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This book is dedicated to my wife, Hana.

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*£1.8Bn worth of cocaine was sold on the streets of
the UK in the year 2014.*

Source: National Crime Agency



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Chapter 1

Asif stands behind the counter, watching the young men as they loiter around his shop. He's seen them around before, hanging around in their big group, wearing hoodies and tattered tracksuit bottoms. They've never come inside his shop before, normally they just stand outside and bother his customers as they go in and out. Asif has had to chase them away a few times when they've scared the elderly ladies who come in for their gin and cigarettes. Now though they're inside, wandering up and down the aisles and shouting to each other.

"Vinny mate!" one of them shouts, "Check this out! Curly Wurlys for a quid. A whole pack of them,"

One of the young men walks over from where he had been staring at the alcohol and joins his friends amongst the sweets. The others slowly drift over and gather around the sweets too. They know that Asif won't sell them the alcohol that they want. None of them have any ID and although they've tried to goad him into it Asif still won't sell them vodka and cider without any. He knows that they get some of the customers to get it for them though. They think that he can't hear them when he's inside the shop and they're outside but he can. He can hear them asking customers who come in regularly to get them vodka. He always turns the customers away though, selling them whatever they want but the alcohol. He won't help those teenagers break the law.

He spots Sally down one of the other aisles, restocking the cans and bottles of soft drinks. She's reflected in the curved mirror that he has in one corner of the shop, her figure distorted. He can see that she's glancing at the teenagers as they loiter amongst the stock, he can see the worry on her face as she flicks her eyes to them and back. He doesn't blame her. Unfortunately there's nothing that he can do right now. They're not really causing any trouble, they're not breaking any laws or any of the rules of his shop. They're just making people uncomfortable and he can't throw them out for that. There's still one of the boys lurking by the cider bottles though and that's worrying to Asif.

He watches the boy out of the corner of his eye, trying to be as careful as he can. Suddenly a loud shout and a crash from the sweet aisle draws his attention. He looks over, standing on his toes to try and see around the corner. He can't see anything but a few chocolate bars scattered across the floor. He can hear the teenagers shouting though and a few more crashing sounds. He sighs and steps around from behind the counter to make his way over. This isn't the first time that teenagers have caused problems in his shop, it won't be the last either. Normally it's kids though, proper little kids who are only just on the edge of being counted as teenagers. He knows that they take things sometimes, small things like a few chocolate bars. But he can never catch them so he can



never punish the one who has stolen from him. That fact fills him with anger and he feels the almost overwhelming urge to strike out against those who disrespect him and wrong him. These teenagers here, these young men who are causing him trouble are probably going to do the same thing to him. He can't let that happen. He has to send a message to everyone who wants to hurt the shop that they can't get away with it. And these teens are the ones who are going to help him do that.

Suddenly the boy who was by the vodka slams into him, sending him flying into the greetings card display. Asif looks over to the boy who is racing out of the shop and sees that he's clutching a bottle of cider tightly in his hands. The boy has stolen it from him! He has actually taken a bottle of cider and run away once he's been caught. Rage boils through Asif and his vision is filled with red for a moment. He won't get away with it.

"Hey!" he shouts, trying to get his balance.

His feet slip and slide on the plastic covered cards that litter the floor but he eventually gets himself steadied. Asif's shout has startled the would be thief and he's lost his footing on the tiled floor. He goes down for a moment, sprawling everywhere. The plastic bottle of cider creaks worryingly for a moment but it doesn't break. Asif races towards the teenager but he's faster than he looks and he's back on his feet in seconds. He can hear Sally running behind him.

"Asif!" she shouts, "Leave him. It's only a bottle of cider,"

He ignores her shouts and races through the door, right on the heels of the thief now.

"Asif!" she cries, stopping in the doorway, "Leave it alone! It's not worth it!"

"It's the principle," he shouts back over his shoulder, "He can't get away with it,"

He reaches out. His fingers wrap around the hood of the boy's jumper and he yanks. The boy tumbles back and falls to the floor. The bottle of cider flies from his hands and skids across the road. The boy is twisting and writhing in Asif's grip. His fists fly out and one catches Asif in the stomach. Asif doesn't think, he doesn't stop. He pulls back his hand, curling his fingers into a fist. He swings. The punch catches the boy in the jaw and he cries out. The boy wraps his arms around his head. Asif doesn't stop. He swings and punches the boy in the stomach. He does it again. And again. The boy is shouting out now, crying. He punches at Asif again, catching the older man on the jaw. Asif roars with anger. He pulls back his arm and punches the kid right in the face. He hears the crunch of bones breaking. He feels a burst of warm wetness on his hand. The boy screams out, clutching his nose. Asif clouts him around the head. The boy falls, spinning as he hits the ground. Asif doesn't stop. He steps forward and kicks the teenager. Again and again until his foot starts to hurt.



There's screaming and shouting all around him. Suddenly strong arms wrap around his body and pull him back. Asif knows he is shouting, knows that he is screaming but he doesn't know what he is saying. He just keeps shouting. He fights against the arms pulling him back, tries to get closer to the boy but he can't. There are sirens in the distance. They're getting closer.

"What have you done?" Sally cries as she crouches beside the boy, "What have you done Asif?"

Asif looks at the boy and suddenly calms. He goes limp in the arms that hold him and they release him slowly. He stares at the scene in front of him. Sally is crouching over the boy. There's blood everywhere. His fists ache. He stares at his hands in horror, they start to shake. He's done this, he's beaten this boy.

"Why would you do this?" Sally cries at him, "Why would you do this to him? To us? Do you have any idea what's going to happen?"

Asif does, he knows it as well as he knows his shop. He's stepped over the line and there's no going back. He got retribution, revenge, and now he's in deep, deep trouble.

"I told you!" Sally cries, rising to her feet and shouting in his feet, "I told you that this was wrong! I told you that violence and revenge don't solve anything. Now look what you've done. We could lose everything! And for what? Revenge? Teaching him a lesson?!"

"You'll be safe now," Asif says, talking on auto pilot. "They won't try to steal from us again. They know that we're not afraid of them, that we'll punish them ourselves. They know that they can't get away with hurting us,"

Sally looks at him for a moment and then her face crumples. She falls to the floor in a heap and begins to cry. People slowly start to drift over and stare at the bloody man, the crying woman and the beaten boy. Even the other teenagers are watching. Asif sees that their eyes are full of fear. Maybe he didn't do the right thing.



Chapter 2

Judd's flat may be small but for being 23 years old and owning your own place it was impressive. There's only one person living there anyway, Judd, and let's face it, how much room does one person really need. And although the flat isn't big there is a lot in it. Not in a hoarder sort of way though, more like every need you may ever have has already been catered for. Everything in the flat has been carefully chosen to scream classiness and elegance while also showing off exactly how wealthy its owner is. It's not gaudy, not too in your face. It's tasteful but definitely out there as interior design goes. Each room has an LED wide screen television in it, even the bathroom. The carpets are thick enough and plush enough to sink your feet into. There's no need to wear slippers, even in winter, the carpets are so thick they keep your feet warm easily.

The bathroom, complete with its own wide screen telly, is marble clad with its own personal sound system and lighting display. If you wanted low, mellow lighting while you soaked in the gigantic tub you could have it. If you wanted bright, brilliant light while you made sure you had shaved off every hair on your chin, you could have it. All it took was the flick of a button and the twist of a knob. The bedroom had every gadget you might ever need in there, iPhones, iPads, tablets, Macs, Macbooks, a massage chair, an adjustable bed. Lights are hidden in every surface and could be controlled from both the doorway and a panel near the headboard. It has its own sound system too, just like in the bathroom, and the television slips out of a panel from the ceiling so it doesn't take up too much space when it's not being used.

The kitchen looks like something out of Grand Designs, all gloss and granite surfaces with more counter space than you think could ever be used. It could make a Michelin star chef cry with jealousy. Any gadget that an amateur, or professional, chef could need is within easy reach. The fridge contains only the best ingredients and the pull out cool cupboard is perfectly stocked with organic fruit, vegetables and grains. No junk food can be seen, it's all hidden away somewhere secret, out of sight and mind until the cravings get too strong. As a place to unwind if cooking's your thing it's perfect and it was designed that way.

Judd had designed each and every inch of this flat so that it is just the way he likes it. He's never had that much freedom, that much room to make things exactly how he wanted. Now though he had an entire flat and he was making sure that not only did it have the latest mod-cons but that the entire space worked for him. Now, as he looks around the place that is essentially his palace, he almost can't believe that he owns it, that it's his and he's only a couple of years out of university. Most graduates are still searching for a job and living with their parents by this point and here he is, owning his

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own home, running his own business and chasing all of his dreams. The flat he lived in now was a far cry from the small apartment he shared with his dad, Sally and his brothers growing up. There had been three of them squeezed into one room when he was a teenager. Now he loves the amount of space that he has.

He's lying on the sofa, playing one of the many Grand Theft Auto games. He's comfortable, wearing the sweat pants of gamers the world over. His t shirt is clean and neatly ironed though, practically fresh out the packet. There's a tiny alligator on the chest, marking it as designer. He's got a lot of points and a lot of money. His street cred is at an all-time high, even for him and he couldn't be happier. He drives his virtual car down the street, stopping at a red light. He makes his character look around.

"Oh come on mate!" he cries, "That's just bad business."

He was watching another player do a drug deal with one of the NPCs. There's a police car just down the street and the lights start flashing and the sirens start wailing. The light turns green and Judd drives off.

"That guy knows nothing about dealing," he mutters in to his headset, "You never do a deal in the middle of the street. Especially not when there's coppers right near by."

A few people agree with him, their accents mark them from all over the world. Someone doesn't understand though.

"Well it's simple isn't it?" he explains, "Doing a deal in the middle of the street gives you too many witnesses. And doing it in front of the plod is just asking for trouble. They'll see you easy. They're trained for that sort of thing, even computer coppers." Someone else asks a question, "Plod means police, you know, the popo, coppers, pigs, The Man. Get a dictionary and look it up or something."

The watch on his wrist beeps and he glances at the time.

"Shit!" he cries. "Sorry guys, gotta love you and leave you. Class starts in an hour and I'm still not ready."

He can't get killed now, he's gained too many points and he's in the lead. If he dies then it's back to square one. He logs off the game and throws his controller to one side

"Xbox off!" he calls as he scrambles for the remote.

The Xbox beeps as it turns off, even as Judd bounds over the back of the sofa, hitting the remote to turn off the telly without looking back.

"I'm going to be late!" he mutters to himself as he rushes into his bedroom. He glances at the clock beside his bed and freezes. "Wait a minute..."

Then he remembers. He had set his watch half an hour ahead, just to stop himself from being late. He knew that he would want to take his time getting ready and if he thought he had more time then he would take longer. So Judd had decided to trick

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himself into thinking he had less time than he would want. And it had worked. Now he had just the right amount of time to get ready. He flings open the doors to his wardrobe, kicking off his sweats as he waits for them to finish sliding open. He crosses his arms over his bare chest, clad only in a pair of tight Armani briefs and taps his finger against his lips as he stares at all his clothes.

“Start with the shoes,” he mutters to himself, “That’s what Dad always says.”

It is what Judd’s father always says, has always said. Judd can remember it from as far back as his memory goes. It was one of the most important pieces of advice Asif had ever given him and it had never steered him wrong in all his years. His father’s voice came in his mind, repeating the familiar words, ‘You can tell a lot about a man from his shoes. If they’re worn and scruffy then he can’t be trusted, if they’re clean and well cared for, even if they’re old, the man is good. If a man can’t even take care of his shoes then how is he supposed to be trusted with anything else?’ With those words in mind Judd realises that he can’t go wrong with a fresh pair of white trainers and dark jeans. They’re all designer of course, Lacoste and Armani respectively. He grabs an Hermes belt to go with it. The trick, he’s learnt over the years, is to dress well to show your wealth, not to dress flash. It’s only if someone looks closely that they can see the labels on the clothes, otherwise they look just like regular jeans and trainers off the high street. Except, Judd thinks to himself as he finally picks out a shirt, they fit a hell of a lot better.

Judd’s dad is a good man who taught Judd to work hard to get where he wants. He’d always encouraged Judd to work for his money, to focus on his studies and do well. It was what had propelled him to study Economics at the University of Essex. Knowing how money was made, the things that had worked and the things that hadn’t, what can influence his chances to make money but are outside of his control, in Judd’s mind that was the best way to make more money and keep it. He’d lived in Farlow all his life. It was close to the university without being so close that he was kept up all night by drunk students and parties. Asif had always taught him that a good night’s sleep made a better student. It was the need to work hard and improve himself that’s led him to taking a law conversion course at night school. Lawyers had always seemed better somehow to Judd. They worked hard, long hours but they made a lot of money and there was always some new challenge on the horizon for them. That’s what Judd thought anyway. The idea of getting justice, punishment for those who do wrong was another appealing thought. He knew that there were flaws in the British Justice system, things that didn’t work the way that they should. If he knew how everything fitted together, how the pieces turned and made the rest move, there was a chance, however small that he could change things.

He had to change things. He had to get justice for his dad. His father who had brought him up, encouraged him to learn and study and work to get what he wanted. His



father had never sat around doing nothing. He'd worked since he was old enough to. He'd run his own shop and made quite a success of it. And now he was in prison, waiting for a trial, all because some little oik had thought it was a good idea to try and nick from him. His father had decided to teach him a lesson, and anyone else who thought they could steal from him. And now Asif was the one being punished. The very thought of it made Judd's blood boil and it drove him to study harder, faster.

**

Judd looks at himself in the mirror, examining each and every inch of his outfit. He wanted to look respectable but casual, like most of the other students on his course. Wealth wasn't there to be splashed around, it was there to make your life easier, at least that's the way Judd thought of it. The plaid shirt, Ralph Lauren of course, fit him perfectly. He looks like any other student but neater somehow, smarter and tidier. He supposes that's because his clothes are designer, not off the hanger stuff. But then again it could just be that Judd has made sure that everything he wears is neatly ironed before it even sees the inside of his wardrobe. Judd smooths the shirt down over his chest. Then he stops and frowns. He holds his arm up in front of his face.

"Stupid button," he mutters.

The button on his left cuff is hanging loose. It's dangling by a thread. A single tug could break it, catching it on something could pull it free. Then Judd would be left with an open sleeve and that just wouldn't do. As he looks closer he spots something else, hidden amongst the stripes of the plaid. It's a small blood stain, stretching in a thin line up his arm.

"Crap," Judd mutters.

He pulls off his shirt, tutting to himself as he quickly flicks the buttons open. He tosses the soiled and broken shirt onto his bed. Shirtless once more he digs through his wardrobe, flicking shirt after shirt to one side.

"Where is it?" he murmurs, "Come on, where are you, you little sucker. I know there's two of you in here,"

Judd gives a cry of triumph and pulls out a new shirt. It's almost identical to the one that lies on his bed. Judd looks it over, holding the hanger in his hand before he nods and puts it on. He looks himself over in the mirror again and flicks a few strands of hair back in place. He's stain free, all his buttons and seams are in order and he looks like a model student. He grabs his backpack as he heads to the door and glances at the shirt on the bed. He will bin it later. He glares at the offending garment and flicks off the light.



Chapter 3

Judd leaves the building, backpack slung over one shoulder casually. It's cloudy overhead and getting darker by the minute. There's a slight wind blowing and out on the main street it's carrying the chill of winter already. There are people huddling under the bus awning for shelter. If he were a poorer man he would be waiting there too, wearing some long coat and gloves. Then again if he were a poorer man he would probably be living with Sally still and working the shop during the day. Judd loves the life that he has now, the money and the luxury, even if his job does have its down sides. Judd nods at a few of the people waiting, recognising them from around the college. They nod back and he continues onward. He can feel their eyes on his back, probably wondering why he isn't catching the bus like they are. Judd starts whistling to himself and spins the key ring to his car around his finger.

He smiles as he catches sight of his favourite girl. She is sat there, in her usual parking space, all shiny and black. Judd can't help but run his hands over her surface as he walks past and opens the door. This car is his dream car, the one thing he has always imagined owning since he was a little boy. He settles himself into the seat, relaxing in to the leather. It's a tall car, letting him see out over the other cars. And it's well made, as all Porsches are. The car practically purrs as Judd starts the engine and he smoothly pulls away. He sends a glare at the council sign over his parking space and the one that sits by the entrance to the car park.

Nine pounds a week is just too much to be paying the council for the privilege of renting this space but there's no other choice. It just feels wrong to Judd, paying for a space that should by rights be his. He owns the property after all, he pays his taxes just like everyone else and he contributes to the economy. Shouldn't that mean that he be allowed to park somewhere or even own a parking space. It riles him. He likes owning things, not renting them. That was why he saved for months to afford his Porsche 4x4. He'd only had it for a few weeks and it had been bought second hand of course but still. It was his and no one could take that away from him. He still can't believe that the previous owner had only owned it for a few months before selling it on.

"Ah well," he says quietly to himself, "Their loss is my gain,"

As he waits at a red light he pulls his smart phone from his pocket and uses the bluetooth to connect to the car's phone. He can't help but look up and down the street, eyes peeled for any drug deals that are happening. He smirks to himself, all too aware that virtual reality and real life are getting dangerously mixed up in his head. He needs to remember that dead is dead in this world. The car beeps, telling him that the connection between the phones has been made.



“Call Reece,” he says clearly.

He drives slowly as he listens to the ringing on the other end. There’s a click.

“Yo,” Reece says in a relaxed tone, “What’s up man?”

“Just heading to class,” Judd says, “Are we still on?”

“On for what?” Reece asks.

Judd can hear the sounds of a different computer game in the background, one that Reece is always talking about and playing when he isn’t working. He sighs and rolls his eyes.

“The meeting tomorrow afternoon...” he says. Reece hums, “Mate! Pause your stupid game and listen to me.”

“Ok, ok, I’m listening” Reece cries. The background seems quieter now and Reece sounds more alert and concentrated.

“We’ve got that meeting tomorrow afternoon,” Judd explains again, slowly this time. “I want to make sure that you’re still coming. Will you be there?”

“I’m your number two aren’t I?” Reece says. Judd can practically hear the grin on his face. “Of course I’ll be there!”

“Good.” Judd says. “Oh and don’t forget to bring Emmet. We need him on board for this part to work properly,”

“Sir, yes Sir!” Reece cries.

The two men laugh and then Reece hangs up with a click.

“Disconnect,” Judd says as he clears a roundabout.

The phone clicks off and for a moment the car is filled with the sound of static. Then Judd flicks a switch and the tones of slow dubstep fill the space instead. Judd likes to drive to dubstep, especially melodic dubstep. It calms him, stops him raging at all the idiot drivers that seem to be filling the streets more and more each day. He drives along the fly over, glancing down to the underpasses below and smiles. He can see cyclists taking those paths, disappearing into the shadows beneath the road and into the trees beyond. He has fond memories of those paths and how useful they had been in the years gone by. He passes more and more of the underpasses and the bike lanes. He starts looking closer as he gets nearer to the college. He wonders whether there is anyone he knows cycling around down there. There should be, there usually is. He decided to check later. He wanted to make sure there were no shift characters lurking around and bothering his boys. He’d heard strange rumours around, whispers of people on the underpasses that shouldn’t be there. That wouldn’t do.

Judd reaches the final roundabout before he gets to the college. He’s taking it slow, all too aware that even though he’s in a big car and very safe the cars around him aren’t and are probably being driven by idiots. He doesn’t want a single scratch or ding



on his baby. Suddenly a car cuts in front of him, pulling out unexpectedly from the last approach road before his turning. He slams on the brakes and hits his horn. Hard.

“You stupid cow!” he shouts inside his vehicle.

He hammers the horn again and again. Finally he just holds his fist there. The horn blares out, loud and long. He can tell that it’s bothering the driver in the car in front. It’s certainly bothering the other cars around him. One zooms past, the passenger sticking up his middle finger. Judd makes a note of the guy’s face. He’s someone he recognises and Judd can sort him out later. The car in front, that cut him off, flashes its rear lights at him and then takes the same turn off as he does. He lets off the horn as they continue on. The sound is starting to annoy him now. He sees the driver hold up a hand, as though to say sorry. It isn’t enough though, not nearly enough. He swears and shouts, slamming his hands down on the steering wheel over and over again. Judd’s temper is flaring, his blood is running hot and he can barely focus. His hands shake as he turns off the roundabout and onto the road that leads to the college.

Judd continues to drive towards his college and he realises that the car that cut him off is going the same way. For a moment he wonders whether it’s just a fluke but then the car, a Vauxhall Corsa Judd realises as he follows behind it, begins to indicate left even though there are no other turn offs or houses to stop near. They’re both going to the college. Judd gets angrier and angrier, gearing up to give the stupid driver a piece of his mind. There was no way that they could escape him now. He would make them answer for what they had done. The Corsa pulls in to a space close to the building and Judd pulls into a space a few cars down. He makes sure that there is plenty of room between his car and the others. There’s already been one close call today, he’s not risking any other harm coming to his precious car if he can help it. He glances at the Corsa and sees a slim blonde woman climbing out. She’s got a bunch of papers in her arms too.

He undoes his belt and reaches into the backseat for his backpack. If he doesn’t hurry he could be late, or worse, arrive with everyone else. Being early was better, Asif always taught him that, and getting a good seat would give him the chance to check out his other course mates and work out where they sit in comparison to him. There is a tap on the window and Judd looks up from where he was checking that he had everything in his backpack. It’s the blonde Corsa driver Judd practically growls to himself as he winds down the window. How dare she pull out in front of him like that? She could have caused a serious accident.

“Are you stupid?!” he yells as soon as the window is down.

“I am so, so sorry,” the blonde says. “I should have looked. I usually look. I don’t know what went wrong today,”



“Do you realise you could have caused an accident?” Judd asks, a little quieter now he realises that the woman knows that she’s done wrong. “It wouldn’t have been me that was hurt, it would have been you and other drivers. You do realise that right?”

“I know, I know,” the other driver says, “I’m so sorry. I’m normally a really, really good driver. Today’s just an off day for me.”

“If you do it again near me I won’t be shouting at you,” Judd growls. “There are lots worse things in this world than being shouted out. Next time you won’t be so lucky,”

“I know how close I came to creating an accident,” the driver says. “Please forgive me, I meant no harm,”

Judd sighs but eventually nods. The woman smiles and hurries off back to her car. As Judd climbs out he sees that she’s still getting things out of her backseat. He wonders why on earth she would need so many notebooks and course books. Is she intending on studying the entire night? He shrugs and walks towards the building, leaving the woman to struggle to carry her things and lock up her car at the same time. Let that be punishment for her.

The inside of the college building is almost deserted as Judd steps inside. There are one or two people wandering around and the caretaker is locking up some of the classrooms but that is it. Judd knows that the buses won’t be there for a while yet and most of the students will be on the buses. He has checked it out already, wanting to know all that he can about the college before deciding he would definitely go to night school there. The entire building still has that school smell, despite it being after hours. There’s the lingering smell of food, sweat and paper. It’s weird being in the empty school building that looks and feels like it should have lots of people in it. Judd shivers and heads towards the room on his class schedule. There are a few people in the corridors, lurking around as they wait for their friends or for their own classes to start. He checks each room number as he walks past, not finding the one that he needed.

As Judd continues to search the corridors he still can’t find his classroom. He’s glad that he left plenty of time between leaving his flat and the start of class. It gave him time to find his room and he clearly needs it. Finally he finds his classroom and peers through the window in the door. There’s no one there but the lights are on and the name of the course is clearly written on the board. He tries the door and inwardly cheers when he finds it unlocked. He picks out a seat, towards the back but not right on the back row and sets himself up. His jacket goes on the seat to one side of him, his backpack goes on the seat to the other side of him. He didn’t want strangers sitting next to him. Perhaps, once he got to know his classmates, he would let one or two of them sit beside him. He glances at his watch and realises that he’s still got 15 minutes to go so he starts sending off a few text messages, making sure that everything with work is going smoothly.



Time passes and the classroom slowly begins to fill up. Judd is surprised by the number of people who are on the course. And as more people come in he's happy that he managed to get there early and make sure he got the seat that he wants. Eventually the tide of students slows to a trickle before there is only one or two racing in to the room. Judd is still playing on his phone, just glancing up whenever he hears someone coming through the door. Then he hears the squeaking of wheels and realises that he recognises the sound. A slim blond woman comes through the door and Judd finds himself staring. He recognises her. It is the Corsa driver, the one who had cut him off. He smirks as he realises that she's going to be part of his class. He can keep an eye on her, make sure that she doesn't make any more driving mistakes. He will be there to put her right if she goes down the wrong path again.

Chapter 4

But she doesn't join the other students at the chairs and desks. Instead she walks towards the table at the front of the room and puts down the pile of books that she's holding in her arms. She lifts the trolley that she was pulling up and on to the table. As the students settle down she digs out a sheaf of papers and hands them to someone at the front. Then she turns to the assembled students, claps her hands and smiles.

"Hello everyone," she says, "My name is Connie and I will be your tutor for this course. I have a history in law. I will admit that while I might not have much experience actually practicing law, I know it inside and out. After all, you know what they say, those who can, do and those who can't teach"

The class bursts into laughter. Judd laughs along too, mechanically. Inside though his mind is racing. He doesn't hear another word even as Connie continues to explain a bit more about herself. Instead he is just thinking over and over about what he has done, running through the incident in the car park in his mind like it is on a loop. His tutor is the same woman that cut him off, the one that he raged at. He groans quietly and wants to sink down in his seat. Clearly he hasn't made the best first impression and there is a really big chance that she will take his anger out on him as revenge. He wouldn't blame her, it's what he would do after all. Then he sighs and shrugs in his mind. If he's made a bad impression who cares. The marking is all done anonymously and she can't and shouldn't penalise him for something he didn't know. Then again, he thinks to himself, women and people in general carry grudges for longer than you could ever imagine. She could very well be one of those people.

"Can anyone define Justice for me?" Connie said.



Judd jolted as he realised that Connie had stopped talking about herself and was now talking to the class as a whole. There was a tap on his shoulder and he realised that someone was handing him a collection of papers. Judd takes the papers from the person behind him and takes one from the top. Then he takes another one to make notes on before handing the rest forward. He looks at Connie and sees her looking around.

“Come on people,” she says, “Anyone at all, take a shot. Would any one like to define Justice for me and the rest of the class?”

Judd looks around and sees no other hands up. He spots other students looking around, checking each other out and figures that they’re trying to suss out their classmates, just like he is. Connie is looking stressed and a little deflated. He realises that this may be the chance to make a better second impression and thinks ‘what the heck’ he knows what Justice is in his mind so he may as well have a go. It’s not like he can make things much worse after all. He puts his hand up. Connie smiles, looking relieved, and points at him.

“Yes, you in the back,” she says, “What’s your definition of justice?”

“Revenge.” Judd says with a shrug, “Those who do wrong are punished by the one that they wronged.”

“Hmmm...” Connie says. She starts to pace back and forth in front of the white board. “That is certainly an interesting view point. And I do agree, the purest, simplest and oldest form of Justice is revenge. In the past, before we were quite as civilised as we are now, when there were no judges, or police men, justice would be carried out as revenge. An eye for an eye as it were. In Viking society for example the wronged would pick the punishment of the wrong doer and their leader, usually a Lord, would see that it was carried out. Often the victim would in fact carry out the punishment. And if a victim was unable to get to their Lord, for instance if their home was attacked or someone attempted to force themselves on the victim, the victim would be well within their rights to fight back and carry out their own justice. If one family were wronged by another they would receive the chance to carry out their revenge. However there were some flaws to that attitude and this way of thinking often lead to feuds that could last generations unless a Lord stepped in to sort things out.”

Connie looks around, Judd glances up from his notes and he sees that everyone around him is taking notes, just like he is. He decides that he may need to look into this Viking attitude to revenge and justice for himself. It certainly sounds interesting enough.

“But Justice,” Connie continues, “Justice as it stands now is defined, formally, as this;”

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She clicks a button on the remote in her hand and words appear on the whiteboard, projected there by a machine at the back of the room. She reads them aloud.

“Justice attempts to punish the wrongdoer for the benefit of the wronged AND society as a whole.”

The entire class furiously writes down the words on the board and Connie’s speech as she goes on to explain it further. Judd does the same although his mind is only half on the woman speaking. Her definition of Justice is, in his book, the definition of revenge. In the world in which he lived his life, his business is built on revenge. Deals were built upon deals successfully because they lay on a foundation of revenge. If anyone tried to stiff him or cut him out of a deal he would seek revenge and so benefited him as well as others of his like. It keeps him safe because people know that if they try to short change him or go after him in any way he would bring it back down onto them, tenfold.

In Judd’s business wrongdoers have to be punished. It is the only way that they will learn not to try and do that to Judd’s business. More importantly it sends a message to the wider community that trying to wrong Judd will bring justice down on your head and it will happen swiftly and furiously. People understand this, they respect it and as a result they respect Judd. They all had the same attitude to justice, they all carry out their own justice when the wider world’s law just doesn’t get the results that are needed and wanted. The community have their own brand of justice and they work together to ensure that it is enforced.

In the world that Judd lives in, understanding that revenge and retribution are key defensive tools make the difference between being a memory or making it. His business isn’t an easy one, for anyone to break into. Few last longer than 3 months or so. Some last more before they get cocky and forget the key rules of justice and revenge, some last far less because they refuse to change their way of thinking to embrace revenge as a tool. Revenge and justice are not just business tools for Judd and his people, they are a way of live, the key to survival in a world that will chew you up and spit you out faster than you can blink. Judd has lasted longer than anyone expected. He’s been doing what he does for going on 4 years and he’s rarely had any problems that he couldn’t deal with because of his form of justice.

Judd knows that there are dodgy suppliers trying to sell you products that are cut down to barely anything usable, opportunists who will leap at the first chance to rob you or blackmail you, staff members who will siphon the stock up their nose or trickle it away to start their own business and customers who will try to pickpocket you on drop offs. There are dozens of dangers out there in his world and being able and willing to carry out revenge sends the message that he is not to be fucked with. People tried at the beginning

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but soon learnt the right way of doing business and all because Judd knows justice and he knows revenge and he isn't afraid to carry out either.

Judd glances up from his notes from time to time, checking the time or just jotting down anything that Connie has written up on to the white board. Every time he looks up he notices Connie looking at him, glancing away whenever he catches her gaze before looking again. Judd wonders why she's looking at him, maybe because he had the balls to be the first to speak up in class, maybe because he gave a clear and definite answer that allowed her to get started with an interesting subject. Judd shakes it off, trying to ignore the feeling of her eyes on him and carries on taking notes as Connie goes into more and more detail about justice and how it works.

Time passes slowly and Judd's pages soon fill up with line after line of notes. Connie's speaking at top speed, animated and articulate about her topic. It's all that he can do to keep up with her words and he considers asking the guy in front for a copy of the recording that he's making. Judd can see the recorder on the desk in front of him, the little red light flashing as it works. Connie briefly takes a break from speaking to swig some water and Judd takes the opportunity to shake his hand. He has never realised that law and justice can be so interesting and he's starting to think that this conversion course may be just the thing that he needs to get his mind going again.

Connie's still looking at him, staring for a little longer now, even as she starts talking again. Judd catches her eye and she doesn't falter. She just keeps talking but holds his gaze for a moment before she looks away. Judd smirks to himself. Perhaps she's decided that she fancies him a little. It certainly looks that way. Perhaps it was the altercation in the car park, the way he had spoken to her. Perhaps that's the sort of thing that gets her hot, turns her on. Judd knows he's good looking and there's no doubt in his mind that Connie is too but he had not thought that she would go for a guy like him. She seems too prim and proper, even for an Essex girl, and although he dresses nicely, he is still a guy from the wrong side of New Town, raised in a corner shop. But then again he has come a long way from his roots, going further than anyone in his family has ever done before. Maybe that luck isn't just restricted to business but to ladies too.

Judd shakes his head and returns to making notes. He needs to buckle down, to finish this course as quick as he can so he can become a lawyer. His dad is relying on him to get him out of prison, to help over turn the court case of assault when all Asif was doing was carrying out justice for himself and his property. There's no time in Judd's life for more complications like women. Business keeps him busy enough.



Chapter 5

Connie glances at Judd, seeing a frown appearing between his eyebrows as he stares down at his page of notes, writing furiously. He keeps looking at her, just like she keeps looking at him. She's pretty and she knows it and that Judd keeps looking at her isn't a surprise. She's a typical Essex bird and she doesn't try to hide it. But she has brains, something that most girls where she comes from seem to be lacking. The Essex boys love it though, love that she can talk to them about things other than make up and the latest gossip. But then they get bored after they realise that she's actually smarter than them too. The boys all want her and they all chase her, even now, when she's stopped trying to hide her brain and lets her intelligence show. They want her for a night or two, some want her forever.

But they all make it too easy for her. She knows that all she needs to do is crook her finger or dial a number on her phone and the boy will come running. It's fun, when she wants it to be but it's still boring. She's a smart girl and she likes a challenge, whether it's in law or in men. She wants to do the chasing for a change, try to win a guy over when he doesn't jump with interest straight away. It would be nice, she realises, to meet a guy who doesn't go all puppy eyed as soon as he sees her. In New Town she's met a man or two like that but the challenge quickly proved to be false and they gave in to her wiles too quickly, the pretence of not being interested just that, a mask, a lie. They all wanted her just as much as the Essex boys and they hide it about as well.

But with Judd she has a challenge. He's interested, clearly, but he's not so interested that his brain leaks out of his ears and he turns in to an idiot around her. She likes that he shouted at her when she appeared at his window in the car park. Most men would take a look at her big blue eyes and instantly start apologising. But Judd barely gave her a second glance and instead laid in to her like no one had for years. It is a new experience for Connie and it's surprising exactly how much she likes it. Now she just needs to get Judd to admit that he wants her. That was a challenge right there.

Eventually the class ends and the sky outside the windows is getting a bit darker. Judd stretches and groans as his back clicks. Connie says a few more words, laying out the homework and telling them all to take a quiz sheet from the table at the front. She wants it returned by the next class so she can see how much they all absorbed. Judd stretches again when he stands up and tries to shake the feeling back in to his arse and legs. The seats just aren't comfortable and he wonders how the kids manage it for hours every day. He's in agony after just a couple of hours sat on it. Then again Judd is used to

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comfort now, and luxury. The plastic chairs with barely there cushions of the school are neither.

The classroom quickly empties and Connie stands near the front, keeping an eye on the papers and clearing up everything else. Judd nods at her as he passes and takes a sheet. She smiles back, warm and welcoming. He doesn't hang around though. He just walks straight out of the building. He doesn't see Connie's face fall with disappointment as his back goes out of the door.

The area outside the school is full of students. Some are climbing on to bikes by the rack and heading off down the cycle paths to get home. Others are gathered in small huddles in the bus shelters, talking amongst themselves. One or two are getting in to their own cars, clunky and old or large and practical. He heads for his car and climbs in. The temperature outside is getting colder and colder and inside it is even colder. He flicks on the heater, letting the car get warm while he rearranges his backpack and shoves it in to the back seat. He glances through his windows and sees people looking at his car, taking in the fact that it is a flash car, a 4x4 Porsche Cayenne Turbo S that few people manage to afford, let alone drive to a college. He sees the other students talking and whispering to each other, talking amongst themselves. He sees some of the girls sending him speculative looks and the boys glaring at him with obvious jealousy. He smirks and shakes his head.

He remembers then that his phone is turned off and quickly pulls it from his pocket and turns it on. Within seconds there is a beep and a name appears on screen. It's Right Stuff and he's sent a text to Judd.

'Call me' is all that the text says. It's simple, no nonsense and yet so cryptic.

Judd closes the text and frowns. He wonders why Right Stuff is texting him as he pulls out of the car park and starts to head home. Out of all the people that Right Stuff could text Judd had thought he would be last on the list. And yet there is, a text on his phone, from a key employee of his rival.

Right Stuff is the right hand man of one of Judd's major business rivals in the area. They aren't rivals in the truest sense, there's an uneasy peace between them due to a truce that they called years ago. There are three of them in the Farlow market, 3 players who all deal drugs in different areas.

Judd has 20% of the market, Summers and Katherine's Ward. He runs everything there. He knows what goes in and what goes out, he sets the prices and enforces the prices and makes sure that there are no other dealers in his area that are selling substandard substances and a cheaper price. He refuses to lose business because some idiot is out there selling coke cut with rat poison that puts his customers into hospital. His

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stuff is good, fairly priced and cut with harmless things that have no dangerous effects on his clients. He is trusted and respected and the go to man for any substance that's a little less than legal.

Obo has another 20% of the Farlow market. He runs Bush Fair and Stow Wards. Just like Judd his stuff is clean and cut fairly. They get their supplies from the same source, making things fair. The peace between Obo and Judd and Obo and Charlie, the third player, is the most uneasy. He doesn't like their truce but he accepts it because there is no other choice.

And it is Charlie that runs the rest of the Farlow market, all 60% of it. He is basically the lord of the Town Centre and the surrounding wards. Anything that isn't in Judd or Obo's territory is his. It was actually Charlie that suggested the truce between the dealers.

There are of course other small time dealers, men-children that are barely old enough to buy booze who deal a little weed here and there to make money for a new gaming system. Some are trying to get to the same level as Judd, Charlie and Obo but lack the determination. Others still just see dealing as a way of looking cool to their mates and as a tool to attract women who otherwise wouldn't be interested. Whatever their reasons are for dealing the three main players barely bat an eyelid at them. The small timers get left alone to play their own games while the three key dealers focus on doing the actual business. That isn't to say that they are ignored completely, it wouldn't do for a small time wannabe to get ideas above their station, but for the most part the two groups leave each other alone.

Of course all three, Judd, Charlie and Obo, had started their dealing businesses that way. There had been mayhem and injuries on all three sides. But they have grown up now, matured and gotten some business sense in their heads. They have an agreement, a truce that helps all involved. They respect each others boundaries, staying only in their wards and leaving the others in theirs. It means that they can trade and deal without having to worry about an all out gang war. The gangs know the terms, from the smallest underling to the right hand men and the agreement is enforced with the strictest form of justice. Judd knows that if one of his guys goes in to Obo's territory then the guy is fair game. If his guy comes back then Judd punishes him before handing him over to Obo to receive a punishment of his own devising. It had been hard at first but people learnt and now there was barely any need to enforce the rules, they are just obeyed without even thinking about it.

That isn't to say that Judd, Obo and Charlie are the best friends that there ever were. The peace is uneasy and there's a little anger lingering on the part of some parties. But they accepted it because it makes sense. It's easy money, hassle free and let's them

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focus on just their area. They all wanted to make lots of money without any trouble and a gang war would give them trouble. So they leave each other alone and get to make money without making war. They all know that the dealing business is full of dangers and not having to worry about a rival dealer coming in and taking over helps them all in the long run.

It works other ways as well. Charlie will help out if Judd or Obo need a hand protecting their patch. If the small time dealers try to start something then it's easier for Judd and Obo to defend themselves and punish the wrongdoer if they've got extra reinforcements from their 'rivals'. They all do it for each other and by working together for so many years, stopping any attempts at take overs, the small time dealers are learning that Judd, Obo and Charlie are to be left alone if they want to keep doing their own little bit of drug dealing.

Charlie likes to help his rivals protect their patches but not because his heart is filled with love and kindness and deep down he's a big soft philanthropist. He just likes knowing who his competition is. He likes knowing and understanding his rivals and he understands Obo and Judd alike. He doesn't like the idea of some young upstart coming in and trying to turn the market on its head just for a few quick pounds. The kids don't have a clue about the dealing business, they see it as some cool thing to do to get street cred, not an actual business. Charlie has seen too many young idiots get caught over the years because they haven't thought things through or don't see the bigger picture. He respects Judd and Obo, they're both smart businessmen, just like he is and with them he knows what he's getting.

Together the three men manage to fix their prices too. Every 3 months or so they get together and lay out new prices for the different measurements. £60 for 1 gram, £100 for 2 grams and £140 for 3 grams at the moment. If there are orders for 4 grams or more, which are rare, then it's up to the individual dealers to make their own deals there. It was all good business, fixing the prices. People keep coming to them, even if their prices are higher than those of the small time dealers out of loyalty. They know that their stock is good and the customer knows that they won't end up in hospital or in the morgue. The small time dealers cut their stuff with anything that they can get their hands on, even if it's poisonous and the regular clients know it. Judd, Obo and Charlie setting their prices together keeps them fair. They don't compete with each other on price or quality because they're all the same supplier and all the same price. If they were competing they'd just keep going lower and lower in price and no one would make any money. Fixing the price stops that from happening and it's something that benefits them all.



Judd is wondering why Right Stuff is messaging him. If Charlie needed Judd's help he would get in touch with Judd directly. If Right Stuff needed the help of a dealing boss he would just go to his own boss, Charlie, so again, why is Right Stuff messaging Judd. He decides to ignore it and focuses on what else he has to do before he turns in for the night.

Judd finds a place just off the Market Square and puts his rucksack in the boot before he walks towards the Square. Even this late in the day it's still busy, full of people trying to get their Christmas shopping done early. He spots the market inspector sitting in his tent and heads over.

"Hey Marcus," Judd says, "How much do I owe you for this month?"

"Same as always Judd," Marcus says with a wide smile, "£250 just like always."

"Cool, cool," Judd pulls out his wallet and starts to count out the cash, "So how's life treating you? Still suffering from the cold?"

"Oh yes," Marcus says, "I'm not as young as I used to be. All this bad weather's making me joints play up something rotten,"

"Here's £300," Judd says, handing him the cash, "Get yourself a warmer coat or some long johns or something mate,"

"Much obliged pal," Marcus says, holding up the wad of cash, "Keep yourself well mind!"

"I always do," Judd calls as he walks away, turning to face the old man and walking backwards, "You just make sure to look after yourself,"

Now that the pitch fee is paid for, Judd can focus on what he came to do, namely tallying up the day's takings and passing on The Bod's wages. He makes his way through the crowds until he comes to the stall that he's owned for a few years now. The Bod is stood there, just like always, calling out to passersby and trying to tempt them in. Judd stops and watches him work, lurking by the side of another stall. Most just carry on walking, uninterested in old DVDs, games and CDs. One or two stop and browse through though. Some have little kids with them who are whining for new games. Judd smiles, seeing for himself that the stall actually does make some profit and has a purpose. What better way to reward the whining brats for 'behaving' themselves after a long day shopping than buying them a game or two on the cheap. When the people The Bod is serving walk away, their purchases in plain white bags, Judd walks over.

"Bod!" he cries, taking the man's hand in his, "How's it going?"

"Same as always, same as always," the Bod says, clapping his boss on the back, "I've had a few oldies looking for games for their precious grandkids, chatted up that girl on the tea stand and managed to make a few Marcus,"

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“Good good,” Judd says with a smile, “Did you note everything down like I asked?”

“Yeah man,” The Bod says, grinning, “Like it’s hard.”

“How did Thursday go?” Judd asks, checking through the list The Bod hands him, “And the weekend? Did you get a good haul?”

“Oh man,” The Bod says excitedly, “You wouldn’t believe some of the stuff people are trying to get rid of. I found an entire collection of Now That’s What I Call Music CDs, some woman had been hoarding them and then her husband found them and sneaked them out of the house to sell,”

Judd tunes the Bod’s words out as he makes sure everything is in order. The stall never really makes much, just enough to pay its own way and to pay the Bod’s wages. Bod gets to keep all the DVDs and stuff that don’t sell after a month or two but most of them time he just leaves them on the stall or puts them back once he’s got fed up of them. The man is a game and film addict and that is exactly what caught Judd’s eyes. Bod isn’t the type of guy cut out for dealing or any of the other illegal work that Judd’s business does but he’s a good guy, a simple guy and someone Judd trusts not to short change him. Judd pays him fairly, every week without fail and for two days’ work, just Monday and Thursday, The Bod makes more than he would on benefits. Besides, he has a skill for sniffing out bargains and loves to root through the car boot sales, with or without a need to get things for the stall. Judd sees it as a means to an end as well as a way to help out an old friend.

“We done well this week?” Bod asks, peeking over Judd’s shoulder. “Got enough to pay me?”

“We always have enough to pay you mate,” Judd says, clapping Bod on the shoulder. “And a little left over too,”

The Bod looks at the paying in slip that Judd is filling out, ready to take to the bank.

“Hey Boss...” he says hesitantly, “Why do you always have like a grand every day? I don’t think we make that much, surely,”

“No mate we don’t,” Judd says shortly, “But you don’t want to know where it comes from. You get me?”

“Of course, of course,” The Bod says, backing up and holding up his hands, “Don’t ask, don’t tell. As long as I get paid I’m happy.”

“Be sure you stay that way,” Judd says firmly. “I can always get someone else to run the stall remember,”

“Yeah but who else can find a bargain like me?” The Bod asks with a cheeky grin. He’s trying to relieve the sudden tension and Judd lets him.

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“Too true my friend,” Judd says, grinning back. “Well I better get this to the bank. Here’s your wages,” he hands The Bod an envelope of cash, “I’ll see you on Thursday, same as always,”

“Of course,” The Bod says with an even wider grin, “I like to get me some fresh air,”

“Don’t forget to bring Marcus some of your mum’s soup,” Judd says firmly, “He deserves something for sitting out there all day in this weather.”

“I know man,” The Bod says, “I don’t know how he does it every day. I’m only here twice a week and I think my balls have gone back inside me,”

“Too much information mate,” Judd says with a groan.

He walks away laughing though and he can hear The Bod’s laughing too.

The stall makes nowhere near £1000 a week but the money from his other business has to go somewhere and he can’t just put it into his bank with no explanation. That’s how questions get asked and people get caught and Judd has seen it happen for himself. So every Monday and every Thursday Judd pays in £1000 on top of what the stall takes in after the stall fee and The Bod’s wages have been taken out. He can’t believe that the bank doesn’t ask anything but he doesn’t push it. As if an old DVD stall would make almost £10,000 a month if not more. But he’s safe and it’s a great way to deposit his money. Sometimes Judd wonders why no one thinks to check what an actual stall holder makes for a day’s trading. Then he thinks about what would happen if someone did and gets angry. He decides that it’s best not to think like that and instead focuses on making it to the bank and back to his car.



Chapter 6

The inside of the car is still warm from the heating. Judd is surprised by this, it's really cold outside and he was in the bank for quite a while. But he isn't complaining. It's nice to go from shivering and having chattering teeth outside to sitting in a nice warm car, sheltered from the harsh wind. It only seems to be getting colder and Judd feels a little sorry for his boys. For a moment he considers giving them all some money to go and get some warm coats or something, sometimes they get stuck waiting for clients for a while. Then he shakes the thought off, if they needed warm coats they would come to him and if they were in the line of work that they were in they would probably have them already.

Judd checks his car when he realises it's still warm inside, he wonders whether he accidentally left the heating on. He hadn't but he's glad that the car is so well made any way. He checks his phone, having ignored the pings while he was in the bank. Cashiers got a little worried when you kept checking your phone and the bank was no place to discuss whatever Right Stuff wanted to talk about. There are too many cameras and attentive security guards around. Judd has three missed calls from Right Stuff and wonders what on earth could be wrong if the other man is trying so desperately to get in touch with him. Surely, Judd thinks, if it's that urgent he can go to Charlie right?

Judd connects his phone to the car via bluetooth and pulls out of the car park. He would stay and have the conversation there but the ticket is almost up and although he can afford it Judd would rather not have to pay a fine. He navigates the narrow streets and back roads as he makes his way away from the town centre.

His mind keeps going back to Right Stuff though, and all of the missed calls. Right Stuff is Charlie's right hand man, the man Charlie goes to for everything from help with the business to advice. Right Stuff is a good man, honest to a fault and completely likeable. Judd wonders whether that's really a good thing, the business that they're all in. Right Stuff is almost too honest for this game really, he always gets fidgety when he's telling a little lie, Judd's played poker enough with him to know that. How would he cope if the police were talking to him? But then again Right Stuff knows that what he's doing isn't exactly on the up and up, he knows the dangers and yet he still keeps on going. Perhaps that's how Charlie has managed to do so well in his part of town, by finding the right people for the right jobs. Judd knows that it's a skill that Charlie has, one that's been proved to be more than useful to the other man time and time again. If Charlie can read a person so well he can probably tell where in his organisation a new man belongs and more importantly, when to show the wrong person the door. Judd wishes that he had that kind of skill.



Still, Charlie is a good boss and there should be no reason for Right Stuff to be contacting Judd. He decides to call Right Stuff and find out what is going on.

“Call-” Judd starts to say.

He is cut off, someone is calling him. He glances at the monitor as he drives through the city and sees that it is Right Stuff.

“Answer,” Judd says. The inside of the car fills with sounds from the other end of the phone, “Right Stuff mate, I was just about to call you. Brilliant timing as usual.”

“Where’ve you been?!” Right Stuff cries. He’s not even trying to exchange pleasantries. “I’ve been trying to get hold of you for ages.”

“I’m good Right Stuff thanks, how are you mate?” Judd says sarcastically, “I’m good thanks Judd, just needed to talk to you about something important,”

“It’s Charlie!” Right Stuff says, ignoring Judd’s piss taking. “He’s gone missing.”

Judd’s blood runs cold and he almost ploughs into the back of the car in front when it stops at the light.

“He’s probably on a bender,” Judd says, trying to fight down the rising panic he’s feeling. “Give it three days and he’ll be back, complaining about his head like he usually does. You know how he gets sometimes,”

There’s a pause from the other end of the phone. Judd’s heart starts pounding. It’s not unusual for Charlie to go out of touch with everyone but usually he gives people some warning. There’s something not right with this, Judd can feel it in his gut, but he wants to ignore that feeling for as long as possible.

“It’s been three days mate.” Right Stuff eventually says.

Shit, Judd thinks.

“Shit!” Judd says aloud. “Ok, tell you what, I’ll meet you at the Great Parndon Community Centre in twenty minutes.”

“Ok, see you then,” Right Stuff says quickly.

“Oh and Right Stuff,” Judd says.

“Yeah?” Right Stuff says hesitantly.

“You better not be fucking me around,” Judd says quietly.

His voice is ominous and filled with foreboding. He imagines that he can hear Right Stuff swallowing heavily with fear. Judd likes Right Stuff, actually trusts him, but the truce between Charlie and Judd is an uneasy one and it wasn’t unheard of for tricks to be played between rival drug lords in an attempt to gain more territory. Charlie was usually above that sort of thing but Judd’s gut was grumbling with foreboding and he knew that there was something wrong.

“Of course not mate,” Right Stuff eventually says.



He's rattled though, Judd can hear it in his voice. The line shuts off with a click and Judd sighs. He had been planning to go home and study, ready for the next lot of classes he had but this needs to be sorted and sorted fast.

"Call Reece," Judd says eventually. The phone rings.

"Yes boss man," Reece's cheerful voice says at the end of the line, "What can I do for you good sir?"

"Get Emmet and get to the Great Parndon Community Centre in twenty minutes." Judd says. "We've got a situation."

"Boss, Great Parndon is in Charlie's territory," Reece says quietly, "We can't go in without permission."

"I'll explain when we get there," Judd says quickly, "Asking permission is a little tricky at the moment and we're not there to deal, we're there to sort something out. Just get there with Emmet as quickly as you can,"

"Yes Boss," Reece says before he hangs up.

Judd heard the nervousness in Reece's voice. He understands the fear that the other man was feeling. He was feeling it himself. None of the gangs went in to each other's territory, not on gang business. If they went into other territories it was for regular life, the stuff that was kept separated from the drugs by agreement of everyone. By having Reece and Emmet meet him at the community centre Judd could be suspected of striking against Charlie but Judd knows that won't be the case. They'll have Right Stuff with them and everyone knows that he's loyal to Charlie, through and through. Hopefully they won't be stuck waiting for him for too long.

By the time that Judd gets to the community centre everyone else is there. They're sat in their own vehicles but still, they're there. That's good although Judd is still annoyed that there was an unexpected traffic jam and he couldn't be there first. He liked to be the first to arrive, it gave him the position of power.

He pulled into the car park and took the space between the two cars. He turned off his engine but left the heating on. The doors on the two cars open, Right Stuff climbs out of one and Emmet and Reece climb out of the other. They walk to Judd's car and climb in. Right Stuff is in the front seat, beside Judd. Reece and Emmet climb in to the back and lean forwards to hear what was going on.

"Charlie's missing," Right Stuff said.

Judd hears Emmet suck in a worried breath through his teeth. The other man knows the game just as well as Judd does.

"What do you mean missing?" Reece demands, "Is this some sort of set up or something?"

"This isn't a set up," Judd says, "I've tried his phone and got no answer,"



“Where’s he gone then?” Emmet asks.

“I don’t know do I?” Right Stuff snaps, “He’s missing, vanished, disappeared in a puff of smoke, incommunicado, gone,”

“Ok, ok, we get the point,” Judd says, holding a hand up between the two men, “Are you sure he’s completely gone?”

“Yeah, I’m sure,” Right Stuff says.

Judd looks at him, waiting for him to expand. Right Stuff sighs and rolls his eyes.

“He was supposed to meet me yesterday,” Right Stuff explains, “The plan was to restock me and get my takings for the last few days. So I turned up at the meeting spot, and no I’m not telling you where it is, and I waited. He never turned up,”

“Ok,” Judd says.

He stares out of the front windscreen and chews on his nails while he thinks. It’s strange, not hearing anything at all from Charlie. Right Stuff has made the right choice though, coming to Judd. If he had gone to Obo who knows what would have happened. Still though, the disappearance of one of the main men in Farlow is bad news, especially considering that Right Stuff was meant to be restocking when Charlie didn’t show up. Judd finally looks back at Right Stuff.

“What are your stock levels like at the minute?” he asks.

“I’m sold out,” Right Stuff says, holding his hands out. “I had enough to last me one more day yesterday but I got a bigger order than normal so it’s all gone.”

“Ok...” Judd says slowly, “Ok... I think I have a plan. I need you to make a decision Right Stuff. Will you sell my stock until we can find Charlie again? You’ve got the network and the customers, you’re just out of stock. Once Charlie comes back things can just go back to normal but until then you can sell some of my stuff and apart from the supply costs and a small percentage you can keep the rest for Charlie. It’s the same as Charlie’s stuff, we all use the same supplier so there won’t be a change in quality. What do you say?”

Right Stuff thinks about it for a few minutes, his hands fiddle with the mobile he’s holding. Finally he looks up.

“I know Charlie would want me to sell your stock,” he eventually says, nodding his head as though he’s trying to steady his own mind with his words, “We’ve got loyal customers and a few newbies. If I stop supplying they’ll just score it from somewhere else and we won’t see any of the money. I need a consistent supply if I want to keep all my clients, and if I don’t have the supply for tonight then I’ll probably lose a few potential regulars for life.”

“I know,” Judd says reassuringly, “I thought this might be the right route. So you’ll sell it?”

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“Yes Judd,” Right Stuff says, “I’ll take your stock. I’m going to need 10g for tonight and then I’ll let you know tomorrow how much I’m going to need.”

Judd nods and looks in the rear view mirror. He catches Emmet’s eyes.

“Emmet, sort Right Stuff out with 10 from our current stock,” he orders. Emmet nods. “We should be good for a few days. What about the other guys? Do they need a top up at all?”

“I don’t think so,” Right Stuff says, checking through his phone. “They all deal with the smaller orders, Charlie lets me handle the bigger ones. They should have enough for a few more days. I’ll let you know if it’s different though.”

Judd nods and smiles slightly. Emmet is fishing around in his bag, Reece is looking around the car park, keeping an eye out for anyone who’s looking that shouldn’t be. It’s smart of Charlie, Judd thinks, leaving the big deals that bring in a lot of money to someone he trusts completely. Some clients, the ones that make big orders, tend to like to see the same person every time. And because those deals bring in so much money you need to know that the middle man is someone you can trust not to skim off the top. Charlie’s picked exactly the right person to be that middle man.

“Ok, Right Stuff,” Judd eventually says once the others have stopped moving around and have sorted themselves out, “We’ve got to go now. But you let me know if you need anything else. Stay in touch and stay safe,”

“Will do,” Right Stuff says. “I’m staying here, I’m meeting someone in a while.”

“Ok man,” Judd says.

The two men clasp each other’s arms and shake. It’s the handshake of brothers, comrades in arms. They look into each other’s eyes and nod firmly. They all know the risks of what they do. Right Stuff climbs out of the car and heads back to his own. He stands by it as Judd pulls away and drives off. Judd looks in his rear view mirror. Right Stuff is just a black silhouette in the orange glow of the streetlights in the car park. He raises his hand and waves. Judd wonders for a moment about who Right Stuff might be meeting but puts it from his mind fairly quickly.

“What’s the betting that Charlie’s just gone on a jolly or something?” Reece remarks from the back, “You’ve seen that bird of his haven’t you. She’s sex on two legs. I wouldn’t blame him if he wanted a week away locked in the bedroom with her. I know I would,”

“You’re an animal,” Judd says, rolling his eyes.

Reece argues with that remark and the backseat erupts into light hearted bickering. Judd smiles and listens to it, glancing back to the car park as it starts to disappear from sight. There’s a car there now. It must be whoever Right Stuff is meeting.



Chapter 7

The car is black in the orange light. It has tinted windows and Right Stuff can only just make out the shape of a person at the wheel. He walks around to the driver's side and leans against the roof of the car with one arm. The window slides down with a gentle whirring sound. He leans in closer. The inside of the car is dark. Someone shifts around quietly.

"Is everything going to plan?" the person inside asks Right Stuff.

"Sure is," Right Stuff says confidently. "They bought every word and did exactly what you said they would."

"So they suspect nothing?" the driver asks, "They don't think that there's something else going on."

"I think Judd may be wondering what's going on a little," Right Stuff reluctantly admits, "He was worried it was a set up when I suggested meeting up,"

"Well he's a smart boy," the driver says, "Too smart for his game. I'd be disappointed if he didn't think something was going on,"

"Yeah..." Right Stuff says slowly, "So what do I do now?"

"Exactly what you said that you were going to do," the driver commands, "Do what you would normally do and go to Judd when you need more stock."

"What about Phase 2?" Right Stuff asks, more urgently now, "When does Phase 2 start?"

"Soon," the driver snaps, "It starts when everything is in place. Just keep doing what you're doing. I'll be in touch."

Right Stuff steps back from the car and watches as it slowly turns around and drives away. He rubs his head and climbs back into his own car. He wonders for a moment what it is that he's got himself into. And whether anything would be the same by the end. He hopes that things don't change too much, he doesn't like change.

Reece and Emmet are still squabbling in the back as Judd drives along, through the city. He's driving over the overpass and he glances out of the window. Suddenly his mouth tightens and his eyes narrow. He speeds up a little bit until he reaches the end of the overpass and then he pulls over into the bus stop that was waiting there. He unbuckles his belt with a loud snap and shoves his door open. Emmet and Reece lean forward and call after him.

"Oi boss man," Reece shouts, "Where're you goin'?"

"Mate what's wrong?" Emmet shouts as well. "Where are you going? What's wrong?"



Judd ignores them. He just storms on to the cycle path and walks along it. He reaches the edge of the estate and stands there. He watches a guy in a hat handing something to some lads who can't be much older than 17. His eyes narrow even more. The guy turns around, slipping something in to his pocket and a wide grin is on his face. He saunters along, heading towards Judd and the bike path.

“Oi Div!” Judd shouts when the guy gets closer.

The guy's eyes widen and his smile disappears as his mouth drops open. The guy walks slowly forward until he steps on to the bike path. Judd strides over to him, towering above the young man and grabs him by the back of the shirt.

“What's the golden rule?!” he demands to know. The guy stammers for a moment. Judd growls and shakes him, hard, “What's the number one rule I tell you never to break?”

“I... I... Judd mate, listen,” the guy stammers.

Judd growls and throws the man to the floor.

“No you listen!” Judd snarls, “You never leave the cycle paths. And you definitely never go in to the estates! Those are the rules! And you've just broken them,”

“It was only the once,” the man pleads. I figured it wouldn't hurt to step onto the estate for a few minutes, better than losing money right?! I got you the money!”

“I don't give a shit about the money,” Judd yells, “You don't go into the estate when you're carrying. You stay on the bike path! Is that so hard to understand?”

“No,” the guy says, sitting up. He looks at the ground and shakes his head, “No it's not. I'm sorry.”

“You will be,” Judd says.

He crosses his arms over his chest and looks down at the guy on the ground. He is furious but he understands the guy's thinking. He's new to the game, doesn't really understand why the rules are there and he definitely hasn't seen why the rules were put in place. Before the rules things were dangerous and sometimes deadly. Now it's safer for everyone.

“Hey Dev!” someone shouts from the estate.

The guy on the ground looks over. Someone is stood by the door to one of the tower blocks and waves a hand.

“Thanks for the door to door!” the person on the estate shouts, “It's dead useful mate, well worth the extra money. Same time next week?”

“We'll see,” the guy, Dev, shouts back even though he's still sitting on the ground.



The guy on the estate goes back inside and the door shuts with the heavy clang of metal. Judd barely pays attention. He's breathing hard and he can hear his heart pounding in his ears. A veil of red is falling over his eyes.

"We don't do door to door." He says quietly, his voice dangerously low and rough with anger. "We have never done door to door. We've banned door to door service."

Dev stammers and looks up at Judd. Dev's mouth hangs open and his eyes are wide and filled with fear. Somewhere behind Judd he hears the sound of one of his car doors opening and slamming closed. There is the sound of racing footsteps, coming towards them.

"What the fuck are you thinking?!" Judd yells.

He steps towards Dev. Door to door is banned for a reason, it is too risky for his guys. If someone wants drugs they have to meet the dealer part way, take some of the risk on themselves. Dealers never go into someone else's house, no matter how much extra money is offered, it is too dangerous. Sometimes if there are two or three people with the dealer it can be accepted but it has to be cleared with Judd first. But he usually says no and for good reason. Anyone can grab the dealer and take the entire stash and all the money they've made. Dealers had been hurt, even killed by junkies doing just that. Judd has that rule in place to protect his people and this idiot has gone and ignored it. Judd raises his hand, getting ready to smack the moron around the face.

Suddenly another hand grabs his wrist and he hears Reece murmuring in his ear.

"Cool it man," Reece whispers, "Calm down."

Judd fights against Reece's grip but he's too strong. Judd is stuck in place, Reece plastered over his back, holding his raised arm in place.

"This tool broke the rules," Judd snarls, "He needs to be punished."

"He's going to be punished," Reece reassures his friend and boss. "Just cool it for now man,"

Judd lowers his hand eventually, Reece moves with him. Judd glances over his shoulder and sees Emmet's face in the Porsche window, watching them all with a big grin on his face. That boy loves violence a little too much, Judd thinks to himself. He looks back at Dev and his blood boils again. He tenses up and Reece feels it. The other man puts a reassuring hand on Judd's arm.

"Come on," Reece says, "He's not cost us any money, in fact he's got us more. But he doesn't work for us anymore so just leave him alone."

"What?!" Dev cries "I'm a good dealer, I'm one of your guys! You can't just dump me like that,"

"You knew the rules," Reece says, looking at Judd as he speaks, "You knew what would happen if you broke the Golden Rule and you did it anyway. You're out."



“But I got you more money,” Dev cries.

“You could have gotten killed,” Judd snarls.

He grabs Dev’s shirt collar in his hand and drags the boy to his feet. He starts rummaging through Dev’s coat and finds the money and bags of drugs that he was carrying.

“Those rules are there for a reason,” Reece says quietly, “But you chose to ignore them. We can’t have someone in the gang or working for us that can’t follow the rules even if they don’t understand why they’re there.”

“They’re just a bunch of stupid rules,” Dev spits out, “What’s the point of being drug dealers if we have rules?”

“Those rules are there to keep you safe you little snot,” Judd snarls, dragging the boy’s face to his, “I keep you safe, I keep you supplied, I keep you with money to buy your stupid girlfriend presents with. All I ask is that you follow a few rules and you throw it all back in my face.”

“Judd!” Reece cries, dragging Judd away from Dev, “We’ve got enough going on at the minute. We don’t need more trouble. Just leave it. Let him face the consequences on his own,”

Judd tries to argue, to go after the ungrateful little shit who’s now glaring at them with anger. But Reece is dragging him back to the car and shoving him in to the driver’s seat. His hands are shaking as he does up his belt.

“Fucking moron,” Emmet says from the back, shaking his head, “He had a great gig going here and he’s gone and thrown it all away.”

“He’s lucky to be in one piece,” Judd snarls as he pulls back out in to the traffic, “You should have let me hit him Reece,”

“He’s not worth it,” Reece says, “You’ve got enough to worry about without throwing in Dev’s older brother trying to take a crack because you bruised his precious baby boy. Reggie’ll understand this, why you’ve let him go.”

“You should have smacked him,” Emmet said, “You should have smacked him right around the head as soon as the little shit got close enough. Who does he think he is going onto the estate when he’s carrying our stock? The kid could have gotten us all in trouble pulling shit like that,”

“Whatever,” Judd grumbles.

His anger is fading just as quickly as it flared up. He knows that Reece is right, Reggie would have come after them all if Judd had laid a finger on Dev. But still not punishing Dev sat wrong with Judd, especially after the thoughts he had had and made public during class. Judd needed justice, he wanted justice and firing Dev, cutting him out of the gang just didn’t feel like it was enough to him. He could only hope that Reggie

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would beat Dev up for what he did. The other man knows about the rules that Judd had, knows why they were there and why they have to be followed. Reggie respects the rules and the way Judd runs his business, even if Reggie isn't involved. He will probably lay in to Dev himself. That realisation helps Judd settle himself a little more. Still he isn't happy and he realises as he listens to Emmet and Reece arguing some more in the back that he doesn't want to bring them back to his flat. He's too on edge, too wound up. He needs to relax and he can't do that with the two guys around.

"Where do you want a lift to?" Judd asks, "I'm going home alone so if you want dropping off somewhere you had better say now."

"I thought you were coming out with us mate," Reece cries, "I thought we was going to go back to yours, do a few lines, have a few beers and then head out."

"Not anymore," Judd says, shaking his head, "I've lost the mood for it. I'm too angry and if I go out I'll just end up hitting someone."

"You never come out with us Judd," Emmet says, leaning against the back of Judd's seat. "Come on, just this once."

"Nope," Judd says, shaking his head again, "I just want to go home and relax."

"But it's the Pump Audio Sound Clash tonight in town!" Reece cries, "All the top names are going to be there. You really wanted to go earlier. It's going to be the biggest night in Farlow music history! We have tickets! You get to see Jumping Jack Frost, Harry Shota, everyone."

"I'm just not in the mood," Judd says with a sigh, "You guys go and have a good time. I've got things that I need to sort out ready for tomorrow. This crap with Dev and the thing with Charlie has made things harder than I thought they were going to be. I need to fix any problems we might have before they appear."

"Fine," Reece says with a sigh, "Boss man, you need to relax sometime. You can't keep pushing yourself this hard, you'll burn out. Do you even go out any where? Ever?"

"Leave him alone," Emmet says, "Just drop us off in the town centre. We'll go without you."

Judd nods and starts making his way through the streets, doubling back on himself to get to the town centre and the best place to drop his boys off. The traffic is getting lighter now and there are barely any people out on the streets. It's cold and the wind is practically howling. It's early too so Judd isn't too surprised that there aren't many people out partying. The streets will get busier later on, he knows this, even if it starts snowing there'll still be people wandering around, the girls in next to nothing and the boys trying to show how hard they are by wandering around in short sleeved shirts. Suddenly the thought of staying inside isn't as bad to Judd, even if he has a lot of work to

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do. It's warm inside and comfortable and best of all he won't go to bed with his ears ringing.

He pulls in to the parking space for drop offs and turns to watch Reece and Emmet do a line of coke each. Emmet wipes at his nose as he looks at Judd.

"Are you sure you won't join us?" he asks as Reece snorts his line.

"Not tonight guys," Judd says quietly, he's much calmer now. "Enjoy yourselves and stay safe,"

The two men climb out of the car. Judd prepares to pull out but someone taps on his window. It's Reece. He rolls down his window and Reece leans on the frame. A cold wind blows into the car's interior, making Judd shiver.

"If you change your mind you know where we are boss man," Reece says, handing him a flier for the Sound Clash, "Just show them this at the door and you'll get right in. Don't bother with the queue or anything, just go right up to the bouncers. They're some of our regulars,"

Judd takes the flier from Reece and looks at it. Reece steps back with a wide grin and a jaunty wave. He pats the top of the Porsche and walks away, side by side with Emmet. Judd smiles and shakes his head.



Chapter 8

The drugs of Farlow are moved in the most efficient ways possible, like in most places. And in Farlow that means moving via the cycle paths. They're completely unpoliced and usually empty, especially at night when most deals are made. They go all the way around the town, passing through places that are usually ignored by the police, and they're actually faster than roads most of the time. Judd likes his guys using them and their bikes for another reason too, not just because they're quiet and deserted. It stops them from being caught too. If someone gets too nosy and dares to report any of the dealers to the police it's a lot harder for a push bike to be tracked down than it is for a car. Bikes look the same, don't have license plates to be noted down and if the dealer is wearing a helmet and a hoodie they're virtually indistinguishable from the law abiding users of the cycle paths. Judd likes that it keeps his guys fit too, they're able to run and cycle at the speeds of fully trained athletes and for just as long. They get fresh air and leave the flats that they'd live in otherwise.

With the bike paths being deserted most of the time, particularly at night because most people are afraid to use them then, no one really gets noticed or interrupted. The darkness and trees all around mean that if a customer does try to dick one of Judd's guys around then a little rough justice can be administered, without question and without anyone else noticing. The customers know by now that they shouldn't try to double cross Judd and his gang, that they should keep their end of the deal and Judd will keep his. Of course though there are always new customers who don't know the score and try to rip off Judd's guys. Or there are the little gangster wannabes who wander around after dark and who think that a dealer on his own is fair game, ripe for the picking. Thanks to the darkness and the solitude of the cycle paths his guys can defend themselves easily and without worry of reprisal.

Of course Judd has rules. He made them, he sticks to them and he enforces them strictly and without compromise. And anyone who breaks the rules is swiftly and firmly punished, just as Dev had been. But Dev was lucky, lucky that Reece had been there to calm Judd down, lucky that Judd hadn't beaten him to a pulp as he initially intended to do before Reece stepped in. Sticking to the rules keeps you safe and Judd makes sure that all his dealers know them and knows to stick to them. The operations go down on the cycle paths, with bikes, never by car. Even if the customer lives a fair distance from the paths they have to cover that distances themselves. The customer had to come part of the way, share the risk of the dealer by meeting in the open. Judd's guys stay to the path and only ever carry out their deals at a junction of the cycle path. A junction means lots of

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directions to run in if things go bad. Judd's guys know the cycle paths like the back of their hands or their childhood homes, they can get from point a to point b in the quickest time needed, even if it isn't the most direct route.

And the number one rule, that everyone HAS to stick to is that they never enter any of the housing estates or the shopping centres. The dealing stays on the cycle paths. It's how they never get caught, ever. There are no nosey old grannies on the bike paths, sticking their noses in, there are no overprotective parents looking out for their kids. The cycle paths are safe, out in the open and surrounded by trees. The dealers run less risk of being jumped and the customers share the risk of getting caught if a stray copper happens to be taking a wander. And of course having the deals done on the cycle paths means that none of the younger, impressionable kids see what is happening. That's another of Judd's rules. Kids are not involved, ever. If they're not old enough to have sex they're not old enough to do drugs, it's an attitude that Judd enforces on all of his guys. Dealing on the paths means that kids who don't actually understand what's going on don't see it and don't get too curious or get any strange ideas. Judd may be a criminal but he still has morals. Kids and drugs don't mix. End of story.



Chapter 9

Judd lets himself into his flat at sighs with relief. It's wonderful to be alone at last, left with silence and only his own thoughts. He enjoys his classes, certainly, and he enjoys spending time with Emmet and Reece, his right and left hand men. But sometimes it can all get to much for him and he just has to be alone. The evening had started out so promising when he had first left the house that afternoon but now it is unravelling more and more and Judd is stuck with too many thoughts in his brain and no real way of processing them. He slings his jacket on to the back of the sofa and is toeing off his shoes when he remembers the wad of cash that he took off Dev moments before kicking him out of the gang. He needs to put it somewhere safe, where it can't be seen or traced. It's going to be a few more days before he can take it to the bank and deposit it there. And there is only one safe place in the world that Judd trusts. He grabs his jacket and digs through the pockets until he finds the three rolled up wedges of cash. He tosses it up and down in his hand a few times, enjoying the weight of it in his palm.

Judd pads into his bedroom and opens the wardrobe. There are a few boxes, slim and elegant, piled up at the bottom. Judd crouches down and gently slides them to one side. There in front of him is a large metal safe, old fashioned and bolted to the floor. It was one of the first things that Judd had had installed after he bought the flat and it is the most important things that he owns. It is fire proof, water proof, crush proof, a top of the line model with a combination of a dial lock and number pad. The safe is a monster of 6 inch thick steel all around, the hinges are set into the door so that they can't be pried open and it weighs more than a full grown man. Very few people know that the safe exists, the few women who were lucky enough to have caught Judd's attention certainly never saw it. His Dad doesn't even know that he needs a safe, let alone actually has one. No one comes into the bedroom really, only the lucky few, and even fewer have seen the safe that is his pride and joy. No one but Judd knows the combination, not even the man who had installed it for him. He dials the combination quickly, with a well-practised hand and then quickly types in the number that he picked. The keypad beeps and flashes green for a moment. The lock clicks a few times and Judd is finally able to open the safe's door.

Inside are a few more rolls of cash, massive bundles that had been there for quite a while. This is all of the cash that the gang makes in a day, easily. He tries to put as much of it in to the bank but dropping off large sums of money every day will raise eyebrows and suspicions, neither of which Judd wants to experience for himself. Judd lifts up the money, flicking through it to make sure that the amount is still the same. It is and he puts it to one side, along with the money that he took off Dev. Then he pulls out a folded sheet of paper. Slowly he opens it out and smooths out the creases after he lays it

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down on the floor. It is a map of Farlow, detailed and labelled with all of the street names and important buildings of the town. The bike paths are all highlighted and labelled and lines pass through parts of the town, marking off the different territory. He runs his fingers along the bike paths, searching for where he had pulled up earlier. There is a red dot close to where the estate is and he taps it. He knows that there is a junction where the runners drop off with the clients, he knows that Dev would have used that. That he should have used that.

Judd's lips tighten as he looks at the map and sees all of the red dots scattered everywhere. Each dot shows a drop point, a junction in the cycle paths that all of his dealers have to use and know that they have to use. He pulls a marker from the safe and quickly makes a note on the spot where he caught Dev earlier, a warning that the people on that particular estate have to be watched and that other dealers must not go into the estates or any of the buildings. He looks over his map once more before folding it up and putting it back into the safe along with his money. He shuts the safe door and gives it a tug, making sure that the safe is securely closed again. Then he puts the boxes back in front of the safe and closes the wardrobe door once more. Satisfied that the safe is completely hidden again Judd climbs back to his feet and heads off to the living room.

He needs to make sure that the safe is secure and undiscovered, it's one of the reasons why he rarely has someone, anyone in his room. If the police were to find it, however they found it, the contents would give them all the evidence they need to put Judd away for good. Just the money would be incriminating enough but the map would get Judd put away for years in an open and shut case. So the safe has to be kept closed tight and hidden from prying eyes. No one knows that the safe even exists, not even Emmet or Reece, despite how much Judd trusts them. The safe is his and his alone, another little secret that adds on to all the other secrets that he is keeping.

When Judd gets in to the living room he sees a light blinking on his answer machine and presses the button.

"Hi Judd," a voice says through the speaker. It is Sally, his step mother and her voice is shaking, "I've got some bad news I'm afraid. The verdict came in for the preliminary hearing for your dad's case. I'm afraid it's not good news sweetheart. The judge has decided that the shoplifter isn't going to be prosecuted. We did our best but the boy's lawyer made a good case and despite the fact that they want to send a message against shoplifters, they decided he has already suffered enough with what your dad did to him." Judd swears beneath his breath. Sally continues speaking. She sounds happier now, more hopeful. I'll text you with the trial date, we should have it by next week. Please come. It would mean everything to your dad if he knew that you were there. Oh! And I'm very busy with the shop but never too busy to stop for a chat if you feel like



popping in. You know you're always welcome. Stay safe sweetheart and call me anytime. Love you, bye,"

The machine beeps and asks Judd if he wants to keep the message, replay it or delete it. He presses the button and Sally starts talking again. He sighs as he listens to her voice and a flame of anger begins to curl in his belly as her words sink in further and further. The shop lifter has broken the law and yet his dad is the one being punished despite the fact that he was defending himself and his business. It just isn't fair, Judd thinks to himself, justice no longer works the way that it should do and the guilty walk free while the innocent suffer. Judd is more determined now than ever to focus on his law conversion course so he can help his father and hopefully get a better outcome for them all. This business with Charlie and needing to step up could not have come at a worse time. That's when Judd realises that he still needs to tell Obo what is happening. It's a conversation Judd is not looking forward to but it needs to be done. If he doesn't tell Obo the news it could shatter their truce, Obo believing that Judd is trying to make a play to expand his territory and take over Farlow completely as the sole dealer in town. Judd throws himself on to the sofa and calls Obo's number. He has it stored in his phone, he doesn't use it unless he has to so he had never bothered to try and learn it by heart. He ends up having to search through his entire contacts list and thinks to himself that he may need to clean out his contacts a little. People are getting hard to find in there.

"Obo man," Judd says when Obo picks up. "How are you?"

"What do you want skinny boy?" Obo asks gruffly. Judd can hear some loud music playing in the background, possibly breakbeat, maybe drum n bass, he isn't sure.

"I've got some news and I figured I better tell you too before you hear it from someone else." Judd says eventually. "Charlie's gone."

"Gone?!" Obo shouts, "You killed Charlie?!"

Judd can hear shouting in the background now and the music has gone. He can hear the anger in Obo's voice, the other man is more short tempered than Judd is and he knows that he needs to tread carefully with his next choice of words.

"I haven't killed him," Judd says with a sigh, "He's just vanished. Right Stuff called me earlier and told me that Charlie missed a drop off and hasn't been see for three days."

"Fuck," Obo says simply, "What's happened to him?"

"Not a clue," Judd says. "But until Charlie gets back I'm going to be keeping Right Stuff and the other dealers supplied. They keep most of the profit to give to Charlie when he gets back and I take a little off the top to cover the preparation and handling."

"Now that ain't fair," Obo says. Judd can practically hear the snarl that's probably on his face right now, "How come that pretty boy's come to you and not me?"



Judd racks his mind and realises that this is indeed a fair question. Why had Right Stuff come to him? Why hadn't the guy gone to Obo? They all used the same supply after all and the terms would be the same either way.

"I don't know Obo," Judd eventually admits, "Maybe it's because I'm closer."

"Well how'd you end up agreeing to supply him anyway?" Obo asks, "If you was only talking about Charlie's disappearance then how did the conversation get on to supply and demand."

"I asked, Obo," Judd says. "Right Stuff said that Charlie missed a drop off, the usual one that brings in more supply but yesterday Charlie never showed so I figured Right Stuff might have been almost out. Turns out that I was right. I figured it was better to keep Charlie's clients with us rather than forcing them to go somewhere else to get a fix. Better to keep them on our supply than turning to someone else's supply. God knows what those other dealers are cutting their stuff with."

"Fairly play," Obo says grudgingly, "I'm not happy with it,"

"Neither am I mate," Judd admits, "I've got enough on my plate without having to worry about where Charlie's gone."

"Why'd he ring you anyway?" Obo asks just as Judd is about to hang up.

"Probably because I was closer," Judd says after a moment. He doesn't want to admit that it's probably because Right Stuff is shit scared of Obo and his temper so he has to come up with another excuse and fast, "I've not exactly kept it quiet that I'm going to night classes after all. He probably figured I was less likely to be too busy."

"Fine, fine," Obo says, "Let me know if anything changes."

"I will do," Judd says.

He hangs up the phone and sighs heavily. Talking to Obo always winds him up, the man is short tempered and easy to piss off. Judd is surprised that Obo kept as calm as he did. Now though Judd needs something to calm him down and he knows just the thing. He knows he should be studying but he can't he's too tense at the moment. Trying to study now would just end up with things going through his eyes but not really sinking in. If he wants to get this course done and get the grades that he needs and wants he needs to be able to focus and pay attention to that. There's no hope of that right now with how he's feeling. So he does the only thing that really relaxes him and turns on the xBox to shoot things.



Chapter 10

A few hours later Judd is still playing on the xBox. He keeps telling himself that he will spend just a few more minutes playing before he gets around to working on his course but something interesting keeps happening in his game and he ends up getting pulled in further. He's not normally one for playing single player games with an actual storyline but this one is actually really good and is gripping his attention. The phone rings.

"Shit," Judd swears.

He pauses the game and reaches for the phone. Through the pause screen he sees a zombie coming at him, one he hadn't noticed before and realises he will need to kill it as soon as the game restarts, otherwise it'll be game over.

"Hello," he says when he finally tracks down his phone. The other end of the line is hissing but otherwise silent. "Hello?"

"Obo is trying to fuck you," a voice says.

The voice sounds distorted, unnatural. Whoever is calling probably is using some sort of voice changer. Judd frowns, pulls the phone from his ear and looks at the screen. It's an anonymous call, no name and no number coming up.

"Who is this?" he asks when he puts the phone to his ear. "What do you want?"

"Obo is going to fuck you over," the voice said again. "Charlie is no more, he is gone. Obo is going to take Charlie's patch and then he is coming for you. He's a greedy fucker and will not stop until he runs all of Farlow. You need to see Mr Big and Right Stuff as soon as you can. They have access to the customer networks that you need to keep your grip on Farlow."

"Who is this?" Judd asks again but gets no reply, "Stop playing games."

"This is no game," the voice says. "I am deadly serious and you need to pay attention. Be careful of Obo, do not trust him. You need to be Charlie now."

Then the phone clicks shut and all that Judd is left with is a blank dial tone in his ear. He slowly pulls the phone away from his head and stares at the screen. It is like a bad horror film, or some crappy thriller. Missing drug dealers and gang leaders and mysterious anonymous phone calls? Judd scoffs at the thought. Still though there's something wrong and he knows it deep down, a gnawing ache in his gut. More is going on than just Charlie disappearing and Judd knows that he needs to be careful.

He's lost all interest in the game now and saves it. As he does so he keeps glancing at his phone. Finally, with a grumble, he reaches for it and finds the number he is looking for. He dials and it rings for a few seconds.



“What do you want now?!” Obo snaps when he picks up. “Has one of your little lackeys gone missing too?”

“No.” Judd says. “I just got a phone call. It was warning me about you. What are you up to?”

“I ain’t up to anything man,” Obo practically snarls. “And I don’t know who’s gonna be calling you with a warning. Actually I can, I’ve got a whole list of people that hate me. But they wouldn’t warn you,”

“What’s going on Obo?” Judd snaps, “I know you’re up to something so just tell me what it is.”

“Why the fuck should I know what’s going on?!” Obo demands, “I only just heard about Charlie from you. How do I know you’re not the one trying to take over so you got Charlie out of the way?”

“If I was trying to take charge why the hell would I tell you Charlie was gone?” Judd snarls, “I’d just keep quiet and let things go on until I had no choice. Jesus Obo, I thought you were smarter than that.”

“Hey you know what?” Obo shouts, “Fuck you!”

Judd doesn’t have the chance to get a final word in, Obo has hung up already. Judd glares at his phone as though it is all its fault. Eventually he throws it to one side, bouncing on the sofa cushions. He climbs to his feet and decides to finally getting around to studying like he should have been doing for hours now. Tomorrow is going to bring new challenges and he needs to be completely focused.



Chapter 11

Mr Big is the Turkish gentleman behind a large portion of Charlie's sales. His personality and his appearance are perfectly suited to the nickname he has been given and he lives up to it completely. He's a prominent businessman and most see him as a generous and kind man with a strong accent and a big moustache. He has a thick and jolly laugh and smiling eyes. But he can be stern, something that his children, his staff and his business partners know all too well. Charlie, before he disappeared, was one of those business partners. Mr Big owns a lot of businesses, mostly entertainment and food. At last count he had a club, a wine bar, three pubs, an amusement arcade and a kebab and pizza shop that delivers. Charlie took a long time to win the man's trust but eventually he won Mr Big over. Now most of his sales go through Mr Big's businesses. Charlie's men are allowed on to the premises of the club, the pub and the bar, arranging with customers to meet there for deals. The customer comes and spends money in Mr Big's places and the dealers get somewhere with what is basically built in security to do their business.

Charlie also uses Mr Big's kebab and pizza shop to do the home deliveries. Clients pay a lot of money to have their goods delivered right to their home but they don't generally like to let the dealers in to the house, at least not the sorts of clients that Charlie deals, or rather dealt with. And dealers randomly turning up at all hours draw suspicion, even from those in the know. So Mr Big lets Charlie's guys use his delivery drivers as part of their network. After all, no one looks twice at a pizza delivery. And in return Mr Big gets a small percentage of the profits and is safe in the knowledge that Charlie's drugs aren't going to leave him with corpses in the toilets like some dealers do.

Judd has never had to deal with Mr Big. The man's businesses are all in Charlie's part of town. He's heard of him, of course, there's no one in Farlow within the gangs who hasn't, but Judd has never met him. He's nervous as he walks in to one of Mr Big's pubs and catches sight of the big man himself. He had been planning on getting in touch with Mr Big sooner or later if Charlie didn't show up but the call last night and the obvious evasiveness in Obo's voice had spurred him into action and now he is determined to see him as soon as he can. Mr Big is sat at a table, drinking a cup of tea and reading the newspaper. It's still early and the pub is mostly deserted except for a bar maid wandering around and one of the regulars sat at the end of the bar and already making his way through a pint.

"Mr Big," Judd says as the man looks up, "I'm Judd, it's great to finally meet you. I've heard a lot about you from Charlie,"

"Not all of it good I imagine," Mr Big says with a wry smile. He waves at the seat in front of him, "Please, sit,"



Judd does as Mr Big asks.

“I suppose that you know why I’ve come,” Judd says after a moment of uncomfortable silence.

“I know about Charlie having gone silent, yes,” Mr Big says with a nod, “Where is he?”

“I have no idea,” Judd says with a shrug, “I only found out myself from Right Stuff yesterday. Since then I’ve been asking around but no one’s seen or heard from him for a few days, not even his missus.”

“Ah...” Mr Big says, again nodding his head. “So why are you here if you have no news.”

“Well to be blunt it’s about business,” Judd says, leaning forward and lowering his voice, “I’m here because I’m stepping in to Charlie’s shoes. Temporarily of course. I’m just here to keep things going for Charlie until he gets back.”

“Mmmhmmm...” Mr Big says slowly. He sits back now and crosses his arms over his chest, “That is what the last guy said. So who am I to believe?”

“Last guy?” Judd asks, “Who was the last guy?”

“Obo,” Mr Big says as though it is obvious, “He said that he was here to make sure that Charlie still had a business when he comes back, whenever that may be.”

“I’m sure that he did,” Judd says.

“And you are Judd,” Mr Big says, “Obo has warned me of you. He has warned me that your stuff is shit, that it will make people ill. He has said that if I want to keep things running like usual I should trust in him. You have bad shit.”

Judd’s temper boils even more. He realises that he should have come to Mr Big the night before, that he shouldn’t have given Obo the time to work his way into the big man’s ear. The voice on the phone was right, Obo was trying to fuck him and it was already working. The thought of it is just making him angrier and angrier. Mr Big is still looking at him though and he breaths slowly, trying to calm himself.

“You can try my shit if you want,” Judd eventually manages to say as calmly as he can. “It’s good and I’ve never had a single complaint. It’s as good as Charlie’s stuff, as good as Obo’s stuff. We all use the same supplier so there isn’t a difference.”

“Not even with what you cut your shit with,” Mr Big asks.

“No,” Judd snaps. He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath, “We all get our supply from the same supplier and it’s all already cut with the same stuff. You can try some if you don’t believe me. I know Charlie probably left you with some before he pulled a Houdini,”

“I care about none of this,” Mr Big snaps, waving his hand in the air, “You did not come to me as soon as you knew that there was a problem. This Obo did. He showed



me proper respect and so I shall show it back. I am going to let Obo supply my network until Charlie returns.”

“Right Stuff came to me,” Judd says slowly, calmer now, “Right Stuff rang me and not Obo. He asked me for help and not Obo. What does that tell you Mr Big?”

Mr Big sits there for a few moments, tapping his fingers on the table top, one after the other. He scratches at his rough beard, running his fingers through his hair as he thinks about it.

“I am open to working with you Judd,” Mr Big eventually says, “I will need to make sure that you are not lying to me before I agree though. I will not make solid choices without all of the evidence that I need to see for myself. I have only your word and that of Obo to go on. I know neither of you two men. So I will wait, and think it out.”

“This is bullshit,” Judd shouts, leaping to his feet. “Obo is full of shit and he’s known for lying about anything he has to if he wants something. The guy would sell his own mother if it got him a good deal. And if he could find his mother.”

Mr Big looks at Judd as he continues to shout and rant. The anger in the young man scares Mr Big a little, shocks him. It is bad business, unprofessional, in Mr Big’s mind. The young man, no boy, has suddenly gotten so angry over something so small. And here he is trying to do business with him. It just isn’t good. A person trying to do business needs to stay calm, professional, unflustered and a little uncaring in Mr Big’s opinion. They should not be shouting and stamping their feet like a toddler.

Mr Big’s lips tighten into a thin, angry line as Judd tells him over and over how Obo is bad news, is full of shit.

“I have made my choice Judd,” Mr Big finally says, cutting the other man off mid-sentence. “If you can prove to me that your stuff is good and that I can trust you then we will see about doing business between the two of us,”

Judd gawks at him for a moment before closing his mouth and nodding shortly. He turns and begins to leave, not even shaking Mr Big’s hand.

“Judd.” The older business man calls. “I have heard things of you, especially about your temper. Next time that we meet I hope that you will keep calm.”

“What sort of things have you heard?” Judd asks over his shoulder, staring at the ground.

“I have heard that you are hot headed,” Mr Big says, sipping a drink, “And what I have seen today suggests that they are right. They say you are a smoking cannon, a live bomb about to go off at any moment. Charlie was not like that,”

“I’m not Charlie,” Judd says.

“No, you are not.” Mr Big says, “But if we are to do business together you must know that I cannot afford to work with a partner who has a short fuse. I have assets that

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cannot be moved, legal business ventures that I have built from the ground up and I refuse to put at risk. I have children and a wife to support. My clubs and pubs and bars are real businesses and I run them as such. They are not a front. I like low risk, it is why I eventually agreed to work with Charlie. I calculate risk and I calculate return. I cannot risk everything working with someone who could ruin it all. A safe £100 is much better in the long run than a quick £1000 that may not even come through. Do you understand me?”

“I understand you,” Judd says, turning to face the other man, “And I understand that you don’t know me. That you’re only going off of what other people have told you. Before you judge a person you should get to know them yourself. After all, don’t they say not to judge a book by its cover?”

Mr Big chuckles.

“This is true,” he admits, “But they also say that first impressions are everything and so far I am not impressed with what I have seen,”

“You will be,” Judd snaps. “I’ll be in touch soon about my stuff, you can try it for yourself,”

“I look forward to it,” Mr Big says.

Judd walks out, storms out really, his body practically shaking with anger. The door slams shut behind him.



Chapter 12

Mr Big shakes his head as he watches the young man go. He has a bad attitude and a short fuse, the man thinks to himself, he could be a problem to work with and just as risky as he was warned. He lacks the proper respect unlike that which Obo shows. Mr Big doubts that next time their meeting will go any better. Mr Big sighs before he looks towards one of the internal CCTV cameras. They are hidden but he knows where they all are, he paid to have them installed after all.

“Ok?” he asks.

He smiles.

Upstairs in the CCTV control room a man is sat, watching the screens. This is the hub of Mr Big’s business, the place where he monitors everything that happens in the pub. Nothing happens in the building without Mr Big knowing about it. There is a control room, just like this one, in every single business that Mr Big owns. It is small, dark and lit only by the light from dozens of screens. There’s a small kitchenette nearby, stocked with coffee, tea, a small fridge and a tiny sink and draining board. There’s a door leading off into a small toilet, a single sink in there. It is all designed so that a person on duty can continue to watch what is happening without having to leave the room for anything. Mr Big has even encouraged his security officers to use the toilet with the door open so that they can see the screens still. Most of them do. He pays them well after all.

The mystery man in the control room smiles and types out a quick text. He watches as Mr Big receives it and nods at the CCTV camera. It has not been hard to get Mr Big to agree to follow through on his plan. Stirring things up between Judd and Obo has been easier than he expected, they already distrust each other so much. Everything is going exactly as planned, better than planned really and soon everything will come together just right. It is only a matter of waiting now.

Outside the pub Judd pulls out his phone and calls Reece. When the other man answers Judd calls Emmet too and adds him to the call.

“Get to my flat,” he says simply, “We have a problem,”

“Eurgh not another one,” Reece groans, “Can’t it wait?”

“You’re hungover,” Judd says simply, “You’re always hungover. Unfortunately this can’t wait and it’s linked to the other problem we have.”

“I told you not to drink so much!” Emmet insists, “Judd I warned him that it was a bad idea. Things are too unsteady and we need to be ready,”

“I don’t care who told who what,” Judd snaps. “Just be at my flat as soon as possible. The plan has changed.”

Reece groans again.

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“Just get there,” Judd snaps.

“Will I get a cup of tea?” Reece asks quietly, pitifully, “My mum was going to make me a cup of tea,”

“If you don’t piss me off too much I will,” Judd says, “I’ll see you later,”



Chapter 13

It is only twenty minutes later when Judd gets back to his flat. It's just another five before a knock at the door shows Emmet and Reece. Reece staggers in, barely mumbling his hellos to Judd, and collapses face down on the sofa. Emmet stops to shake his friend and boss's hands. The two roll their eyes at Reece's antics, this isn't unusual behaviour for him.

"Do you have any gear?" Reece mumbles, "I just need something to take the edge off,"

"You know I don't keep that stuff here," Judd snaps, "They already look at me like I'm dodgy as it is. I don't want a ton of coke in my place to make them more suspicious."

Reece moans pitifully and rolls on to his side. Emmet clucks his tongue at his friend and ruffles his hair.

"I'll make you some coffee lightweight," he says quietly, "Just try to pull yourself together until we're done."

"Tea!" Reece shouts after Emmet before he winces at the loud noise, "I'm never drinking again."

Judd rolls his eyes and makes himself comfortable. Emmet soon re-joins them and Reece grabs happily for the hot sweet tea that he's made.

"So what's going on?" Emmet asks. Reece is watching and listening too.

"I got a call last night," Judd says, "Anonymous, came up unknown caller on my ID and I didn't recognise the voice. They said that Obo's trying to fuck with us and is planning to take over the town centre operations."

"But that's Charlie's territory," Emmet cries, "He can't do that can he?"

"He can with Charlie gone," Judd says shrugging, "We have to face facts that Charlie might be permanently gone but until we know what's happening for sure the town centre operations are fair game in Obo's eyes. He never wanted the truce after all. This is just the chance he's been waiting for. Once he's got the town centre operations then he can take us on. That's what he's actually planning I reckon, he seems to be putting everything in to play already,"

"What?!" Emmet cries. Reece whimpers, "He can't do that can he? It'll take months, maybe years to get everyone Charlie was involved with for his operations to trust him and then it'll take just as long to get the two areas balanced out."

"That's the problem," Judd says with a sigh. "I waited too long to get in touch with Mr Big and now Obo's got him on side. He's been spreading rumours that our stuff is pure shit and Mr Big has believed him. Now Mr Big won't do business with us until



we give him a proper sample of our coke. Hell he won't even deal with us to discuss a deal."

"That's not good," Emmet says simply, "Dude, why'd you wait so long to let Mr Big know?"

"I was a bit more concerned about making sure Right Stuff had enough gear," Judd snaps. "Now Obo is with Mr Big. He's got the businesses, legit and otherwise on side and probably a few of Charlie's guys working for him. But we've got Right Stuff and with Right Stuff that means we've got Charlie's really loyal guys and any of the other businesses Charlie usually deals with as long as Right Stuff backs us up. And we've got Right Stuff because he trusts us and doesn't trust Obo. As long as Right Stuff makes that clear we should be golden."

"So what's the plan," Reece asks weakly, "I mean, we can't exactly sit here with our thumbs in our arses and wait for Charlie to pop up again. We don't know what's happened to him, if he's coming back or anything. Hell, for all we know he could be dead or worse, he could have gotten nicked and be rotting in prison as we speak."

"Or he could have turned grass," Emmet points out, "I mean, it's not a nice thought but if he's narced on us then we're fucked. And he'd know it. Maybe the fuzz put him into witness protection or something, like they do in the films. Maybe he's off somewhere else with a whole new identity or something,"

"Those are films shit head," Reece snaps, "They're not real. There's no such And anyway why would Charlie want to turn on us? He has most of Farlow under his control anyway."

Judd listens to his two men arguing for a few more moments before he calls for quiet. Reece instantly falls silent, snapping his mouth shut and turning a little green. Emmet tries to keep arguing for a moment before Judd looks at him sternly and he finally falls silent too.

"The simple fact is..." Judd says slowly. He's hesitant to actually say it, "The fact is that we need to take Obo out and get in with Mr Big. Preferably sooner rather than later."

"We need to go to war with the fucker," Emmet shouts. He startles Reece who spills a little of his tea on his shirt. Emmet doesn't notice and continues, "We need to go to war with Obo. If we don't he'll wipe us out, destroy us. We need to get him before he gets us,"

"You don't know he'll be coming after us," Reece points out, "For all we know once he gets control of the town centre he'll be happy. He might even leave Charlie's dealers to us to look after and just stick with the other businesses."



“Bull shit!” Emmet shouts “He’s never liked the truce we had. He never liked that Charlie had 60% of all of Farlow’s business and he liked the fact that we got 20% even less. He wanted it all and he’s just been biding his time since we made the agreement before he could take over and run everything. He was waiting for his chance and now he’s got it.”

“But we got the truce to stop this sort of thing happening,” Reece says, “None of us wanted war and if we hadn’t put the truce in place that’s what we would have ended up with. If we go to war now then we lose everything that we worked to get done in the first place. I don’t think Obo would want a massive gang war. People would end up dead or locked up or in hospital, his people as well as ours.”

“So what do you want to do?” Emmet asks harshly, “Sit around and talk about our feelings like a bunch of girls? I don’t wanna do that and Obo definitely won’t.”

“I’m just saying that we don’t need to fight,” Reece says calmly, “A gang war isn’t going to help anyone and we’re all going to end up worse off than we were before. If we have a war we’re going to be even more paranoid than we already are. We won’t know who to trust and we probably won’t even trust each other. I like you guys, you’re my mates, I don’t wanna think you’re about to stab me in the back. I’m sure if we think about it then we can find another way to sort all of this out, *without* any bloodshed.”

“Bollocks!” Emmet cries out, “The only way we’re gonna be able to show Obo that he doesn’t scare us is by beating the crap out of him. He needs to know we mean business and he can’t get in the way of that. We gotta fight. If we don’t we’re just gonna look like a bunch of weak arsed pansies or something. You’re just saying all this crap about finding another way because you’re too hungover to care.”

The two continue to argue and Judd listens to them. They’re both making good points about their different stands and Judd is finding it hard to decide who is right. Every time Emmet speaks Judd starts to think that an all out battle is the only way to win control back. But then every time Reece makes another suggestion that doesn’t involve fighting Judd starts to think that it’s a good idea as well. It’s hard to choose and Judd tries to listen, thinking the entire time of ways that he can find a middle ground that makes them both happy and makes him happy as well.

“Enough,” Judd says when a brainwave finally hits him. The other two shut up instantly. “I think I know what we’ve got to do.”

They look at him.

“We need to teach Obo a lesson,” Judd says with a shrug, “I think we can all agree on that.”

Reece opens his mouth to argue but Judd holds up a hand and the other man closes his mouth and sits back to listen. Judd has taught them well.



“We teach him a lesson like I taught Dev yesterday,” Judd continues, “We slap him around a bit and give him a good talking to. If we rough him up and tell him to shut the fuck up talking shit about us we should be able to get him to back off. And then we’ll tell him to back off from Mr Big and wait until Charlie gets back so that we can sort this all out between us. We take our knives but there’s no actual stabbing happening.” Here Judd looks at Emmet as though he is able to read what he’s thinking, “We just rough them up and use the knives to scare him and his boys. That way we can send a firm message to Obo to stop playing around and get him to let us carry things on for Charlie until he comes back from wherever he’s fucked off to.”

They sit in silence for a while, Reece and Emmet are processing what Judd has just said. Finally Emmet shakes his head.

“You’re being a pussy mate,” he says eventually. “Give him a good talking to? Rough him up? You’ve gone soft. There’s no way that’ll work on Obo. It might work on immature little shits like Dev and the other boys but Obo’s one of us. He’s hard and tough and he knows how to look after himself. For fuck’s sake he’s been in the business since he was thirteen. Some blades and a bit of punching aren’t going to scare him.”

“Well I think you’re being too hard Judd,” Reece says, “You do anything like that, anything to hurt Obo and he’s going to turn around and retaliate just as hard, if not harder. He’ll want to avenge anything we do to him and it’s gonna be me or Emmet that bear the brunt of it. No way would he come after you.”

“You’re a pussy too Reece,” Emmet says with a sneer, “We could get hurt and you’re all scared.”

“I’m not scared,” Reece snaps, “I just think it’s a bad idea. I don’t want to get hurt but I don’t want anyone else to get hurt either. Which is what’ll happen if we try to ‘teach Obo a lesson’ like Judd’s talking about.”

Reece and Emmet start to ramp up to argue again but Judd quickly shuts them down.

“We’re doing this,” he says sharply, “This is the plan and this is what we’re doing. We’re not letting Obo get away with fucking us over but I don’t want to start an all out war. Teaching him a lesson is the only way we’re going to be able to get Obo to back off and not suffer too much.”

Reece looks away, clearly not happy with the decision Judd has made. Emmet glares at Judd, arms crossed over his chest.

“Oh stop pouting you big prick,” Judd says. “You look like a girl.”



Chapter 14

“So what is your master plan then?” Reece asks as he comes out the spare bathroom.

There’s a towel wrapped around his waist and he’s drying his hair with another one. He smells clean and looks better than he did a while ago. After Judd had declared his decision Emmet had started sulking, not talking to Judd or Reece and looking away every time they tried to look at him. Judd had given up trying to bring him around and encouraged Reece to take a bath. Reece’s hungover state had been stinking up the apartment as more and more of the booze worked its way out of his pores. Judd had contented himself playing on his xBox and eventually Emmet had joined in. Now the two men are in a neck and neck race on Grand Theft Auto, each trying to knock the other out and win the race. They barely look up as Reece walks out after his bath. He collapses on the sofa with a sigh, having nabbed a pair of Judd’s sweat pants and a loose t-shirt.

The game goes on for ages and eventually Reece gets tired of watching and listening to the two friends swear at each other. He reaches over and presses the pause button on Judd’s control. Judd looks at him, about ready to fly off the handle. Reece holds up his hands and starts talking.

“First of all, thanks for the bath,” he says quickly, “I feel like an actual person now and it’s great. Secondly, thanks for the clothes, I don’t think I’ve ever worn anything so comfy. And thirdly... if we’re going ahead with this whole teaching Obo a lesson thing I want to know the plan before we do anything or put any of the wheels in gear,”

Judd looks at Reece for a moment.

“XBox off,” he commands at last.

Emmet gives a squawk of unhappiness but Judd ignores him. He stands and walks over to the window, looking out over the entire city which was starting to light up as the sun set. Then he turns and takes a seat on the large armchair that sits in front of the window. He leans forwards, elbows on his knees and looks at his two right hand men.

“I’m gonna call Obo,” Judd says eventually. “I’ll tell him that I want us to meet up and actually talk about Charlie’s disappearance. He wants me to let him do more with holding over Charlie’s part of Farlow so I’ll use that to draw him out. And he’d get suspicious if I didn’t want to meet face to face. It was me who wanted the truce to be arranged in person. He’ll probably know that I want in with Mr Big too, and he’ll know that I know that he’s been spreading lies to the big man.”

“That’s a lot of people knowing a lot of different things,” Reece says slowly. “I’m confused,”



“Shut up you idiot,” Emmet snaps, feigning that he is going to hit Reece around the head. Reece falls for it and wraps his arms around his head. “Carry on Judd. You’re gonna make him come alone right?”

“He’d smell something was up if I didn’t,” Judd says with a smirk. “I’m just gonna do what he’d expect me to do. I’ll get him to come alone. We won’t be meeting in any building or anything, that’s too hard to keep safe. I’m going get him to meet me at the underpass near Sumners.”

“What if he doesn’t want to meet us on our turf,” Emmet asks quickly, interrupting Judd. “I mean, the guy’s an idiot but he’s not that stupid,”

Judd fights down the urge to smack Emmet around the head for interrupting. It’s a fair question and one that he’s given a lot of thought to.

“If he wants to meet on his patch we’ll meet at Bush Fair underpass,” he says. Emmet and Reece both nod, “It’s the furthestest point from the precinct where most of his cronies hang out and it’s right on the edge of his territory. There are some bushes nearby that you two can hide in.”

“What if he brings guys of his own?” Reece asks, biting a nail.

“He’s too cocky to do that,” Judd says with a smirk, “He’ll probably think that he can take on me and anyone else I bring along. He thinks he’s really hard and a great fighter. But he isn’t and I know it. I’ve seen the guy fight, he can’t punch for shit. So I’ll meet him and you two can hang back and listen in. Then I’ll confront him. I’ll ask him about the lies he’s been telling and whether he’s trying to fuck me over or not. He’ll probably deny it the little shit. That’s when I’m going to say ‘we need to talk’ and you two need to both appear on either side of him.”

“What then?” Reece asks hesitantly, as though he doesn’t want to know the answer. “We’re going to beat the crap out of him?”

“No,” Judd says sharply, shaking his head hard, “That’s when I lay down the law. I tell him what’s what and what he’s going to do. He’s going to retract what he said about our stuff to Mr Big and anyone else he’s been talking shit to. And then I’m going to tell him to back off Charlie’s patch and let us keep babysitting it until Charlie gets back.”

“And if he doesn’t agree?” Reece asks.

“That’s when we rough him up a bit,” Emmet says, bloodthirstily. “We give him a bit of what it’s worth so he knows not to fuck with us again,”

“That’s when we show him we mean business,” Judd corrects. “We give him a few punches sure but nothing too serious or damaging. Then we’ll show him the knives and tell him that’s what he’ll have to deal with next time.”



“Sounds like a plan,” Emmet says eventually, clearly a little impressed. “Got a nice bit of violence that shows we’re not soft but nothing that could get us beaten up for. Good compromise Judd. Right Reece?”

“I suppose,” Reece says reluctantly. He sighs, “It’s better than anything else we came up with I suppose.”

Judd looks at the two guys that are his right hand men. He trusts them completely and utterly. He knows that they’ll always have his back and he’s happy that they’re on side. He knows that neither is really that happy with what Judd has come up with but he also knows that there’s no other way to meet both of their ideas in a way that won’t go horribly wrong. He smiles at the guys and reaches for his mobile.

“Obo,” Judd says when the other end is answered, “We need to talk, face to face.”

“About what Judith?” Obo says with a sneer in his voice, “Wanna accuse me of fucking your mum now?”

“We need to talk about Charlie,” Judd says. He’s breathing slowly, fighting against the urge to start screaming after Obo has called him a girl and insulted his mother.

“We’ve already talked about Charlie,” Obo says. “That’s what all of those phone calls were about last night or did I miss something? Has he suddenly reappeared and wants to thank us with chocolate and roses?”

“We need to talk about what we’re doing about his patch,” Judd says, ploughing on and determined to ignore everything else that Obo says that isn’t relevant to his plan, “And we need to do it face to face. The underpass at Sumners, 7pm?”

“No way am I going on your pussy boy territory,” Obo says, “I’ll probably catch something. We do it on my patch,”

“Fine,” Judd snaps, “Bush Fair underpass work for you. It’s close to my patch but still on yours,”

“Yeah whatever,” Obo says. He sucks through his teeth. “You better come alone Judith, I don’t wanna see none of those pussy white boys of yours,”

“As long as you come on your own,” Judd says, “And I don’t want to see any of your gang hiding out in the trees and bushes either,”

“Bush Fair Underpass, 7 o’clock,” Obo says, “Now fuck off and leave me alone, I’m busy.”

The phone clicks silent and Judd is left with a bleeping tone. He looks at his phone for a moment before tossing it on the sofa, beside Reece.

“Well that’s sorted then,” Judd says with a sigh. “Be here tomorrow well before seven so we can head there and you can find a decent place to hide. And wear dark clothes, not those bright Hawaiian shirts you love so much Emmet,”

“Aww come on,” Emmet says with a whine, “Those shirts are cool.”



“They’re ugly and they hurt my eyes,” Judd says, “Why can’t you buy some decent clothes, you’ve got the money?”

“I like my shirts,” Emmet says, pouting again.

“Whatever,” Judd says before the discussion has a chance to devolve into a ridiculous argument, “You guys just go and do something else. Preferably somewhere else. I’ve got class later and I need to finish the reading.”

The two boys laugh at Judd.

“You’ve always got your nose in a book mate,” Reece says, “If I didn’t know you I’d think you were a right geek,”

“I just want to do well on my course,” Judd says, “I’ve got to do well so I can help my dad.”

“We know mate, we know,” Emmet says soothingly. “And we respect you for it. It’s just funny hearing a drug lord talking about having to go to class. It’s like hearing a blonde say she’s got to go and work on some science shit or something. Just seems wrong,”

“So what are you two doing with your night?” Judd asks, accepting what Emmet has said,

“We’re going out again,” Emmet says, “We scored some tickets to tonight’s Sound Clash last night. Turns out one of the bouncers is a regular customer of Charlie’s and Right Stuff introduced us. Then we met the boss man and he gave us the tickets because we’re your guys.”

“Don’t get too drunk,” Judd warns, “I want you both able to move tomorrow. And yes I am looking at you Reece,”

“Hey don’t worry about me,” Reece says with a wide grin. “I’m hoping to get an early night tonight if you know what I mean,”

He nudges Judd with his elbow and winks. Judd rolls his eyes.

“I know what you mean,” he says dryly, “Even if I wish that I didn’t.”

“We’re both on the pull mate,” Emmet says, “Might even see if we can score a three way or something. Maybe even an orgy! Some of those coke bitches are horny as hell and will do anything if you offer them enough coke.”

“Just don’t go dipping into the business supply,” Judd says sternly, “Use your own stuff. I don’t want to have to teach you a lesson too,”

“Relax mate,” Emmet says, slinging an arm around Judd’s shoulders. “We know the rules and there’s no way we’re going to break them. We respect you too much for that.”

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“Maybe you need to go out on the pull,” Reece says, “You’re wound so tight I’m surprised your head’s not popped off or something. When was the last time you got laid anyway?”

Judd glares at Reece.

“Come with us mate,” Emmet coaxes, “It’ll be fun and you can unwind. Hell you can meet us out once you’re done with class. Going on the pull is way more fun than studying. You don’t have to drink or anything, just hang out, watch the girls, maybe pull one or something?”

“No I’ll be fine,” Judd says with a shake of the head, “You two go and have fun, just don’t get too wasted.”

Reece and Emmet let themselves out, Judd waves at them from his seat on the armchair. Once the door has clicked shut behind them he throws his head back and sighs. It’s days like this that make him wonder why he’s still in the drug game. There’s always so much going on, so many things pulling him in different directions and he feels like there’s almost never any time for him to do what he wants to do. Now though he’s alone and he can finally hit the books.



Chapter 15

Judd is now researching Restorative Justice. He has his books open in front of him, a bunch of notes covering several sheets of paper and multiple print outs. He couldn't help but do a bit of research online once he started reading about it. He has found many papers, essays and debates on restorative justice and he has printed out each one to read through and make his own notes. Most seem to agree that restorative justice is the direction that modern law is heading towards. The more that he reads the more Judd likes the idea of this kind of justice. It isn't traditional justice like Connie described. Restorative justice is much closer to what revenge is all about. It is the wronged, the victim who decides on the punishment that the wrong doer deserves, it's the victim who decides how harsh the punishment is. It's the old eye for an eye thing and Judd can get behind this completely.

The more and more that Judd reads on the subject the more he likes it. It's exactly what he thinks of as justice. The victim doesn't just explain what happened but shares how it's affected them and how they think the wrong doer should be punished. It's how Judd thinks the law system should be working already and it's justice in its purest sense. The class that evening should be an easy one for him, he thinks, he already knows most of this and the topic is so interesting and exactly what he thinks that remembering everything he needs to know shouldn't be hard.

Soon the clock ticks around to an hour before class and Judd decides to start getting ready. He likes to look good, look smart and you can't look smart if you don't take your time getting ready. First though he has to try and get all of his notes in the right order. It doesn't take him long and within a few moments he heads into his bathroom.

When Judd gets to his classroom there is no one there and he's glad for this. It means that he can sit wherever he wants and he takes the same seat that he had last time. He's determined to make a good impression this time around and he gets his notes out ready to start wowing Connie. Slowly the other students start to file in and take their seats. Connie finally arrives, once more laden down with files and books. She quickly sorts herself out, much quicker than she did the class before and stands before them all.

"Good evening everyone," she says brightly, "Did you all do your research on Restorative Justice?" the group nods and she smiles, "And how did you all find it?"

A few hands go up and one by one Connie picks them out and they explain what they thought. A lot of the ideas are the same and Judd chuckles under his breath at the lack of the originality. To be fair though those thoughts that are being shared are much the same as Judd himself had originally, before he researched more and read around.



“Well I’m glad that you’ve thought about the subject,” Connie says, “Now, what is Restorative Justice? It is an alternative to traditional justice. The offender describes why she or he did what she or he did and then the wronged person describes how the crime committed effected them. This is the model of justice that most closely resembles that of the Vikings and it is also the direction that modern justice system is taken.”

The room is filled with the sounds of scribblings and all of the heads are bowed down. Judd stops looking around and takes his own notes. Connie’s voice fills the room.

“Through Restorative Justice the victim has the choice of how they are compensated,” Connie says, “The victims are given the chance to express what it is they need to return them to how they were before the crime was committed. They effectively choose what they need in order to restore them to a better place and restore any damages. They can request anything that they might want, whether it’s a public apology, a better explanation from the offender for why they did what they did or even compensation in some form. They can also request a prison sentence and even the amount of time the offender spends in prison.”

“So restorative justice is basically a more organised form of revenge?” Judd asks, putting his hand up, “Both sides have their chance to give their sides and then the person who is wronged gets to choose how the offender is punished. That sounds like revenge to me?”

“Well you’re right in a way... Judd, was it?” Connie says. Judd nods when she gets his name right, “It is a form of justice that is very close to revenge. Now who agrees with this form of justice? Thoughts on it anyone?”

“I think it’s a good form of justice,” Judd says simply, “The victim of the crime should always get the chance to determine the punishment. That way they won’t feel as though their pain and suffering has been ignored and that the offender has been punished enough. To do anything else just seems ridiculous to me,”

“Yeah but it can be ridiculously dangerous to have that sort of thinking,” another student says “It’s a slippery slope into vigilantism. If you get to choose how a criminal is punished in a court of law and they are punished how you want what’s to just stop you going and punishing the person without bothering with the courts?”

“Yeah but if the courts have this attitude then it makes sense to stick with them,” Judd cries out, “You get to choose the punishment and then at the same time you get the support of the courts so you know you’re in the right, It’s law appointed, sanctioned justice and no one can argue with it,”

“Yeah but it could really lead to vigilantism,” the same student says. He twists in his seat to look at Judd, “People could just not bother with the courts if they take too long. They’d just go after the offender themselves and ignore the courts. And if everyone



starts to do that then it's a really quick slide into anarchy and no one will bother with law or order at all."

"And when it turns to anarchy it's just Darwinian," another student says, "It's survival of the fittest. Those who are physically fitter will be able to seek their own justice and take down anyone who gets in their way. Why should it only be the physically fittest that have access to justice? It's not fair. If people aren't smart enough or fast enough or strong enough then they die or end up with nothing. That attitude is fundamentally flawed. We need difference in life and if it's just survival of the fittest then we all end up the same."

"That's a good point," Connie says, walking back and forth across the front of the class, "Does anyone else have thoughts on that point?"

The class all raise their hands in the air and Connie points out one of her students who starts talking. Judd watches and listens, making notes once more. He keeps glancing at Connie though, feeling as though there was something different about her today. He realises that she is dressed differently. She's got her hair down, styled in loose waves that flutter around her face. Her make up is stronger, her eyes wider and more obvious, her lips perfectly painted and her entire face flawlessly made up. Her clothes are almost flirty. Her blouse is low cut, the tops of her breasts right there, in his face and as she leans forward to listen more closely to what the other students are saying Judd can see right down her top. The ruffles around the edge of her blouse draw his eyes right down to her cleavage. His eyes keep drifting down to look at it. He realises that he's licking his lips slightly and that there's a stirring in his trousers. He looks away and focuses on writing his notes. He doesn't have time for this.

But he can't help but look at her again. She's walking back and forth in front of the class again and he notices that her skirt is tight. It's a pencil skirt from what he can tell, it cups her buttocks and makes her legs look unbelievably long. He sort of wants to stroke them, run his hands up them and feel the softness of her skin. She sits on the edge of the table and crosses one leg over the other. A slit appears in the skirt, over one leg and Judd catches a glimpse of the top of a lacy stocking. Her feet swing back and forth and he sees that she has insanely high heels on, a bright red colour with a long, slender heel. No wonder her legs look amazing. He looks away, swallowing hard. It's almost as though she wants him to look at her, wants him to see her as more than a teacher. And it's worked.

Then, as the class continue to debate and discuss the pros and cons of restorative justice Connie begins to talk more and Judd pays attention, trying not to let his eyes get drawn to her body. Then, as he takes notes and looks at Connie from time to time he notices that she's looking at him too. They're quick glances that she's clearly trying to

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keep hidden. But whenever she catches his gaze she lingers and a small smile seems to appear on her mouth. Judd keeps finding himself drawn in and keeps looking at her body but every time he realises what he's doing he shakes his head and tries to focus again. He can't let himself be distracted, he has to focus. He's got his goal in mind, the aim of starting a business and getting as rich as he possibly can. He can't let Connie or any other pretty face turn his head and take his attention and focus away from that.

He can't help but feel flattered by the attention though. It's been a long time since someone has looked at him like that or shown little more than a simple passing interest.



Chapter 16

“Obo man,” Jonny says, reaching out to shake Obo’s hand, “How’s it goin’?”

“Things are good mate,” Obo says, shaking Jonny’s hand, “You heard about Charlie disappearing?”

“Yeah,” Jonny says, “Sounds a bit iffy if you ask me. You reckon the coppers got him or something?”

“Dunno,” Obo says, shrugging, “But that Judd guy’s trying to take over Charlie’s patch and I ain’t gonna let that happen,”

“Ahh,” Jonny says with a nod of his head, “I was wondering why you got in touch. What’d you need man? I’m always happy to help you out,”

“What’ve you got?” Obo asks, stepping closer, “I don’t need anything hard core, just something to scare him and his little boys,”

“I think I’ve got just the thing,” Jonny says with a wide smirk.

He steps towards his car and unlocks the boot. Obo steps up beside him. They’re in an underground car park, right in the corner. The boot is hidden behind a pillar, just in case anyone is watching. Obo’s already paid the security guard to look the other way. The boot is filled with rows and rows of guns. They’re all different sizes, all different makes and all carry different calibre bullets. There are a few boxes of ammunition stuffed in the corner. Obo reaches for a Glock, a small handgun. He pulls back the slide at the top and lets it snap in to place. He checks the line of the barrel, looking down it to check that the sights are straight.

“How much?” he asks, waving it at Jonny,

“For you?” Jonny says, “Five gee,”

“Bit pricey isn’t it?” Obo asks with a raised eyebrow. It’s a lot more expensive than he expected. “I could buy a car for that,”

“You’d end up with a shitty car mate,” Jonny says. He takes the glock from Obo’s hands and starts to take it apart, “It might be pricey but it’s a damn good weapon. Why do you think the police over in the States use them? They rarely jam and they use a standard ammunition which doesn’t cost nearly as much as you’d think. They’re easy to take apart, easy to clean. If you want a gun that looks scary and does the job then this one’s perfect for you,”

“Save me the sales pitch Jonny,” Obo says, “You sure you can’t do it any cheaper?”

“I might be able to go down to 4.5,” Jonny says, “But that’s as low as I can go. And that’s only cos you’re a mate,”

“Wicked,” Obo says with a sly grin.



Money changes hands and Obo tucks the glock into the waistband of his trousers. Jonny hands him a box of rounds that he puts in the car and he turns back to his friend.

“So you expecting trouble then?” Jonny asks cautiously, “Anything I can help you with.”

“I’m meeting Judd later,” Obo says, “And there’s gonna be trouble. The patch we’re arguing over is worth too much for there not to be. Besides, Judd’s got a temper on him like a girl on the rag, he’s gonna get wound up in a few minutes.”

“You meeting alone?” Jonny asks while he shuts his boot.

“Supposed to be,” Obo admits, “But I don’t think Judd’s gonna come on his own. He’s too much of a pussy to face me without his boys around somewhere. Why do you think I got this mate?”

He pats his waist where the gun is, the metal cold against his skin. Jonny smiles at him wickedly.

“Well let me know if you need some back up,” Jonny says, “I’ve been meaning to get back at the Reece bloke. Arsehole fucked my missus didn’t he!”

“He what?” Obo shouts, “Why didn’t you say something sooner?”

“Cos it was her fault,” Jonny said with a shrug, “He didn’t know till afterwards that she was my girl. He knew she was someone’s girl though so it ain’t a proper excuse,”

“Now I’m hoping I get to do more than scare those little shits,” Obo says grimly.

Connie sits in her car, shivering. She tries the key again, hoping and praying that the engine will work this time. It tries to turn over but there’s no luck. It just makes a faint chugging sound before it stalls out. She knew leaving the heating on was a bad idea but she didn’t want to come back to a freezing car. Now she wishes she’d followed her instincts. It’s starting to snow outside, big white flakes that are settling on the frozen ground. They’re already starting to create a thick blanket even though it’s only been snowing for a little while. Everyone else has already gone, they left as soon as she ended the class. Most of them were clearly in a hurry to get their buses before they stopped because of the weather. She’d seen some of them heading towards their own cars and a couple had gone to the library. Among those heading to the library had been the man, Judd she thought his name was, who had the clear ideas on justice and revenge. No matter what she or anyone else said he couldn’t be swayed. Connie had stayed behind to tidy up her classroom, ready for the morning classes.

Of course that means that she is now completely alone outside, sitting in a freezing cold car that just won’t start, no matter how hard she twists the key or how much she presses her foot down on the pedal. She hits at the steering wheel.

“Come on you piece of shit,” she mutters, “Why won’t you start?”



It's a fruitless question but she can't help but ask it anyway. She clutches at the steering wheel and leans her head on her hands. How is she going to get home now she wonders? There's no way she can call any of her friends. They will all be busy either working or getting ready to go out. Some will probably be sleeping off the crazy night before. She is well and truly stuck at the college.

Just as she is about to give up hope and call a taxi to come and get her a light falls on her face. She looks up and sees someone walking out of the entrance to the college. She can't see who it is, the light behind them is just too bright. Then they step out of the light and she sees that it's him. It's Judd. She tries the key one last time, just in case. The engine tries to turn on but it sounds horrible, like something is choking. She notices that Judd has looked over but he's still walking towards his own car. Connie quickly climbs out her car.

"Judd!" she calls, running carefully over the snow and ice on the ground, "Judd wait a moment."

Judd isn't shivering, even when he stops to turn and face her. He's wrapped up warm, wearing a thick coat, a massive scarf, a stylish and obviously warm hat and some very fancy looking leather gloves. Connie shivers and wraps her arms around herself.

"Listen, my car won't start," she says quietly, "Can you help me at all?"

"Afraid not," Judd says, shaking his head and turning away. "I don't know the first thing about cars. If I did I'd help you find the problem and try and fix it but I don't have a clue,"

He opens the back seat and puts his things in there. He turns back to Connie, leaning on the door and looks her up and down.

"But if you want I can give you a lift somewhere?" he offers.

He sounds almost hesitant and shy.

"That'd be great!" Connie says enthusiastically, "Thank you so much. I'll be over in a minute with my stuff,"

Connie races back towards her car, slipping slightly on the icy ground in her ridiculous heels.

"I'll be in the car," Judd calls after her, "Warming it up."

Connie is back within moments and puts her things in the back seat. She makes sure not to squash or ruin anything that Judd has put in there, moving them carefully to one side with her free hand. Once she has everything settled she slams the door shut, harder than she needs to which makes Judd wince. She climbs into the passenger seat and sits there, shivering. Judd turns the heating up a few more degrees and Connie slowly starts to peel off a few of the layers she's wearing as it gets a little warmer in the car.

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“Thanks so much for this,” Connie says gratefully, “I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t come out when you did,”

“No problem,” Judd says, not looking at her, “My dad always taught me that good manners cost nothing and being a gentleman can work wonders.”

“Well your dad was right,” Connie says, “Girls love a guy who looks after them.”

Judd looks at her out of the corner of his eye even as he finally fires up the engine and starts to back out of the parking space. There’s something about her.

The man’s breath comes out white as it billows from his mouth. The inside of the car is cold, almost colder than it is outside. He leans forward as he spots Judd coming out of the college and Connie running over to him. The car that the man is sitting in is a few rows down but it has a perfect view of the space that Judd and Connie are in. It looks like Connie has managed to get a lift with Judd, if the fact that she’s putting her files in the back of Judd’s car is anything to go by. They’re both in the car by this point and the man can tell that it’s warm in there. He can see Connie taking her gloves and scarf off. He can’t wait to put his own heating on and maybe get some feeling back in his toes and fingers. The car pulls away and drives out of the car park. The man watches it with narrow eyes and finally starts his engine. The heated air gushes into the confined space with a loud humming. The man doesn’t care about the sound. He’s just happy that it’s warm again. He manipulates the wheel and within seconds he’s following after Judd and Connie.



Chapter 17

“So what did you think of class today?” Connie asks brightly as they drive down the road, “Do you still think revenge works or does it just lead to disaster?”

“I don’t know,” Judd admits reluctantly, “I mean, my dad always taught me that you need to stand up for yourself and fight back. That’s what I see as right,”

“Yeah but justice and standing up for yourself aren’t the same thing,” Connie says, “They’re two very different things. I’m talking about justice and revenge taking over all aspects of life and ending in disaster,”

“I don’t know,” Judd grumbles, “Why did your car die anyway? What’s wrong with it?”

“I left the heater on,” Connie says dismissively, “I didn’t want to get into a cold car after class so I kept it running. I guess the battery died. Come on tell me what you thought about restorative justice, I know you were listening, did you change your mind at all?”

“It was a lot to process,” Judd says, he’s getting a little annoyed now, “I’ve still not worked it all through in my mind yet. But this weather is crazy right? Who expects snow in November?”

“Plenty of people I imagine,” Connie says. She leans forward to look out of the windscreen and up at the sky. It’s snowing harder now, “It has been pretty cold lately. I think everyone’s more surprised it didn’t come sooner.”

They lapse into silence for a short while. Judd is relieved. He really doesn’t want to talk about justice and revenge even if his mind is working over and over what was discussed in today’s class. There’s just too much on the subject to talk about, his views are too strong and he’s already wound up as it is. He knows that if he starts talking about it he could end up getting very annoyed and angry very quickly. Then he’ll just scare Connie, not explain his view properly.

“Really though Judd,” Connie says suddenly, “I’d love to know what you think about restorative justice. Didn’t anything that I said today, or that one of your classmates said, maybe make you change your mind a little?”

Judd growls under his breath. She clearly isn’t going to leave him alone about this.

“I still think justice is an eye for an eye,” he says eventually, “Or at least that’s the way it should be. Restorative Justice would work I think. People wouldn’t commit crimes against other people because the people who’ve been wronged would choose the punishment. It’s one thing to commit a crime when you know what your punishment will be, even if it’s a few years in prison. But it’s another thing entirely when you don’t



know what you're going to end up with. Justice as it is now is way too predictable and lenient. Vengeance and restoration are the only way to make sure that the wronged are paid back for the crimes committed against them."

"But that's such a dangerous way of thinking," Connie cries out, "Who's to say that instead of going to the police or through the courts towns won't just set up their own little justice systems following their own rules? If there's no set punishment how will people know that they'll actually be punished. If the wronged are too scared that the wrongdoers or their families will come back and take it out on them they're never going to ask for a strong sentence. And what's to stop people abusing the system? Someone could start something with someone they have a problem with so a crime is committed and then ask for the death sentence or something."

"That's why we would have a system in place," Judd insists, "The courts work better because of the unpredictability of sentencing. If people know that their views are going to be heard and listened to and that their opinions matter they'll go through the courts. We could make sure that the wronged have protection until after the punishments are carried out. And having such unpredictable punishments, with the threat of serious injury, lifetime maiming or anything that the wronged want, well people will stop committing crimes because they don't know what might happen. Even if things devolved in to vigilantism, like you think they will, then the revenge thing wouldn't be needed any more because of the fear. It's all about fear. If the criminals don't know the severity of their punishment they'll be afraid of what it could be. If they're afraid they'll think twice about committing crimes. And those without fear who do it any way will probably be too insane to be allowed to stay in society anyway."

"It would be too complicated!" Connie cries, "Justice goes beyond vengeance and revenge. Justice is safety and order. Justice is a way of making sure that their crimes will be punished, regardless of the thoughts of the wronged. And it ensures the victims that they will be heard and the people who hurt them will be kept away from them. Trying to keep each person safe in the system you're talking about would cost more money than locking up three prisoners a year I bet. It would be too complicated to do what you're saying. And who would decide how harsh the punishments would be? You? Me? Some bloke at Westminster? There's a whole question of morals and right and wrong as people involved in restorative justice that you just don't realise is there until you look closer,"

Judd falls silent as he thinks over what Connie has said. She has some good points.

When he first thinks about revenge it's simple. Someone hurts you and you hurt them back. But trying to put it into a system more importantly a system that works for everyone, makes it complicated. The more he thinks about it the more Judd realises that



it's not as simple as it first seems. Revenge is a small thing, an attitude to have in a small world where you know the people around you. On a larger scale it gets more and more complicated, there are things to work out at every turn. Judd realises that he could spend weeks trying to figure out a system of justice that matches how he thinks and he would still have problems hidden all over the place. Maybe that's the problem with the current system, he thinks to himself, it was designed to handle a much smaller population than it does now. Of course the population wasn't that small when it was first designed but it was smaller than it is now. And laws are always changing. It's just hard to get such a massive system to keep up with the even bigger world.

But he's still not convinced and they continue their debate. Judd points out flaws in Connie's arguments against him and she points out flaws in his. Judd's points seem to have more flaws than Connie's do. As they talk more and more Judd starts to question his own thoughts. The ideas that seemed so clear to him before don't seem as much of a good thing as they did before. He starts to lose the passion in his speech, he takes longer to come up with ideas based around the notion of revenge.

"Ok," he says eventually. "I think I can see where you're coming from. In a civilised world there may not be room for revenge. It just doesn't work. There are too many people and we're all too connected. Maybe once upon a time, way back when, an eye for an eye system worked but that was when it was a smaller world and crime was a lot more obvious. Not anymore though, the world's too big and everyone's in everyone's business. People know too many people and there are just too many different sorts of crimes to commit. But it does work in an uncivilised system,"

Connie falls silent for a moment and Judd is a little surprised. It feels like this entire journey she hasn't stopped talking and now she's suddenly fallen silent. And the journey has been a very long one. The traffic is slow and Judd is driving very slow and very carefully. The roads are covered in black ice and the snow is making it hard to see. He really doesn't want to crash his shiny new Porsche.

"Why are you making a distinction between civilised and uncivilised systems?" Connie asks. She looks genuinely confused, "UK law applies only to a civilised system, that's the only system that we live in."

"Dunno really," Judd says quickly, "I suppose I was just thinking about Vikings and stuff, like you were talking about."

"Ok..." Connie says slowly. She's clearly not convinced by Judd's reply, "But just because the Vikings weren't as advanced as we are doesn't mean they weren't civilised. They actually had a highly civilised way of life for the time period,"

Judd nods and Connie seems satisfied. He lets out a small puff of breath, relief filling him. He had been thinking about the business when he mentioned uncivilised

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systems. And the drug business, especially small time like it is for him, isn't the most civilised of systems. Drug lords rarely play by the rules, they make up their own and sometimes don't even stick to them. And they definitely don't follow the law, after all, they get their money through crime, clearly the law means nothing to them. Judd wonders for a moment how he found himself in the drugs business, it was something that he never saw for himself. And yet, here he is.

The lights ahead turn red and Judd is forced to slow to a halt. Everyone is driving so slowly and the roads are almost empty. Judd squints through his window and doesn't see a single person on the street. Even the homeless man that can usually be spotted lurking in the shelter of a side door by McDonalds isn't there tonight. He must have found somewhere better to sleep. Judd hopes that it's inside, the guy is funny and he's a bit of a fixture in Farlow. Judd looks up at the traffic lights which are showing no sign of changing. A flash of movement in the corner of his eye draws his gaze.

It's Connie, shifting around in her seat. He can't help but watch as she unfolds her legs and crosses them again, one over the other. Her skirt has ridden up, the slash opening wider. He can definitely make out a strip of pink lace running across her thigh. The skin above the lace is pale and creamy looking, the skin below has a slight shimmer. Judd wants to reach out and touch. A honk of a horn draws his attention back to the lights and his heart leaps with shock when he realises that they've turned green. The honking behind him suggests that they've been green for a while, Judd just hasn't noticed it. He wonders how long he was staring at Connie's legs for.

They're in the town centre now, Judd is winding his way through the streets. It's a complicated one way system so he keeps getting stuck at a lot of traffic lights. Now and then Connie mutters out a direction and he takes it. She seems to be leading them towards one of the slightly more questionable areas of town. What is she doing living there, he wonders. She also seems to be crossing and uncrossing her legs every time that she speaks. Judd keeps seeing it out of the corner of his eyes and he can't help but look. The stockings are so tempting and her legs look amazing. Once or twice he caught her eye and there was almost a smile on her lips. He wonders if she's doing it on purpose? Does she know he likes legs and that hers are amazing? Why would she keep on tempting him with her legs? Is there something else that she wants from him apart from the obvious? Judd can't help but feel that there is. Why else would a teacher be trying to seduce her student like this if she's not trying to gain something.

Eventually they leave the one way system behind and start towards the suburbs. Connie's place is a little out of the way but the area isn't quite as bad as he thought it would be. In fact he realises, as they get closer that he could have taken a different way and they would have arrived in half the time. He wonders again if Connie is trying to



seduce him. There could be no other reason for taking the longer route other than to keep them in the car together for a longer amount of time. She either wants him, Judd decides, or she's so lonely that spending any time with anyone is better than going home alone. He thinks that he prefers the first option. He doesn't like the idea of being some random choice to keep her company.

They pull up outside Connie's block of flats and she turns to him, smiling.

"Thanks so much for the lift," she says, her hands fiddling with her keys. She won't meet his eyes. "I have to admit that I really enjoyed our chat. I've not had such a good discussion with someone in ages, at least not someone who actually gets what I'm talking about."

"Yeah," Judd says, also smiling. He keeps trying to meet her eyes though, "I enjoyed talking with you about this. It was a nice change, I never normally get to talk like this with someone so intelligent,"

She finally looks up at him and her smile widens. Judd's breath catches for a moment, that smile took her from pretty and attractive to downright beautiful. She's not getting out, he realises, she's just sat there fiddling with her keys and touching her hair now and then. He wonders what she's waiting for.

Connie is, in truth, waiting for him to make a move. She doesn't care what it is as long as it's some sort of move. She hopes that Judd will ask for her number, or maybe even help her to her door with the files. He just sits there though, looking a little shell shocked and confused. He's still smiling however which is a good sign. She can't believe that this guy could be so shy, he seems so confident and put together, surely he has dozens of women throwing themselves at him all of the time. He certainly has something to offer, it's why she's talking to him after all. Her heart begins to race as she realises that maybe he hasn't picked up on her signals. Maybe he isn't interested in her at all and she read whatever was going on between them wrongly. She shifts and crosses her legs again, absentmindedly, the tension in the car is making her nervous. His eyes drop towards her legs and the slit in her skirt and a slight stain of pink appears on his tanned cheeks. No he's definitely interested in her. She thinks that she may have to be completely blunt with this guy and make the first move, there's really no other choice if she's to get what she's after.

"Well I'm glad that you enjoyed our talk too," Connie says eventually when it becomes clear that Judd isn't going to make a move, "Listen, I'm going to give you my number. Then if you think that you might want another chat like this sometime then call me. Even if it's stupidly late. Just give me a call. I enjoyed our discussion and I'd like to do it again."

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Judd smiles and is filled with a sense of relief. He relaxes and he didn't even realise how tense he was. Connie scribbles down her number on the back of a business card that she pulled from her purse. When she hands it to him their fingers brush and linger. Their eyes meet. Judd is tempted to lean forward and kiss her but he knows that it's a bad idea. He has things to do and he needs to focus on his studies. Having discussions like the one that they had today wouldn't be so bad though, in fact they could only help him. He takes the card and makes a show of putting it neatly into one of the pockets of his wallet.

"I may just take you up on that," Judd says, "Most of my friends aren't exactly deep thinkers. Or if they are they've never given me any sign of it."

"Great," Connie says happily.

There's a moments hesitation before she finally turns and gets out of the car. She scrambles around in the back seat, collecting together her notes and then finally the door slams shut. She walks around the car and pats its roof, the sound echoing inside. Judd watches as she walks up the path to her flat. He watches her closely as she walks further and further away. He tells himself that it's just good manners, he wants to see her home safely. This area may not be as rough as he expected but it still isn't completely safe to be wandering around in late at night, especially when you look like Connie. Besides, what if she slips and falls? She could lie there for ages in pain and helpless. He ignores the fact that his eyes are lingering on her buttocks and those amazing legs. He's just showing good manners.

Finally she gets her front door unlocked and steps inside. She smiles at him and waves through the window. Judd doesn't start the car until her door shuts and a light comes on in the hallway. Connie is home safe and now he needs to go to his own home. He has things that he needs to sort out.



Chapter 18

As Judd drives home he can't help but think about the conversation that he and Connie had. He can't believe that he had actually changed his mind about something and all by his own free will. He was surprised by that fact, and by how open minded he had been while they talked. He hadn't been lying when he said he didn't normally have the chance to have those sorts of complicated discussions. It was nice to talk with someone just as smart as he was, maybe even smarter, someone who actually knows what they're talking about. They had had an amazing back and forth and he hadn't once gotten angry, at least not at the conversation. Mostly his anger had come up whenever Connie tried to ask about anything relating to the drugs. Usually he didn't mind using the whole drug dealer, drug lord thing to impress girls, although those days had started to fade away now. But with Connie Judd didn't want her to know, he didn't want her to think less of him for it. He wants her to want him and like him because of who he is, not what he does or how much money he makes. And right now he knows that Connie likes him because he is just Judd, not Boss Man or Judd the third lord of Farlow.

And his thoughts return to the conversation, the ups and downs and the winding route that their talk had taken. He loves Reece and Emmet and he likes their conversations too. They're blunt, honest and to the point. They don't mess around with two faced comments or wrap the truth in layers of fluff that he has to decipher. They put it all out there and they make him laugh. And they care about him too. But the conversations that Judd has with Reece and Emmet are a little limited. Not because the two other men are stupid, far from it, they're actually very intelligent. Mostly it's because they don't want to use their brains, they have certain interests that they talk about and any deeper topics are left alone. He knows them, cares about them and they care about him but their conversations never make him think or work. Not like his talk with Connie did. He decides that he may just give her a call and it'll probably be some time soon.



Chapter 19

Judd is waiting for Mr Big. They're meeting in a club this time, it's dark and dimly lit but there's an air of sleekness and modernity to the place that was missing in the pub where they met the first time. There is a lot of stainless steel and chrome around and Judd thinks that this is much more Mr Big's style. There are no staff around, Judd wonders if Mr Big ordered them to go or if they're usually not here by now. Mr Big appears at the door, startling Judd.

"I am glad that you are early my friend," Mr Big says as he walks towards the table where Judd is sitting. "It speaks well of you that you are a punctual man. That holds great promise for our possible future dealings with one and other."

Judd rises and reaches out to shake Mr Big's hand.

"I'm glad that you agreed to see me again," Judd says, "I would like to apologise for my behaviour last time. It wasn't a good day, truth be told, but I shouldn't have let my personal life get mixed up with business,"

"Yes I am sorry to hear about your father," Mr Big says, patting Judd's shoulder in condolence. "It is hard to see our fathers become different to the men that we thought they were. I hope that things work out for the best for you and for him,"

Judd raises an eyebrow in surprise. He had not expected Mr Big to know these things about his own life. He doubts that even Obo knows about the trial his father is undergoing. Then he realises that Mr Big is a businessman, through and through, he needs to know about his competitors and his business partners. It only makes sense that he would be asking around about Judd. He feels violated though, his privacy invaded. He takes a deep breath to calm the white hot anger threatening to spill out and ruin the meeting.

"Let us get down to business, no?" Mr Big says, taking a seat. Judd sits down opposite him, "Do you have some of your stuff as I asked?"

"Of course," Judd says, smiling.

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small bag of cocaine. He holds it out to Mr Big between his forefinger and his middle finger, the drugs dangling enticingly in the baggie. Mr Big smiles and takes the bag. He lays out a line and delicately snorts it up. He sits back and snorts before coughing slightly and wiping at his nose. He sits there for a few minutes, waiting for it to kick in completely. He looks a little spaced out. Judd sits and waits, holding his breath. He knows the drugs are good but he just wants to hear it from Mr Big. Finally the other man smiles broadly.

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“Yes, yes,” he says, “Very good. You were right, your stuff is good. If I did not know that you used the same supplier I would almost say that yours is better than Obo’s stuff.”

“Thank you,” Judd says, bowing his head, “I assume that means that we’ll be doing business?”

“Yes my friend,” Mr Big says, “It certainly means there is the possibility of us both working together. But first I would like to talk to you about something else,”

Judd was about to get out of his seat and shake hands with Mr Big but his words make him sink back down. He can’t understand what Mr Big could want to talk to him about, they are there to make a deal and nothing else.

“I see a lot of myself in you Judd,” Mr Big says. He leans back in his chair and wraps his fingers together over his ample stomach. Judd raises an eyebrow, “Oh not in looks, you are far more handsome than I was at your age. Such is the problem of having a very hairy Turkish father.”

Judd laughs nervously. Mr Big smiles fondly, like he is looking at a favourite grandchild.

“I mean that I see the same drive in you that I once had,” Mr Big continues, “You know what you want and you are going for it with all of your attention and determination. Believe me, that sort of drive is hard to find nowadays. You are dedicated and smart, driven almost to the point of ignoring everything else around you. I like you Judd, despite your temper, and I am not sure if the path that you have chosen for yourself is the right one. Why are you in the drugs business my young friend?”

“The money,” Judd says sharply, “I want to make enough money to care for my father like he used to care for me. And I like the respect I get,”

“An honest answer,” Mr Big says, clearly impressed, “You are a smart man so I will not mess you around by talking in riddles with you. This business does not give you respect. It gives you power, certainly, but not respect. You are treated with fear, fear for what you will do to those who cross you and fear that you will not give the people what they want. People do not work for you because they like you or respect you. They work for you because they are afraid of you. Or if they do not fear you they want something from you because you have the power and the money that they desire.”

“Reece and Emmet are my friends,” Judd says defensively, “They respect my views and opinions and they care about me,”

“I am sure that they do,” Mr Big says, “After all, they followed you in to this business. But that may not be why they stay. They may stay because they are the friends of a powerful man. I am sure that they respect you, as a person, but I doubt that they respect you as a drug lord. I have lived a long time and I have seen many, many things. I

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have seen many young men in your position come and go and they rarely find what it is that they are looking for. I fear that you will become the same and that is something that I do not want.”

“You might be right about the respect,” Judd says slowly through gritted teeth. “But you aren’t mentioning anything about the money. I make plenty of money and I’m far better off than most people my age.”

“That is because you are lucky,” Mr Big says, “You have a good brain and you use it well. You think like a business man, you treat the drugs like a business. If more people did the same as you there would be drugs all over the place. But there is another way to make more money. You are very smart and you have a good eye for business. Even before you took your degree I am sure that you had that eye already. Your father raised you well and taught you much about business. You understand that world in a way that few do.”

“So?” Judd says, sneering, “Just because I understand it why would I want to be a part of it?”

“For the very reason that you are a part of the criminal world,” Mr Big says, holding out his hands, “You enjoy the money. But you must look around you. I make a lot of money, and only a very small amount comes from the deals that I made with Charlie. Most of my money comes from my businesses, my clubs and my bars. Each one is legitimate and has all of its paperwork in order. Even before I started dealing with Charlie I was making more than enough money. Charlie’s business has just given me the ability to expand my own ventures sooner than I thought. And you too could do the same,”

Judd is listening properly now, leaning forward on his chair with his arms resting on the table in front of him.

“I could?” he asks uncertainly, “How?”

“By applying yourself much like you already do,” Mr Big says, smiling even wider now, “Were you to apply your mind to making legitimate, legal money you would be even richer than you are now. And you would have proper respect from people such as myself. It would be harder, I’m sure, but I think that you are the sort of man that likes a challenge. Why be in the jungle with the low lives and criminals, living by their rules and laws when you could be rising ever higher in the business world? You spend most of your time, I imagine, fighting off other people trying to take over your place in the drugs world. You probably have to have plan after plan for getting revenge on those who wrong you. That takes time, too much time, I am sure. Even this business with Charlie disappearing is taking up more time than you’re willing to spare I’d wager. Plotting revenge, always watching your back, that is no way for a man like you to live.”



Judd listens closely. Some of what Mr Big is saying has been lingering in his own mind, appearing more and more often lately. He wonders how Mr Big could know all of this, all the thoughts that he's never shared with anyone.

"Charlie speaks of you often," Mr Big says, "He sees for himself how hard you make yourself work. He knows that you are not making as much money as you deserve to make. He believes that you spend more time playing the little games of drug dealers. And we both agree that you would be much better off spending your time more wisely. You could spend the time you get back, if you leave the drug dealing world, on something much more satisfying and you would get a much higher return. I think that there are many things that you could put your time to better use doing. Your father's case for one springs to my mind,"

"You and Charlie talked about me a lot?" Judd asks eventually. Mr Big nods, "Well it's a shame that he's gone missing isn't it. I'd like to hear these things from him. But oh. Wait. I can't. He's vanished. And honestly, I don't think you want me out of the drugs business. Right now I'm the best option you've got for keeping drugs in your club. And the bit about me wasting my time dealing with petty crap? It's bullshit. I enjoy dealing with people trying to butt in. I like showing them the real pecking order. Thanks for the pep talk but I really don't need it, now or ever. I know what I'm doing with my life and I know where I'm heading."

Mr Big's lips narrow into thin lines and he breaths out harshly. A small line appears between his eyebrows.

"Very well," he says shortly, "Do not say that I have not given you some useful advice, from one smart man to another,"

"Whatever," Judd says, waving a hand dismissively, "Can we just get down to business? Do we have a deal or what?"

"I am afraid that it is not as simple as that my friend," Mr Big says. Judd gets ready to argue but he holds up a hand to stop him, "I am not saying this because you have mocked my advice. I am saying this because I am a good business man and treat the people that I make deals with, with respect. I must speak to Obo before anything else is decided,"

"What the fuck?!" Judd shouts. "We had a deal!"

He leaps to his feet, the chair clatters and slides across the floor behind him, tossed out by the force of his legs. A pair of men in suits appear from the shadows and walk up to stand on either side of Mr Big. He holds up a hand to stop them getting any closer.

"I never said that I would make a deal with you Mr Judd," Mr Big says, "I said that I hoped we could work together. However it is only right that I talk to Obo first. We



made a deal together first, before I spoke to you. I must show him respect and give him the chance to alter our agreement. If he does not provide me with a satisfactory offer than I will happily come to you.”

“This is complete bullshit!” Judd shouts. He still isn’t sitting down. “You said it yourself, my stuff is better than Obo’s. If mine is so much better why even bother with Obo at all. Tell him to fuck off and deal with me.”

“Mr Judd!” Mr Big snaps, his voice loud in the quiet club, “I will not insult my business partners by ignoring the rules. All members of a deal must be consulted before that deal changes. It is only right and good manners. I am sure that your father taught you that much. All parties must agree before changes are made. And I do not like to be put under pressure to make a decision, or forced to ignore what I know is right.”

“Oh come on,” Judd says, almost whining, “We both know that’s a crock of shit. You’re scared of Obo just like everyone else. You don’t want to piss him off, that’s all.”

“I fear no one,” Mr Big says. He stands and towers over Judd. Judd hadn’t realised until now how tall the other man actually is. They have always met sitting down. “I do not fear you, I do not fear Obo and I did not fear Charlie. I have manners and respect for people that I do business with and I will not be forced to put those things aside for one child’s tantrum. I ask that you calm down and leave.”

“So that’s it?” Judd snaps, “I have a ‘tantrum’ and you don’t want to do business anymore? Right Stuff chose me to fill in for Charlie, not Obo. What does that tell you?”

“It tells me many things,” Mr Big says, “Mostly that Mr Right Stuff may not be as good of a judge of character as everyone believes him to be. But it is also the reason why I am not dismissing you all together. I want you to leave, to calm down and think about what we discussed earlier today. I hope, for your sake, that you take my advice. But either way I will be in contact soon regarding our deal. I honour my promises Mr Judd and I will talk to Obo before deciding whether to work with you or not.”

Mr Big nods and crosses his arms over his chest. Judd glares at the other man for a few moments. The two suited men take a step forward, closing in on him. He flaps a hand at them.

“Alright, alright,” he says, “I’m going.”

He walks to the doorway and pauses. He turns back to Mr Big.

“You better call me,” he says, pointing at the older man, “Whatever you decide I want to know,”

“Of course my friend,” Mr Big says with a smile, “You will know as soon as I have made a decision.”

Judd leaves, slamming the door behind him.



Chapter 20

He stomps through the snow outside, shivering from the cold. The flakes are no longer falling and it feels a slight bit warmer than it did the day before. Some of the snow has already melted, forming slushy puddles everywhere. Judd reaches his car and climbs in, twisting the key and flicking on the heating. He clutches the steering wheel in both hands and tries to take a few calming breaths. He cannot believe that Mr Big spoke to him like that, gave him advice as though he were his father. That reminds Judd of his own father and he reaches for his mobile. After dialling a number the phone rings a few times and is then picked up.

“Hello?” comes Sally’s singsong voice, “Sally speaking,”

“Sally?” Judd says, “It’s Judd,”

“Judd sweetheart!” Sally cries, “How are you? How’s school going?”

“It’s going well, really well,” Judd says. He hesitates for a moment, “Is dad there?”

“Oh sweetie,” Sally says. He can hear the tears in her voice. “Sweetie, Asif isn’t here, he’s still in custody.”

“What happened?!” Judd cries, “I thought that the trial was going well?!”

“It was Judd, it really was,” Sally says. When she next speaks she sounds annoyed and frustrated, “But your father, damn him, your stupid father decided he wanted to talk to the jury, man to man, if you will and explain what he was thinking,”

“Oh no,” Judd says, “He didn’t swear at them did he?”

“Oh god no, nothing like that,” Sally said, “He just wanted to get them on his side. Anyway, he explained to the jury that he wanted to teach the shoplifter a lesson, he wanted to send a message to him and any of the other hoodlums out there who want to rob our shop that they’re messing with the wrong people. He wanted to show everyone that you can mess with him or his shop and get away with it,”

Judd groans.

“Please tell me he didn’t use the word hoodlums,” Judd says,

“He did.” Sally says. Judd groans. “It was going well though, even with your dad talking all old school. But then he started to get a bit... forceful. You know how he gets when he’s passionate about something. He went bright red in the face, started shouting and waving his arms around, ranting about revenge. I’m surprised the judge didn’t get him carted away as an insane person,”

“So has he ruined all chances of the case going well then?” Judd asks in resignation, “There’s no way they’re going to be lenient with him now,”



“Well the lawyers think there might still be a chance,” Sally admits, “But he needs to try and stay calm. They think Asif was actually starting to get through to the jury about showing that he wasn’t to be messed with before he started to rant,”

“Seriously?” Judd asks, “They really thought he was doing right?”

“Well...” Sally says, hesitating, “They didn’t think that what he did was completely wrong. I saw their faces Judd, some of them were nodding as your dad was talking. They really seemed to understand where he was coming from. But when he started to yell and wave his arms around... well you know how he gets when he starts going like that. They started to get afraid, some of them, even the ones who were nodding seemed to see him as a crazy person after that.”

“Shit,” Judd says. He leans forwards and rests his head on the steering wheel, “He’s done it now. They’ll never get that image out of his head,”

“Our lawyers still have a few tricks up their sleeves,” Sally says quickly, “Don’t worry so much. They’re cross examining the boy tomorrow. I think our men have a plan in mind to show the jury that this guy isn’t such a sweet and innocent baby that the prosecutors are trying to show him as,”

“Ok.” Judd says. “Ok. Let me know how it goes,”

“You could always come along you know,” Sally says, “The case might be finished within a couple of days, I think the lawyers are giving their closing statements by the end of the week.”

“I don’t know,” Judd says slowly. “I mean, what could I do just by being there?”

“You couldn’t do a thing dear,” Sally says gently, “But it would mean the world to your father and I think it might make the jury think a little more about the man your father is. If you’re there, looking all smart and tidy they might realise that he’s a good man who raised a good son,”

“Sally...” Judd says. He hesitates, trying to find the words but they won’t come.

“Judd please,” she says, begging now, “You’ve barely spoken to your dad since he got arrested. He needs to see you, he wants to see you but I know you won’t go to the holding cells. If you go to court it would just make him feel so much better, no matter what happens.”

“I suppose,” Judd says, “I’ll need the dates though, so I can see if I’ve got anything else on. This isn’t a yes though Sally!”

“Just think about it,” Sally says, sounding much, much happier now, “That’s all I ask, I just want you to think about it.”

“I will,” Judd says. “I’ll think about it and let you know,”

“Thank you dear,” Sally says softly, “I love you. Take care of yourself,”

“Love you too Sally,” Judd says.



He hangs up. He feels heavy, leaden, like a massive weight has dropped on to his shoulders. There's no way that anything is going to go well now with his father's case. And there's everything else on top of it. Judd, for a moment, feels like he just wants to disappear, curl up in his room and sleep until everything goes away. He suddenly realises that he's praying, asking a God he doesn't really believe in to just wake him up and show him that it's all a dream, a very bad, very complicated dream.

Chapter 21

His phone beeps. It's Reece.

'How'd the meeting go?' the message says.

Judd groans as he remembers exactly how well the meeting with Mr Big went. He lost his temper, yet again, and it's really very possible that they've completely lost any chance that they may have had at doing a deal. Then again Mr Big really does seem to like him, Judd realises, it's unlikely that the guy goes around giving advice to everyone he meets with. Either that or Mr Big sees some real potential in Judd to become a serious competitor in their world. Judd sighs, heavily, and finally starts the car.

The traffic is quiet as he drives through the streets towards Emmet's flat. When he gets there he beeps his horn twice and the two guys come rolling out. They're dressed warm, thick coats and gloves. Reece has the black scarf that his gran knitted for him wrapped tightly around his neck.

"Nice scarf." Judd says as the guys climb in.

"Hey, it's warm!" Reece says defensively, "You're going to wish you had one just like it when you're freezing your arse off waiting for Obo,"

"Whatever," Judd says dismissively.

He peels away from the pavement and enters in to the traffic. The way to Bush Fair is a little busier than Judd expected but his nimble car has no trouble negotiating the twists and turns of the traffic. He darts in and out of cars, tyres rolling and eating up the tarmac. Emmet leans forward between the two seats in the front and looks at Judd.

"So... how'd the meeting go?" he asks.

"It went as well as can be expected," Judd says quietly, his eyes locked on the road.

"Oh man," Emmet groans, "You lost your temper again didn't you?!"

"No!" Judd says sharply, glancing at Emmet quickly, "Mr Big doesn't like to be rushed. He's going to call me later and tell us his decision,"



“That’s it?” Reece asked, his voice thick with disbelief, “You took over an hour to get that little bit of info.”

“Well he gave me some advice I didn’t really give a shit about,” Judd says. Then he sighs, “And I called Sally,”

He leaves the sentence hanging, not saying anything else. Reece and Emmet share a glance, he sees it in the rear view mirror. Emmet sits back in his seat and the two boys say nothing. They travel in silence for a while longer.

“So... it’s not good news?” Reece eventually says, breaking the silence, “Did they reach a decision already?”

“Couldn’t have,” Emmet says harshly, “That would be way to fast,”

“Dad went on one of his rants,” Judd says.

The two boys groan. They know all too well what Asif’s rants could get like if he is allowed to keep going once he gets fired up. They lapse back in to silence.

“So what are you going to do then?” Reece asks, “I mean, will you need to go and run the shop for him if he gets found guilty?”

“No, I think Sally’s got that under control,” Judd says, “But she asked me to come to the trial. At the courthouse,”

“I hate that place,” Emmet mutters from the back, “It just seems really creepy.”

“It’s old mate,” Reece says, “All old places seem creepy to you.” He turns back to Judd, “So are you going to go to the trial then?”

“I don’t know,” Judd says after thinking it through for a moment. The admission feels like he’s having to force it through his teeth, like it doesn’t want to come out at all, “I really hate the courthouse. I keep thinking I’m going to get arrested at any moment or something.”

“Yeah but mate...” Reece says, “It’s your dad. It’s Asif. Isn’t that reason enough to go?”

Judd sighs and looks at Emmet in the rear view mirror. Emmet nods in agreement with Reece’s words.

“Yeah,” Judd sighs, “I suppose you’re right. I’ll let Sally know tomorrow,”

“Good man,” Emmet says, clapping his friend on the shoulder. “Go there and stand up for good old Asif. Do you want us to come too?”

“God no!” Judd cries out. Then he laughs, “The last thing we need is you going to the courthouse. You’ll probably burst into flames or something.”

The three friends laugh together at the image in their minds. Then they lapse in to silence, companionable and relaxed. Judd keeps driving, street light after street light flashing by. The car is filled from time to time with the bright lights of oncoming cars that fade away quickly into red as the cars pass.



“Aren’t we going to be really early?” Reece eventually asks. “I mean we’re meeting Obo at what? Half seven? It’s only six now,”

“Better to be early,” Judd says. “It gives you two time to get in to position and knowing Obo he’ll try to get there early so he can have the power. We get there first and he doesn’t have the chance to do that,”

Judd pulls in to the car park near Bush Fair and the two boys climb out before Judd even gets the keys out. He climbs out and pulls his coat’s collar up around his neck. The wind is blowing hard and still has flakes of snow in it. He can practically feel the flecks of ice biting into his skin. He kind of wishes that he did have a scarf like Reece’s. Reece and Emmet stand on either side of him. They walk down the paths, further and further in to Bush Fair. The trees and bushes close in around them and for a moment they are protected from the wind.

They finally reach the meeting point. Judd can see the lights of the estate glittering off in the distance, through the trees as their branches sway from side to side. There’s no one else around and the entire area is filled with orange light from one of the nearby streetlights.

“Ok,” Judd says as he looks around. “Looks like we’re alone. Reece, you go over there, Emmet, you go over that side.”

“Yes Boss,” Emmet says, nodding happily.

He disappears in to the trees, fading away amongst the dark leaves and shadows. Reece hangs back though, standing close to Judd.



Chapter 22

“You ok?” Reece asks once he knows that Emmet is out of hearing range. “It’s gotta be tough hearing about your dad,”

“Yeah, I’m good,” Judd says, shrugging, “I’m as ok as I’m going to be,”

“You’re doing the right thing you know,” Reece says, leaning forward to look Judd in the eye, “Going to his trial I mean. He needs you there. And I know it’ll be hard seeing him in cuffs but if you don’t go you’ll regret it later,”

“Yeah I know,” Judd says. He sighs heavily. Then he smiles, a little awkward and it feels wrong. “Let’s just hope none of the coppers recognise me and try to arrest me.” His smile drops away and he frowns, “That’s the last thing that Sally needs right now, her stepson and husband both being arrested. And it wouldn’t reflect well on my dad either, his only child being arrested and charged with drug dealing.”

“Like they’d arrest you,” Reece says kindly, patting Judd on the shoulder, “You practically do their job for them, keeping the drugs away from kids and taking on crappy dealers who try and cause violence,”

“Yeah I suppose so,” Judd says after a moment. He shakes himself and clears his throat. “Enough of that though. Let’s just focus on getting through tonight and forget everything else,”

“You sure?” Reece asks, his face creased with concern. “We can talk later if you want,”

“Just go,” Judd says, patting his friend on the shoulder and laughing. “Thanks for the thought. Keep focused on what’s happening,”

Reece pats Judd’s shoulder again and turns away. Judd watches his friend walk off and turns to look down the path where Obo should be coming from. He can hear Emmet or Reece rustling around in the trees and hopes that they will both stay still and silent when Obo gets here.

The wind picks up while Judd waits and he checks his watch again, shivering hard against the wind. He hopes that Obo will soon appear and before he even has a chance to finish the thought he sees Obo in the distance. The other man is alone, wandering along the darkened path from the direction of the bright estate. The light catches Obo’s face, brightening it suddenly and he’s looking right at Judd. Obo raises a hand and waves at him, Judd returns the wave. As Obo gets closer Judd steps forward a few paces so that he is standing right beneath a streetlight, bathed in its orange glow.

“Judd,” Obo finally says once he is close enough.

“Obo,” Judd replies, nodding.

“So...” Obo says slowly. “What do you want?”



“We need to talk,” Judd says slowly, his voice carrying across the park, “About Charlie and what it means for us,”

“I thought we already talked about that,” Obo says sharply.

Behind him the trees rustle. A twig snaps. Obo looks around, clearly on the alert. Judd smirks as shock appears on Obo’s face when he sees first Emmet and then Reece appear from amongst the trees.

“What the fuck is this?!” Obo demands, turning back to Judd, frowning, “I thought we said to come alone,”

“Well I know you,” Judd says shrugging, “I know you’d try to pull some sort of shit so I came prepared.”

“You shit,” Obo spits.

Judd steps forwards, hands raised. He’s ready to grab Obo’s jacket and shove him against the tree trunk nearby. He has the entire conversation planned in his mind already. His fingers brush the fabric of Obo’s jacket, but before he manages to get a grip Obo takes a sudden step back. He reaches in to his pocket and grabs something. Judd takes a step back, the hairs on the back of his neck starting to stand on end.

Something isn’t right here.

He takes another step back as Obo pulls his hand out of his jacket and reveals that he’s holding a gun. Judd stares down the barrel, the metal of the gun glinting brightly in the streetlight. His heart is pounding and he starts breathing heavily.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Obo says harshly. He lowers the gun to point towards the ground. “I came prepared.”

Judd glances at the gun and steps back again. Emmet and Reece come around either side of him. Reece’s mouth is hanging open and he’s staring at the gun, eyes wide. Obo catches the look and shifts the gun slightly. Judd hears Reece jump and swear under his breath. He looks at Obo and sees the smirk on his face. Obo nods his head quickly at Judd. Judd reaches out to take a grip on Reece and Emmet’s wrist and pulls them back with him as he steps back. Obo’s smirk widens, growing prouder, smugger and more arrogant with every second that passes.

Judd can’t believe that this is happening. Sure he has a knife on him, Emmet and Reece do too, it’s standard procedure for all of them. Not having a knife on you can mean the difference between staying safe and staying alive in their line of work. He’d made sure that he was carrying one before he even left the house to meet Obo. Obo was a dangerous man and he couldn’t be too careful when dealing with him.

But carrying guns is a step too far for Judd. He’d never allowed his guys to carry guns, even when they insisted it was a good idea. It was a step that he was just not willing for himself or the others to take. He’d never allowed it and anyone who hadn’t liked it



was made to walk away and find someone else to work with. They are a small time operation, he is a small time dealer in a small town. Carrying guns is for gangsters in the big city. But now Obo has one and things are just a lot more dangerous. He takes another step back.

“I thought you might pull some shit like this,” Obo says eventually, “You’re smart but not smart enough sometimes. I just knew you’d have two of your pussy boys hiding in the woods or something, ready to jump me. And I knew you’d try and get me to listen to you with force.”

“So you’re smarter than you pretend then,” Judd says, “You seriously need a gun to make a point though? If anyone’s the pussy it’s you,”

“Big words for a guy with a gun near his face,” Obo says, his tone suddenly serious, “But here’s what’s going to happen. I’m going to keep the deal I made with Mr Big and you’re going to step back and leave him alone,”

Judd’s eyes widen in surprise. Obo smirks.

“Yeah, I know you’ve been trying to change that shit up and you’ve been trying to make deals behind my back.” He says, almost proudly, “I mean I should have expected it, you’ve always been a sneaky bastard. AND a two faced liar. I guess I just sort of hoped that you’d actually stick to our agreement for once. But no, I have to hear, from Mr Big that you’ve been trying to get him to deal with you instead of me. And you’ve been mouthing off about me and losing your temper like you always do.”

Judd says nothing. He just keeps looking at Obo, waiting for him to say something else.

“Yeah,” Obo says harshly, “You know you’ve done wrong there and you can’t even deny it. But we’re going to put that all right, now at least. I keep the deal with Mr Big, the one that I made when I told him what was happening with Charlie first. And I expect to see Right Stuff bright and early tomorrow morning. From now on I’m supplying him and his customers. He comes to me, I give him the gear and he leaves you alone.”

“And what do I do?” Judd says, arching an eyebrow.

“Oh he speaks!” Obo cries, laughing and leaning his hands on his knees, one hand still gripping the gun, “I was starting to think you’d shit yourself into silence when you saw the gun. You, my friend, are going to back off, leave Charlie’s patch alone for me to deal with. You’re going to go back to your own patch and stay there for the time being. Got it?!”

Judd stares at Obo for a few long moments. His brain races, the thoughts swarming through his head. He glances at Reece who shrugs. He looks at Emmet who

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doesn't say anything, he's just stuck staring at the gun. He knows that he has no choice, the other options that he might have had are all gone now that Obo's got a gun.

"Fine," he says reluctantly through clenched teeth. "I'll go back and stay on my patch. Then you leave me and my boys alone. Agreed."

"For now," Obo says, smirking. "Now go."

Judd turns away and walks back down the path they came down. Reece and Emmet walk beside him. Emmet keeps glancing over his shoulder, back towards Obo with a strange expression on his face. Judd can't figure out what it is but knows that it isn't fear. Judd can practically feel Obo's eyes burning into his back, in to the spot between his shoulder blades. He's fighting the urge to turn back and look, keeping his eyes fixed straight ahead, towards the car that he can now make out between the trees. Reece catches his eye for a brief second, the other man's eyes are wide before he looks away quickly. Their shoulders brush and he swears that he can feel the other man shaking slightly.



Chapter 23

They say nothing to each other as Judd unlocks the car and they all climb in. They stay silent as Judd puts the key in the ignition and turns it enough to start the heating. Hot air blows in and slowly Judd can start to feel the sensation coming back in to his toes and his fingers. He turns the heating up higher. They still haven't said anything to each other. Reece is staring at his hands, completely focused on holding them in front of the hot air vent. Judd knows he wants to say something, can feel the tension in his friend's body but they're not saying a thing. He sighs, grumpily, and finally turns the engine on properly.

They drive along in continued silence, Judd is staring at the road intently, all too aware that the roads have now turned very icy. Reece sighs heavily and Judd glances at him.

"I'm leaving the crew." He suddenly says.

Judd slams on the brakes and turns to look at him, leaning on the steering wheel.

"What?!" he cries, "What the hell are you talking about?"

Reece sighs heavily and when he continues to talk he does so reluctantly.

"This isn't what I signed up for," he says, "I didn't get into this game to have guns pulled on me in dark places. I didn't sign up for a gang war. All I wanted was to make a few quid for myself and not have to worry about the bills. I didn't want to work for any one else, to have to answer to some bloke who thinks he's better than me because he went to university or something, no offence Judd."

"None taken," he says wryly, "Nice to know how you think of me,"

"Oh come on mate," Reece says with exasperation, "You know I'm not talking about you. You're sound, you're cool and you don't order me around or talk down to me or any of that crap. You're a good guy and a good mate. It don't feel like I'm working for you, but I'm working with you instead. But now I've gotta risk getting shot or something. If things keep going the way they're going we're gonna end up in a full out war. I don't want to get shot, I don't want to end up dead or in prison."

"It's not going to come to that mate," Judd says firmly "We can sort this out easily and as soon as Charlie gets back everything will go back to normal. You know it will."

"Maybe," Reece says, shrugging "Maybe not."

Judd stares at him for a long minute. He's breathing heavily and he's trying to fight down his anger. He doesn't want to say something that he'll really regret later. Reece looks at him, his face apologetic. Emmet just sits in the back, looking between his two friends as though he's waiting for something to happen.



“Face it mate,” Reece eventually says, “We don’t know where Charlie is, or how long he’s going to be gone for. We don’t even know if he’s going to even come back. And without him around the entire of Farlow is going to become a battle ground. We’re going to be stuck dealing with some wild west, frontier justice type shit and I don’t want to be caught up in that shit. If I get out now I can be safe, focus on me and mine.”

“You’ve got to be joking!” Judd cries, “One little thing goes wrong and you’re running for the hills. I thought you liked the life drug dealing was giving you? When things get a little hard you just turn around and leave. Maybe Obo was right, maybe you are a pussy,”

“Fuck you!” Reece shouts, “You and I both know I’m not a pussy. This isn’t a little thing going wrong, this isn’t things getting a little hard. This is everything going to shit. We got in to this to make money and keep things a little safer than what things were like before. Now that’s all gone tits up. This was never a lifelong career for me. I’m done, I’m out.”

“Oh come on,” Emmet snaps from the back, “You’re seriously backing out? Now? This is the proper stuff, the proper drug dealing, gangster life. Why the hell would you want to get out?”

“I didn’t want to be a gangster,” Reece snaps harshly at Emmet, twisting in his seat to look at the other man, “I never wanted to be a gangster. I wanted to make a little money and that was it. Now it’s got really dangerous... I’m not interested anymore. It’s not worth it, nothing’s worth it.”

Judd says nothing. He glares at his friend, the guy that he had considered his best friend for most of his life, and grinds his teeth. He’s breathing hard through his nose, nostrils flaring. Finally he turns away and starts the car, getting ready to drive away. As he makes his way through the traffic his movements are sharp and jerky. He can feel the tension simmering deep down below, he can feel his heart pounding. His hands grip the steering wheel so hard that his knuckles are white.

He doesn’t know what to say, how can he know what to say? All he wants to do is smack Reece around the head and yell at the other man until he listens to him. But he knows it’s not entirely Reece’s fault. Of course he is running away from the problem, like Judd accused him off. Then again Judd should have handled everything better, he should have thought everything through and kept himself calm. But he hadn’t and now things are starting to spin out of his control. There’s nothing Judd can do about it.

He grinds his teeth together as he drives. They’re all silent still, on edge and shifting around restlessly.

“So what are we going to do then Boss?” Emmet suddenly pipes up from the back seat. “I mean, we’ve got to get back in control right?”



“How?!” Judd demands, “The guy’s got a gun and we both know that the rest of his boys will have guns before too long too.”

“We fuck him up,” Emmet shouts, banging his fist on the roof of the car. “We fuck him up just like he was going to fuck us up and just like we were going to fuck him up before. I’ve been saying it all along that we need to tool up and take Obo and his guys out before they take us out.”

“You know I don’t like guns,” Judd says, glancing at Emmet in the rear view mirror. “I don’t know if getting guns is a good idea.”

“It’s a stupid idea,” Reece snaps. He stares out ahead through the front window, arms crossed over his head. “It’s the most ridiculous idea I think that you’ve ever had Emmet, you moron.”

“You don’t get a say,” Judd snarls, “You’re leaving.”

Judd pauses for a moment, thinking. He’s still furious. The blood is pounding through his head, he can feel the white hot burn low in his stomach. His hands are shaking and tightening and loosening on the wheel, almost outside of his control. He remembers the conversation that he had with Connie, about justice and restoration. An eye for an eye is just what needs to be done. They aren’t civilised in the drug dealing world, as much as they might want to think that they are. Obo had gone too far, had threatened him and his business, now it was time to get some justice for himself and for the i4i crew.

“You’re right Emmet,” Judd finally says. Reece gasps, “We’ll get guns and I’ll have another chat with Obo.”

“Are you mad?!” Reece shouts. Judd winces, the sound is almost too loud in the small space of the car, “You’ll end up dead. Do you want to put your dad through that? On top of everything else?”

“It’s what needs to be done,” Judd says firmly, staring through the windscreen, “Obo has wronged me, wronged us all. He’s the one that took it all up a notch. We’re just following him so we stay even.”

“This is so wrong,” Reece whispers.

He sits back, leans his head on his hand with his elbow resting on the car door. He stares out the window, watching the streetlights go by and catching sight of his own reflection. His face is pale and drawn, the bags under his eyes more pronounced than ever in the dim light. He can’t believe what is happening, what Judd is going to do. There’s no way that he can stop this now and he knows it. He’s glad that he’s getting out, now before everything gets so much worse.

“I knew you’d come around!” Emmet cries, patting Judd on the shoulder, “We’re going to finally fuck Obo up and get what’s ours at last.”



“Yeah mate,” Judd says quietly, “Yeah.”

They’re close to Reece’s house now, a small semi-detached in the suburbs. Judd realises that his friend doesn’t live too far from Connie and for a moment wonders what she’d think of all this. He’ll never know though, he can’t exactly come out and tell her that he’s a criminal. She’s a lawyer and law teacher after all. He knows that she’d probably think it was all ridiculous though, that she’d probably tell him to stop and think about what he’s doing and get out while he still could. Like Reece is doing.

He looks at Reece out of the corner of his eye. The other man hasn’t said a word since Judd made his decision. Judd knows that Reece isn’t happy about it, that it’s the wrong path to take. Part of Judd agrees, a small voice whispering in his mind that this is wrong. Judd ignores it though. He looks in the rear-view mirror and sees Emmet, practically vibrating with glee. He’s actually enjoying all of this and for a moment Judd wonders why. He remembers the strange look on his friend’s face when they left Obo behind. Emmet has the same look on his face now and it only grows clearer when he catches Judd’s eye. Judd looks away, focuses on the road and shaking his head to clear those little niggling doubts that are trying to worm their way in.

“Are you sure you’re out?” Judd asks Reece as they pull on to his road, “You can still change your mind you know? Once you’re out though, you’re out. For good.”

“I’m sure,” Reece says firmly, “Guns and violence and gang wars aren’t what I signed up for. It’s your choice but I don’t want to be involved any more.”

“You’re important to us you know,” Judd says quietly, “You’re like that little voice of reason in the crew.”

“Eye for an Eye will be fine without me,” Reece says although Judd catches the quiver in his voice, “You never really listened to me that much anyway,”

“We did,” Judd says, firmly, “You kept us safe most of the time. You kept me calm.”

“I’m still your friend,” Reece says, looking at Judd now, “I just can’t be involved in this. I don’t think you should be either.”

Judd looks away, his mouth tightens in to a thin line. His nostrils flare and he shifts his grip on the wheel. He pulls the car to a stop in front of Reece’s house and doesn’t look at his friend. Reece sighs and gets out. Before he shuts the door he leans down, his breath billowing out of his mouth in a cloud of white vapour.

“I think you’re making a mistake,” Reece says. “Guns aren’t going to help you. And I think you know that.”

“Good bye Reece,” Judd says firmly, looking out of the windscreen, “Take care of yourself.”



Reece sighs again. For a moment he looks like he wants to say something else, that there are words just hanging on the tip of his tongue, ready and waiting to burst out. But he doesn't say anything. Instead he closes the car door with a dull, heavy thud. He walks up the garden path towards his front door.

Judd doesn't wait to see if he gets inside safely. He starts the engine and drives away. He does wonder what Reece wanted to say though. He wonders how important it might have been. Emmet clammers over the seats and into the front while Judd slowly makes his way through the narrow side streets. For a moment the man is a tangle of arms and legs before he topples into the passenger seat with a grunt. Then he straightens himself out and twists to look at Judd.

"So... what's the plan?" Emmet eventually asks. "We going to get the guns and go in blazing?"

"No," Judd says. The grin on Emmet's face brings the hot rush of anger back, "No, we're going to get the gun and then have another chat with Obo and Right Stuff. Tomorrow."

"So are we going to try what we did tonight tomorrow then?" Emmet asks. "Is that going to work?"

"No, it won't," Judd says, "So we're not even going to bother. We're just going to turn up at the meeting like Obo expects. We'll take Right Stuff with us and for a while we'll pretend that we're playing along with his demands. It'll be just you and me, out front and obviously alone."

"And then we bring out the guns right?" Emmet asks, a glint in his eyes, "And when he doesn't agree we shoot his ass?"

"No!" Judd cries out. He looks at Emmet and for a moment doesn't recognise his friend, "Why would you even think that we'd do that? We're trying to scare him, not kill him."

"Well what's the fucking point then?!" Emmet snaps, "We wave the guns around until Obo pisses his pants? Then we take over all of Farlow? Can I have Obo's patch to run?"

"We're not taking over anything," Judd says tiredly, "We're going to show him the guns, possibly fire at the ground if we have to until Obo knows that we mean business. He needs to know that we're willing to arm up and we will use the guns if we need to. Right now he thinks we're scared, he knows I don't like guns and wouldn't actually arm us with them. But that's why this will work."

"Then what?" Emmet asks, "We just split Charlie's business up? Right down the middle, nice and clean."



“No,” Judd says, “There’s no point. I don’t think Mr Big is going to take the deal I offered. I think he likes me but not enough to deal with me. I probably pissed him off with my temper.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” Emmet says, chuckling, “Remember school?”

Judd smirks and laughs, low, as he remembers their school days and how he would annoy teachers and students alike with outbursts of anger. Emmet and Reece always managed to calm him down and keep him out of trouble. Judd’s smile falls.

“We split Charlie’s business,” He says, “Like you said, but instead of splitting the territory we split the drugs. Obo keeps the deal with Mr Big. We keep Right Stuff and his home delivery. The Mr Big thing makes more money I reckon, I think Obo would be happy with that.”

They finally reach Emmet’s apartment building and Judd pulls to a stop outside the path. Emmet stays where he is though, sitting there, staring out of the front window. He’s clearly deep in thought and Judd sits there, waiting for his friend to speak.

“I suppose so,” Emmet reluctantly agrees, “But what if he won’t agree to that? What are we going to do then?”

“We’ll deal with that if it happens,” Judd says with a shrug after he thinks about it for a moment. “If he won’t agree we’ll try to figure it out. Until then we just stick to the plan,”

“Fine,” Emmet says, “Whatever.”

“Keep your head in the game Emmet,” Judd warns, “I need you on point. Without Reece you’re gonna have to work doubly hard to watch my back mate,”

“I know, I know,” Emmet mutters.

“Now get out my bloody car and go to bed,” Judd says, smiling widely, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Emmet chuckles and eventually opens the door. Judd shivers as a blast of cold air rushes in to the car. Emmet pats Judd on the shoulder before he climbs out and makes his way to the front door of his flat’s building. Judd reaches over and pulls the door shut, Emmet has left it open like he always does. Judd starts the engine again and drives away.

Judd worries about Emmet as he drives. The other man was just acting as though nothing off had happened, that things were completely normal. But the trio had just gone down to a twosome, Reece had just turned around and abandoned them without any warning. And Emmet had acted as though he doesn’t care, at all. Judd wonders whether it was just his friend trying to put on a brave face, Judd knows that he himself was trying not to let his feelings about Reece dumping them show. But another part of him, the same part that sometimes whispers to him to leave the drugs business, was whispering a different idea. It’s still whispering it now. Perhaps Emmet actually doesn’t care. Perhaps



that man sees Reece leaving as a chance to get Judd to do what he wants. He had certainly seemed excited enough but the argument between his two friends. In fact he'd barely put up any argument at all.

And then he had taken Reece's seat in the car as though it had always been his, as though Reece had just been warming it up for him. He hadn't wanted to talk about Reece, he'd just wanted to talk about Obo, guns and the possibility of a real fight. Emmet's words about the proper gangster life ring through Judd's head and bring back memories of Mr Big's speech about the two men only being friends with him now because they liked the power and the fear. Judd wonders if that is what Emmet likes, if that's the only reason that he is still around. A cold chill rolls through him at the thought, hairs stand up on the back of his neck. The possibility that Emmet is only there for the fight, the violence and the criminal lifestyle is something that had never occurred to Judd before. But now the idea is there and it's starting to ring true with things he had been told.

And it resonated with memories of Emmet's past behaviour, things that the other man had said and done that had sent off warning bells in Judd's head. Judd wonders whether Emmet is finally showing his true colours. And he wonders what that could mean for himself when Emmet finally takes off the mask that he may have been wearing.



Chapter 24

Judd sits in his car in the deserted car park. It's late, all the houses near by have their lights off and only the orange glow of the car park lights fills the area, barely managing to chase away the shadows. The corners of the car park, the bends and pillars cast long fingers of blackness over the concrete. There is the glint of ice on the ground, beneath the shallow blanket of snow. Judd shivers and turns the key in the ignition enough to turn the lights on and set the radio blaring.

"Jesus!" he cries, the noise startling him.

He laughs to himself even as he turns the radio down and on to a quieter channel. There's not much playing at this time of night but he finds a station that's playing smooth jazz. He turns on the heating and sits back to wait, relaxing as he listens to the saxophones playing gently in the background. He doesn't know how long he's been waiting, or how long he's going to be left waiting. All that Jonny said was to meet him at the car park around midnight, ish. Judd turned up early, wanting to make sure he didn't keep the dangerous man waiting too long. It's half past now and there's no sign of any one else. He leans his head back against his seat and closes his eyes.

A banging on the window jerks him awake. A quick glance at the clock tells him that he's only been asleep for about fifteen minutes. The banging repeats and he looks over to see Jonny, stood there shivering with a big grin on his face. The other man waves and Judd leans over to open the door. Jonny climbs in to the passenger seat, bringing the cold and smell of frost with him. He shivers and holds his hands up to the blowing heaters.

"Freezing night," he says, almost cheerfully, "Been waiting long?"

"A while," Judd says, nonchalant.

"Sorry mate," Jonny apologises, "I was at the pub and my missus turned up. I had to buy her a drink and then drive her home. Can't have her wandering the streets in weather like this, can I?"

"Definitely not," Judd says firmly, "Nice to see people looking after those who are important to them,"

"Well she's pretty much family ain't she?" Jonny says, "Gotta look after family. If you don't have family you ain't got nothing in this life,"

"True, true," Judd says.

They lapse in to silence for a while. Eventually Jonny stops shivering and he leans back in his seat, grinning over at Judd.

"So," he says slowly, "What are you after then?"

"A gun," Judd says slowly.



“Any particular make or model?” Jonny says, “You weren’t exactly particular in your texts.”

“Don’t really care,” Judd says with a shrug, “I just need to scare someone and show them I mean business. It doesn’t matter what kind of gun it is as long as it works.”

“Thought you might say that,” Jonny says with a sly smirk. He reaches in to his coat, “That’s why I brought this with me.”

He pulls a hand gun out of the inside coat pocket. It’s a dull grey colour, barely catching the light, but every inch of it is polished and spotless. Judd reaches out, hand shaking slightly, to take the weapon. He examines it in the low light in the car, light that only comes from the streetlights outside.

“Looks alright,” Judd says, “Does it work?”

“Course it bloody works,” Jonny says. “Don’t you wanna know the specifics?”

“Not particularly,” Judd says blankly, “I’m trying to send a message, not actually kill any one,”

“Well in that case this is the gun for you,” Jonny says firmly, “It’s big and scary and shoots ok but it’s range and accuracy over distance are a bit shit.”

“I’m not planning on using it,” Judd repeats, his voice firm, “I just need it to scare someone,”

“Whatever mate,” Jonny says, holding up his hands, “What you do with it once it’s yours is your business, not mine. Just don’t tell anyone that you got it from me.”

“I know the rules,” Judd snaps. He pockets the gun and nods at the glove box, “Money’s in the envelope. Three grand, just like you asked for.”

Jonny reaches in to the glove box and pulls out the white envelope that Judd put there earlier. He yanks out a wad of notes and flicks through them, counting with practised ease. He sits back and shuts the glove box, clearly satisfied.

“Pleasure doing business with you mate,” Jonny says, reaching over with one hand.

Judd takes it and shakes. Jonny doesn’t say another word. He just climbs from the car, letting in a blast of freezing air before he shuts the door. Judd leans forwards on the steering wheel and watches the man saunter over to his own car. Once Jonny’s in Judd starts the engine properly and drives away. He can feel the weight of the gun in his coat pocket, sitting heavily against his leg.

Jonny watches the Porsche drive away. His smile has dropped now and he looks down right sinister. He glares as the Porsche descends the exit ramp and enters the bowels of the car park. That Judd is too cocky for his own good. And for a bloke who went to university he isn’t exactly smart either. Jonny pulls out his phone and dials a number. It rings for a few moments.



“I don’t need any tools Jonny,” the voice on the other end says harshly. “I’m sorted with the one I’ve got already,”

“What about information?” Jonny asks, checking himself out in the rear view mirror, “I’ve got some of that for you.”

“What sort of information,” the voice asks, “And how much is it going to cost me?”

“Oh I’m giving you this one for free Obo,” Jonny says, “And it’s about your buddy Judd.”

There’s silence from the other end. Then scratching and scrambling sounds. Jonny can hear whispers and banging in the background. He smirks, knowing that he’s in with a good thing now and he did right calling Obo.

“What about him?” Obo eventually says,

“The guy just bought a gun off me,” Jonny says, “I thought you might like to know,”

“And you thought this was somehow important to me because...?” Obo says. Jonny knows that he’s trying to stay calm, pretend to be unbothered by the news but he can hear the shake and crack of anger in Obo’s voice.

“Come off it mate,” Jonny says, “I’m telling you this as a favour, no need to go all paranoid on me. Everyone knows you too are at loggerheads right now. I don’t wanna get caught in the middle so I thought I’d give you a heads up.”

“So Juddy boy bought a gun did he?” Obo says, “What sort?”

“Nothing good,” Jonny said, “I sold him some shitty old thing from the 50s. It’s a piece of crap for serious shooting but can do a fair bit of damage close up. It don’t have a thing on your Glock though.”

“Fine...” Obo says, “Thanks for the heads up,”

“No problem mate,” Jonny says, “I just hope you remember who your mates are when the time comes to repay them,”

“I owe you one,” Obo says, “I know. And you’ll get a reward for this, no worries,”

“Alright mate,” Jonny says, “As long as we’re agreed. I’ll catch you later, the missus is waiting up for us and she’s got the horn on at the mo,”

“Too much info,” Obo says although he sounds like he’s trying not to laugh.

“Take care of yourself,” Jonny says, “And watch out for Judd,”

Jonny hangs up the phone, tossing it on to the passenger seat. He starts his car engine at last and shivers as a jet of warm air blasts in to the car. He laughs to himself as he drives down the ramps, thinking only of his girlfriend and no thought goes to the trouble that he may have just caused for Farlow.



“That little fucker!” Obo shouts after he hangs up the phone.

He throws his mobile across the room. It slams in to the wall and shatters in to a shower of plastic, glass and metal. His gang members and lackeys look at him in shock, all conversation dies down. Obo is panting heavily, chest heaving and arms swaying as he breaths hard to try and control his anger.

“Boss...” one of Obo’s men asks quietly, “Boss, what’s wrong?”

“That little shit Judd,” Obo snarls, “The fucker’s only gone and bought a gun off Jonny hasn’t he?!”

“Shit,” the man says.

A low murmur of discontent flows through everyone in the renovated warehouse that Obo has made his home. No one knows what to say or do but all are unhappy with the news. Obo jerks to his feet and starts pacing, muttering under his breath. He’s fuming, practically vibrating with the strength of his anger.

“That little bastard don’t know when to quit does he?!” he snarls at one of his men, “First he tries to pretend like everything’s hunky dory even though Charlie’s done a runner. Then he gets pissy with me when I think things through and get in touch with Mr Big.”

“Don’t forget he tried to go behind your back Obo,” one of his other men shouts out.

“Yeah!” Obo snaps, “Yeah he did do that the wanker. Little shit thought he could pull one over on me didn’t he? Look how well that turned out. Mr Big thinks he’s a massive boner and he’s losing Right Stuff too.”

“But what’s he gonna do now boss?” the first of Obo’s men asks.

“Well him and his little bummer boys tried to gang up on me already,” Obo says. He slams his fist into his hand as he talks, “What’s to say he ain’t gonna try it again now he has a gun in his hand.”

“Shit,” the other man says, “What if he tries to kill you boss?”

“He probably will,” Obo says.

He pauses and kneels down to sniff some coke of the taut stomach of one of his men’s girlfriends. He stands up, sniffing and wiping his nose.

“Shit, he’s probably trying to kill me,” Obo says. “I know it man. Next time we meet, and he’s gonna wanna meet again because I scared the shit out of him last time. Next time we meet he’s gonna try and kill me. Then he’ll take over all of Farlow, just like he’s always wanted. He was too much of a pussy to take on Charlie. Now Charlie’s gone though he’s gonna take me out and take over. I know it. Why else would the fucker buy a gun? He don’t like guns, he won’t even let any of the i4i crew carry one. The only reason he’d actually have one was so that he could kill me with it.”

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“So what are you gonna do Obo?” asks another of his friends.

“Well it’s obvious innit?” Obo says, slumping in to a chair. He is met with a bunch of blank confused faces, “I’m gonna have to kill him first.”

Obo’s statement is met with cheers and shouting. Everyone seems to agree with him and the rabble descends into partying as music blares out. The rest of the evening is filled with music and the occasional silence as one of Obo’s runners comes in for a resupply. There’s no sign of Right Stuff though, even though Judd agreed to send him. Obo just sees that as another reason to get rid of the other man. Clearly he can’t be trusted to keep his word.



Chapter 25

Judd is lying on his bed, staring up at the ceiling. He really doesn't know what to do. It feels wrong to have the gun in his flat, well hidden as it is in his safe. He feels lost, restless. Normally he would call Reece when he feels like this but the betrayal of Reece leaving him is too fresh, too raw. Judd knows that if he calls they'll just end up raging and shouting at each other. Any chance of reconciliation would vanish thanks to whatever harsh words they might throw at each other. He wants to keep that chance of reconciliation open, his friendship with Reece goes too far back to just toss aside easily. So instead he's stuck in his flat, being bored.

He's tried to play Call of Duty already but his heart wasn't in it. By the third time that he got shot in the head and then tea bagged by the enemy team his own team was fed up with him and he was ordered to log out and get his head on right while someone else played in his place. He'd tried to play some of the zombie games but he couldn't focus and he kept making stupid mistakes that ended up with him staring at a graphic of some horrible zombie eating his avatar's corpse. He wouldn't even complain, he'd just sit there, watching it blankly, not even properly realising what was going on.

He needs to do something, talk to someone but doesn't know who. He considers calling Emmet but knows that he'll just want to come around and look at the newly acquired gun, maybe even want to take it to some deserted place and fire off a couple of shots. He's too blood thirsty for his own good sometimes. Judd shudders and glances outside.

He jolts upright and stares out of the window. It's getting dark already and the streetlights are coming on. A glance at the clock tells him that it's later than he expected. When he had first collapsed on the bed it was barely mid afternoon. He has been staring at the ceiling for hours. Judd's stomach grumbles and he climbs to his feet, stretching out the kinks in his body from staying in the same position for too long. He tosses a ready meal into the microwave and starts making a cup of tea. When he's putting the milk back into the fridge and shutting the door he notices a scrap of paper with a series of numbers on it. He takes it down and looks at it closely. It's Connie's number and he remembers her giving it to him. Maybe he could call her.

He had enjoyed their last conversation, or rather debate. Their time together had flown by and he had actually regretted when it had been time to say good bye. For those short minutes in his car he had managed to forget that he was anything other than a regular guy, he had forgotten that he is Judd the drug dealer and boss of a third of Farlow. He had felt normal, like a student having a regular conversation. He had really enjoyed that feeling. Judd stares at the paper in his hand, thumb gently tracing the looping letters.



He doesn't know how long he is standing there but at some point his phone appears in his hand and he starts dialling the numbers.

"Hello Connie speaking?" a soft voice says.

Judd swallows, unsure of what to say for a change.

"Hello?" Connie says quietly, "Is anyone there? Sam is this you? I told you to leave me alone!"

Judd can hear her muttering under her breath and suddenly realises that he needs to say something before she hangs up and ignores his number forever.

"Hi Connie! It's Judd," he says quickly, "How are you?"

"Judd... Judd," Connie says, thinking, "Judd... Oh college right?!"

"Yeah..." he says, hesitant now. He thought that she liked him but hearing her unsure about him he wonders whether it has just been all in his mind. "I gave you a lift home when your car died after class,"

"Oh yes!" Connie says. Her voice sounds friendlier, "Sorry, I have so many classes and I tend to give my students nicknames. I very rarely think of them by their real names. I do remember you now though, no worries.... Judd."

"What was my nickname?" he asks, leaning against the counters in his kitchen.

"Wouldn't you like to know," Connie says, sounding coy.

Judd can just imagine the smug, teasing look that is probably on her face and a jolt of desire to see it for himself runs through him.

"So what's up?" Connie asks brightly, "Not that I'm not happy to hear from you of course. I've been looking forward to your call. I just figured that you'd be with mates or something this time of night and... I'm rambling aren't I?"

"Yeah, a bit," Judd says with a laugh. "I was remembering that debate we had, the chat in the car. And I found myself wanting some proper adult conversation like that again."

"Oh!" Connie says, "I really enjoyed it too. Did you want to go for a drink or something?"

"Actually..." Judd says. He hesitates, worrying that what he's about to ask is a little too forward. "I was kind of wondering if I could come round to yours and we could have that coffee and talk that you mentioned last time."

"Of course you can!" Connie says quickly, "Please, come round as soon as you can,"

"Ok," Judd says, a smile spreading across his face, "I'll be right round."

Judd hangs up and quickly gets to his feet. He turns to his wardrobe and looks through his clothes. For some reason he wants to make a good impression on Connie, a



better impression than he has so far. He finally decides on an outfit and gets changed. Moments later the door of his flat clicks shut and he's making his way to the car park.

Connie stares at her wardrobe, looking at all of her clothes. She finds herself liking Judd more and more. She knows that it's unprofessional, that being attracted to one of her students is wrong but she can't help it. To be fair she's never cared for those moral rules that govern the college and tends to ignore them when she wants to. She's dressed provocatively before, tried to tempt him in when he gave her that lift home but it didn't seem to work. She wonders whether she needs to try a different approach. This is all new ground for her, completely new. Most guys come running to her, chase her for her attention. But now she is having to do the chasing, she is having to pursue Judd. She wonders whether he would like to see her wearing something more comfortable and casual, wonders whether that would work better than clothes that show of her legs and body.

As she flicks through her clothes she remembers Judd's response to her clothes last time. He had certainly kept looking at her, had kept staring at her legs and breasts. He had certainly liked them and her body, he couldn't keep his eyes off her, she had seen his body's reaction to her. It was hard to miss to be fair, that large bulge that kept growing at his crotch. But he hadn't made a move, hadn't responded to her flirting or anything. She wondered what would make him respond better this time. Eventually she decides and slips on a casual wrap dress that is warm and figure hugging. Her dress is a deep burgundy colour, woollen and wraps around her body. She slides black tights over her legs and pops on a pair of fluffy socks.

The intercom chimes as she's touching up her make-up and when she answers she hears Judd's voice. She smiles as she buzzes him in and then returns to the mirror. A quick layer of lip gloss and a fluff of her hair finishes her look. By the time that Judd is knocking on her apartment door she's ready and opens the door with a wide smile.

"Hey," she says softly.

"Hi," Judd says.

He stands there, shifting from one leg to another and looking at the floor.

"Come in," she says, stepping back and waving a hand towards her apartment.

It doesn't take long for the couple to settle themselves on opposite ends of the sofa and start discussing everything that comes to mind.

"I can't believe that you're all for vengeance," Connie says at one point. "I would have thought that with everything going on with your dad that you'd want to trust in the justice system to work for you rather than taking it in your own hands,"

"How'd you know about my dad?" Judd asks, confused.



“You told me,” Connie says with a smile, “Last time in the car. You explained about your dad being in court because he attacked a kid who shoplifted,”

“I don’t remember,” Judd says, frowning. Then he smiles a little embarrassed, “Then again I don’t remember everything that we talked about. It sort of blended together,”

“Same here,” Connie says with a shy smile, catching Judd’s eyes, “So how are things with your dad?”

“They’re ok,” Judd says with a sigh, “He’s still in court and his insistence, that he was getting justice for a wrong done to him and trying to teach others a lesson in case they were thinking about trying something, is not doing him much good. He gets a bit worked up and scary when he’s on a rant,”

“My dad gets the same,” Connie says, her smile growing, “Do you think it’s going to be ok though?”

“I’m not sure,” Judd admits eventually. His eyes are tear filled and his hands shake, “We thought that things were going well but then he went on a rant and the jury turned away from him a bit. At least that’s what Sally thinks and the lawyers say. I’m going to go to the trial, just for the last few days.”

“That’s not going to be easy for you,” Connie says quietly, “Are you sure you’re up for it,”

“I have to go,” Judd says. His voice breaks a little, “He’s my dad. I’d hate myself forever if I wasn’t there for him,”

“I know,” Connie says. She reaches out and squeezes his hand for a few moments before drawing back, “I’m sure that your dad will be grateful for you being there. It’ll probably cheer him up so much,”

“We’ll see,” Judd says. He looks away, pensive for a moment, “I just hope things go ok. I don’t know what’s going to happen to everyone if he ends up locked away. It’d break Sally’s heart.”

“I’m so sorry Judd,” she says quietly, gently reaching out and wrapping her fingers around his hand, “But that’s what I’m talking about. You’ve seen for yourself that vengeance doesn’t work. Not in a civilised society. Your dad is the one that’s got into trouble, not the one who did the original crime. Doesn’t that tell you something?”

“It tells me my dad’s part of civilised society and forgot that fact,” Judd says firmly, “But vengeance works sometimes and it is an important part of some people’s lives.”

“Like yours?” Connie asks.



Judd looks at her sharply. She's just looking at him, her face blank and expressionless. He can't even see her brain working behind her eyes, she's just looking right at him. It feels like her gaze is penetrating his very soul. He looks away.

"What do you mean?" he asks quietly.

"Judd," she says quietly, putting her hand on his again, "I'm not a total idiot. I figured out you were involved in something possibly illegal. You're too set and firm on vengeance and revenge. The only way for you to think those things are important is if you were part of an uncivilised society. And the only way you could be part of one of those is if you're doing something illegal."

"You're not just a pretty face," Judd says. He can't help but be impressed, not even his dad figured it out, "Does it bother you?"

"Not particularly." Connie says with a shrug. "I suppose it's up to you what you do with your life. I mean, I can't understand why someone as smart and talented as you would be involved in crime but its just one of those things I suppose."

"It's a way of life," Judd says with a shrug, "It's just something I got in to, started doing just to make money and then I realised that I was actually really good at it. And in my world we have our own justice. We right our own wrongs, take revenge on those who hurt us and have our own rules. We stick to those rules and punish those who break them."

"Sounds brutal," Connie says, her voice quiet and a little sad, "I can't imagine living in that sort of world. Doesn't it scare you?"

"Sometimes," Judd admits quietly, shifting and getting closer to Connie. "But most of the time I stick to the rules and make sure that everyone else does as well."

"And if they don't you take vengeance right?" Connie asks. Judd looks at her confused, "I noticed the tattoo on your arm. 'Vengeance is mine'?"

"Oh," Judd says.

He looks at the tattoo on his arm, rubbing the fading words. He remembers the sharp pain that had covered his skin when he had gotten it done. But it is important to him, it covers every thing that he believes in with a few simple words, it encompasses everything that his dad has taught over the years. It is the rules of his world in one sentence. He remembers hearing it somewhere, sometime, and the words had stuck in his mind. It had made sense to get those words marked on his body when he decided to take that step.

"You realise that's from the Bible right?" Connie asks. He looks at her, "It is. And it wasn't said by a mortal man. It's a saying that apparently came from the mouth of God. It means that no one can avenge the wrongs done to them. The only one who can bring



vengeance down on people is God himself, no one else. And he does it during their ultimate judgement at the gates of Heaven or the doors of Hell.”

“Wow,” Judd says, raising his eyebrows and staring at the words. He runs his hand over them. “I didn’t realise that.”

Connie laughs. Judd glares at her, not pleased that his confusion and surprise is so amusing to her. He can feel that heat bubbling up inside him. He purses his lips, drawing them in to a firm line and looks away. He breathes deeply, trying to fight down the rage.

“Sorry,” Connie says eventually, “I just thought you knew that, is all,”

Judd just grunts and ignores her for a moment.

“So... what crime do you do?” she asks out of the blue. Judd stares at her in surprise, “Oh, oh, oh, let me guess!”

“Fine,” Judd says, rolling his eyes, “Guess away,”

“Are you a hired thug?” Connie asks, “Actually no, that’s a silly idea, what am I saying. You’re not big and muscley enough for that. Hired thugs generally look like man shaped gorillas, not like they should be playing football or cricket.”

Judd laughs.

“Ok, second guess,” Connie says. “Are you a... assassin? You’re slim enough and smart enough to plan killings. And I bet you’re patient too, I think you’d be able to sit for ages waiting for your chance at the target,”

Judd shakes his head.

“Wrong idea,” Connie says, nodding, “Right, new idea. You’re a mafia boss,”

“No!” Judd says with a loud laugh. “Next guess,”

“Are you... a drug mule?” Connie asks. Judd smirks and waves his hand from side to side. “Ok... you’re not a drug mule. Are you a runner?”

“Warmer,” Judd says slowly, “You’re getting warmer,”

“Ok,” Connie says happily, “You’re involved with drugs,” Judd nods slowly, “Are you a minion?” Judd shakes his head, “Are you one of the people that are like second in command?” Again Judd waves his hand from side to side. She jumps up and down excitedly as another idea occurs to her, “Oh. Oh. Oh. Are you the one that’s actually in charge?! Do you run the entire thing?”

Judd doesn’t say anything. Instead he smiles a little.

“You are, aren’t you?” Connie says. She laughs and claps her hands together. “You’re like a drug lord!”

“Correct,” Judd says, nodding solemnly, acknowledging her success.

“Oh my god!” Connie says. “You’re one of the Lords of Farlow aren’t you?!”

“That’s what they’re calling us?!” Judd asks in disbelief, “The Lords of Farlow? Who on earth came up with that?”



“Don’t know,” Connie says with a nonchalant shrug, “It’s just something that started going around and it sort of stuck. I can’t believe you’re one of the Lords of Farlow. This is surreal. I’m sat in my living room, talking with one of the Lords of Farlow,”

“Hold on a moment,” Judd says quickly, holding up a hand, “How do you know about the three of us?”

“Erm...” Connie hesitates for a moment. “Well I like to do a little bit of coke from time to time, just at parties and nights out and stuff like that. It’s fun to have a good time with,”

“Can’t deny that,” Judd says with a sly smirk. “It’s a fun time thing indeed,”

“You take it?!” Connie asks sharply, “You diddle in your own supply? Is that allowed?”

“You seem surprised,” Judd says.

“Well I am,” Connie says with a shrug, “I thought that it was some unspoken law that you don’t take from your own supply.”

“I am the boss,” Judd said, smirking, “I can pick and choose if I touch my supply. It’s not like I’m a complete coke-head or anything. I just use it now and then when I need a pick me up or I’m partying.”

“I know what you mean,” Connie said quietly, “I have to admit, I do like to do it now and again. Not often but just sometimes,”

Judd looks at her, a little shocked. Then he grins and reaches in to his jacket pocket, twisting in his seat. When he turns back he has a mischievous smile on his face. He holds up a clear plastic baggy with a fair portion of white powder inside. He wiggles it enticingly. Connie looks at it, a little surprised before she smiles slyly. Judd doesn’t say anything, he just leans forward towards the table and starts to lay out few lines for them to enjoy together. There’s not much left in the baggy once he’s done. They start to snort the coke up their noses and when they’re done Connie quickly puts a film on. They sit back and relax.

Connie can’t help but keep sneaking glances at Judd as they watch the film together. She’s surprised that he decided to come round to hers. She had gotten the feeling from him that he wasn’t really interested in women in general, not from lack of attraction, but from his drive to achieve something greater in life. She felt like he worked to look past other people and just focus on his goals. It must be a lonely existence for him, she figured, just switching between work with the drugs and his studying. She wonders if there was any more that was holding him back. The fact that he had actually decided to ignore that determination and actually come round touched something inside her.



The thought makes her heart skip a little and her stomach flutters. She can only remember feeling that sensation once before, back when she had been at University, about twelve years ago. She had felt it when she had started to fall in love with her first boyfriend, the man who had broken her heart. The idea of seeing Judd had sent her heart racing and her stomach jumping all over the place. And as she looks at Judd that feeling bursts in her again.

Then again the fact that she finds him attractive isn't really that much of a surprise to her. She's always been attracted to men who seem to be aloof, keeping themselves above others, men who have that air of arrogance to them that suggests that they feel that they are better than others and actually have a reason to feel that. Those sorts of men never seem to recognise the beauty on the outside and the inside of her, they just looked past her. That sort of arrogance sends her blood boiling in a good way, the lack of interest tends to make the men actually like their true selves. Most guys who are interested in Connie for just one reason and they tend to know they need to act a certain way to impress her, or rather they think that they do. It never works. The aloof men don't do that though, they don't feel like they need to act a certain way to impress her so they're themselves. And that's what she likes.

She can't figure Judd out though, can't understand what exactly it is that motivates him or why he stays in the drug business. The question keeps racing through her head, building her up with a burning desire to know the truth, the secrets that Judd is keeping so completely hidden.

"I don't get you," she finally says as the question and the need for answers becomes too much.

The film's credits are playing on the screen and she's surprised to realise that she barely saw any of it. She can't tell anyone what happened in it, at any point.

"What do you mean?" he asks, looking at her, "There's nothing to get,"

"Yes there is," Connie says, giggling, "There's totally more to you than you're showing. I mean, look, you're clearly smart, way smarter than most people in your line of work and yet you keep doing it."

"Because I need the money," Judd says shrugging, "Doing a law course doesn't exactly come cheap and I like my independence. Until I become an actual lawyer I'm going to take that money any way that I can."

"But it's so dangerous," Connie exclaims, "I mean... you've probably seen already that revenge just keeps escalating with each person that gets involved. Don't you worry that you'll get hurt? Don't you wonder whether one day you're going to make the wrong choice and piss off the wrong person? Revenge escalates, it gets stronger and stronger and there's no way of stopping it once it starts really getting going."

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“Connie,” Judd says carefully. He twists and takes her hands in his gently, “I respect you, I really do, but you really have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Connie looks at him for a moment, her eyes starting to sparkle as they fill with tears. He realises that perhaps he was a little harsher than he meant to be but he couldn’t help it. Here is a woman, clearly smart, unarguably beautiful and who sometimes dabbles in drugs, and yet she is trying to lecture him about the morality of his career choice and actions.

And she doesn’t know what she’s talking about, Judd realises as he drives home later that evening. She’s not really a part of his world, even if she does dabble occasionally. She doesn’t really know him or why he does what he does. There’s no way he’s going to explain to her that he deals drugs because it’s what he knows, it’s easy and because he doesn’t want to end up like his father. He wants to be his own man, run his own life and right now he can only do that through dealing. She doesn’t understand that watching his dad come home day after day, too exhausted to even finish his dinner, made Judd know that he didn’t want to be stuck in some regular job like everyone else. He is the one who has to be in control of his life, he is the one who calls the shots on whether or not he makes any money. Every penny that he has, he has gained through his own hard work and the business skills that he learnt at university. There’s no way that Connie can understand this without understanding him. And he isn’t ready to let her see that part of himself yet. It’s possible he may never be ready.



Chapter 26

Judd walks in to the courthouse and feels instantly on edge. There are police everywhere, some in uniform and some in plain clothes. Even though they're wearing the clothes of ordinary people, as though they're just viewers in the courtroom Judd can tell that they aren't. It's something about the way that they're walking, talking and standing still, there's something in the way that they look around the court room's entrance lobby, it all marks them as police officers. There are lawyers wandering around too, talking in small groups of two or three, some walking intently towards courtrooms as they clutch piles of folders and briefcases in their arms. And then there are the people involved in the cases themselves. They have a tightness to their expression, a worn down look that suggests that they're under a great deal of stress regardless of which side of the case that they're on.

Judd has chosen his most fashionable suit, the suit that shows his figure without being too ostentatious. It's the suit Asif always encourages him to wear to weddings and the few funerals that they've had to attend together. It's the same suit that he wore when he went to his college interview, the one that he had to go to in order to be allowed to study his conversion law course. As he looks around and watches the lawyers hurrying to and fro he remembers why he is taking the course, what it is that he's taking the course. It's for this, the ability to attend course and carry out justice on behalf of those who can't do it for themselves. Judd pauses in the middle of the lobby and looks around. He knows why he's here, what he's come to do.

Within seconds of looking around he spots Sally. She's stood there, her arms wrapped around herself. She looks exhausted, on the very edge of her sanity. Her hair is styled, just as it always is, but he can see the neglect that she's been putting herself through. The roots have grown out, the grey that she works so hard to cover with blonde dye have begun to appear at last, creating a rough ring of grey and brown around her head. She's looking down, barely looking around at all. Her eyes have great bags under them, barely covered by her make up. Then she looks up and catches sight of him. A smile passes over her face and Judd realises for a moment why Asif married her. The smile makes her look a little less tired, a little younger. But it doesn't reach her eyes.

He walks towards her and is almost immediately grabbed in a hug. She squeezes him to her tightly, almost a little too tightly. He wraps his arms around her and hugs her back. She holds him for a long time, he can feel her shaking against him and he tightens his grip. She buries her face in his chest and he can feel a slowly growing patch of dampness on the front of his shirt. She's crying.



“Hey,” he says softly, pulling her away from him, “Hey now, what’s wrong Sally?”

“I’m sorry Judd,” she says, wiping away the tears and swallowing heavily. “I don’t know what came over me.”

“I think you’re allowed to have a moment,” Judd says kindly, “I can’t even begin to imagine what you’re going through and it’s totally fine to have a little cry now and then,”

“Thank you,” Sally says with a smile, although it is shaky and still doesn’t meet her eyes, “I just... I guess it’s just all been quite a lot for me to handle. You’re here now though, I’m not alone.”

“No, you’re not,” Judd says firmly, “You’re never alone, you know that don’t you? If you need my help all that you need to do is ask,”

“I don’t want to bother you,” Sally says, “I’m coping alright, not too much stress. It’s just the worry about your dad, not the shop, that’s getting to me a little. I just want you to focus on your studies, we both do,”

“Ok,” Judd says. He pulls her back in to another hug, “Ok. Just ring me if you need to talk though, any time.”

Sally opens her mouth, about to reply when Asif’s name is called out. She freezes for a moment and then looks sharply towards the court room doors.

“We can talk later,” Judd says.

He steps away from her and puts his hand on her shoulder. He steers her around, towards the courtroom.

“Let’s go and check on Dad,” he says.

They walk together, side by side, into the court room, down the aisle of seats. They take a seat and watch everyone else walk in. The doors close with a heavy thud and the case begins.

The beginning of the trial seems to be a recap of everything that has been talked about already, the arguments that had been made and where each side stood. It seems that Judd has missed most of the trial and he wishes that he hadn’t. If he had been there he may have been able to stop Asif from ranting about teaching the shoplifter a lesson. But he has been busy, with his studies and with everything that is going on with Charlie and Obo and he thought that his dad would be ok. He is here now though, now that he’s discovered how bad things could be for Asif and he hopes that his presence will be enough to keep his dad a little calmer than he has been.

“We’re on closing speeches today,” Sally whispers to him, “The jury will be leaving today to deliberate on their decision. So right now the lawyers are making a final attempt to sway them their way.”



“Will Dad get a chance to talk?” Judd whispers back, “Will the judge let him after last time?”

“I think so,” She whispers back. “The lawyers said-”

She’s brought to a stop by a sharp glare from the judge. He looks at them with distaste. The lawyers don’t seem to notice though, the prosecution just keeps talking and talking. Judd notices that the jury seem to be nodding and agreeing with what the lawyers are saying. A thread of fear works its way up his spine. It may be that Asif won’t win like they’ve all been thinking and expecting.

“Defence may address the court,” the judge says solemnly.

Judd looks up sharply, he hasn’t even realised that the prosecution was done with their discussion. Now it was the turn of the defence and maybe his father will get a chance to talk.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the jury,” their lawyer says, bowing to the jury, “Your honour. I would like to call the defendant to the stand, one more time and allow him to explain what it was that motivated him to take the actions that he took,”

There’s a small smattering of applause from the gallery as Asif walks to the stand. He coughs and clears his throat for a few moments. He looks at Judd, catching sight of him at last and he smiles gently. Finally he turns to look at the jury.

“I.. um, I,” he stammers for a few moments, “I’m not proud of what I did, of how badly I hurt that boy. I am ashamed of how badly I hurt him. But I just want to make you understand why I did what I did. I was trying to teach him a lesson, teach him that stealing is wrong. Because it is wrong and everyone knows it and still that boy chose to steal from me. He and his friends, they all know that they should not steal from people and yet they do. I wanted to make sure that he and his friends, the other boys and men and girls and women who might try to steal from me in the future would know that they shouldn’t. They have to know that it is a bad idea to try and cross me and steal from my shop.”

“And why was that so important?” the lawyer says, “Why do you want to send them a message to leave you alone? Was the value of the item really so much that it would have caused you serious financial difficulty?”

“No,” Asif admits, proudly almost, “But I have seen this happen to other shop keepers, like myself, who run their own small business with no help from anyone else. If there is one person stealing from you then another will follow. They may not steal very expensive items but if lots of people are stealing from you over time it can add up and you can lose a lot of money. For a shopkeeper, for small business owners like myself, that can be very damaging for business and for my livelihood.”



“And you are a small business owner aren’t you?” the lawyer says, “You speak to other shop keepers don’t you? Share information? Share news? Can you tell the court how hard you may or may not work to keep your shop running? What it is that your shop means to you besides a way of making money?”

“I work very hard,” Asif says, “I have worked very hard since I was old enough to work. My father ran the shop before me, he bought it for us when he just arrived in England from Pakistan. He used it to make friends with the people nearby, to get to know the people that we were living amongst. He would push me to go to school, to study hard and to see if I could do more with my life. But I was not really made for school and for studying. So when I left school I worked for my father and eventually took over from him. He gave me the shop when he reached his sixtieth birthday and I have run it ever since,”

“So your shop is a family business?” the lawyer asks, “It has strong emotional ties for you? It isn’t just a way to make money?”

“Oh no!” Asif cries, “It is almost like a family member. I have seen more of that shop than I have of anyone else. I work hard to make my shop a place where everyone can come to buy things and to talk to each other. Many of the people who shop there have done so since I was just a small boy.”

“So it’s a hub of the community?” the lawyer asks. Asif nods. “How did you feel when someone, the boy in question, tried to steal from you?”

“I was angry,” Asif says slowly, “I was very angry. But I was also hurt. I felt betrayed. I have known that boy since he was just a baby. I used to give him a lolly when he came in with his grandmother. And then he has turned around to do that to me. He has stolen from me, stolen from my family and from the place that has been good to him all these years. I could not believe that he had done it and I was so very angry.”

“There we have it,” the lawyer says, holding an arm out towards Asif. “We have a man who wanted to protect not just his livelihood but a centre of the community. The shop is not just a business, it is a way of life for this family and for the people all around. And it was hurt, betrayed by someone who was a part of it. Would any of you not act the same if it were your home that were threatened? Your family that was betrayed? I ask you to think about that ladies and gentlemen of the jury, as you make your decision.”

Judd sits back and watches, only half listening as the prosecution ask a few more questions. He has never realised how much the shop means to his father. He thought it was just a quirk of Asif’s personality, an oddity that was a remnant of his time in Pakistan. Judd had never known that it was the way that Asif and his grandparents had become a part of English life, that it was what had helped them to make themselves a new home in England. Suddenly, with this news, Judd understands why his father was so firm



with him, so determined to make sure that he could run the shop if he needed to and why Asif always insisted that they protect the shop and make sure that no one steals from it. The shop is as much a part of their family as Sally or himself is. Now his father's lessons about justice and vengeance are beginning to make much more sense to him.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury," the judge begins.

Judd looks up sharply. He had not even realised that the prosecution had finished their final questions. He leans forward, listening intensely to what the judge has to say.

"I know that many of you will understand now the motivations for the defendant's actions," the judge continues to say, "But I ask you to also bear in mind these facts. This was the young man's first offence against him. The manner of the offence was minor, at best. I feel that Asif's actions in this crime were grossly out of proportion to the offence that was perpetrated against him. He beat this boy, in cold blood, for stealing a bottle of alcohol. Now do not think that I condone underage drinking, far from it, but I also feel that this was a very minor offence and did not warrant the viciousness of the attack that was then carried out. Asif," the judge looks right at Judd's father, "Here in England we trust in our justice system, we trust that the police will come when called to protect us. But you did not even call them. They did not fail you because you did not even go to them for help. Instead you took justice in to your own hands and mercilessly assaulted a minor for stealing a fairly minute item. And then you attempted to defend yourself by claiming that you were trying to send a message. But you went too far, this young man was hospitalised by your actions, by your temper and you have never truly apologised for what you have done. You did not even allow the justice system to get involved and now you are paying the price. I now dismiss the jury to make their decision on the charges being held against the defendant and your suggestions on sentencing."

The jury nod and file out. The door shuts behind them with an ominous and final sounding thud. The judge turns back to Asif and the gallery of people.

"Sir," the judge says, "I will warn you now that if you are found guilty you should expect a very long jail sentence. You carried out a vicious and malicious attack, far out of proportion to the wrong that was done to you. You carried out this attack on a seventeen year old boy. Teenagers do not have the full brain capacity yet developed to understand the consequences of their actions and yet you assaulted this young man, this minor, so fiercely that he spent several weeks in hospital. I take a very dim view on violence against children, and yes, that is what the young man is, and I will not be lenient on you. Court is dismissed until the jury reach a verdict."

"All rise for the Honourable Judge," the speaker calls out.

Everyone rises to their feet as the judge walks away, out of the courtroom. Then, talking in hushed voices, everyone else walks away. Judd and Sally stand there, waiting and



watching as a police officer goes up to Asif and reattaches a pair of handcuffs. Asif looks at them, tears in his eyes as he is led out of the courtroom through a different door. Judd puts his arm around Sally's shoulders as she sobs quietly. He leads her out of the courtroom and deposits her on a nearby bench. He crouches down in front of her and hands her a tissue that was hiding in his pocket.

"I've got to go and make a few phone calls," he says quietly, "Will you be ok until I get back,"

Sally nods and sniffs, dabbing at her wet eyes with the already damp tissue. Judd nods, smiles tightly before he stands up and walks away. He's out on the courthouse steps before he even realises it. There are a few journalists scattered around, some photographers are fiddling with their cameras. It's clear that they have no idea who he is or that the jury had gone out to make their decision. If the journalists and paparazzi knew who Judd was he would be surrounded in an instant. Judd glances at them as he pulls out his phone. Then, while he scrolls through, looking for the right number, he edges away until they're almost out of sight. He holds the ringing phone up to his ear.

"Hello?" the voice on the other end says.

"Reece," Jud says after a second or two, "I'm at the courthouse, the jury are deliberating at the minute,"

"Jeeze Judd!" Reece cries, "You should have said something, I would have come with you,"

"No mate," Judd says, his tone a little harsh, "There's no point. I've not had to say anything and I'm still way too pissed off with you to see you,"

"But you rang me?" Reece asks, confused.

"For my dad's sake," Judd says, "I know you love him, almost as much as I do. It's only right that you know what's going on. I figured I may as well tell you now while we're waiting to hear."

"Take your mind off it," Reece says, "I get it."

They say nothing to each other for a few moments, the silence between them stretching out. It's strange and unusual and awkward for Judd. Normally he and Reece can't stop talking to each other. But he wants to scream and shout at Reece for leaving him, even though now really isn't the time. So instead of saying what he feels he's saying nothing at all. He knows that the moment he opens his mouth he'll start yelling and screaming all



the words that he wants to say to his once friend. And now isn't the time at all. He needs to be calm, he needs to be collected, for Sally. And he can't do that if he's just screamed at his friend.

"Are you still going ahead with your plan then?" Reece asks suddenly, "Are you still going to try and take Obo on, head to head,"

"I don't want to talk about it," Judd snaps harshly, "You're out and it's none of your business now. I just wanted to fill you in about my dad,"

"Ok, ok," Reece says softly. Judd can practically see the other man holding up his hands in defence, "Give my love to Sally when you see her."

"I will do," Judd says

"Oh and Judd?" Reece says,

"Yeah?" Judd replies,

"Take care of yourself," Reece says.

The line goes dead and Judd stares at the phone in his hand. He can see the journalists moving around out of the corner of his eye. Something must be happening, he realises.

He puts the phone back in his pocket and hurries inside. Sally is still where he left her but she's standing now, looking towards the doors to the courtroom and back towards the entrance. A look of relief flashes across her face when she sees Judd jogging over.

"What's going on?" he asks her quietly, "Have you heard anything?"

"The jury have made their decision," she says quietly, "They're ready for us to come back in,"

Judd steps up beside her and holds out his arm. She gently loops her arm through his and they slowly make their way in to the courtroom. People stand aside as they pass, watching them, their eyes full of judgement. Judd fights down the sudden surge of anger that fills him when he sees the expression in their eyes. Instead of saying or doing anything like he wants to he just keeps staring straight ahead.

"All rise for the Judge presiding," the court clerk calls out.

The room rustles as everyone climbs to their feet. The judge walks through a door at the back of the court, his sombre robes dark against the lighter wood panelling on the walls. The jury have already filed in, Judd watched them as they walked in, searching for



some sign of what they had decided. He hadn't been able to spot anything though. The people in the gallery sit down again as the judge takes his seat and bangs on the gavel a few times. Silence falls as Asif is led in. He's wearing a crumpled suit and the handcuffs shine brightly as they catch the light of the courtroom. Beside him Judd hears Sally sob slightly and puts an arm around her shoulder without looking away from his father. Asif glances over his shoulder at them and nods to Judd slowly. He takes his seat beside his lawyers.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the judge says firmly, "We are here today discover the Jury's opinion on the charges laid out before this man. Chairwoman of the Jury, please stand,"

A middle aged woman in a bright pink dress suit stands up. She looks terrified and is clutching tightly onto the cards in her hands. She nods to the judge.

"On the charge of grievous bodily harm against a minor," the judge says, "How do you find the defendant?"

"We find the defendant guilty," the chairwoman says quietly.

"On the charge of vigilantism," the judge says, "How do you find the defendant?"

"We find the defendant guilty," she says again.

"And on the charge of assault with the intent to cause serious harm," the judge asks one last time, "How do you find the defendant?"

"We find the defendant," the chairwoman says. She pauses for a moment, "Guilty."

Sally cries out, her voice sounding like her heart is breaking. Asif looks towards them, his face full of worry. Judd grabs Sally and drags her close to him, holding her against his chest as she sobs. The entire courtroom is filled with whispers and talking at the revelation of the verdict. Some of the people in the gallery, the ones who know Asif, who have known him for years have leapt to their feet and are shouting at the people of the Jury, and at the judge. The judge bangs his gavel on the stand.

"Order!" he shouts, "Order! Order in court,"

The room quickly falls silent and some of the more outspoken viewers sit down once more. Eventually everything is calm once more although Sally is still sobbing in Judd's arms. Judd looks up at the judge, clutching tightly to his stepmother.

"Would the defendant rise" the judge says firmly.

Asif does as he is told. He stands upright, tall and proud, looking the judge straight in the eyes. Judd feels a flicker of pride run through him as he watches his father's honourable approach to the judge's decision.

"Asif," the judge says again, "You have been found guilty of all charges. You will now be sentenced. I will take my time deciding on your sentence. I advise that you take

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this time to say your final goodbyes to your loved ones. Your sentence will not be short. I intend to make it a very long sentence. You have committed a violent and life threatening assault, you have done so against an individual who is, in the eyes of the law, still a child, you carried out this assault without a second thought and you have taken the law in to your own hands. Any one of these would see you spending many years in prison but all together they are an even greater charge. I intend to sentence you for a long time. Court is dismissed to await sentencing,”

The silence rings in Judd’s ears as he mechanically stands while the judge leaves the room. Sally is crying harder against his chest and he sees Asif look at him again. There are tears in his eyes now, his father looks terrified and heartbroken as his eyes drop to look at his sobbing wife. Judd fights back the hot prickling of tears that are gathering in his eyes. He sniffs. All around him and Sally the people are slowly filing out of the courtroom, talking amongst themselves. He needs to talk to his father, he decides.



Chapter 27

Judd sits at the table in the sterile room. There's a mirror on one wall, bright against the dull grey of the concrete bricks. He taps his fingers on the table, following a random rhythm that's appeared in his head. He doesn't know where the tune has come from, or what it is, but it's stuck there and as he waits he can't keep his fingers still. He knows that there are people on the other side of the glass, watching probably. He doesn't like being cooped up, he hates having people look at him, especially when he can't see it. The door creaks open. Judd looks up.

Asif is led into the room by a police officer who gently undoes the cuffs around the older man's wrists. He nods to Asif and steps out of the room, drawing the door shut as he goes. Asif watches the door close and when the sound of the click of the lock echoes through the room he rushes forwards and wraps his arms around Judd. Judd freezes for a moment before he hugs his father back. He feels the thin muscles beneath his dad's clothing, the almost fragile feeling bones of Asif's body and for the first time he realises that his father is now shorter than him. There's still strength in Asif's arms though, he almost breaks a few of Judd's ribs as he squeezes his son so tightly.

Eventually though they break apart and take separate seats on either side of the table. Asif rests his hands on the table top, clasped together and leaning on his elbows. Judd copies the pose and leans closer to his dad.

"Are they treating you ok?" he asks quietly.

"Of course they are," Asif scoffs, "This is England not Guantanamo Bay. They're very polite and respectful."

"Well that's good," Judd says.

He looks away, he just doesn't know what to say to his father. A hand on his brings his attention back.

"There's something that I need you to do for me Judd," Asif says solemnly

"Of course!" Judd says, "I'll do anything that you need me to, just name it,"

"I need you to look after Sally for me," his father says, "I don't know how long I'm going to be away for but I need you to look after Sally while I'm gone. I need to know that she's safe, protected and cared for while I'm not there to do it. You're the only one I trust to make sure that she's ok,"

"Of course I'll look after her," Judd says, squeezing his father's hands, "You know she's like a mother to me. I'd never just ignore her, especially not with you gone."

"Good, good," Asif says, nodding. He looks at Judd and smiles fondly, "I know she seems like a strong woman and she is, but she is vulnerable sometimes. She needs to know that help is there when she needs it. Sometimes you'll need to force the help on her,



her pride can get in the way and stop her asking for help from time to time. I need to know that someone who knows her almost as well as I do will be there to help her. She's got no one else, all of her family's on the other side of the country. I'm all she's got, me and you, that's her family."

"Dad," Judd says firmly, looking at his father, "I would never ignore Sally or abandon her. I love her to bits, she's been like a mother to me since you first met her. I don't think I could live with myself if I just left her."

"Do you promise?" Asif asks, shaking his son's hands in his, "Please, promise me you'll look after her."

"I promise that I will look after Sally, Dad," Judd replies, "I promise that I will do everything that I can to help her until you come back."

"Good," Asif says.

He lets Judd's hands go and sits back. He looks away but Judd knows him well enough to know when he is thinking. And whatever Asif is thinking it's a very big topic.

"Ok," Judd finally says as the moment of silence stretches on more than is comfortable, "What's on your mind?"

"I was wrong," Asif says with a sigh, "Retribution, justice, we don't carry it out. We have to allow others to carry it out for us."

Asif leans forward and stares at Judd intently.

"I need you to learn from my mistakes Judd," Asif says solemnly, "I need you to look at what has happened to me and take a different path. I thought that the only way to keep our family safe was to create my own system of justice. But I was wrong. I almost killed that boy, all for a bottle of cider and to send a message. I put him in hospital. That isn't justice. It could never be justice,"

"Dad..." Judd starts to say.

Asif holds up a hand and cuts him off.

"Please son, let me finish," he says quietly. "What I did was wrong. I should never have run after that boy. I should never have laid a finger on him. I wasn't protecting myself, I wasn't protecting my family, I wasn't even protecting my shop. All I did was take out my rage and anger on this poor boy and I nearly killed him. Justice is not to be carried out by the wronged, I see that now. I thought I was right but I wasn't. The wronged have no place in carrying out a punishment. We're too close to the situation, we feel it too closely, too deeply. Judd," he reaches out and takes Judd's hand in his, "Judd I need you to look at what I've become and learn from them. See the way not to be and see the way that you should take. Make sure that you don't make the same mistakes I do."

Judd is about to reply when the door swings open and the police officer walks in.



“Time’s up,” he says quietly, nodding at Judd, “Say your goodbyes and leave so your father can see his wife.”

Asif stands as Judd does and reaches out to his son. Judd wraps his arms around his dad. He’s filled with memories of when he was younger, getting hugs after school from Asif. He remembered feeling so safe, so protected and loved when his father held him like this. Now though all he feels is a sadness, filling his entire being. These hugs always said that Asif would always be there. Now they are saying that he’s going away and won’t be there to help any time that Judd might call. Judd squeezes Asif tightly one more time and sighs as he lets his father go.

“Good bye,” Asif says, “Be a good boy and look after Sally for me,”

“Bye Dad,” Judd says as he walks to the door, “Try not to get in to too much trouble in there.”

He hears Asif laughing as the door shuts behind him, blocking out the laughter. As he walks back into the waiting area he passes a sobbing Sally, going in the opposite direction, walking towards the room where Asif is waiting. There’s another police officer at her side, guiding her way. Judd sees that her eyes are rimmed with red and she’s sniffing and sobbing in to a soggy and crinkled handkerchief. Judd takes a seat in the waiting area and thinks about what his dad has just said. Is the way of life that he’d always known the right one? Was his dad right? Was vengeance the wrong path to take in life? As soon as he gets home to his flat Judd calls Connie. He just needs someone to talk to. He would normally call Reece but he’s already learned, from their earlier conversation, that things aren’t as easy between them anymore. He wonders why he thought they would be but then figures that it was probably out of reflex. Now though he just needs to talk to someone, anyone, without them butting in with other opinions and thoughts.

“Judd?” Connie says when she picks up, “I wasn’t expecting to hear from you so soon. Is everything ok?”

“I just left the trial,” he says, “They’re waiting to sentence my dad,”

“Oh sweetheart,” she says softly, “Are you ok? I can’t believe that they found him guilty,”

“They were right to,” Judd admits with a heavy sigh, “What my dad did was wrong and he knows it. Heck, he was practically begging to be convicted and punished. It’s just a bit hard to accept that’s all,”

“I’m sure it is,” Connie says quietly, “Even if you know it’s the right thing to do, the fact that your dad’s being charged and locked away can’t be easy,”



“It really isn’t,” Judd says slowly, “I mean... before I went in I was sure that he deserved to be let off. But then he was talking and saying how sorry he was. And I started to wonder whether maybe he was wrong, that he’d been teaching me wrong all these years,”

“And how do you feel now?” Connie asks, a little hesitant, “How do you feel about your dad’s change of mind?”

“It’s sudden,” Judd says frankly, “It’s sudden but I think deep down it wasn’t unexpected. Dad crossed a line and even I knew that. But still, there’s something wrong with your dad turning around and telling you that he’s been wrong all of his life, that the ideas and ways of life that he’s been teaching you for as long as you can remember are wrong. I don’t quite know what to make of it all,”

“It’s going to be a shock, I know,” Connie said. “But at least the worst bit is over right? Now you know for sure he’s going to be in prison and there’s no waiting to see if he’ll come back or not. How long is he in for?”

“I don’t know,” Judd says, sighing heavily again, “The judge is making his decision about sentencing tomorrow. Until then my dad’s in holding.”

“That’s a long time,” Connie says, surprised, “Normally they can make a decision within a few minute of the jury’s verdict coming in. I’ve never heard of a judge waiting an entire day before.”

“Apparently it’s a special case,” Judd says, “The judge wants to send a message to everyone else who wants to be a vigilante but at the same time he wants to be fair with my dad, especially because he’s realised that he’s in the wrong. I think the fact that Dad’s struggling with what he’s done and feeling really guilty might actually work in his favour.”

“What changed his mind?” Connie asks, “Wasn’t he completely convinced that he was in the right last time?”

“I don’t know,” Judd says with a shrug. He lies back on his bed and stares at the ceiling, “Maybe he spoke to the boy’s parents? Maybe seeing me there made him realise that he’d seriously hurt someone else’s son? I have no idea. But I think... no, I know, that I’m proud of him for admitting the truth of how he’s feeling. And for admitting that he’s been wrong for his entire life. That can’t be easy,”

“No, I imagine it can’t be,” Connie agrees. “Listen, I was just about to put the kettle on. Do you want to come round for a cup of tea or something? We can talk about all this a little more if you wanted.”

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“No,” Judd says, sighing again, “I’ve got other things that I need to be doing. But thank you for the offer,”

“Anytime,” Connie says. Judd can hear the smile in her voice, “And if you ever want to talk like this again you know where I am. Doesn’t matter what time, night or day, just get in touch and I’ll make sure that I’m there for you,”

“Thank you,” Judd says softly. He’s smiling but he can feel tears prickling at the corners of his eyes. Something in his chest fills with warmth at her words. He bites back tears as he speaks, “It means a lot to me. Good bye,”

“Good bye Judd.” Connie says quietly.

Judd hangs up the phone and drops it on to the bed beside him. Now that he’s finished talking to Connie he still doesn’t know what to do. He feels lost and confused and too emotional. But he needs to do something, he can’t stay still, it feels like his body is full of too much energy, making his skin tingle and his legs restless. He has to do something.



Chapter 28

That night Judd knows that he has to arrange to meet Obo. He's put it off long enough. Emmet has been texting him since the day before, insisting that Judd sorts out the meet as soon as he can. Judd wasn't ready though, he was still too angry. If his meetings with Mr Big have taught him anything it's that he needs to rein in his temper if he wants to be taken seriously. Judd has known he needs to do that for a while but now he feels ready. He has to stay calm and in control when meeting Obo or things could go really badly, really quickly. If he lets his temper flare up he runs the risk of losing control of the meeting and perhaps even losing his business. He's calm now though, his hands are steady and his head is clear. The anger he feels towards Obo and the entire situation simmers quietly in his belly but it isn't pounding through his veins or clouding his judgement. Even when he calls Obo and hears the man's voice on the other end of the line he stays calm. He's pleased with himself and smiles in satisfaction.

"Judd," Obo snaps, "Stop pissing around and tell me what you want,"

"We meet tonight," Judd says firmly, "Over at the Big Copper pub. It closes at midnight and we should meet there after 12 in the small bar near the back. Do you know it?"

"Yeah I know it," Obo drawls, "I know the owner. I reckon I can make sure that it's just us there. We can still get drinks."

"Good, good," Judd says.

He's about to hang up but Obo speaks, stopping him.

"Judd, come alone," he orders, "There's just going to be me, you and Right Stuff there, three sides of the issue. No one else. You don't get to take suggestions from your guys and I don't get suggestions from mine. Right Stuff acts as Charlie in the whole discussion."

"Why do we need suggestions?" Judd asks harshly, "We're sorting out who's in charge of what till Charlie gets back, that's all,"

"Yeah mate but it's not enough," Obo says. He sounds tired, "We need to talk about what's going to happen if Charlie doesn't come back at all. It's been almost a week now and we ain't heard nothing from him. We gotta talk about it now while we're still calm and all in one place,"

"Fine," Judd says with a sigh, "We'll talk about it all. See you tomorrow,"

"See ya," Obo says.

Judd falls back on to his bed and closes his eyes for a minute. He supposes that Obo is right, it just doesn't make sense for him to be the one suggesting it. Judd can't understand why he didn't come up with the idea first. He's usually so on top of things



like this, coming up with the plans and ideas before everyone else does. But tonight Obo beat him to it. Judd sighs and picks up his phone again. He calls a number.

“Right Stuff,” he says quickly when the other man answers, “I’m meeting Obo tomorrow night,”

“At the Big Copper after twelve,” Right Stuff says, interrupting him, “Yeah I know, Obo already got in touch about it. I know I’ve got to be there to represent Charlie. I’ll see you then,”

Right Stuff hangs up before Judd can say anything else and he looks at his phone in confusion. Right Stuff is normally so happy to talk to him. Tonight though he just blew him off, barely saying more than he had to. The hairs on the back of Judd’s neck stand on end and he gets a sense of dread in his stomach. There’s something more going on here, his mind screams at him, there are other plans being made that he can’t control. He needs to talk about it so he calls the only person that he thinks of.

“Reece, I need your help,” he says when Reece greets him tiredly.

“Can’t it wait until the morning?” Reece mumbles down the phone, “I’m knackered mate,”

“No it can’t wait,” Judd snaps, “I am in deep shit and I need your advice.”

“Fine,” Reece says. Judd can practically hear him rolling his eyes, “What’s going on?”

“It’s my meeting with Obo,” Judd says quickly, “I think there’s more going on than there seems.”

“Judd, I told you already,” Reece snaps, “I’m out. I’m not coming back and no matter how much you try to draw me in again I’m not going to take the bait,”

“I need you mate,” Judd pleads, “You can’t just up and leave without warning. It’s not right. I need you by my side if things are going to keep going.”

“And I told you I’m out,” Reece says harshly. “I’m not going to come back! This isn’t the life that I want. You should get out too, while you still can.”

“Whatever,” Judd snaps.

He hangs up the phone and throws it across the bed.

He can’t believe that Reece has left the crew. Judd had been sure that it was just an act, a temper tantrum. He thought that it was a spur of the moment decision that Reece would regret in a matter of hours before he came crawling back. Judd had been all ready to forgive him and welcome him back with open arms. But Reece isn’t coming back, he means it and Judd doesn’t know what to do.

He does understand where Reece is coming from though. They’re on the edge of a gang war and that isn’t something that any of them really want. They wouldn’t have created a truce if they didn’t. But now it was threatening to crumble and Reece couldn’t



face that fact. Judd was doing all he could, meanwhile, to hold everything together. The more that he thinks about it, the more Judd wonders whether he should do the same thing. Whether he should step back and let everything else happen without him there. He's had a good run after all but he's got more things going on in his life that need his attention. Things are getting dangerous and Judd knows that he'd never forgive himself if something bad happens during this deal.

That thought reminds him of Obo, seeing the man who keeps escalating things and of the business. There are people, dealers and runners, who he's created a bond with and who know him very well. Obo has wronged him, committed a crime by the unspoken rules of their world. The anger flares back. Judd needs to keep his business going, he needs to make a point and he needs to confront Obo to do it. Even though it could end badly Judd won't show Obo that he's a coward by not coming to the meet. He has to go and confront the man who tried to fuck with him. And he's going to need help to do it.

When he calls Emmet though, trying to make sure that he will have back up tomorrow night, there's no answer on his mobile. In fact that call doesn't even ring, it just goes straight to answerphone. Judd wonders whether Emmet has gone somewhere and left his phone behind or possibly just let the power run down. A quick glance at facebook tells Judd that Emmet is actually at home, playing a computer game, at least he was 15 minutes ago. He tried again and again, at least three more times with twenty minutes in between each attempt. He has no luck though and once more he turns to Reece.

"What do you want now Judd?" Reece asks with a sigh.

"I can't find Emmet," Judd says, "I've tried calling him but he won't pick up."

"You mean you haven't heard?" Reece asks in surprise. "You don't know what's happened?"

"What's happened?" Judd snaps, "Is Emmet ok?"

"Shit!" Reece cries, "You really don't know do you?"

"Know what?!" Judd cries, "What am I supposed to be knowing,"

"Jud mate..." Reece says slowly, "I thought you know. Emmet works for Obo now."



Chapter 29

‘Emmet works for Obo now.’

The words reverberate through Judd’s brain. He can’t believe what he’s hearing. He’s sure that it’s a joke, some strange way for Reece to get back at him.

“What?” Judd says. “What are you talking about?”

“He called Obo last night,” Reece explained, “He doesn’t think you’re hard enough, he doesn’t think you’re going to last. Obo offered him a good deal the other day and he’s been thinking about it for a while. I guess he finally made up his mind....”

“FUCK!” Judd shouts.

He hangs up, not wanting to hear any more. His blood pounds, he can hear his heart beat in his ears. He swears in his head as he paces back and forth across his living room. He can’t believe that Emmet has done this to him, after everything that Judd has done for Emmet. He’s turned around and gone over to the enemy.

“Fuck them,” he snarls, “Fuck them both. Fuck the whole lot of those ungrateful tossers. They’re welcome to each other. They deserve each other.”

He doesn’t want to admit it but Emmet’s betrayal stings. His heart hurts when he realises that he’s lost Emmet as a colleague and a friend for good. He can feel tears starting to well up in his eyes and he swipes them away. He finds his phone from wherever he threw it.

“Connie?” he says quietly, “Can I come over? I don’t know what to do and I need to talk to someone,”

“Of course you can,” she says softly, “Come right over and I’ll put the kettle on.”

She must have seen something on his face because as soon as Judd is through her front door she wraps her arms around him and holds him tightly. He eventually raises his arms and hugs her back. He buries his face in her hair for a moment, trying desperately to regain control.

Within moments she has him sat on the sofa with a cup of tea in one hand. The other is held in both of hers, her thumb rubbing gently back and forth across the skin of his palm.

“What’s wrong?” she asks gently, “You look broken,”

“I think I am,” he says bleakly, staring at the swirls of milk as they roll around his tea. “I don’t know what to do, everyone’s just abandoned me,”

“Start at the beginning,” she suggests gently, “I’m sure that we can figure something out,”



So Judd does. He tells her everything. About the drug dealing, about Charlie disappearing, about Obo trying to take control, about the meeting with Mr Big. He leaves out no detail and Connie gasps in surprise at everything.

“And now,” he says, his voice breaking, “Now my friends have left me. They’ve let me down. One left me because I was too hard, too focused on getting vengeance. Reece has always been like my brother, he’s always been the one to talk me down when I got wound up. And now he’s gone. The other’s abandoned me and changed sides because he doesn’t think I’m vengeful enough. He thinks I won’t act to defend myself when it really comes down to it. Not now. And he’s gone over to join Obo.”

“Well it sounds like he wasn’t a very good friend to begin with,” Connie said softly, “If he’s going to leave you because he’s scared he wasn’t a true friend at all.”

“But Reece left me too,” Judd snaps, “Things got hard and he bailed. He even tried to talk me into doing the same thing.”

“Because he cares about you,” Connie points out. “He doesn’t want to see you get hurt so he wants you to step back. And I think you should listen to him.”

“What?” Judd asks, looking at her, “How can you say that?”

“I’m saying it because I care about you,” Connie says, looking him right in the eye, “Your world, your business, it’s all built on vengeance. Someone wrongs you so you punish them back. But if other people don’t see it as punishment, if they see it as you trying to step on their territory, well they’ll just punish you right back because you’ve wronged them. And it just keeps happening. You don’t talk to each other, none of you really knows each other. And when you’re operating by a code of honour that uses vengeance as a tool it’s only going to end up in someone dying.”

Judd doesn’t say a thing. He just looks at his tea and eventually takes a sip. It tastes good, better than he expected. He looks at Connie when she shifts in her seat.

“Your world is all about survival of the fittest,” Connie says, leaning forward. “Remember what I said in class, what everyone was pointing out. With that way of thinking and acting it doesn’t matter who’s right or wrong in an argument. It only matters who’s stronger, who’s more willing to do what they have to in order to survive. People have to make tough, brutal decisions that you might not agree with or be willing to match. With survival of the fittest, with vengeance, whoever is willing to go as far as they have to is going to win, no matter what. Are you willing to do whatever it takes to keep your business? Are you willing to keep living in a world where someone could kill you in a moment? Are you willing to take another person’s life to keep your business going? Are you the fittest?”

She sits back and watches Judd. His eyes flick back and forth, he’s thinking about what she’s said. In her mind he is the fittest, not in terms of physical strength of course,



she's seen the other drug dealers that operate in Farlow. Compared to them Judd is tiny. No, for Connie, Judd's strength lies in his mind, in his ability to out think his opponents and think three steps ahead of them. But he's losing that edge, the stress is making him unravel and it's almost painful to watch. He isn't willing to disregard the lives of other people, he cares about them, she knows that, it's why he has so many rules about weapons, where his guys drop off and who they sell to. If he didn't care then he'd run his operation however he wanted, his guys would probably carry guns and they'd do house deliveries. Kids in his territory would probably be off their heads on coke if Judd didn't have those rules. And that caring is his strength as well, his convictions and his willingness and determination to make sure that he and everyone else under his control live by them make him strong because they make him likable. He cares about people and in return they care about him.

She can see the pain on Judd's face as he comes to the realisation that he isn't the fittest person when it comes to surviving in the drugs world. He never could be. He has morals and convictions that he stands by. The people that he's up against don't.

Judd realises that Connie might be right. He also realises that Reece was trying to tell him the same thing, he just doesn't have the ability with words that Connie has. She's told him in frank, brutal terms, how his world really works, the way that it always has worked. Judd realises that he's been deluding himself. He's been trying to change things to work around him but everyone else just wants to keep things the way that they are. If things had changed Judd would be the strongest in that world. But his world is the same as it has ever been. It is dog eat dog, survival of the fittest. He wants to say that he is the fittest. But he knows that he can't say that. He isn't the fittest, he never really has been. He might talk a good talk and walk a good walk but at the end of the day, Judd knows that he won't make the decisions that could hurt other people. He isn't cut the same way as Obo or even Charlie. He doesn't have that streak of ruthlessness and cruelty that everyone else seems to have.

It is in him to care about people. His dad taught him to believe that. It's why he has so many rules, to make sure that as few people get hurt as possible. It keeps him safe too, him and his operation. But it could never have lasted forever because Judd won't, can't take those actions that he knows are wrong. He won't step over the line that could make him a murderer and a monster.

Judd sighs heavily, realising that maybe, he might need to follow Reece's advice. And his dad's advice. It's going to hurt, it's going to be hard but it's something that he needs to do. He looks at his watch.

"I have to go," he says to Connie. He rises to his feet.

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“But Judd...” Connie says. She stands beside him and puts a small hand on his wrist, “Judd, you’ve not answered my question.”

“I will,” he says. “I’ve just got something important I have to do at half twelve. I’ll give you my answer, I promise,”

Then he turns away and walks out of the door. Connie follows him quietly, not saying a word. Judd pauses and turns at the doorway. He looks at her and gently reaches up to stroke her cheek. He leans forward and softly kisses it.

“Thank you,” he whispers.

His lips close on hers for a fleeting moment and then he turns and walks away. Connie watches him go and can’t help but wonder if she’ll see him again.



Chapter 30

“Hey,” Right Stuff says in to his phone, “It’s me,”

In a dark room somewhere in Farlow a man sits in shadows and murmurs something into the phone.

“It’s on,” Right Stuff says, “Yeah, he went for it,” he pauses as the man says something, “Yes, it’s at the Big Copper, just like you thought it would be.” Another pause as he listens, “Ok, I’ll see you then.”

It’s only a little while later and the man is out on the street. He stops and looks at the picture on the side of the building of a small orange pot. It’s the Big Copper. He looks from side to side, scanning the street. Finally he spots a doorway in shadows, further down the road and walks towards it. He should be able to see the pub from that spot. There’s a view through the window into the back room where Right Stuff told him that Judd and Obo would be meeting. The man settles himself into the chilly corner of the doorway. He sends a warning glare at a homeless man who tries to take shelter there. The man turns his attention back to the Big Copper. Excitement is bubbling in his stomach, he can barely keep himself still. He watches as the patrons of the pub pour out, time called for the evening and last orders drunk down. He sinks deeper into the shadows as bleary eyed customers stagger and stumble off in different directions, heading home or to other places. He doesn’t know and he doesn’t care.

It’s not much longer after that before Obo appears at the pub door and knocks. The three short raps echo down the deserted snowy street loudly. It would have made the man jump if he hadn’t known they were coming. The door is opened, spilling light out onto the street and Obo disappears inside. The door closes and everything is dark again. Right Stuff appears by the door a little while later. He doesn’t knock straight away, instead he looks around. The man knows he is hidden, very well hidden, but he also knows that Right Stuff is actually looking for him, unlike the others. Right Stuff looks towards the doorway and gives a nod towards the man before he too disappears inside.

Now the man is left waiting, filled with anticipation. Judd still needs to arrive and then he will see at last how Judd and Obo settle things. He hopes that it will go to plan but there’s no way to tell.

Judd walks down the empty street, pulling his coat closer around himself and shivering with the cold. It’s not snowing at least and for that he’s thankful. His phone beeps and he checks it, fingers numbing quickly in the wind. It’s a text from Right Stuff, telling Judd to use the side entrance of the Big Copper, not the main entrance. Judd thinks it’s a little strange but he shrugs and decides to do as he’s told.



When he knocks on the door it swings open to reveal Right Stuff. The other man looks scared and nervous. He keeps glancing over Judd's shoulder, out in to the street, looking up and down it. Eventually he nods and steps back, letting Judd in to the small bar. Judd nods at Obo who's sitting at the back, cradling a drink. Judd turns to look at Right Stuff and unwinds his scarf from around his neck.

"What's with the spy stuff?" he asks. When Right Stuff looks at him with no comprehension of what he's talking about Judd snaps, "You know, looking up and down the street like you're trying to make sure no one's following me. What's up with that?"

"It's just the way I am," Right Stuff says shrugging, "It's the way I've always been when I'm in new places."

Judd nods slowly and turns away, only half convinced by the explanation. It looked almost as though Right Stuff had been looking for someone. He looks at Obo who's watching him intently.

"I'll keep my coat on if you don't mind," Judd says to him, looking down his nose at the other man, "It's a bit cold in here. Couldn't you convince your mate to keep the heating on a little longer."

"No." Obo said simply. "Sit down,"

He kicks out the chair opposite him, almost catching Judd in the groin with the back. Judd jerks out of the way just in time and glares at Obo. Right Stuff sniggers and takes a seat at the table. Judd turns his glare on him and Right Stuff falls silent, looking at the table a little embarrassed.

"I said sit," Obo snaps.

Judd raises an eyebrow but takes hold of the chair and pulls it out further. He slowly sits down, edging closer to the table. Obo sits up a little straighter when Judd's hands disappear. It's an almost imperceptible move but Judd is watching Obo closely. The other man seems to relax when Judd's hands reappear and he decides to test something.

"So..." Obo says slowly as Judd rests his hands on the table top. "We all know why we're here,"

"To plan to take over the world," Right Stuff cries out, "Mwhahaha,"

"Not the time mate," Judd says sternly. He raises one hand to scratch at his head, the other to rest on his thigh, beneath the edge of the table. Obo gets tense again and his eyes keep flicking between both of Judd's hands.

"We know why we're here," Judd eventually says.

"Ok. Good," Obo says. "Let's talk business then."

"Fine," Judd says, cocking an eyebrow, "Where do you want to start?"



Obo doesn't say anything. He looks at Right Stuff and waves a hand. Apparently they've discussed this already and Judd isn't actually that surprised. He expected something like this.

"Alright," Right Stuff says with a shrug, "We all know that there's a big problem here and part of it is because Charlie's gone missing. The rest is because, let's face it, you two hate each other,"

"Oh I don't know about hate," Judd says. He lifts his hands on to the table and crosses his arms, leaning forward on his elbow, "Hate is a pretty strong word. I'd say it's more that we intensely dislike each other,"

"Hate, intensely dislike, whatever," Obo snaps, waving his hand around. "Let's talk business."

Judd sits back, leaning against his chair. His hands are resting on the table, clasped together. He notices that Obo keeps flicking his gaze towards them, staring. It's like he's expecting Judd to reach for something at any moment. The man is on edge, shift. Judd wonders whether he knows about the gun which is pressing, cold and heavy against the small of his back where he tucked it into the waistband of his jeans. It isn't easy to get to but it's hidden and for Judd that's the most important bit. Judd taps his fingers on the table rhythmically and he watches as Obo relaxes and sits back in his seat. There is definitely something going on there. He catches Right Stuff glancing at Obo, waiting for him to take the lead.

"Oh just get on with it," he snaps, "I know you two have already talked about this. Stop trying to act like you haven't. Clearly Obo's got to you Right Stuff, just like he got to Emmet," Obo looks at him in surprise and Judd grins dangerously. "Yeah, I know about that. A better friend than Emmet told me. You're welcome to him mate. Just remember, we're old friends and he turned his back on me without a second thought. There's nothing stopping him from doing the same to you,"

Obo looks away, clearly disconcerted by the realisation. Emmet's loyalty is clearly questionable but there is nothing that he can do now.

"Get on with it," Judd snaps. He wants to get out of there as soon as possible.

"We've been talking," Right Stuff says hesitantly, "We sort of made an arrangement."

"What white boy here's trying to say is he's ditching you for me," Obo says. He grins maliciously, "Just like Emmet did,"

Judd's nostrils flare for a moment and his mouth tightens to a thin line. Inside his head he counts down from ten, letting the anger flare up for a moment before he fights it back down. It's clear that he doesn't have the upper hand here.



“We’ve done a deal,” Obo says, still grinning, “From now on I’m gonna be supplying him, not you. And you are gonna keep on your patch. You stay there, keep doing your thing and I won’t trouble you. You keep your boys in your territory and I keep mine in my territory. Easy peasy. No one steps out of bounds, no one gets hurt.”

“That won’t be hard,” Judd says, shrugging, “We do that anyway. Sticking to the boundaries isn’t anything new for my boys. They do as they’re told. But what about Charlie’s patch? What are we going to do with that?”

“I’m gonna look after it,” Obo says, smirking now, “For the next 7 days I supply everyone in Charlie’s patch. Charlie’s guys work for me and Mr Big deals with me.”

“Hold on!” Judd cries, “Right Stuff came to me, he asked me to do that. You can’t just waltz in and take over because you want to.”

“You don’t have the balls to stop me mate,” Obo snarls, “You’ve shown that already. I’m gonna run my patch, and Charlie’s patch until I say otherwise.”

“And what if Charlie comes back?” Judd asks, “What then? Are you just going to roll over and hand the reins back to him?”

“Of course,” Obo says.

But the other man isn’t looking at Judd. He isn’t looking at Right Stuff either. He’s staring at Judd’s hands again, his gaze only flicking up to meet their’s now and then. Judd knows that it won’t be as simple as Obo is saying. He knows that if Charlie comes back something serious will happen and someone will end up dead. It will probably be Obo.

“But,” Obo says, leaning forward and holding up an unnecessary finger to quiet everyone, “If Charlie don’t come back soon we’re gonna have to have another talk,”

“When?” Judd asks, “And don’t say in a month. I’m not going to sit back and watch you get more and more power so you can take over my patch. I’m not an idiot.”

“Never thought you were,” Obo says with a shrug, “Balls-less, sure. A little weak and cowardly, definitely. But stupid, I never thought you were stupid and I still don’t. You wouldn’t have lasted as long as you have if you were stupid.”

“Glad to hear it,” Judd says, nodding his head.

Strangely hearing those words from Obo makes him feel better about himself. Obo is known for being cruel and ruthless with those who wrong him. If Obo thinks that Judd is cowardly that’s a good thing. Obo’s opinion of what makes people brave is far from normal. The weak part though is a little worrying. But Judd knows that this could make Obo underestimate him, make him think that Judd won’t do anything if pushed. That gives Judd the bonus of surprise if push comes to shove and he needs to act.



“So how long are we gonna wait before we meet again?” Right Stuff asks, looking between the two men. The tension is palpable and he doesn’t want to get caught in the middle. The sooner he’s out of the pub the better in his opinion.

“Seven days,” Obo says. “We wait seven days, I look after Charlie’s patch, and then we have another meeting if he still isn’t back by then,”

“And I bet you’ll still be in charge of Charlie’s patch,” Judd says with a sneer on his face.

“Not really,” Obo says, “I might get bored of all the shit involved. If it’s too much hassle I might just hand it over to you and keep Right Stuff doing the deliveries.”

“Or we could let me run Charlie’s patch,” Right Stuff says. “After all, I was his second hand man,”

The two other men look at Right Stuff in a strange mixture of disbelief and mockery. Judd pats him on the shoulder.

“Sorry Right Stuff but I don’t think so,” he says kindly. “You’re a good man but you wouldn’t last two minutes in Charlie’s place. You’re too nice.”

“Yeah mate,” Obo says apologetically, “You’re great man, really, and I like you a lot but you’re not cut out to run the operation.”

Right Stuff looks at the two men before he sits back, rolling his eyes. He knew that they would say that.

Judd feels something vibrating in his trouser pocket. It’s his phone. The sound of a ringtone comes out, one that he knows he’s set for someone but he can’t remember who it is. Obo smirks as the words of the pop song fill the room. Judd wonders who could be ringing him at this time, everyone important knows that he’s busy at the moment. He reaches for his phone, leaning back and looking at his leg. A clatter of wood on wood suddenly sounds out and he looks up. Obo is scrambling to his feet, reaching in to his jacket. Right Stuff kicks himself backwards, rolling away from the table. Judd jolts to his feet. The pop song continues to play from Judd’s pocket.

“What you reaching for?!” he snaps, “You reaching for that gun you bought off Jonny?”

“I’m trying to get my phone.” Judd shouts, holding out his hands, palms open, towards Obo, “You can hear it ringing,”

“How do I know it’s a proper call?!” Obo demands, “How do I know you’ve not just got someone to call you at some point so you can go for your gun without us noticing?”

“Because you’re a paranoid moron?” Judd suggests, “Why the hell would I go to all that trouble?”



“Because you’re a smart arsed bell end,” Obo snaps, “I don’t know what goes on in your head. You probably wanted to get me distracted so you could shoot me without noticing.”

“I think you’d notice me shooting you,” Judd says, “People tend to notice when a massive hole opens in their chest.”

“Shut up!” Obo snaps, waving his gun at Judd, “Just keep your hands where I can see them,”

“I’m going to get my phone,” Judd says slowly, “I need to end the call because the song is doing my head in,”

“Don’t do it man,” Obo says warningly, “Don’t you move,”

Judd ignores him. He looks away and reaches to his pocket. Obo yells and Judd looks up. Obo pulls his gun out from inside his jacket and levels it at Judd’s head. Everything feels like it’s moving in slow motion for Judd. He can see Obo’s finger slowly squeezing the trigger. He can see Right Stuff mouthing something, saying something. The gun is pointed right at his head.



Chapter 31

-click-

-crunch-

Obo stares at the gun in consternation. He hits it a couple of times and points it at Judd again. It's jammed though. It won't fire. Judd realises that Obo is actually trying to kill him. He reaches behind his back and wraps his fingers around the gun, pulling it out. His finger slides over the trigger like it's the most natural thing in the world. He ignores the ringing of his phone and points the gun at Obo's head.

"You stupid fuck," he snarls.

Obo stands there, gun hanging limply from his hands. He stares at Judd, at the barrel of the gun and starts to shake. Judd reaches in to his pocket and grabs his phone, eyes locked on Obo the entire time. His gaze flicks to the screen for a moment, just long enough to see that it's Connie that's calling him. He hits the silence button, the song dying away and leaving the bar quiet. Right Stuff sighs in relief.

"I hate that song," he says with a shrug when Judd looks at him in question. "Really bugs me and I don't know why."

"What the fuck Obo?" Judd snaps, ignoring the other man, "You actually try and kill me?! What the hell is wrong with you?"

Obo says nothing. He just stands there, glaring at Judd. He knows that Judd won't pull the trigger. Judd knows that he might pull the trigger though. He's looking at a guy who wants him dead, who actually did try to kill him. He knows that he would be dead right now if the gun hadn't jammed. He doesn't know what to do. He's got two choices that he can see and neither are particularly attractive to him at the moment.

Part of him wants to just pull the trigger, let the gun fire and take Obo out of the picture forever. It's screaming for justice, demanding that the wrong that Obo tried to do to him be righted by him doing the same right back. But another part of him knows that killing Obo won't solve anything. Judd knows he probably wouldn't be able to live with himself if he takes another person's life. The thought feels wrong to him, to his logical mind at least, even if the animal part of his brain is crying out for justice. He also knows that he would have much larger consequences to deal with than just knowing that he killed Obo. Judd would have to spend the rest of his life looking over his shoulder. Killing Obo would essentially create a gang war. His men would be targeted by Obo's guys, Judd himself would probably be killed, murdered in cold blood, out of revenge for him killing Obo. Judd doesn't think that he can do that, face the death of his friends, men and himself all because he killed one man.



Another part of him, one that's steadily growing louder as he and Obo stare each other down, is telling him to just walk away. The voice sounds like Reece and Connie combined. It sounds like Sally, and strangely his father. Judd wants to listen to it the louder that it gets. This part of him is telling him to forgive Obo and walk away. It would be easier, all round. Judd could lower his gun, apologise to Obo and forgive him for trying to kill him and then just walk away. He wouldn't need to worry that someone would turn up one day and try to kill him. He wouldn't need to worry that Obo's men would try to get revenge. Obo would make sure of that. Sparing a person's life, especially when that person tried to kill you, creates an obligation from that person. Despite the type of man that Obo is, or perhaps because of it, he will try to honour that obligation and no one would be sent after Judd.

But walking away from Obo would also mean walking away from the entire business. Judd doesn't know if he can do that, leave everything behind. He's built a reputation for himself, a customer base. He's created this business from nothing and now he will have to leave it all behind. Word would spread that he spared Obo's life, that he didn't pull the trigger. But no one would see it as an act of mercy. They would see it as Judd being weak, that he isn't able to make the choices that have to be made in their world. Everyone who is willing to make those choices would come after him and try to take the business away from him. They would expect him not to fight back and they would push him to the point of killing or being killed.

Neither option sounds great to Judd in his head, but he knows within moments what he needs to do.

Slowly he lowers the gun and tosses it on to the floor.

"I forgive you," Judd says to Obo who just stares at him, "I forgive you for trying to kill me. And I want you to remember that I could have killed you but didn't. You leave me and my family alone. You leave my friends alone. You hurt no one that I care about. Understand?"

Obo nods his head slowly, clearly in shock still.

"And you can have my patch," Judd says, waving his hand. "I'm getting too old for this game anyway. Just do me a favour and don't sell to kids. Stick to my rules if you can, it's safer for everyone."

Then Judd turns and walks away, the bar door slamming shut behind him. He pulls his coat closer around him and shivers against the cold. He forgot how freezing it was outside and the wind and snow have picked up and gotten worse.

The sudden cold shocks Judd for a moment and he realises what he's done. He's actually left the business behind. He can never go back. And strangely he doesn't care. He feels lighter, happier and freer than he has in a very long time. He walks back to his

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car, not really looking where he is going. It passes in a blur and he suddenly finds himself back in his car with the heater going. His phone beeps and he snaps back to the present, away from the thoughts that are rolling through his mind. He looks at it and sees that Connie has called him three times in the last fifteen minutes. A thread of worrying works itself in to his mind and he quickly calls her.

“Judd!” she cries as soon as she answers, “Are you ok? Did he hurt you?”

“I’m fine,” he says automatically, “He tried to kill me but I’m fine.”

“Oh thank god,” she gasps, “Judd I’m so sorry, I didn’t think you’d get hurt.”

“Ahuh,” Judd says, not really registering what she’s saying.

“I know Charlie,” she says quickly, “He put me up to it and I agreed to help him. I’m so so sorry,”

“Can I come round?” he asks shortly, “I need to talk to someone,”

“Of.. Of course,” Connie stutters.

Judd starts his car and drives away.



Chapter 32

When he reaches Connie's she looks upset. She won't meet his eye and sits on the edge of the sofa staring at her clasped hands. Judd stares at her for a few moments. He sits down in the armchair near the sofa and clears his throat.

"I'm out of the business," he says simply, "I couldn't take it anymore,"

Connie looks at him sharply then away. Her breath catches on a sob and she raises shaking hands to her mouth.

"What were you trying to tell me on the phone?" he asks, "I wasn't really listening."

"I'm so sorry that I helped do this to you," Connie says, "Believe me I thought that it was just going to be something simple and I'd help someone get a better life for themselves. I never expected to feel anything for you. But I do, I feel things for you that I haven't felt since I was at university. Fuck, you made me care about someone again besides myself for the first time in 12 years. After my ex dumped me for a prettier girl I shut myself off. And then you turned up, so focused on passing your law course but still being so nice to me, even though I've screwed you over and I couldn't help myself. I've told you things I've never told anyone."

"So why are you telling me this now?" Judd asks, looking at her.

She sits forwards and looks him in the eye, her gaze filled with tears.

"I care about you, so much," Connie says. "Even though we haven't known each other very long I really think that we could have something in the future. I want to tell you about Charlie because I can't live with myself if I don't. I want to tell you the whole truth now, before we get any deeper. I don't want it coming back to bite me in the arse and ruin anything we might have."

"You know Charlie," Judd says. It's not a question. "And you know what's been going on even before I told you,"

"Yes," Connie whispers. She hangs her head in shame. "God I feel like the most awful person alive. I've lied to you, about so much. I don't know where to start,"

"Just start from the beginning," Judd says coldly, shrugging, "Tell me what the hell's going on,"

"Well..." she says, hesitating, "You know how I said I do coke from time to time?" Judd nods, "Well I do it a lot more than I told you. I do it pretty much every day because there's nothing else in my life really. Charlie's my supplier. I accrued a small debt... well a very big debt with him. I kept getting coke on credit and promising to pay it off. I didn't know why he kept letting me do it, it didn't seem very smart for a supplier to be honest. But I wanted the coke and didn't ask too many questions,"



“He had something planned,” Judd says.

“Yes,” Connie says, “The one time that I did ask him why, before all of this started, he said that he had plans that he could use me for in the future. He said that he was giving me the coke and in return I’d help him when he asked. I didn’t think it would be anything serious or too dangerous so I agreed. Then a few weeks ago he came to me and said he would wipe my debt clean if I did him a small favour,”

“What was it?” Judd asks quietly although he already has some idea. Connie hesitates for a moment and he snaps at her, “What was the favour Connie?!”

“He asked me to influence you,” Connie bursts out. “He knew you were going to be in my class. I don’t know how he knew that you were taking the course or how he knew I’d be your tutor but he did know. He asked me, told me, to befriend you and use my influence over you to get you to think about giving up the drugs business. He said that you were too smart for this game. That you could do bigger and better things with your life if you weren’t so focused on dealing all the time and handling things with Obo.”

“And you agreed?” Judd says, “Just like that you agreed to manipulate me into doing something that I never wanted to do,”

“Yes,” Connie says. “Because I didn’t know you, not really. I only knew what Charlie told me. You’re a graduate for fucks sake! You said it yourself that the drugs business was only a stop gap for you. But Charlie knew that even if you passed your course you’d probably never leave. It was too comfortable for you, too familiar and too easy.”

“So what happened?” Judd asks harshly, “You just agreed to it and pretended to like me?”

“God no!” Connie says, “Charlie thought that you’d listen to me because I’m your tutor. I thought the same thing. I only ever planned to use the course to change your way of thinking. I never thought that I’d like you as much as I do or develop feelings for you. I was going to keep things professional, tutor to student, friends maybe. But things changed and now I’m telling you the truth.”

“So if your feelings aren’t a lie, what is?” Judd asks, “Did your car really break down?”

“Well... yes and no,” Connie says. “Charlie put me up to pretending that my car was broken so you’d have to give me a lift and I’d have the chance to talk to you. I thought that I’d only be pretending that my car was broken but Charlie got one of his guys to fiddle with it so it wouldn’t start and I couldn’t fix it myself. He was in the car park, watching us that day. He was in a car a few rows down to make sure that I would get a lift with you and talk to you.”

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“Jesus,” Judd says, “He really thought of everything. Why did you agree to it Connie? Why did you agree to help him? Surely you could have just paid off your debt over time. I know Charlie’s reasonable, you could have worked something out to pay off your debt over time,”

“This sounded easier.” Connie admitted. “And it sounded like I was going to be doing a good thing. I mean, he wasn’t asking me to hurt you or do anything illegal. What he was asking wasn’t so bad. He was asking me to influence you to get OUT of the drugs business for God’s sake. He didn’t want to hurt you, he wanted to get you safe and I thought it was a good thing, right? I mean, how many dealers do you know that would actually want to get someone out of the drugs business? At least without killing or hurting the person. He wanted to do it nicely, to help you come to the decision on your own before you got in so deeply you could never leave. In my mind it was a good thing, a great thing, and it would make up for all the crap that I’ve done over my life. It is a good thing right?”

Judd doesn’t say anything, he just sits back in the armchair and thinks. The past few days rewind through his mind, everything that’s happened since Right Stuff called him about Charlie being missing rush through his brain. Every moment, every interaction runs around his head and with the new information he sees it all in a different light. Charlie had known Judd and Obo would go to war. There was no doubt in Judd’s mind that Charlie knew. It wasn’t just Obo’s obsession with getting more power that would drive them against each other. Judd realises that Charlie had thought much further about all of this, about how both Judd and Obo would react to the news and what they would do. It is no secret that the pakis hate the blacks even though they should be on the same side against the other racist shits of Britain. It was also no secret that Obo hates Judd, that he is intensely jealous that Judd comes from a proper loving family who love and support each other. It’s something that Obo had never had and had never understood. But Obo wants it for himself anyway, even if there are problems along the way. But it’s something that Obo can’t get, will never get because he doesn’t know how to be warm and loving and supportive.

Charlie had also known, just like Judd does, that Obo would never back down from the challenge of taking over. He just isn’t that sort of person. He has always kept going and going until he gets what he wants and trying to take over Charlie’s turf would have been no different. Judd had known it himself. And from the instant that Obo had pulled the gun at him in their first meeting Judd had known that Obo would make sure that everyone would end up tooled up. That route would have lead only to the eventual death of one of the two. It would have been Judd, he knows this. He doesn’t have the



burning need to take a life, to prove himself to everyone else like Obo does. For a moment Judd is glad that he has made a better choice for himself.

And with that thought comes another realisation to Judd's mind. He realises exactly how smart Charlie is and has been. He had always known that Charlie was smart and could read people but after hearing everything Judd realises exactly how deep Charlie's skills run. Charlie knows Judd better than he knows himself. Charlie had seen the doubts that niggled at Judd's mind and cracked them wide open. Judd was not, is not, cut out to be a drug dealer, not in the long term. He would never have been able to pull the trigger of a gun when it was pointed at someone else, not even in the heat of one of his strongest flares of anger. Judd just isn't wired that way and Charlie must have seen that.

Charlie knew that Judd would eventually come around to the way of thinking that he wanted. He had gone to university after all, he had been taught to think and adapt and take new ideas and actually absorb them instead of letting them simply wash over him and forgetting about them the next day. Charlie had known that Judd would eventually see the light and get out of the drugs business. He knew that that change of thinking in Judd would come even quicker if he had Connie there to push things along. Someone in a position of authority is someone that Judd automatically listens to, especially if they're sharing information that he wants and needs to learn. Charlie just exploited Connie's position to get Judd to take the suggestions a little more seriously. More importantly Charlie had known which thoughts to manipulate in Judd's mind so that he would listen and accept the suggestions that he was trying to make.

Judd realises, even as he feels grateful to Charlie, that there is a lot more to Charlie's actions than simply trying to get someone out of drug dealing and into a better job. Charlie wanted more territory, it was simple, and getting Judd to leave his patch open was a much better way of getting more territory than taking either him or Obo out and possibly causing a gang war. Doing things this way means that not only does Charlie get more territory but he gets to do something good at the same time. In a strange way, Judd realises, it's Charlie's attempt to do a good thing to make up for all the bad that he's done through drug dealing at the same time as helping himself.

And just like that it finally clicks in Judd's mind. He finally understands why Charlie accelerated the process that was already beginning to happen. He understands why Charlie chose him to take the territory from. He was the easier target. He was the least vengeful and least ruthless of the two choices, despite everything that Judd had believed about himself. The facts are that Judd is never going to be as vengeful and ruthless as Obo or Charlie. He has something that they don't, something that pushes him to act differently to them. He has alternatives, different paths that he can take to make his



way in the world. The others don't, they have no other path that they can take. For Judd dealing is something that he is doing, or rather was doing, until something better comes along. That's what he has always told himself and it is actually true although it may have taken him longer to find that something else without Charlie's machinations. But for Obo and Charlie dealing is their careers. It's the only thing that's open to them, the only way that they can make a living for themselves. They don't do it because it's easy like it is for Judd, they do it because they have no other choice.

Charlie might once have had choices, Judd thinks, but he chose to ignore them and stay on the path that he had chosen for himself and as time had passed those other choices had gone and he was left with only dealing. A wave of gratitude suddenly rushes through Judd, surprising him. He had expected to feel angry, furious even, that someone was deliberately manipulating him into doing something that he doesn't want to do. But instead he was only grateful that Charlie had gotten Judd to make the choices that he never made and get out of the drug dealing business for good. Judd looks at Connie.

"I think I understand why you did it," he says quietly.

She looks at him, eyes wide and still full of tears. Judd reaches out and takes her hand.

"I'm grateful actually," he admits, "I was already thinking these things even if I didn't want to admit it. You just got me to see everything more clearly. I'm not completely happy that you worked me over but I understand why. You were desperate and you thought you were doing a good thing. Your intentions were good at the end of the day and I won't hold it against you."

"You're still mad though aren't you," Connie says.

Judd purses his lips and thinks for a moment.

"A little," he admits, "But not at you. Not really. I need you to call Charlie though and confirm that your debt is clear. I don't want your efforts to be a waste for you,"

"Ok," Connie says quickly, nodding her head. "Ok, I can do that."

She scrambles for her phone but her hands are shaking and she keeps dropping it. Judd leans forwards and puts the phone into her hands. He wraps her fingers around it and covers them with his own. He gently raises them to his mouth and kisses her fingers softly. He smiles and Connie breaths out slowly, her returning smile a little shaky but surer than it was before. She flicks open the phone, her hands steadier, and dials a number. Judd reaches forward and puts the phone on loud speaker. The sound of the ringing fills the small apartment.

"Connie," Charlie says, "I didn't expect to hear from you so soon."

"It's finished," she says, "I want to make sure that my debt is cleared with you."



“If Judd is out then your debt is clear,” Charlie says. Judd can hear the smirk in his voice. “Is Judd gone?”

Connie looks at Judd for guidance.

“Connie?” Charlie says. “Is Judd gone?”

Judd takes the phone from Connie’s hands and holds it up to his mouth.

“Yeah,” he says. “I’m gone.”

Judd doesn’t wait for a response, he just hangs up the phone. He tosses it on to the cushions beside Connie and sits back in his chair. He heaves a great sigh of relief and relaxes, closing his eyes.

He’s staying in Farlow, despite the possible problems. His life is here, his family, his friends, his degree course. And Connie is there too, and despite everything that she’s done he still wants to see what might happen between them. Besides, he needs to stay to look after Sally.

Charlie might want him to leave Farlow, so might Obo, but Judd doesn’t intend to go anywhere. It might get hard, it might be tricky but he will find a way to live the life that he had always had in mind. And he can do it legally, without anything to hide. Judd looks forward to the challenge.



Epilogue

Judd is woken up by his phone ringing. It's loud and jarring and for a moment he can't figure out where he is. This isn't his usual room, none of the things in it are what he recognises. Then he realises, remembers where he is. He's at home, the family home, and he's in the house that he's always had whenever he returns. He reaches for his phone as it continues to ring and he's surprised when he sees that it's Charlie calling him.

"Hello?" he asks quietly, his voice thick with sleep.

"What are you still doing in Farlow Judd?" Charlie asks, "You're out of the game and you're supposed to be out of Farlow too,"

Judd blinks for a moment, trying to figure out exactly what Charlie is talking about. Then he remembers. It's been three weeks since Judd declared that he was out of the drug dealing business and it's been three weeks since he has been in touch with any of his old gang, apart from Reece.

"Well?!" Charlie demands. "What's your excuse?"

"I'm half asleep mate," Judd says, yawning as he runs a hand over his face, "Give me a minute to wake up,"

"Fine," Charlie snaps.

The other end of the line falls silent but Judd can hear Charlie breathing and the muttering sound of voices from wherever Charlie is.

"I can't leave," Judd says eventually, "I would if I could but I have to stay,"

"What's so important?!" Charlie cries, "You have a chance to get out of this shitty little town! What's so important that you can't leave?"

"My life," Judd says. He shrugs as he speaks even though Charlie can't see him, "My entire life is here in Farlow and I'm not ready to leave it yet,"

"Well you need to get ready," Charlie snaps, "You can't stay in Farlow forever and you being here is going to make people think you might come back to the game,"

"Well tell them I won't!" Judd snaps back, "I don't want to be in that world any more and I never want to go back. But I can't leave."

"Why?!" Charlie asks, his voice harsh.

"Because of my dad," Judd says quietly, "Because my dad's in prison for beating up a seventeen year old and my step mum's all on her own."

"Oh..." Charlie says quietly at the other end.

"I promised my dad I would look after her," Judd explains quietly. He's glad for the chance to vent to someone completely removed from the situation, even if it is Charlie, "I can't just leave. If I go she'll be all on her own and I won't do that to her. She's like my mum and she needs my help."



“So you’re staying then?” Charlie asks. It’s not really a question though.

“Yes,” Judd says, “I’m staying in Farlow. At least until my dad gets out. After that... well after that I don’t know. But for now Farlow is my home and I’m not going anywhere,”

“Ok,” Charlie says quietly, “Ok, I understand. I’ll spread the word,”

“Thanks Charlie,” Judd says, surprised to find that he’s genuinely grateful, “I’ll try and get a few of my mates to spread the word too. I just want to be here for Sally, and get my course finished. I don’t want any trouble and I don’t want to come back to your world. I’ve left it behind me and I’m looking for a better life now. The sooner people get that then the better,”

Charlie hangs up and Judd rolls over to go back to sleep. He’s staying in Farlow, whether people like it or not.

The End

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