?”

“Save a drink for me on your wedding day.”

“You still bent on that? How about the cake?”

Billy threw him a disgusted look.

Mason laughed. “All right. But I think you’re getting your hopes high for nothing. Rhys ... He deserves the truth.”

“The truth? You mean, about Toby being a ghost and talking to you? I’m not sure, man.”

“I can’t tell him that I love him and continue to lie. That’s no way to live.”

Billy threw the cigarette butt on the ground and crushed it. He reached for another and looked at Mason. “Going to let me poison myself, chief?”

Mason laughed. “I think you’re a big boy now. You’re free to make mistakes. Since you proved so well that you can handle yourself, there’s nothing else for me to teach you.”

“You’re one hell of a good guy, Mason,” Billy said and lit his second cigarette.

“About Boyd, though, how did you do it?” Mason asked.

Billy threw him a guilty look. “Don’t get mad at your friend. It took a lot to convince him to get me on the same team with you to watch over Rhys’s wellbeing. I had to promise that if the situation got hairy, you’d be out.”

“So Boyd knew? What a friend,” Mason said, somewhat miffed. “Why didn’t you guys rope me in, though?”

“The operation was all on need to know basis. Boyd doesn’t know the tenth part of what you know right now. And while I felt I could trust you, my line of business teaches me every day that I could be wrong at any moment. And mistakes tend to be quite costly in every possible way.”

Mason nodded in understanding.

“Levine’s fingerprints are not on the murder weapon,” Billy started. “But that billiard mace does belong to him.”

“It doesn’t surprise me,” Mason said.

“We ran the fingerprints through the database, but nothing came out,” Billy continued. “As expected.”

“How about taking Anita’s fingerprints?” Mason said.

Billy turned toward him. “That’s your theory? She’s Levine’s maid. Her fingerprints on the murder weapon should not be a surprise. She polishes the silverware.”

“Exactly,” Mason said. “She wouldn’t leave any fingerprints on, right? That would be a sloppy job. Unless, of course, in a moment of, I don’t know, anger --”

Billy’s eyes lit up. “You’re a genius, Mason. Now we have to make Levine admit that he put her up to it.”

“Frankly, I don’t think so. I think she acted on her own. Just when she put the ketamine inside the drawer in Rhys’s kitchen, probably to make people think he’s a drug addict once Levine’s plan came to fruition.”

“Because she likes to go beyond the call of duty,” Billy added, remembering, just like Mason, Levine’s words. “But why would Levine keep such an unstable person close? She obviously made some grave mistakes.”

“And still, Levine trusted her to finish Rhys after getting the micro SD card from me.”

“Hmm, how about becoming my partner for real?” Billy asked.

Mason shook his head. “It sounds dangerous, whatever you do. I’d rather be a bodyguard. I’ve had my fair share of interesting things during these last weeks.”

“But hey, you got to fall in love,” Billy said, good-naturedly.

Fall in love. Some people made it sound easy, but it was also a burden because no one was ever the same after that happened to them. The thought alone was frightening.

“Let me know if my theory about Anita is right. I think it would help Toby.”

Billy nodded. “Sure thing.”

Mason still had one thing to ask. “I also want to ask you about the man Levine hired to kill Renzo. Do you think he’ll come after Rhys?”

Billy shook his head. “That guy doesn’t lift a finger if he’s not paid royally. Plus, he’s a con artist above all else. He likes to squeeze his so-called employers of all the money he can before acting.” He made a disgusted face. Mason suspected that Billy’s dislike toward the hired hitman ran deeper than what met the eye. “Don’t worry about him. He won’t bother either of you. He doesn’t do personal, ever.”

Mason knew he had to be satisfied with that. His former partner had turned to be a capable individual, proficient in his line of business.

Billy threw the smoked cigarette on the ground. He looked around as if he wanted to remember that drab courtyard for some reason.

Mason knew what that meant. "I guess this is where we say goodbye, right?"

"Not forever," Billy said with a smile. "Just save that drink for me. I want to make a toast for you and Rhys at the right moment."

"You're an optimist," Mason said. "I told you --"

"He'll believe you," Billy said with conviction and offered his hand.

Mason shook it firmly.

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Rhys stood with his head hanged low and looked at his hands as if there was some secret they could tell him. Mason knew there were many unanswered questions between them, but they were heading home, and no one appeared in the mood to talk.

Still, the way Rhys seemed so lost made him feel hurt, real hurt, in the middle of his chest. "It's over now," he said in a noncommittal voice.

"Yeah, I guess." Rhys spoke monotonously, just like him.

"Levine will be put away for a long time."

"Is that evidence truly enough? What about Toby?"

"I asked Billy to look into my theory. It shouldn't take long for us to hear from him."

Rhys looked out the window. An early fall rain was misting the glass. Mason stared for a moment at his back and then focused on the road ahead.

"Who do you think did it?" Rhys asked, but without looking back at him.

"There is only one person close enough to Levine to have interest in doing that."

"Not the mysterious man in that recording, though."

"No, this person was sloppy. So my guess is Anita, the creepy maid."

Rhys turned toward him and stared at his profile. Mason could sense his questioning eyes on him.

"I understand that she tried to kill me, too," Rhys said without emotion.

"We stopped her, me and Billy."

“I’m lucky then. Toby wasn’t.”

Mason sighed and gripped the wheel tightly. The windshield wipers moved to and fro with metronome precision, but the rain was getting stronger, and it looked like they would become overwhelmed soon. “Please, Rhys,” he said softly.

“Please, what?”

“Don’t push yourself in a corner. Don’t punish yourself. It wasn’t your fault, any of it.”

“No, it wasn’t,” Rhys confirmed. “But it was Toby’s. He should have come to me. We would have left, gone to the police, something.” All of a sudden, he was animated, and his voice was on edge.

That took Mason by surprise. “He was trying to protect you.”

“He left me alone,” Rhys said with bitterness. “And he wanted to count on me, or else what would he put the card inside my pendant? I just wish he went all the way, and tell me about the danger he was in. We were both in. We were one.” His words hanged heavy between them.

Mason wished for the windshield wipers to work harder, faster. “Don’t blame him for loving you more than himself.”

“More than himself? Please stop it with the bullshit, Mason. He loved more? You think that’s it?”

“Yes, I do,” Mason said curtly.

“And you know that, how? What was left for me to do, then? To be a loved person and that should have been enough? But let me tell you this. It wasn’t. I loved Toby.” Rhys began choking on his words. “I love him,” he added as his words turned into whispers. “So I can’t forgive him.”

The road before them was a blanket of running water. Mason pulled over and killed the engine. He felt too messed up on the inside to drive in that kind of weather. “You should forgive him,” he said with finality.

Rhys shook his head, and it was evident he was fighting back the tears. Mason wished that he would just let them go, along with any resentment he still felt toward his late lover. The wound couldn’t close without letting go. “How can you ask me that? I can’t. I simply cannot.”

“But he would want that. He would want for you to forgive him.”

And let him go. The thought hit Mason with sudden clarity. What if that were what Toby really needed? What if it weren’t about finding his killer at all?

“You don’t know anything,” Rhys replied. “How could you? Only Toby would ... and sorry to say,” he added with a short nervous laugh, “but he’s no longer around to tell us what he truly wants.”

Mason looked ahead, the deluge in front making it hard to see anything at all. “What if he were?”

“If he were what? Still around?” Rhys asked him. “I’m not the kind to visit psychics and throw money at them just so that they tell me what I want to hear. They and shrinks are the same bunch.”

They should have been at home by now, and this conversation should have been easier. But maybe it was for the best that they were trapped there, in the rain, with the world shut away from them for a while.

“He is still around,” Mason said softly.

“What?” Rhys looked at him.

He didn’t dare to say another word.

“Mason, what are you saying?” Rhys’s voice was guarded now.

He had to end what he had started. Horribly aware of how he sounded, he said, “I can see Toby. I can talk to him.”

The silence that fell between them was unbearable. Mason risked a look at Rhys, to be met by cold eyes.

“Toby is dead, Mason, dead and buried, so explain yourself right now,” Rhys said. “You’re not going to sell me on some story that he’s still alive, are you?”

“No. He’s dead. But ... I’m talking to his ghost.” Yes, that sounded as insane as he had expected.

“His ghost?! Do you think I’m crazy? How can you spout such crap? Oh my God, are you Levine’s man? Are you trying to make me appears as if I’ve lost my mind?”

“No, no, no,” Mason protested. “I wouldn’t do this to you. But it’s the truth, and I don’t want any lies between us.”

“Isn’t it rich, then, that you’re trying to fool me with some crazy shit?” Rhys spat.

Mason was conscious of Rhys moving away from him, and not only emotionally. He had been through a lot, and hearing about his dead lover making an appearance as a ghost couldn’t be something reasonable and easy to accept.

“Rhys, I’m telling the truth.” There wasn’t anything else he could say but the truth.

“Okay. Let’s say I believe you,” Rhys said in an icy tone. “Tell me something only he and I know. Ask him. Is he here now? Chilling on the back seat?” He looked ostentatiously over his shoulder.

“No, he’s not. And I cannot tell you anything because he doesn’t remember his life before he died.”

“A ghost with amnesia? Damn, how convenient,” Rhys revolted.

Anyone in their right mind would have reacted the same. Mason squeezed his eyes shut. “I’m only telling the truth,” he repeated like a mantra.

“Why would you do this?” Rhys asked bitterly. “Are you afraid of being stuck with me? Is that it? If it is, it’s easier just to tell me that we’re through. Since I’m not in any danger anymore, according to the police, your job is done. Ah, and you’re right. It’s over now.”

Mason was surprised by Rhys opening the door on his side and climbing out of the car.

“Rhys, wait! Where are you going?”

The only reply was the door getting slammed in his face. With a curse, he climbed out of the car, too, and hurried after Rhys.

How fast could he run? He was already a white silhouette in the rain. Mason took a few steps and then stopped. No, it was better like this. Much better. He couldn’t force Rhys to believe him; that was a choice for another to make.



## *Chapter Twenty-Five – Remember Me Like This*

Mason listened to the old clock on the wall. An electric buzz came from the fridge, and if he focused enough, all the electrical devices present hummed and drummed. The sounds of his small apartment had turned deafening ever since he and Rhys had broken up.

There hadn't been much to break, he tried to reason with himself. The situation had been exceptional, and under such circumstances, they had somehow fallen into each other's arms. He turned his attention to the sounds of his tiny home. Annoying as they were, they were better than

—  
“Are you really not going to talk to him again?”

“I have not one clue why you're still hanging out with me,” Mason said and didn't take his eyes from an invisible point on the wall.

“Obviously, I like your company.”

“If I ever wanted a pet, I wouldn't get a ghost, though,” Mason pointed out.

Toby laughed softly. “Come on, man, you like me. And you said I was like a dog, good at investigating this and that. Sorry, but we can't play fetch, though. No paws, or teeth, or ... well, anything.”

“Anita admitted to killing you,” Mason said.

“Yeah. Whacked by a crazy old lady. What a way to go for me.”

“And yet, you still don't remember one thing. And you're still here.”

“Looks like it.”

“And isn't that bothering you?” Mason closed his eyes, tired of punishing them by having them stare at nothing.

“I'm not sure how that would feel. But yeah, it bothers me. Could Anita be protecting someone else? That PI said that her fingerprints weren't found on the murder weapon.”

“Apparently, she knew how to be careful. Except she dropped the mace when her master came around to take her home. While Levine was questioning her about what she had done, Ary must have come in and taken the weapon. Things do make sense.”

“And now she admitted to having done it. Which she could have denied.”

“Maybe she doesn't want to leave her boss to rot in jail alone,” Mason added.

“It's not like she'll tidy up around his prison cell. That doesn't make much sense.”

Mason sighed. “What does, in this world? You’re still here, and I did everything I could to get rid of you.”

“You’re so breaking my heart right now.” Toby paused for dramatic effect. “You know what I think it might help?”

Mason was really not in the mood to hear that for the umpteenth time.

“It would help if you called Rhys.”

“Not going to happen,” Mason said curtly.

Toby clicked his tongue. “Why?”

“Why? What better reason than the fact that he thinks I’m trying to set him up for being sent to the loony bin by trying to convince him that I can see and hear his dead lover?”

“Ugh, point taken. Too bad I wasn’t with the two of you when you broke up like two silly kids.”

“Silly? Who’s silly?” Mason couldn’t gather the strength to protest too much, but Toby was now getting on his nerves with his patronizing tone.

“You,” Toby replied promptly.

Mason straightened up and worked his neck until he heard a pop. “Just give me a break.”

“What I don’t understand,” Toby continued as if he hadn’t heard Mason, “is how you could let him leave after everything you two have been through.”

“Apparently, it was much easier than anyone would have thought,” Mason said with a bit of vinegar added on top.

“I had no idea you were such a quitter.”

Why did ghosts have to be immaterial? Mason wanted to strangle Toby so bad right now. “I’m not going to force him to believe me. And I have no forgiveness in me to teach him about it, too.”

“Forgiveness?” Toby was surprised. “What you are talking about?”

Shit. He had let that out of the bag without thinking. He knew what Toby would want the moment he exposed his theory. But he couldn’t see Rhys; people never stayed, and it wasn’t in his power to hold them, even if he used both his arms and all the strength he could muster.

“He keeps on calling you,” Toby pointed at Mason’s phone. “He just got upset temporarily. He wants to get back together.”

“Sure. Because people can just forget about the fact that someone is trying to sell them on the idea that they can see ghosts.”

“Hey, no need to go in such a roundabout way about everything. It’s only one ghost you see. Are you seeing other ghosts? Because if you do, man, we need to have a talk. I’m not into open relationships, you hear me?”

Mason rubbed his face hard with both hands. “He will give up on calling, eventually.”

“He might since you turned off your phone. But he will start coming around here often.”

That had been quite the surprise, but Mason had managed to see Rhys waiting out in the street; he had slept that night at a motel and hadn’t gone back home for days. It would be easier if he just moved out, only that he wasn’t in the mood to go through all that just yet.

“Are you going to mope for how long?” Toby continued to nag him. “Seriously, man, I think I’m starting to see your muscles getting all flabby.”

Mason threw the ghost a murderous look.

“Yeah, yeah, look at me like you’d like to kill me all you want. Someone beat you to it.”

“And I’m starting to think of a couple of reasons why you make people want to kill you.” Mason hanged his head down. “Sorry about that. It was uncalled for.”

“Don’t sweat it, man. I’d give you a hug if I could. But I think I’m still here because there’s one thing left for me to do.”

“Which is?” Mason asked.

“I need to get you and Rhys back together.”

“Well, you’re free to try.”

“I am trying. What do you think I’m doing, talking to you day in and day out?”

“I knew it had to be a strong reason why I couldn’t get a wink of sleep. I’m not getting back with Rhys because it’s impossible. He will never believe me. And I won’t lie to him. I’ll say it over and over until I’m red in the face, and he will only get mad. The way I see it, I’m just saving both of us a lot of fucking trouble.”

Toby remained silent. “There is one way.”

“I don’t want to hear about it.”

“Well, you will because I’m here and impossible to ignore. You said Billy realized that I was talking to you, right? I mean, I heard him talking about it, and I shat my pants.”

“You shat nothing; you don’t have an asshole,” Mason retorted.

“Right. Well, it’s just a way of saying. But Billy could go to Rhys and tell him that. Tell him that he believes you’re one fine ghost whisperer, and he can vouch for you.”

“And then Rhys will hate both me and Billy.”

“Billy would do it. For your sake, he would.”

“I don’t want to get him involved. What’s the big deal? Do you really want me to swoop in and take your place in Rhys’s life?”

There was a short moment of silence from Toby. His voice was serious when he spoke. “Yeah, I really want that. Because that place is fucking cold, man. And who knows what kind of douchebag will come and charm Rhys, only to abuse him later. With you, I know I’m leaving him in good hands.”

“Well, I don’t feel that charitable, forgive me. If Rhys doesn’t want to believe me, then that’s that. I can’t convince him, I can’t force him, I can’t lie to him. It’s over.”

“I don’t think so. I’m here, and that means that being stuck with a ghost will make your love life miserable. Just imagine me popping out just when you try putting it in, if you know what I mean.”

“Are you threatening me that you’ll be my personal cockblocker for life?”

“I have to consider it. You need to see Rhys again. Yeah, tell him the same thing until you’re red in the face. Tell him that you love him. Tell him anything to stop the both of you from destroying your chance at love.”

Mason shook his head. “No. I’ve done everything you wanted, Toby. I went and solved your frigging murder, for fuck’s sake. And now, you’re just an annoying piece of shit, all right?”

“All right,” Toby said and put his hands up in defeat. “But this isn’t the last time we’re having this conversation. I know I will wear you down. I’ll do it until you’re so mad at me that you’ll have no other choice but to do as I tell you.”

“You really are something,” Mason murmured under his breath.

“Yeah, I am. That’s why I’m not going to leave you be.”

“Really? That’s why you’re so annoying?”

“No, man. It’s because I care about you. And Rhys. You two are meant to be together.”

“And weren’t you and he meant to be that?”

“Who says love happens only once in a lifetime?”

“Funny, I thought you would serve me some bullshit soulmate theory.”

“Nah, I believe in love, not soulmates.”

“Such a convenient philosophy.”

“Whatever it takes, man, whatever it takes.”

It hurt Mason that he couldn't pick up Rhys's calls. He wanted to know how he had been, where he was now, if he had a place to stay, or if he ate enough. But those were not his worries to keep; his decision was set in stone.

And who was he to ask Rhys to forgive Toby, after all? In his heart, he had never forgiven Aimee Knight for leaving him all alone, with just a glimpse of happiness to remember for the rest of his life and carry like a burden.

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He was barely out of the shower when his phone pinged with an incoming message. Toby had been quiet lately, only popping here and there to nag him or just keep him company. Maybe he was going insane a little because he liked having a ghost as company. They were even watching games and stupid movies. The only thing they couldn't do was to drink beer together and get smashed.

It was a dangerous thing to isolate so much from the world, but the cocoon in which he had wrapped himself lately was comfortable and numbing.

He checked the phone, hoping and dreading that Rhys would send another proof of life. While he didn't want to reply to his texts or take his calls, it was good to know that he existed somewhere in the world.

It was a text from Billy who wanted them to meet. Mason quirked an eyebrow as he read the location of their meeting; the old wooden bridge was pretty far, and no one went there much anymore. It was just a vestige from another world, soon to be swallowed by vegetation if the memory served him well.

But, of course, given the secrecy of Billy's profession, it seemed like a good choice. Maybe they hadn't said all their goodbyes the last time, and Mason couldn't deny the speck of warmth lighting up in his chest as he thought of their friendship.

Billy would be pretty disappointed to hear that things hadn't worked out between him and Rhys. But Mason had warned him before; with all of Billy's natural enthusiasm and optimism, sometimes things were just what they were.

He looked outside. It would rain again soon, but he didn't feel like taking an umbrella along. A bit of cold rain would help him clear his head; he had been indoors for far too long.

Still, he opted for a warm sweater and a leather jacket. There was nothing more miserable than having a cold and being by himself. Too bad he couldn't train Toby to make tea; that would have been helpful.

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Mason looked up and allowed a few raindrops to fall on his eyes as he leaned against the wooden rail. He blinked a few times to chase them away.

"Hey." A soft melodic voice he knew well called for him from a few feet away.

He turned on his heels and set his jaw hard. "What's this?"

Rhys looked as beautiful as ever, albeit a bit thinner than Mason remembered. He wore a long, fashionable coat that looked abnormally white in that kind of weather, and like him, he didn't have an umbrella.

Mason didn't move, but Rhys took a few steps toward him. "This is me, coming to apologize and ask for your forgiveness."

Mason pushed his hands into the pockets of his jacket and looked away. Just seeing him so close was torture. It would take so little to reach for him and hold him, to taste his lips again and breathe in his scent. If he did that, all was lost.

"You're forgiven."

"Yes, of course, your curt and mean tone says it all," Rhys said and laughed softly. "No, I mean it, Mason."

"And I do, too. But I'm not going to take back anything I said."

"And I'm not asking you to."

Mason snorted. "What? Do you believe me now?"

"Yes. I do."

Mason pondered for a moment. Of course, how come he hadn't realized already? "Did Billy tell you that you should?"

"What?" Rhys sounded surprised. "Can Billy see Toby, too? The nerve on that guy, to haunt everyone except me. He was my boyfriend, after all."

There was real shock in Rhys's voice. Mason checked his beautiful face for signs of an attempt to take him for a fool. He found none. "How come you thought of putting Billy up to texting me?" Mason asked, too unnerved for a moment to continue the conversation on his ability to see ghosts.

Rhys leaned against the wooden rail, his hands deep in his pockets, but didn't come any closer. "It wasn't easy. Did you know Billy is some kind of big shot investigator? Renzo didn't want to give me his number until I threatened him. Something about his needing to disappear from the face of the world after a job well done. But persistence pays off, I think. So I gave the message to Renzo, and Renzo gave it to him, and now you're here. We're both here."

Mason looked ahead. They were both crazy for coming there without an umbrella. Being cold and miserable with no one able to make tea seemed to be in the cards, after all.

"So," Rhys started again, "what does Toby say?" This voice was awkward and tense.

Mason turned his head and looked at his profile. "What would you like to know?"

Rhys shrugged. "Anything at all. I'm not the expert in talking to ghosts here. When did it all start?"

With difficulty, Mason tore his eyes away. "The day I met you. That evening, I mean. It took a while to figure out who he was. Toby didn't know his identity, but he was damned happy I could see him." He weighed his next words carefully. "It looked like he became conscious, as a ghost, I mean, about the time you got released from that place."

"Good to know that he still has some connection with me," Rhys mumbled and pulled his coat around him tightly.

Mason wanted to reach out and hold him, keep him warm. But first, they needed to have this talk about dead lovers. "He knows that he loves you."

"He does?" Rhys's voice trembled.

"Yes," Mason said without one ounce of hesitation. "Even if he doesn't remember about your life together."

"Did he help you solve his murder?"

"To the best of his abilities, yes. And he watched over you. We wouldn't have gotten to you in time if it weren't for him."

"That makes sense," Rhys replied. "I apologize for being such a reckless fool. As I was giving my statement to the police, I realized how much anger I had in me, about Toby and everything. It

wasn't right that I got mad at you. It took me less than a day to realize that. But then, you wouldn't take my calls."

"Do you truly believe me, Rhys?" Mason asked, dreading the answer.

"Yes."

"But how? No person in their right mind would."

Rhys chuckled. "Then maybe I'm not in my right mind anyway."

"You're not crazy," Mason insisted.

"I know. But I also know something else, something I haven't said in a while now. I decided long ago that when I'll love, I'll love with all my heart. That the person I love will know that, every moment of his life. And that means believing in him, too. Completely."

You can't love me; you still love him. Mason said nothing and listened.

"Of course, for most of my life, that person was Toby."

"You still love him," Mason pointed out.

"Yes, I do, I still love him. But the one I'm in love with right now is not him anymore."

It was hard to keep from breathing, but it looked like the only thing to do.

Rhys shook his head. "It took me a bit to realize that. It wasn't love the first thing I noticed happening to me. But guilt and shame."

"Of what? You're not guilty of anything," Mason said in a gruff voice.

"I felt so. I met you and started betraying Toby, in my heart. So all along, it was myself I was mad at. Not you."

"What about Toby?"

Rhys sighed. "I am still mad at him. I don't know what to say. It will go away, eventually."

"Make it go away now," Mason said.

Rhys threw him a curious look. "Like now, now? I'm not sure --"

"What did I miss?" Toby appeared by their side all of a sudden.

Mason no longer knew how to act startled at Toby's sudden entrance. But why had Rhys stopped?



“He’s here now, isn’t he?” Rhys asked.

Mason nodded. “How do you know?”

“Your face changed, and I’ve seen it before,” Rhys replied. “Like you want to kick someone’s ass. Toby often made me feel that way, but nothing too serious.”

“Seriously, my dudes, what did I miss?” Toby insisted.

“What is he saying?” Rhys asked. “And where, exactly, is he?”

“Right in front of you,” Mason replied.

Rhys looked straight ahead.

“OMFG!” Toby exclaimed. “He believes, right?”

“He does,” Mason replied. “He asked if you believed me now,” he explained to Rhys.

He stopped when Rhys buried his face in his palms and began sobbing softly.

“Tell him he looks beautiful,” Toby said. “And that he shouldn’t cry. And also, that you’re not crazy, definitely not. And --”

Mason put one hand up. “Slow down, Toby. I will tell him everything you want, but don’t count on my short-term memory that much.”

He knew the words came from his mouth like an avalanche, only making Rhys cry harder, but he couldn’t stop. It was insane, whatever the three of them were doing, so choosing such a remote place for their meeting had been inspired.

Rhys took a handkerchief from his pocket and sniffled a few times. “Mason, tell Toby to shut up for a minute because I have things to say, too. That was exactly like he was when alive.”

“I had a hunch,” Mason replied.

“Has he driven you nuts with his talking, too?”

“You bet,” Mason said, happy to see a hint of a smile on Rhys’s face. “Now you tell Toby what you want him to hear from you,” he encouraged him.

The words that followed weren’t what he expected.

Rhys said, “Toby, do you think you can forgive me?”

“Tell him that I do, although I have no idea what he’s talking about,” Toby said quickly.

Mason repeated every word.

Rhys sighed. "I'm in love with someone else now. I promised you that I would only love you and you only."

"Really? Is that what he wants me to forgive him for? That's frigging easy," Toby said.

Mason put a comforting hand on Rhys's shoulder. "He says there's nothing to forgive."

"Because he doesn't remember me?"

Mason exchanged an uncomfortable look with Toby. He didn't need to hear what he had to say to know. "He is certain that he's still here because he needs to make sure that you're in good hands."

"Yours?" Rhys asked and looked into Mason's eyes.

Mason nodded.

Rhys began laughing softly. "So have I fretted so much over nothing? My Toby thinks that I should just go on with my life?"

"Totally," Toby said. "Tell that to him, Mason. Tell him that love always happens again. It never ends."

"You and your philosophy," Mason mumbled. Regardless of how awkward he felt to say those words, he repeated them. "Toby says love always happens again."

"Tell him that he must love again."

Mason sighed. "He says that you must love again."

Rhys shook his head and smiled. There was no more beautiful sight in Mason's eyes. "Love? Again?"

"Yes," Mason confirmed.

"Then that's easy." Rhys continued to look Mason in the eyes. "Is he sure he won't get mad if I do this?" He pulled him into a tender kiss.

"Yippee!" Toby exclaimed.

"What is he doing?" Rhys asked and kissed Mason once more.

"He's doing one weird as hell victory dance that I don't know how to describe," Mason replied.

"You don't have to. I know all his crazy moves. I'm still pissed that he doesn't remember me and is willing to let me go so easily. Toby," Rhys turned slightly, and Mason pointed the right direction, "I forgive you, too."

“That’s f-ing great!” Toby said, without stopping his crazy moves.

Rhys turned his attention on Mason. “So how is living with a ghost? I’ll make all the necessary adjustments, no questions asked. I mean, I just need to know what they are.”

“Well, he doesn’t eat and doesn’t need anything. It’s annoying that he never sleeps, though. He might pop in and ask crazy questions when you least expect it, so make sure to be prepared if you intend to manipulate dangerous objects. It will be tough,” Mason joked.

“Guys, guys, I really don’t think you need to worry about that,” Toby said, drawing Mason’s attention to him.

A ray of light was pointing exactly where Toby stood.

“Mason, do you see what I see?” Rhys pointed at the ray of light. “The clouds are breaking.”

“I ... remember everything!” Toby exclaimed. “Oh, God, I really do! Tell Rhys I’ll always love him.” The warm light was all around him like a warm blanket.

“That might be a sign from heavens,” Mason explained to Rhys, “because I can see Toby, ugh, damn, rising on that ray of light.”

“Really?” Rhys smiled broadly. “So will he be okay? Just ask him to tell me a few words more.”

Mason looked at Toby, who was already floating up in the air. “He says he’ll always love you, and that he remembers now.”

“Also, to remember my crazy dance. Yeah, that’s how I want him to remember me,” Toby added. “I had no idea riding like this would be so cool. See you, guys, on the other side someday! But not too soon, okay?”

Mason repeated Toby’s words to Rhys. The clouds that had parted gathered again. Toby was nowhere to be seen, and the rain started again with a vengeance.

“Oh,” Rhys complained as the raindrops began pelting them. “Do you have an umbrella, Mason?”

“No, I was too damned depressed to care.”

“Me, too,” Rhys admitted. “So Toby is now gone? For good?”

“I think so. Maybe all you two needed was to say goodbye.”

“Thank you, Mason. For helping me say goodbye,” Rhys said and kissed him. “Now, are we going to make a run for it?”

“It’s not a good idea.” Mason took him by the shoulders and looked him in the eyes. “Are you sure, Rhys? That you’re --” he choked on his own words.

“In love with you? Of course,” Rhys replied. His voice was soft like rain. “You’ve seen my all, Mason. I think love is, sometimes, like this. Like when you bump into someone in the rain. And although you can’t see his face, he’s familiar and you just know it. So you stop, you forget all about where you were going and why you were in a hurry, and then you turn, and he stops, too. Your eyes meet and the rain gets in them, but you see more clearly than you’ve ever seen in your life. That’s what I feel about you.”

“Fair enough,” Mason admitted, too overwhelmed to imagine himself capable of returning that declaration of love with crafted words.

“But now, I have to tell you. I know I must be overbearing, with my constant need for ... Why are you laughing?”

“I’ve only run away from what I wanted most. Someone to care about, to protect.” It was the right time for coming clean, after all.

“I might be good at running, too,” Rhys warned.

“Away from me?” Mason was in the mood to pull Rhys’s leg a little.

“Really, Mason? What I meant is, I’ll run after you until I catch you. Wait, that’s exactly what I did. Now, are you ready to tell me that you love me, too?”

“Not until we’re home, under warm blankets, with cups of hot tea in our hands.”

“Fair enough.” Rhys grabbed his hand and began walking.

Mason stopped him and gave him a long kiss. “I love you, Rhys Harmony. Wait, what’s your actual last name?”

Rhys smiled mischievously. “Do you have to ask? It’s going to be Knight soon, I hope, so it doesn’t matter.”

“Ah, Rhys Knight. Hmm, it doesn’t have quite the same ring to it as Rhys Harmony. You should keep your stage name, you know, for your stage appearances.”

“How generous of you. Now, Mason, let’s just go somewhere we could call a cab because this rain is seriously trying to get us.”

“All right. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“I know. But I like to hear you say it. So, I love you.”

“How long are you going to play this?”

“Until we find a cab.”

“Fair enough.”

## *Epilogue*

*Several months later*

“I still cannot believe that you two decided to take the big step so fast,” Boyd said and nudged him playfully.

“What could be the point of waiting?” Mason pulled at his collar. He was accustomed to being inside a suit, but this one was new; in fact, all his clothes were new since Rhys had insisted.

“True, true,” Boyd admitted. “Rhys looks amazing, by the way.”

Although they had plenty of friends from the music industry invited to their wedding ceremony, Rhys had insisted on playing a few songs himself, so he was at the piano on the small stage, exchanging jokes with the people in the band.

Mason wanted to look all serious on that special day, but he couldn't help break into a goofy smile each time he looked at Rhys. When the minister had allowed him to kiss his partner, Mason had made the entire audience hoot over how breathless he left Rhys. After all, they had been inseparable during these last months, which meant that their physical need for one another should have calmed down a bit.

It looked like nothing of the kind would happen soon.

“I noticed an unoccupied place to your left,” Boyd commented. “Is it for someone who couldn't make it?” He made a move to take the full champagne flute from the table, but Mason caught his arm.

“He'll make it.”

“Hmm, mysterious. And who's the guy?”

Mason didn't know just how much secrecy Billy needed, so he kept his mouth shut.

“Ah,” Boyd said as if he knew it all. “Don't tell me it's that guy.”

“What guy?” Mason decided to play dumb.

Boyd seemed a bit uncomfortable under his direct gaze. “Are you still mad at me about that time? The guy made me swear.”

“Oh, he made you swear,” Mason commented. “And since we're all twelve, there was no way in hell you could break that promise.”

“It seemed really serious. I mean, you wouldn't get mad at me on your wedding day, right?”

“I can’t,” Mason replied. “Your wife brought Rhys the perfect toaster as a wedding gift. Apparently, he’s big on toast or something.”

“Phew, then she saved me,” Boyd said. “But just so you know, I made him swear that he would take care of you, no matter what.”

“Ah, he swore. You swore. Then it all makes sense.” Mason wasn’t really upset anymore, but he liked to pull Boyd’s leg a little for not saying anything at that time.

“He has a knack to make people like him. No surprise he’s some big shot in his line of work. I wonder where he is right now. Most probably, cracking some new case somewhere. It was one hell of a ride. I mean, for you guys. I’m still not sure I understand how you managed to bring someone like Levine Goldman to his knees.”

“Billy paid you royally, didn’t he, Boyd?” Mason asked, unwilling to let his best friend off the hook that easily.

“Yeah, he did,” Boyd admitted and laughed. “But honestly, it wasn’t only the paycheck I got that convinced me. He told me to opt for someone I truly trusted among all the people I worked with. And I didn’t hesitate one bit when I told him about you.”

Rhys flexed his fingers over the piano and broke into a happy tune while the people around him sang along. Renzo was, of course, a scandal, striking a lewd pose on top of the piano. Ary was doing his best to accompany Rhys, but he appeared to hit the keys randomly. No one seemed to care that they were completely out of tune.

“I suppose I can’t stand mad at you,” Mason said.

Boyd followed his line of sight. “Of course. Of all this, you got yourself a husband. Who would have thought it possible?”

Mason shrugged. “Certainly, not me.”

“Yeah. You were like the prince of doom, destined to die alone. Sarah got so worried about you that she began scouting her friends for all the gay acquaintances they had. She really wanted to set you up with someone.”

“Then I dodged a bullet, there,” Mason said.

“You can bet. Sarah might have strange ideas about what the right people could be for other people.”

“Hey, she chose you. Ah, I guess that makes the point, though.”

Boyd made a sour face, but only for a moment. “She’s crazy about Rhys. Now she can brag to friends that sometimes, she has a celebrity over on Sundays.”

“Rhys likes her back. I thought I would be the guy to cook in this family, but Rhys now experiments with all of Sarah’s recipes.”

“Oh, yes. He even told her that you once set the kitchen on fire. When had that happened?”

“Some time ago.” Mason’s thoughts traveled back. It still felt strange to believe he had been able to see Toby’s ghost. But he had come to terms with it somehow.

“The way you and Billy got Levine in cuffs was legendary,” Boyd said. “Seriously, it was like you had divine help or something. A guy like that shouldn’t be easy to catch.”

“It wasn’t divine help,” Mason retorted. But he had had help, with Billy as a badass investigator or problem solver, as he called himself, and Toby, who, even if he had seemed just a goofy ghost, had brought his contribution, too.

“Anyway, what happened next was so frigging weird. I mean, Levine was a fraud, through and through. To think that he would keep his real mother to work as a maid.”

“It was because of the DNA tests that they discovered that, right?” Mason asked. That piece of information had come as a pretty big surprise.

“Yeah. It looks like Levine’s parents couldn’t have a child, so his father thought of a solution.”

“By getting pregnant one of the maids,” Mason completed the statement.

“Weird rich people,” Boyd said with a snort. “And they kept it a secret for so long. Levine learned about it after he reached twenty, as I heard. And by then, Anita had raised him, anyhow. I guess it wasn’t that big of a shock for him.”

“Still, he kept his mother working as a maid. What didn’t he find a way to help her? With his money, anything was possible.”

Boyd shrugged. “Who knows? But that explains that bat-shit crazy brand of loyalty on her part. Only a mother would go that far.”

“That far as to kill a guy who she overheard blackmailing her boss, slash son. Well, that was what she thought.”

“Toby just wanted to be safe. Levine had learned that he was trying to warn off Renzo. He cornered Toby and threatened him. So Toby thought of putting Levine’s mind at ease, by telling him to meet and give him the micro SD card. He also warned Renzo, so he felt he had done everything he could without putting himself and Rhys in danger. He thought he was guaranteeing their freedom, so there was no blackmail. Here I am, creating theories, and you’re doing nothing to stop me, Mason. Was that how things were?”



Mason nodded. "Pretty much. Only that someone had seen Toby leaving Levine's office, and that made the situation worse."

"Who did?"

"The hitman hired to kill Renzo," Mason explained. "Toby must have thought he could warn Renzo, and be done with the responsibility he had toward a friend. He even wanted to destroy the evidence. But Levine must have learned from his hired henchman that Toby had been there that night."

Boyd seemed to ponder for a while. "Do you really think Levine would have let Toby live?"

Mason shook his head. "I don't know. But I don't think so. Levine wanted Renzo dead only because he was better than him at promoting new artists. His greed was of a strange nature, that to be recognized as number one in all his enterprises."

"Strange man," Boyd concluded. "But let's not forget this is your wedding day. How about another glass?"

The server hurried to their table with a new bottle of champagne. Mason hadn't gotten tired yet of hearing congratulations and wishes of goodwill from the people invited. He had still hadn't heard that toast he had been waiting for, though. But the ceremony was not over yet.

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"I'm so beat," Rhys complained and put his head on Mason's shoulder. "Should we go, too? Everyone else already did."

Mason stood there, his eyes on the untouched champagne flute.

"Ah, we're still waiting for him, right?" Rhys said and snuggled close to him.

Mason put one arm around him. "Yes, we're are. He'll come."

It didn't take a genius to know that Billy worked and lived dangerously. But Mason had no intention to let his mind go there. If the man said he would be there, he would be there.

"Do you think the news on the wedding went national? I checked a few newspapers, and the ad we placed was there," Rhys commented. "But what if Billy didn't read those?"

"I think we paid our wedding one more time in ads online, offline, and everything in between," Mason replied. "There is no way he could have missed it."

Rhys nodded. "He'll be here then."

"I'm sorry to bother you, but we need to clean the tables," a server said as he approached them.

“Just one more minute,” Mason said curtly, and the man took the hint.

“Maybe we should take the champagne with us,” Rhys suggested. “We might have Billy join us a bit later.”

Mason didn’t like the idea of giving up, but the personnel at the venue were getting impatient. They were working people and needed to get back home to theirs just like anyone else.

“All right,” he agreed, albeit reluctantly.

Rhys grabbed the full champagne flute and a still half-full bottle. “Don’t worry, Mason. We’ll get to see him.”

It felt good to hear someone so determined to believe that. Mason stood up and followed his husband to the limousine waiting for them outside.

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For a moment, he hoped that Billy would suddenly appear, maybe even from the backseat of the limo, but the car was empty. The driver, a young attractive Latino man in his early twenties, held the door for them.

“Sorry to keep you working at this hour,” Rhys apologized.

The driver just nodded. The brim of his hat obscured his face. Maybe he didn’t speak too much English, Mason concluded. Still, he wanted to see his face –

“Mason, are you coming?” Rhys called from him from the backseat.

Mason handed him the champagne flute, which he held so that Rhys could get inside. Once they were both there, a silence fell between them.

“Are you disappointed?” Rhys asked and stared dejectedly at the champagne flute in his hand.

“I guess I’m more worried than disappointed.”

The limousine started moving. Most probably, the driver already knew their destination.

“What should we do with this?” Rhys pointed at the still full flute.

“No point in wasting it.” Mason smiled. He could be wrong, but it didn’t matter. He lowered the privacy screen. “Hey, man, pull over for a bit. We have a favor to ask.”

Rhys gestured for him to explain. As the driver stopped the engine, Mason took the glass from Rhys’s hand.

“We have a friend who didn’t make it tonight. We just got married, and we saved this drink for him all night. We would like you to drink it in his stead. And maybe say a few words if it’s not too much.”

“Senor, I cannot drink,” the driver said in a heavy Mexican accent.

Rhys patted his arm. “Mason, leave the man alone. He’s working. He cannot drink.”

Mason pondered for a second, but then he extended his arm and placed the drink in front of the driver. “Does your new case require you not to drink a drop, Po?”

He half-expected the driver to turn to him and express his surprise.

Which was just what he did. “Just how exactly could you tell, Mason?”

Rhys yelped in delight. “Oh my God, Billy! Is that you? You’re so different!”

“Just take this drink and hold that toast already,” Mason warned, but he was smiling broadly.

Billy took the flute and raised the glass to them. “Well, a promise is a promise, guys.”

Only his voice and eyes reminded them of good old Po. This guy was slender, tanned, and sported a sexy grin.

“You really are the master of disguise, aren’t you?” Mason asked.

Billy threw him a knowing look. “Not that much of a master if you could tell it was me.”

“I have no idea how Mason realized it,” Rhys intervened. “You look so different. I guess if I look at little closer ... Ah, what am I saying? You really are different!”

“Thank you, Rhys. My reputation is grateful, but Mason here makes me think that I need to get better at disguising myself.”

“I was just expecting you is all,” Mason explained. “Otherwise, I don’t think I would have been able to tell.”

“You’re just saying that to make me feel good. But where were we? Ah, the toast.” Billy raised his glass higher. “To Rhys and Mason, the best partners to one another and to any guy who’s fortunate to call them his friends.”

Rhys clinked the bottle against Billy’s flute, drank from it, and then passed it to Mason to do the same.

“To love,” Billy added, as he crossed looks with Mason.

“May it happen to you, too,” Mason replied.

“I thought we were sharing goodwill and wishes,” Billy said with a grin. “I think you might have just cursed me now, Mason.”

“All right. Then let me say something else. To the guy who always believed Rhys and I would end up married.”

“Are you trying to say you had doubts?” Rhys asked.

“I couldn’t hope you would go with an ordinary guy like me,” Mason replied.

“Ordinary,” Rhys said with a small cute snort. “Drink up, guys. It’s really our wedding!”

“Wait,” Mason interrupted them, as Rhys was filling Billy’s flute again. “If Billy gets smashed, who is going to drive?”

To his dismay, the two little devils began laughing.

“We’ll figure out something, dad,” Billy said nonchalantly.

“Dad, huh? And wait, are you going to tell us your real name?”

Billy pondered for a moment. “Maybe when you two celebrate fifty years of marriage.”

When they laughed now, Mason joined in. Fifty years of marriage? That sounded doable.

**THE END**