

*Be mine. Always and Forever...*

# THOU SHALT NOT GOVET



J S G R E Y

## Chapter One

The wind roared past his ears as he sprinted across the forest floor, the thorned spikes from the branches whipping across his face leaving streaks of thin scarlet in their wake. The crunch of the pine needles piercing the soles of his feet, the bare skin pounding into the earth, he traversed the expanse of the woods.

“What the fuck do you want?” he screamed into the darkness, the high pitch shriek of the wind picking up his cries and dispersing them into the night. He could feel him getting closer, his speed matching his own.

The rain poured down through the canopy of the trees, fat droplets striking his face, soaking the earth below. He gasped for breath, his heart pounding in his ears. He was far too young to die, yet he knew that if he slowed down for a moment, his life would be over. He would feel the sharp sting of the blade against his back, or maybe what his pursuer wanted was to look into his eyes as the life ebbed away.

The crunch of boots against wet earth sounded just behind him; a sob tore from his throat. He heard that damned low chuckle and a million spiders seemed to crawl along the length of his spine. His legs pumped faster, fighting for that moment of extra speed that could spell the difference between him meeting with his new investors next week and lying on the forest floor, his blood mixing with the rain below.

He risked a quick look behind him. He knew that this guy wanted him dead, he just wasn't sure why. His eyes

quickly scanned the space between the trees. Blackness greeted him; the lack of sight made him nauseous. He was still being pursued, of that he was sure. He kept on running.

“What the fuck did I do?” A cry tore from him. “Why are you doing this to me?”

He whipped his head back forward, ducking quickly to miss a branch that would have stopped this chase in a moment.

“I want you.” The voice carried on the wind.

The voice seemed to be all around him; he clutched at his stomach as he ran, his lunch threatening to make a violent reappearance. His heart pounded against his ribs; he was sure that any more of this and it would give. He had seen it happen once to a horse at the track. Reaching top speeds, the horse had seemed to jolt and then come to a sudden stop. Collapsing against the grass, twitching as its life seeped away. He pictured himself, lying between the trees, his chest open as his life merged with the forest.

He was a wealthy man, things like that just didn't happen.

“I don't know what you want, I'll give you whatever you want.” He meant it, first thing in the morning he would arrange to have everything transferred to this guy. “Is it money? You can have it.”

“I want you, Mark.” A little part of him gave up at that moment. Those four words filled him with a paralysing terror that he had never experienced before. Everything could be fixed with money: scandal, love, business. Not this, there was no fixing this.

He looked around once more, again there was no sign of him. Mark jumped over a fallen log, stooping and crouching, his back to the bark, the coarse wood rubbing through his white t-shirt. What was once a clean tee, now looked as if a gardener had worn it without washing it on multiple occasions.

His breathing stopped as he listened to the sounds of the forest, through the trees, through the wind and the rain. He listened for the sound of breath, of death coming to call.

He twisted his t-shirt over his heart, pressing into the skin as if he could quieten the sounds of his racing heart. Tears pricked his eyes, he struggled to keep the cries under wraps. His instinct wanting to call out for his mother and father. He hadn't been a child for a very long time, but his parents' smiling faces were all he wanted to see right now.

"Come out, come out wherever you are." A low chuckle sounded from about fifty feet right ahead of him. "I just want to play with you for a little while."

Mark bit his bottom lip, he didn't want to die. He tried his best to imagine his future. Parties with friends, Sunday dinners with Mum and Dad, lying on the beach with some faceless guy who he'd assumed he would meet one day, and had given a face to match the fantasy. There was a lot he hadn't done. He tried so hard to picture that future but he couldn't see beyond tonight. Panic rose sharply.

"I'll tell you what Mark." The lightness in the voice made it a hundred times more petrifying. "You come out now and I promise I'll only make a mess of your body, I'll leave that pretty face so your parents have something to mourn."

A sick part of him considered it for a moment, the thought

of just giving up, stopping it all, and letting it all just be over. The sharp song of metal sounded as if someone had flicked the blade behind the fallen log. Mark craned his head slowly, waiting for the hot slice of the knife. Above him stood the monster he feared would be there. He was facing the other way though. He only had this one chance.

Pushing onto his knees he sprang away from his hiding position and barrelled into the dark woods. He ducked through the trees, trying to lose him by changing direction, ducking low, and picking up speed. It didn't matter, he felt him everywhere. The forest became a living breathing thing. He had to get out of these damn woods.

There was something his brother had always used to say, that the shortest distance between any two points was a straight line. Straight ahead, it was the only way, no more twists, and no more turns.

What felt like hurricane winds bent the trees, their branches slowly stripped of leaves as they swayed in the harsh winds. As the trees leaned precariously to one side, Mark thought he could see a pinprick of light glimmering in the distance. His eyes narrowed like a predator seeking its prey.

Hope surged within him. A house stood in the distance, but aside from a basic structure with a roof he couldn't make out anything else about it. It didn't matter, it stood for salvation. His lungs burned as he sprinted through the densely packed wood. The branches tearing his skin and the pine needles that ripped open his flesh were no longer a concern. Those were things he would worry about when he was safe and warm in the house up ahead.

Bile burned his throat as his lungs burned as if they were trying to make an escape. The property, now more visible, appeared to be a farmhouse, and beyond the main house stood a large red barn with white doors. The sounds of horses' hooves pounding against the ground were music to his ears.

The property was still eight or nine hundred yards away, but it was getting closer with every second. Each moment his legs pumped, each scratch on his arms and face from the tree branches meant he was almost safe. If only he could just...

Something struck him hard from behind, his feet catching on the shrubbery between the pine trees. His body flew forward, his arms coming out ahead of himself to minimise the damage of the impending impact. It didn't matter, he was seconds away from being murdered. It was such an odd concept to think. You hear in the movies or on the news that someone is being murdered, but to have the thought that 'I'm currently being murdered' filled him with such dread and loneliness that the tears fell before he hit the earth.

A sharp swift kick to his stomach blew the remaining air out of his lungs, a garbled sound constricting his throat. His clenched fists pushed into his stomach to prevent any further blows. He kept his head tucked down, his eyes tracking a pair of dark black boots as they walked upwards towards his head.

"Come on Mark," the deep baritone voice sighed, "You're no fun." His assailant used the toe of his boot to push Mark onto his back. The heavy rain pelted against his face, the droplets making it hard for him to see. The heavy footfalls

squelched in the mud around Mark's head, and he moved around him, the tip of the boot prodding him every couple of seconds. The oppressive darkness made it almost impossible to see any features of the man about to end his life.

A pair of strong legs came to stand on either side of his stomach, the tall broad man now standing directly over him. Suddenly the man sank down into a crouch, seated just over Mark's groin. The heavy weight pressing Mark down into the ground. Sheer terror now permeated his entire being, it was one thing to be stabbed to death, but it seemed as if the guy now had plans to strangle the very life out of him.

Mark's hands flew up, his fingers into claws. If he had even a chance of survival, this was it. He got inches away from the dark shadow across his attacker's face when blows from fists rained down over his face and neck. His arms immediately retreated back to block as many hits as he could. Pounding in his head throbbed as the blows continued to fall. Even through the dampness of the rain he could smell the blood seeping from wide cuts in his lip, nose, and cheeks.

"There he is, it's no fun when they don't fight back." The voice took on an almost petulant whining tone. "I think that's all the fight you had though, huh?" The figure tutted before reaching back to the ground behind him. Mark reeled back as he saw the glimmer of a sharp blade.

"Please don't," he whimpered. Terror permeated his very core, he could feel the trembling all over that had nothing to do with the cold seeping through the fabric of his clothing, making it cling to him like a second skin.

“Why are you begging?” The voice sounded confused. “You know I’m going to kill you.” He trailed the tip of the knife up from Mark’s wrist along the length of his arm until the tip pointed into his shoulder. He pressed ever so slightly, the tip puncturing the skin slightly. A small bead of blood pooled at the surface of the cut. He collected it with the blade and brought it up for Mark to see.

“It’s so pretty, you have all this scarlet within you, so vibrant and alive. I’m going to show you just how pretty you are inside, Mark.” Mark whimpered, trying to turn his head so he didn’t have to see. The edge of the blade pressed against his cheek as he was forced once more to face his killer. The tip of the knife was again on the move as it crossed the plane of his cheek until it came to rest just above his left pectoral muscle.

“Please if you’re going to kill me, make it quick.” There was no point in bargaining, but if he could secure this one last deal. He was good at this his whole life, he could make the deal. He needed to secure this last deal and it would all be over.

“Now why would I do that? There are so many wonderful things that I have to show you sweetheart.” The endearment made him feel like he might throw up. He had been called sweetheart by a number of ex-partners. Each man got what they wanted from him before they up and left. This man would be the last in a long line of people taking what they wanted from him.

Mark turned his head to the right away from the knife, his cheek pressed against the dirt, the bitter taste of the soil against his lips. He squeezed his eyes shut and prayed for



anyone who would listen to make this quick. A white-hot pain speared him as the knife plunged down into his shoulder, his screams carrying on the wind. His right arm reached around, digging into the dirt, scrambling for something, anything to take the focus away from the pain.

His fingertips glided across a smooth wet surface, hard and sturdy to the touch. *A fucking rock.* Mark's hand curled around the rock, the underside coarse against his skin. He had mere moments before the knife would surely plunge deeper into his chest. Swinging his arm in an arc, the rock smashed against the hard bone of his attacker's skull.

A muffled sound wooshed out from above him, a sickening crunch as the rock fell to the ground. The body above him fell sharply to the ground, the sound of soft mud splattering against fabric as the man hit the floor. He wasn't out cold though as Mark had hoped. Groaning, his hand pressed against a bloody wound on the side of his head, soft curses spilling from his mouth.

Mark grabbed the hilt of the knife, pulling the blade quickly from his flesh. Letting the bloodied knife fall to the ground next to him, he pressed the heel of his palm against the oozing hole in his shoulder. He had seconds before the guy would recover enough to pick up where he had left off. He had to go. Now!

Rolling onto his knees, a wave of nausea had him clutching his stomach. His shoulder burned, blood seeping through his clothes, fabric grating against the open wound. Pushing up onto his feet, Mark stumbled towards the treeline, the farmhouse lit like a beacon in the darkness, just waiting for him to come home. His thighs burned as he ran the remaining hundred yards until he breached the

edge of the forest.

Stopping briefly, he took in the expanse of field separating the forest from the farm. A small stream separated the fields from the house. A short red wooden bridge crossed the water, leading directly onto a dirt driveway.

“You fucking cunt,” a groggy voice sounded from a hundred yards behind him. Mark took off from his spot and began to sprint across the field towards the bridge.

“Help me!” The wind was so loud, he wasn’t even sure his voice carried all the way to the house. The lights appeared to be on in the upper floors, but he couldn’t see any evidence of movement downstairs. Horses stamped their hooves against the earth, the sound almost like a freight train rushing through a station.

Reaching the wooden bridge, Mark noticed the rising water rushing beneath his feet, the light from the farm illuminating the scene just enough to see small twigs and branches held together in clumps as they rushed downstream. Running quickly across the bridge, his feet made the old wood slats beneath his feet groan with pressure. Making it to the other side, the sound of footsteps on the bridge had him pausing. The steps were slow and deliberate. Craning his neck to look over his shoulder, he saw the man standing still on the opposite side. The knife hung loosely between his fingers by his side. Mark’s heart pounded against his ribs, the burning in his shoulder intensifying. The man took a single step forward, raising his knife to point it in Mark’s direction.

A sudden flash of lightning illuminated the night, the face of his attacker appearing clear as day.

“You!” Mark gasped, a cry breaking from his throat. Thunder boomed and cracked the sky. Turning on his heel, Mark ran towards the house. The footsteps behind him resumed slowly across the wooden bridge.

Sprinting down the driveway, the scrapes on his bare feet burned against the dirt, stinging pain travelling up his legs. “Somebody help me!” His throat was on fire as he screamed into the storm. Another light came on in one of the upstairs rooms, a small figure appearing at the window, pulling the sheer curtains to one side. “Help!”

Mark scrambled onto the wooden porch, grabbing the handle of the old wooden door only to find the door locked. Clutching the brass wooden knocker, he banged the metal hard against the wood three times.

“Help me!” he screamed again, his mouth only an inch away from the hardwood door. “Please help!” Turning around, he saw him strolling down the driveway, that damned smile playing on his lips. How could he have been so fucking stupid?

“Help, he’s coming!” He banged against the door with his fists.

“Hold your horses son, these old bones don’t move like they used to.” A small voice from inside the house sounded. Whistling from behind him had him pounding harder against the surface.

“He’s gonna fucking kill me!” Tears poured down his cheeks, the salt burning a path across the cuts on his cheeks and lips.

The door handle wobbled, the door remaining closed.

“Oh hang on, the key is on the table,” the voice griped inside.

Mark rested his forehead against the door. His eyes scrunched together as a sob ripped from him.

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“I’m going to fucking kill Myrna,” Jack mumbled, wiping the sleep from his eyes. The wind outside made it difficult to hear. “Leave the fucking key in the door, that’s all I ask.”

He was the one always looking for the damn thing every time they had a delivery. It wasn’t like the old days when you could just leave your house unlocked. He grimaced, realising he sounded a lot like his old man who had used to say the same thing. *You could just leave your house unlocked when we were young.* Of course you could, because there was fuck all worth stealing back in the day.

Digging into the small ornate green bowl on the table, Jack retrieved the old iron key and headed towards the door.

“This better be fucking important to wake me up at this time of night,” he shouted through the door. Sliding the key into the slot, he turned the heavy barrel lock and heard the familiar clink. He turned the big brass handle and the wind pushed the door towards him. Blinking his eyes to shield against the brutal wind and rain, he squinted into the empty space beyond the door.

“What the fuck.” An unpleasant chill crept along his spine. Pulling his old blue dressing gown around him, he walked out onto the porch, the wind whipping up his wiry white hair and the rain plastering it against his face. There was

nothing.

Grabbing hold of the wooden rail he walked down the three steps to the dirt driveway, his gaze tracking along the length of his property all the way to the treeline. Nothing but fields, trees, and darkness.

“Those fucking Jenkin kids, just you fucking wait.” The twins from the next farm over were always fucking with him, letting his chickens out, leaving pictures of hard dicks in his mailbox, and a whole host of other crap that he was surely going to be telling their mother about first thing in the morning.

He pulled his shoulders up to his ears as the cold wind howled into the night. Turning back towards his house, he walked the few steps up to the wooden deck. What sounded like a scream pierced the night; he whipped his head back around toward the trees, his eyes wide with alarm. Stumbling back down a couple of steps he hobbled towards the bridge. He should have bought his fucking cane from the house. Myrna always left it by the door as he refused to use it around the house. Grasping the edge of the rail he leaned heavily against it, listening out for any more sounds.

“Hello,” he shouted into the dark, the sounds of the rushing stream and the storm his only response. He could have sworn that had been a voice. Squinting into the dark, he tried to make anything out, but nothing took shape. Bottom lip held between his teeth, he sucked in air, shook his head and headed back towards his house.

“Losing my fucking mind.” He hung his head, shaking it slightly. Reaching his front door he went to grab for the

handle when his eyes went wide. There on the door, bloody handprints were painted on the light wood.

He pushed the door open hard and it slammed against the walls inside the entryway.

He screamed up the stairs. "Myrna, call the fucking police!"

## Chapter Two

The sun rose over Chesterfield bright and harsh in the sky. The air was crisp and clean after the previous evening's violent storm, the wind and rain pushing away the clammy air and the stifling heat the city had been experiencing for the past few weeks. It was as if the city was breathing a sigh of relief, the same way it always did after a storm passed over without any major damage.

People still remembered the great flood of '93 like it was yesterday. They had been told that the levees would hold, that the flats were safe. Then the rain had just refused to stop. The Missouri River had broken its banks, the levees had failed and the Gumbo Flats had been no more.

The city had recovered in time, the flats now host to the Chesterfield Valley. The memory still lived in the minds of those who had survived it, each storm on the horizon a warning to keep their eyes to the sky.

The sun streamed in through the wooden shutters on the windows. The shafts of lights spilled across Archer Paul's face. His eyes scrunched up, his arm coming up to rest across his eyes, trying in vain to chase the day away. The high-pitched calls of the white-throated sparrow that had made a nest above his window indicated that the bird had other ideas.

The song of the bird, whilst not loud, pierced his slumber and roused him back to the land of the living. Pushing himself up, he rested his back against the headboard, pushing the sheets down to his waist. Rubbing the back of his hands against his eyes, he peeked out towards the

window. A cloudless sky had replaced yesterday's gloom.

The bird's song sounded again along with the small clattering of tiny feet against the roof.

"Ok, god damn I'm awake," he groaned, throwing the sheets back. Archer looked to the left, the crumpled sheets and dent in the pillow the only indication that someone had slept beside him last night. The dent's creator had apparently gone at some point during the morning before he'd woken, and had not even bothered to say goodbye.

"Well fuck him," Archer grumbled. Spotting a small square of folded paper on the bedside table, he reached across to snatch it up, groaning as the muscles in his arms creaked and pulled. He'd gone particularly hard in the gym the previous evening, trying to vent some of the pent-up anger and frustration after his fight with Finn.

Archer had met Finn on an evening tour of the Butterfly House. Archer had worked at the house for almost ten years after he had graduated from Missouri State University; Go Bears! He'd completed his undergrad before deciding to go for his masters in Entomology, finally specialising as a lepidopterist. His best friend Declan had made fun of him for being the type of gay guy who wanted to work with butterflies.

*"What's next man, Leprechauns and Unicorns?"* Declan had chuckled when Archer had told him what he'd planned to study after high school. He reminded Declan that butterflies were real and that he was a dick.

Finn had been part of a group who had booked the tour as part of a getting-to-know-you session, set up by the faculty of Logan Chiropractic College in town. Finn had just



moved from Seattle to Missouri to start his first semester.

Archer hadn't been able to take his eyes off Finn the moment he'd opened the doors to the evening tour group, and had seen him at the back looking shy and reserved. He'd immediately felt like a dick for thinking that someone who looked like Finn had no business looking shy, because of course anyone could feel self-conscious and out of place.

Finn, just on the surface, was really something to behold; with his pale skin and rosy cheeks, he stood out amongst the tan-skinned people around him. Archer's eyes had immediately been drawn to the full pink pouty lips and then to his light jade-coloured eyes. If he hadn't known any better, he would have said that this ethereal man was otherworldly, like a faerie or an elf dragged straight from the pages of the fiction he'd used to read as a child.

Finn's eyes had darted up and locked with Archer's, the shy smile and lip bitten between his teeth making Archer want to fight his way through the crowd and gather Finn up into a huge bear hug and steal him away.

During the course of the tour, Archer had done everything in his power to stand as close as he could to Finn, once even leaning right across him to point out the thick lily pads in one of the centre's water exhibits.

After snatching Finn away during a break in the tour, he'd managed to convince him to exchange numbers and meet for drinks the following weekend. That was almost a year ago. Archer would have loved to think that things had just gone from strength to strength since then, but they hadn't. He definitely had all the feelings for Finn, but Finn had

some insecurities that caused friction in their relationship. Mainly Archer's friendship with Declan.

A week hadn't gone by with Finn making some pseudo-sarcastic comment about Decan being secretly in love with Archer, or questioning their history together. Finn just couldn't seem to accept the fact that there had never been any type of romantic relationship between them. Other than harmless light flirting every now and again, there had never been anything between him and Declan. They had been friends since they were kids, had gone to the same elementary school, junior high and high school.

Archer moved across the bed until his feet were pressed against the carpet, his toes wiggling through the soft fibres. Opening the small square note, he discovered a simple kiss with the word 'sorry' scrawled on the piece of paper.

Biting the inside of his cheek and smiling, he pressed the note against his chest and pushed to his feet. He opened the windows and shutters, allowing the fresh air to stream into his room. He had been forced to use the air con the previous night, the wind so harsh that leaving his windows open had not been an option.

His view looked out over a wide expanse of land. The new housing development he'd bought a home in was surrounded by woodland on all sides. The whole development was made up of around only twenty-five larger-sized homes. Archer looked across at his neighbours' house, the older man out mowing his lawn whilst his wife weeded the surrounding flowerbeds. He smiled at the domestic scene, hoping that someday that would be him and his husband. He wondered whether that picture could include Finn in it; he knew that that was what

he wanted, if only Finn could get his shit together.

The older man, Frank, looked up and spotted Archer in the window. Giving him a friendly wave, he turned to his wife, Gladys, who followed her husband's lead and waved a hello from across the road. Archer returned their greetings before moving away from the picture-perfect scene.

He craned his neck to look at the clock: it flashed 10.13am. It was very rare that he got to sleep late. With the Butterfly House being a tourist hotspot, it was not very often that he got to take a Saturday off. But Jayla and her new squeeze Tina had worked it so they could work their shifts together, which meant that he got the next three Saturdays in a row off. Thank the Lord for lesbians and their breakneck-speed love.

Grabbing some clothes from the dresser, Archer made his way towards the shower room. The grand plan for this morning was a hella long shower, followed by blueberry pancakes drowned in an ungodly amount of maple syrup. Rubbing a hand across the hairy hard ridges of his abs, he frowned down, contemplating whether the extra calories and sugars in the pancakes and syrup were worth it. Fuck yeah they were.

Archer worked hard on his body, having been a bullied kid in high school will do that a young gay guy in the Midwest. Whilst aesthetically he knew he was very attractive; he also knew that he had stacked on the muscle to make sure no one fucked with him.

He turned the knobs on the shower till the jets hammered down onto the cream marble tiles below. The steam quickly filled the room, the glass partition fogging up until

he could see the heart shapes that he'd drawn there the night before, after his gym session. His muscles still ached a bit, but he hoped the hot water would soothe them in a few moments.

He stepped out of his briefs and under the shower, and the heated water hit his skin. The initial heat shocked him for a moment but he stood still, allowing the spray to pink the skin across his chest and arms. Losing himself to the melodic drumming of the shower against his body and the wall behind him, Archer let his mind wander into a state of euphoric nothingness.

A loud creaking on the stairs yanked him from his peaceful state. He knew that creak well. Many a night he had tried to creep quietly downstairs to watch college football in peace, only to step on that damn floorboard, the resultant creak echoing throughout the house which consistently woke Finn up. He loved Finn but explaining the ins and outs of why he loved the Missouri Tigers with the passion that he did was just something he was not willing to do. Finn would always make the same joke that Elijah Drinkwitz sounded like the name of someone who should never have a drinking problem. He'd laughed the first time, but it just wasn't funny.

"Hello?" Archer called, sticking his head out of the shower cubicle. Silence greeted him.

"Finn is that you?" Archer listened for the tell-tale sound of keys, or footsteps stomping around the house, like Finn's tended to. No response. Archer figured that he must have been hearing things or it potentially was just the sound of the house settling. People said that sometimes and he'd never been sure he understood what it meant, but it

sounded as good of a reason as any.

Stepping back into the shower, Archer reached for the Irish Spring soap bar, rubbing the hard green brick over his body. He gathered the lather in his hands to scrub across his face, the stinging at the corner of his eyes present as always. Finn complained that the soap was what his granddad had used, reminding Archer that higher quality stuff was available. The fact was that it also reminded Archer of his own grandfather, which was why he continued to use it.

Laying the soap back on the small shelf set into the wall, Archer leaned forward under the shower spray, washing the suds and soapy remnants away from his face. A thud sounded sharply on the floor outside the bathroom.

Jumping out of the shower, Archer grabbed the towel resting over the corner of the sink. Wrapping it around his waist, he slowly approached the door. A small creak indicated a presence on the other side.

“Finn is that you?” Archer’s voice croaked, the heat from the shower masking the sweat that was starting to bead on his forehead and neck. Again only silence. He reached slowly for the doorknob, the metal cool against his skin as he slowly turned it to open the door. “Finn?” he whispered once more.

The hinges moaned as he slowly opened the door. He peeked slowly around the edge into the empty corridor. Confused, he pulled the door open wide, walking into the empty space, looking down both ends of the narrow walkway.

*Is this what happens when you spend nearly all your time*

*alone or in the company of butterflies?* he wondered. *You start to imagine people where there are none.* Rubbing the moisture from his forehead with the back of his hand, he let out a nervous chuckle and returned to finish his shower.

Twenty minutes later, Archer stood in front of his bedroom mirror. A towel wrapped around his waist was the only thing covering his modesty. He studied his form, knowing that he had a body and face that most men would envy. The sharp-angled jaw, overly defined abs and pecs, large shoulders and pumped forearms drew many a stare on a daily basis. Archer wished that he could be one of those people who professed to only look the way they did so that they could be as healthy as possible. In reality, he looked the way he did because he craved attention: attention from his boyfriend, friends and even strangers. The attention that had been sorely lacking for a kid raised in the foster care system, whose idea of family celebrations was time spent with people he barely knew, spouting nonsense about how next year he would find his forever home. He never had.

Archer's parents had been drug addicts who had burned to death in their trailer trying to cook up meth. Archer had been at kindergarten that day, one of the days his parents had bothered to wake up in time to take him. He remembered a social worker had come to collect him from school; they'd told him that his parents had gone to live with the angels. That had been the last day he'd ever seen his parents, his school or any of his friends. The next thirteen years had been a mixture of group homes and foster care. Not many people had wanted the kid who'd screamed when he slept, who'd wet himself more nights than not, who'd experienced such severe night terrors that the doctors had medicated him for a good four years until

someone finally realised that maybe he needed therapy.

He pushed the towel to the floor; standing bare, he appraised his reflection. His hand trailed down his chest, across his abs. His fingertips played in the soft sandy brown pubic hair above his cock. He always made sure he was well-groomed down there, ensuring every aspect of his physical being was aesthetically pleasing. His hand moved further south, sliding over the smooth skin of his shaft, cupping his balls and giving them a small squeeze. His other hand came up to massage over his chest, pulling at his nipple. Archer's head craned back as he gasped at the sensitive touches across his body.

His cock thickened in his grasp as he pulled the skin back over the head. A glistening bead of precum slid out through the slit. Gathering it up on his thumb, he brought his hand up to his mouth and cleaned it off. The salty sweetness of his own essence made him moan harshly, causing his dick's girth to swell. Reaching back down, he gripped his cock tight, building up speed as he jerked himself off. Feeling the tell-tale tingling at the base of his spine he quickened his motions.

He twisted his nipple harshly, the sharp bite of pain perfect against the smooth pleasure of his cock. He squeezed his eyes shut as he felt his orgasm barreling down his spine. He wanted to see his load spurting from him against the glass of the mirror.

A heavy breath against his neck had him snapping his eyes open, only a gasp able to escape as the dark figure behind him raised its hands.





## Chapter Three

“What in the actual fuck are you doing?” the voice gasped from behind him, a large warm hand landing on his shoulder, pulling him around.

Archer felt for a moment like his soul might leave his body, lurching forward out of the hold on his arm. His knees felt weak and they buckled; reaching forward he grabbed the frame of the mirror to steady himself. His sweaty palms caused his hands to slip for a moment before he gripped the frame again, righting himself.

He turned his head to see the face of his best friend Declan, an embarrassed smile playing on his lips. Declan’s eyes tracked downwards across the broad expanse of Archer’s chest, down across his abs to the rigid firm cock, still erect and pointing accusingly at his friend. Quickly covering himself up with his hand as best he could, Archer scooted behind the tall freestanding mirror.

“Oh wow, I never expected to...” Declan started, laughter in his voice.

“Declan, what the fuck are you doing in my room?” Archer’s eyes narrowed at his former best friend. Reaching forward with his leg, he tried to snag the towel discarded on the floor.

Seeing him struggle Declan reached down and picked up the wet towel. Covering his eyes with a hand, he stepped forward and passed it to Archer.

“Oh calm down, you’ve seen it all before,” Archer chided.

“Yeah but not like that,” Declan chuckled, pointing in the general direction of Archer’s crotch.

Wrapping the towel quickly around his waist, Archer stepped back into full view.

“You can take your hand away now, Mary Ingalls.” Declan peeked through a gap in his fingers before letting his hand drop to his side. “I’ll ask you again. What the fuck are you doing here?”

Declan looked up, confused. “You told me to be here.” Pulling a phone from his pocket, he flashed the screen at Archer.

A memory surged to the surface of his mind, of him knocking back a number of neat Scotches and texting his best friend, complaining how much of a dick Finn had been. Asking him to come over in the morning and bring him a bagel. He looked down to see the white paper bag dangling between Declan’s fingertips.

“Fuck you’re right, I’m sorry.” Scrubbing his eyes with the back of his hand he took a deep breath. “I guess I was a little drunk last night.”

Declan eyed him cautiously before stepping around him, giving him a wide berth and plonking himself down on the windowsill. He appeared to be deep in thought about something, purposefully avoiding eye contact.

“Everything ok?” Archer prodded a fingertip against his shoulder. “You seem... I don’t know. Off maybe?” He noticed a deep flush extending from Declan’s neck down into his chest, visible through the collar of his powder blue polo shirt. Declan only got that way when he was either

feeling guilty or completely embarrassed about something. A thought popped into Archer's head.

"Oh my God." Archer's deep chuckle caused Declan's gaze to dart up to meet his own.

"Oh your God what?" he snapped, annoyance on his face.

"You're embarrassed because you caught me in front of the mirror right?" If possible, Declan's flush grew a number of shades deeper. He looked away out the window as if the old couple across the street raking leaves was the most important thing in the world and he couldn't miss a moment.

"Declan?" Archer prodded his shoulder once more.

Declan's silence confirmed to Archer that he had seen more than he'd bargained for. Letting out another bark of laughter, he grabbed some clothes for the day and started to change.

"I'll wait for you downstairs." Archer looked up to see Declan suddenly by the door, still not meeting his stare.

"Hey Declan, wait a minute," Archer called out before he had a chance to get far.

Declan popped his head back through the doorway, a small smile playing on his lips. "Yeah?"

"Were you outside my bathroom door before, when I was showering?" Archer asked, realising that was what the noise earlier must have been.

"No, the front door was open so I thought you had just got home yourself or something. I came upstairs and found

you doing that.” Declan waved his hand at the mirror.

Archer nodded as Declan made his way down the stairs. The telltale creak of the stairs sounded throughout the house. If it hadn’t been Declan outside the door, then who the hell had it been?

And why the fuck had the front door been open?

\* \* \* \* \*

“So what did he do now?” Declan sang, rolling his eyes as Archer walked through the archway into the kitchen. One thing about living in a new development was that you could design your own living space. Archer had always wanted to have that family kitchen that he had always dreamed of growing up. The big island in the middle where people could gather and chat about their day, where his kids would someday tug on his sweatshirt asking for another cookie. Onto which he would lift his husband one steamy night, and make love to him for hours. Each time he walked into the space that he had designed, a smile spread across his lips.

Quickly schooling his expression he shrugged at Declan, opening the fridge and bringing out a pitcher of OJ.

“Same old, you know.” He poured a couple of glasses and passed one across the wooden surface of the island, like a barkeep at a Western saloon.

“That’s the problem, I do know. How much longer are you going to put with his shit Archer?”

Archer slammed the glass he was holding down onto the counter in front of him, giving his friend a sideways

warning glance before tipping the remaining contents of the juice down the sink. Gripping the edge of the sink, Archer dipped his head. "Are we going to start this again? I thought we've gone through this already." Declan had made his position on Finn clear on any number of occasions. Archer mentally slapped himself for even messaging him after an argument, but alcohol makes for loose lips and loose lips sink ships.

Declan held his hands up in front of him. "I don't want to get into another argument, I know where I stand when it comes to Finn."

Archer turned quickly to look directly at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well it means when it comes to me or him, you always choose him." His voice lowered to a whisper as if he didn't really want Archer to hear.

The words sliced through Archer like a knife. "Hey that's not true, Finn is my boyfriend..."

Declan stood and moved towards Archer, laying a hand on his shoulder. "Let's not talk about it; let's just agree to disagree."

Archer opened his mouth to say something, but the look in Declan's eyes told him everything he needed to know. Somewhere along the line Archer had hurt Declan. He would not be letting this go, but he would put it on the back burner for now.

Declan started to move away but his hand stilled for a moment, and he looked at Archer thoughtfully. A knot of concern formed in Archer's stomach at what his best friend

was going to say next.

“Just be careful. Can you do that for me?” Declan reached down to squeeze Archer’s hand, his grip tightening.

“Why would I need to be careful?”

“I’m just worried about you, ok? There’s just something off about Finn.”

“Declan!”

“I know, he just scares me, ok? The way he looks at you when you’re talking to anyone else, when you’re on the phone and he doesn’t know who you’re talking to, when you’re just hanging out with me. This look of, well I don’t know what, but it just seems off. I don’t like him,” Archer rolled his eyes and huffed out a breath, “but you chose to be with him so I have to respect that.”

“Yeah you do.”

“Ok.” Declan once again tried to move away.

Archer pulled him sharply against himself. Declan’s chest collided with his own. Archer’s hands came around his friend’s waist, tightening his grip. Declan rested his head against Archer’s shoulder. There was something comforting and just right about his friend being in his arms. He wouldn’t say it was a sexual feeling or a desire, but just a feeling of calm and rightness. It would have made things so much easier if he and Declan shared those types of feelings for each other, but they had just never materialized.

“You give good hugs,” Declan whispered in his ear.

“You too.” Archer smiled against his face, taking a beat to just revel in the warmth of comfort and familiarity.

“Sorry to interrupt.” Finn’s voice, husky and low, sounded from across the room.

Archer jumped back from Declan’s embrace, putting a good six feet between them. The disappointed look on Declan’s face did not go unnoticed.

“We weren’t doing anything,” Archer snapped, picking up a dishcloth from the side and wringing it through his fingers.

“Mhmm.” Finn’s cold stare at the couple chilled the air around them.

“He knows there was nothing going on, don’t you Finn?” Declan’s voice dripped with disdain.

Finn’s cruel smile twisted over his angelic features. “Oh I don’t know, you both seemed pretty cosy. Maybe I should leave you to it.”

“Baby c’mon, don’t be like that,” Archer pleaded, just hoping to regain some air of civility between his friend and his boyfriend.

Finn crossed the room and pulled the fridge door open, grabbing a bottle of water and twisting the cap off. He put the rim of the bottle to his lips, his gaze never straying from Declan.

“It’s ok, I’m going to get going,” Declan sighed.

“Declan...”

“No it’s fine, I have some stuff I need to be getting back to

anyway.” Tapping his hands against the counter, he moved towards the door.

“Bye Declan,” Finn called out across the room. Declan’s withering look was the last thing Archer saw before his friend left the kitchen, the sound of the front door clicking and the car leaving the driveway indicating his full departure.

“Finn what the fuck?”

“Don’t ‘what the fuck’ me, I came home to find my boyfriend in the arms of some guy!” Finn bit out.

“Not some guy, my best friend and it was just a hug.”

Finn rolled his eyes before walking out of the kitchen, dismissing Archer completely. Archer sagged and sat down at the island, his head resting on folded arms on the surface. He couldn’t go on like this forever, feeling like he was walking around on eggshells in the home that was supposed to be his sanctuary, the place that he never had growing up, the place that was just his, the place he could escape, where he could just be him.

He thought back to where things had started to fall apart. The night at the club should have signalled to him that he had no business being in a relationship with Finn, but his lovesick mind had convinced him that his boyfriend was just overprotective, and the thought had somehow made him feel flattered.

*“Cold out here, right?” Archer quietly laughed whilst standing next to some poor guy on the edge of the sidewalk glancing up and down the street, looking very lost.*



*“Huh?” The guy looked around to see Archer smiling.*

*“I’m saying it’s cold. Are you ok?”*

*“Yeah I guess. Sorry, I’m just waiting for a friend; she went to get the car and that was like fifteen minutes ago. I’m not surprised, she did this to me last week in Iowa, left me standing waiting whilst she chatted up an Uber driver.” The guy was pretty cute, not really his type, but he could imagine he had no problem scoring with the guys or girls.*

*“Iowa? Wow you’re far from home,” Archer laughed.  
“Gonna be a long drive home.”*

*“What?” The guy looked confused before a grin split his face “No, me and Lizzie are driving across the country, she has an audition next week in San Diego and I don’t like flying, so we are driving instead.”*

*“Wow, good friend.” Archer winked at the young man. The blush on his cheeks gave him an adorable cherub-like look. “So where are you guys from?”*

*“Maine.”*

*“Oh ok, so this really isn’t cold for you then?” Archer barked out a laugh.*

*“Yeah, no,” the guy smiled, “This would be considered positively balmy in Maine during the winter.”*

*Archer’s eyes were drawn to the guy’s arms, not because of how toned they were or how snugly the guy’s clothes clung to his muscles, because he definitely had noticed that, but because the tattoo on his forearm caught Archer’s eye.*

*“Holy shit, is that a Porygon?” Archer exclaimed, reaching out to snag the guy’s wrist to get a closer look.*

*The guy gave his arm up willingly, chuckling at the nerdgasm Archer was so clearly having. “Ah, you’re a Pokémon nerd as well huh?” the guy smiled, his eyes sparkling for a moment before a fist seemed to come from the ether, connecting with the cute guy’s jaw.*

*Archer gasped and turned sharply to see Finn’s rage-filled face twisted into a grimace.*

*“What the fuck?” Archer screamed, pushing against Finn’s shoulder. He turned to see the guy holding a hand against his wounded face, the other arm up to defend himself.*

*Finn turned to Archer, the anger evident in his face and posture. The air around him seemed thick with fury. “So you’re just out here groping some guy whilst I’m inside trying to get us a table quicker?”*

*“I wasn’t groping anyone you absolute dick, he was showing me his tattoo.” Archer pointed at the guy’s arm, which was currently held in front of his face. Finn’s gaze tracked down until he saw the colourful Pokémon etched on the skin of the forearm.*

*“Oh my God.” Finn’s face crumpled, tears springing to his eyes. “I’m so fucking sorry. I honestly just thought...”*

*A car horn beeped behind Archer making him jump - a white Subaru with a pissed-off looking girl inside revving its engine.*

*“Just don’t, leave me the fuck alone you psycho,” the cute*

*guy said before getting into the car, seconds before it took off into the night.*

*Archer turned to face Finn, his arms flung out wide, waiting expectantly. "So?"*

*"Archer baby, I'm so sorry. I just came out here and you had your hands on him and I just saw red and jumped to conclusions." Finn moved towards him, only stopped by Archer's grunt and his movement away from Finn.*

*"Even if I was groping someone, you think it's acceptable to go all fucking Rocky Balboa on them?" He had never seen Finn act like this before. He was normally so reserved, maybe a little annoying sometimes, but never the violent type. Seeing Finn for a moment through a new lens gave Archer pause for thought.*

*"No, but you don't understand, Archer, what it's like to love someone like you. To have you in my arms, but seeing everyone leer at you, knowing exactly what they are thinking. I feel like I have to keep a tight hold of you or I'm going to lose you. You are so fucking beautiful and you could literally have anyone." Finn's voice was meek and his words came out in a rush.*

*Archer softened a bit, sighing and moving towards Finn, placing a small kiss on the top of his head. "But I want you Finn; I don't want anyone else."*

*"But everyone else wants you." The voice was muffled against his chest.*

*Archer pulled Finn against him, pressing small kisses against his head, feeling the warmth of the man who warmed his bed most nights.*

*“Don’t think I didn’t notice your slip there by the way,” Archer smiled against the skin of Finn’s cheek.*

*“Huh?”*

*“You said you loved me.” The feeling welling up in Archer’s chest warmed him from the inside out until he felt like he could radiate it to the world.*

*“Well,” Finn stammered, “You know... I was just... and you know you were... and well I was thinking about...”*

*“I love you too.”*

*Finn laughed and sank into the embrace, pressing small kisses against Archer’s chest. “Good.”*

The upstairs bathroom door slammed, sounds from the shower echoing through the house. Maybe if he just gave Finn some space for a little while they could have a more constructive conversation later.

Archer walked into the front garden, Frank and Gladys immediately waving at him from across the street. Their good nature made him smile against his will. He jogged across his lawn, giving them a little wave to let them know he was coming over.

“There he is,” Gladys chirped as he crossed over to drop a small kiss on her cheek, “we missed you last week for the *Drag Race*. Frank here says that he would look... what is it you said you would look, Frank?... in my Chanel suit.”

“I said I would look *sickening*.”

Archer barked out a loud laugh, earning him a squint from

Frank which just made him laugh harder.

“Yeah sorry, I had a work emergency.” Archer shrugged.

“Butterflies have emergencies?” Gladys’s mouth formed a thin line as if she was trying to hold back her own laugh.

“No silly,” Archer chided, “but there was something wrong with the atmospheric. They needed me to have a look at it.”

“Place would collapse without you holding it up son,” Frank smiled from behind his aviator shades.

Archer blushed and tapped Frank on the arm. “Well I’m up for next week if you guys are?”

Gladys’s face seemed to droop a little, the light dimming in her eyes. “I’m not sure honey, we will have to let you now. One of our friends Myrna is in the hospital. It’s not looking good. They say she might not last the week. She has never been the same since Jack passed last year.”

“Oh I’m so sorry guys, yeah that’s absolutely fine. Just let me know if you need anything.”

Frank smiled before getting back to his garden.

“I’m going to head back over. Finn’s home early.”

“Our lips are sealed.” Gladys chuckled. “You kids these days with your open marriages and your bed hopping. Lord knows it wasn’t like that in our day.”

Archer’s eyes narrowed at Gladys. “Erm we are not in an open relationship, I mean there is nothing wrong with that, but I’m a one man guy.”

“Right,” Gladys winked.

“Gladys I’m serious.”

Frank’s face seemed to pale slightly. “So who was in your house this morning then?” he asked, concern in his voice.

“What do you mean?” Archer’s heart pounded in his chest.

“When you waved at us from your upstairs room this morning, there was someone in the room next to it, standing in the window. Watching.”



## Chapter Four

“They are both blind as bats and half cut most of the time babe, I wouldn’t pay them too much attention,” Finn said, rubbing a dry towel bunched in his hand against sodden hair fresh from the shower.

“Finn, they said someone was in the room next to ours,” Archer said, waving his hands towards the adjoining wall. “Also, I told you about what happened whilst I was showering, didn’t I?”

Finn rolled his eyes, stepping into his briefs and pulling them up his thighs. “What, you mean that you heard squeaking floorboards and thought you saw a shadow?”

Archer grumbled the word ‘prick’ under his breath before going to leave the bedroom.

“Hey, I’m just saying, is it possible that it was just a trick of the light and the squeak was just a floorboard creaking on itself?”

Like the house was trying to prove how crazy Archer really was, a creaking in the walls sounded somewhere in the house. Finn gestured wildly towards the door. “See!”

Archer flipped him off and made his way downstairs.

Finn walked coolly towards the window, staring out over the garden and across the street. He saw the old couple doddering about on their lawn pulling at weeds and digging holes in the flowerbed. The old man looked up at him standing in the window and peered curiously at him. Finn lifted his arm in a half-hearted wave before pulling the



blinds closed.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Ok I’m sorry,” Finn murmured as he pressed himself against Archer’s back, lips pressing small kisses against the shell of his ear. Archer hadn’t heard him come into the living room. “If you believe someone was in the house then I trust you. We can go around and have a look to see if we can spot any signs of an intruder if it will make you feel better, or we can call the estate security to ask them to keep an extra eye on the house?”

“No,” Archer sighed, “you’re right. Probably just an overactive imagination and an old couple who watch too many unsolved mysteries.”

Finn wrapped his arms around Archer’s waist and squeezed. Archer smiled and turned in the embrace until he was pressed up flush against Finn, craning his head down to press a kiss against his soft plump lips.

Head pulled back from the embrace, Finn’s hands rested on Archer’s shoulder. “I’m sorry for being such a dick. I know you wouldn’t cheat. I just get really crazy when it comes to you. I can’t stand the idea of someone else’s hands on you.” Archer gasped as Finn pressed kisses along his jaw. “Their hands on your cheeks, on your jaw.” He continued trailing kisses. “On your neck.”

“Finn please.” Heavy breaths escaped Archer as he felt his heart start to thunder against his ribs, his dick swelling and pushing against the front of his jeans.

“Shhhh baby, I’ve got you.” Finn smiled against Archer’s neck. “No one else is allowed you like this, you know that

right? You're mine. Always."

"Nnnnmmhhh." Garbled nonsense was all that Archer seemed to be able to manage, all his senses firing, his skin on fire, his hands and body itching with the primal need to have this beautiful man all over him, inside him.

"Say it," Finn whispered, nipping against the skin of Archer's collarbone.

"Huh," Archer panted.

"Say you're mine, only mine," Finn's voice demanded as his fingertips kneaded the back of Archer's neck, holding his head in place. Heat and desire burned in him.

"Fuck yes, only yours."

Finn smiled wide, triumphantly, as he reached down and pulled Archer's shirt over his head. He immediately dipped down to press his mouth against the skin of Archer's chest, nuzzling his nose against the thick wiry hair. Grasping the back of Finn's head, Archer pulled him closer.

"I want you," Finn breathed.

Growling, Archer grasped Finn by the shoulders and pushed him back onto the couch. Quickly shedding his jeans and underwear, Archer straddled a fully clothed Finn, grinding down onto Finn's crotch. Crushing their mouths together, Finn stroked his tongue against the length of Archer's.

"I need you," Archer panted, lifting his waist off Finn's lap, "now." Reaching behind him he tugged down the dark blue shorts Finn had put on after his shower, wrapping his

hands around his now-hard length, stroking the bead of pre-cum that had formed on the smooth skin of his cock.

“Baby fuck, that feels so good.” A deep whine rumbled in Finn’s throat.

“It’s about to feel so much better.” Archer cupped his hand and spit into it, reaching around and rubbing the saliva into his hole. Sliding a couple of fingers inside himself, he pumped them in and out only briefly. Bringing his hand back around he held his palm in front of Finn’s mouth. “Lick it, get it wet for me.”

Grabbing his wrist, Finn licked a wet stripe along Archer’s palm, leaving a wet stripe in his wake. Archer bit against his bottom lip and he slid his slick palm down Finn’s solid prick, twisting at the base as he pushed against the heavy nutsack. Finn grasped at Archer’s hips, squeezing his fingertips into the hard muscle of his Adonis plate.

Positioning the head of Finn’s cock against his wet hole, Archer pushed down until he felt the familiar pop as the saliva-soaked head of Finn’s dick slipped past the first ring of muscle. He welcomed the sudden sharp burn as he pushed further down. This would feel so much easier with lube, but there was something about the heat of Finn’s dick as it slid against his hole and burned his insides that he couldn’t get enough of.

“Oh my god you feel so good,” Finn gasped, pulling on Archer’s neck until their mouths collided in a fury of teeth and tongues. Archer grinded down further until he settled on his man’s thighs, the full thick hard length throbbing inside him.

Archer met Finn’s stare. A swell of emotion rose in his

chest. He could see the love and affection in Finn's eyes as he seemed to peer into Archer's soul. The moment when he saw Finn like this, he remembered why he was so in love with him, and more than anything how much it sucked that only he got to see this gentle and caring side of him.

Finn seemed to swell impossibly large inside Archer. His legs tingled and shook as he rode Finn faster and faster. He loved the feel of Finn's balls pressing against his ass on each downward thrust, and the way the head enlarged inside him, making it slide roughly against his prostate.

"Baby if you keep up like this I'm gonna cum really quick," Finn moaned.

Archer slowed his motions, smiling as he leaned down and pressed his cheek against Finn's. "Isn't that kind of the point?"

"Oh fuck."

Without warning Archer slid Finn's dick out of him and stood up from the sofa. "I'm not quite done with you yet though." Reaching down he took a hold of Finn's cock and gave him a few slow tugs. He bent down and sucked the head into his mouth, sliding his tongue under the smooth skin and tasting the musky flavours of the two of them combined. "Delicious." Finn's cock popped from between his lips.

Turning away from Finn, Archer dropped to his knees and leaned forward until his elbows were resting on the floor underneath. He reached around with one arm, supporting his body on the other. He slipped his fingers between the crease of his ass and slid two fingers inside himself. He

pumped them in and out, an obscene squelching noise coming from him.

He looked back and saw Finn's mouth hanging open, his tongue coming out to trace his bottom lip as he watched his man fingerfuck himself on the rug in front of him.

"Are you just gonna sit there and watch or are you gonna fuck this hole of yours?" Archer chuckled.

Like a magical spell that brought him out of a deep slumber, Finn sprang from the couch and spat into his hands in the same motion. Running his hand down his cock, he lined up with Archer's ass and impaled him in one thrust. Archer screamed out and gripped the rug pile between his fingertips. The sweet agony of each thrust scorched inside of him as Finn picked up a punishing pace.

Feeling the telltale tingle at the base of his spine Archer reached out and grabbed hold of Finn's thigh. "Fuck I'm gonna cum! I need you to fill me up ok?" Not able to respond with words, Finn nodded frantically, sweat pouring from his forehead onto Archer's back.

Fin pounded against Archer's prostate, and Archer's vision became blurry at the edges until he squeezed his eyes shut as the pleasure threatened to overtake him, scared of where it might lead if he let it build to crescendo.

"Fuck baby I'm gonna cum, I'm gonna cum, I'm gonna... oh fuck!" Finn bellowed as Archer felt the warm heat flood inside him, Finn's hips stuttering more and more with each punishing motion. Archer reached underneath him and jacked his heavily leaking cock. It took no more than three strokes, and his hole clenched around Finn as he shot

white ropey spunk over the carpet in front of him.

Gathering it up with his fingertips he brought it to his mouth, only to have his wrist grabbed by Finn and yanked to his own mouth. Finn ran his tongue around Archer's fingertips until they were clean.

Collapsing in a heat of sweat and cum, Finn rested against Archer's back, sliding a hand around his waist and pulling him flush against himself.

"No one fucks as good as us," Finn said through stuttered breaths.

Archer barked out a laugh and squeezed Finn closer to him. "Yeah we are pretty good."

"Tens across the board," Finn chuckled.

"Someone's been watching Drag Race."

"I have not... ok well maybe I caught a few episodes," Finn grumbled.

"By that do you mean you watched an entire season?"

"Maybe." Archer laughed and brought Finn's hand up to press a kiss against his palm.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So he deep-dicks you and now he isn't a tool anymore?" Declan asked whilst sipping from his beer, before resting the mug back against the surface of the bar.

Declan had called later that afternoon and asked Archer to meet him at their favourite-slash-only gay bar in town, Bar

Mo's, a name Archer had always thought was a bit on the nose.

"I never said he was a tool." Archer squinted at him.

"No you don't have to, his general presence and demeanour tells you that just by talking to him."

"Declan," Archer said in a warning tone. He wished more than anything else for the two of them to get along. It would make his life so much easier. In one way though it benefited him as he got to have the two worlds completely separate. Finn had his own friends and Archer had his.

"So you were saying those creepy old fucks were spying on your house?" Declan muttered nonchalantly.

"That's not exactly what I said," Archer chuckled.

"Don't you find it weird? That they are constantly calling you over to chat, his wife sends over those care packages and they just feel like they have this weird grandparent claim on you." Declan winced.

"I think it's nice." Archer smiled fondly. "It's nice to have that you know. I never really had that growing up."

Declan sighed and smiled back at Archer. "Yeah I guess you're right. It's sweet of them to worry about you. Also it's nice that I get to steal that taffy that she puts in those care packages. I mean because you're so obscenely overweight that it's my duty to watch out for your health," he said as he patted a fist against Archer's abs.

"I feel your plight," he returned, deadpan.

"You're not alone though, Finn really doesn't like them

either. He gets this weird look when they come over or I go over to spend time with them. It's not sneering so much as a look of confusion, like he is wondering what the fuck," Archer said, rubbing his fingertips against his temples.

"Wow, something we agree on, that's a start." Declan's voice was filled with wonder. "So yeah, you said they saw someone in your house."

"Yeah not long before you got there."

"Did they happen to mention if your ghost intruder was hot or not?" Declan questioned.

"Are you seriously considering fucking my ghost intruder?" Archer laughed.

"I mean it's kinda hot right, I'd be all alone and defenceless until the big strong man came and held me down and showed me heaven and hell." Declan fake-swooned.

"You are fucking twisted man," Archer chuckled, shaking his head. "I'm sure it was nothing though. Just an old couple who can't really see for shit anyways."

"Yeah I guess." Declan's face morphed from worried to jubilant in a flash. "OK so the Gay Pride Parade is on in a few weeks in Columbia. You are going right? You are still going? Hillary May Jenkins you are still coming with me, aren't you?"

"Calm down before you blow a gasket," Archer said, resting a hand against Declan's forearm. "As far as I'm aware, barring any emergencies we are still going."

Declan narrowed his eyes at his friend and nodded, taking



another swig from his glass. He looked up to see Archer peering at him curiously. "What?"

"There's just something off with you. What's up?" Archer asked.

"Nothing."

"Don't give me nothing, I know when there is something wrong."

"You won't want to hear it." Declan shrugged.

"You could let me be the judge of that," Archer smiled.

Declan heaved a big sigh. "I'm just saying about Finn..."

"Declan!"

"I'm just saying, you don't have to settle. You can get any man you want. I mean, before Finn, guys were the ones to approach you. You never had to go trailing after anyone or jumping through any hoops. I just want to make sure that you're not with him because of a perceived lack of options. Because you're objectively hot as fuck, and I say that as your best friend." Declan took a deep breath.

"Ok let's look at my history of men shall we? There was Leo who decided that I wasn't worth waiting for when I asked for a short break during my finals so I could study, there was Graham who fucked everything that moved behind my back," Archer said, checking them off his fingertips.

"Not me," Declan raised his hand.

"OK nearly everything, and then there was Mark who

basically promised me the world, only to up and ghost me when I started talking about getting serious with each other. So excuse me if my stellar record doesn't fill me with confidence. And aside from that, I love Finn, like I really love him."

Declan raised his hands in mock surrender and beamed a smile at Archer before nodding resolutely. Archer returned the smile before picking up his own glass and taking a big gulp.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Did you get the chips and the dips? You know I can't watch this without chips and dips," Frank yelled into the kitchen from the living room.

"Frank you do know you can get off your lazy fat ass and find out yourself if I got the chips and dips, don't you?" Gladys chuckled.

"They only taste good when you're getting them for me darling," Frank shouted back.

"And yet no one cares whether stuff tastes good for me too," Gladys murmured to herself. She loved taking care of Frank really. Nearly as much as she liked to complain about it. There was something cathartic about nagging that Gladys just really loved. She knew that Frank found her nagging funny as it was never really meant maliciously or in a way that was to stress anyone out.

"Come on Glad," Frank yelled, "Ru just told us all to get our engines ready, they are about to sissy that walk!" Gladys smiled as she peered down the hallway, the glow of the TV

lighting up the room at the end where her husband was currently watching five drag queens strutting their stuff down a runway to impress Mama Ru. Things sure were different than when she was a nipper.

A creak in the pantry off to the left of the kitchen had her turning back round. She was sure she had closed the window to the pantry. Whenever Frank left it open, it would inevitably cause the pantry door to bang and creak all night.

Putting down the armful of food she edged towards the pantry, the slight crack in the door showing only the darkness beyond.

What was that noise? What was surely the wind blowing through the gap in the door had an eerie resemblance to stuttered breaths. Inching ever closer to the door she pressed her hand against the wooden frame. The sound in the pantry picked up pace as if someone couldn't catch their breath. Sweat formed at the base of her spine, her voice frozen in her throat from fear. Unable for some reason to stop herself from moving forward, she placed her hand against the pantry door and started to push.

"Gladys!" Almost jumping out of her skin, heartbeat racing, Gladys grabbed at her chest.

"Frank you asshole!" Gladys shouted, turning around. "You nearly gave me a heart attack!"

"One of the queens has a stack of books on her head!" Gladys eyerolled hard.

Picking up the items from the counter, she walked down the hallway towards the living room, the music from the TV

show loud up ahead. Not loud enough though that she didn't hear the pantry door slam open and the figure rushing out into the night through the back door, slamming it behind him.

Dropping the heaps of chips and dips on the floor, Gladys screamed.

## Chapter Five

The sound of the sirens wailing into the night shocked Archer from his sleep. He bolted upright in his bed, the darkness of his room splintered by the flashes of blue and red across the white ceiling. Looking around the room half asleep, he expected to find the source of the noise and the lightshow somewhere within his house before realising a moment later that police cars and sirens didn't tend to just show up in his room.

Throwing his legs off the side of the bed, Archer stood and strode quickly across the room. Peering out the window he saw two police cruisers screeching to a stop outside Frank and Gladys's house. Four cops jumped out of both cars; guns drawn, they moved quickly to the front door.

Heartbeat racing, sweat beading off his forehead, Archer rushed back to his bed, throwing on the shorts and t-shirt he had discarded at his bedside before collapsing earlier this evening. Praying to any god who would listen, he pleaded that Frank and Gladys be ok.

Archer rushed through the house and out onto the street. A few of the neighbours had also come to their front doors in various states of dress to find out the cause of all the fuss. Archer strode across his garden and up Frank and Gladys's driveway.

The front door was left open a crack, and he could hear muffled talking coming from somewhere within the house. Giving Shelley, the next door neighbour, a nervous shrug, he pushed into the house.

The second the door swung open, his eyes unfocused as they stared down the barrel of a Glock 17. Archer's knees began to buckle from underneath him. Reaching out behind himself, he grasped the door handle to stop himself from hitting the floor.

"Put the goddamn gun down Dirty Harry," Frank's gruff voice sounded from the living room.

"Holy mother of god," Gladys screeched, rushing across the room to gather Archer into a bear hug, whilst also giving him a warm body to lean against rather than the cold wood of the door.

"I'm fine, seriously," Archer croaked.

"Tell that to the yellow puddle on the floor," Frank cackled.

Gasping in horror, Archer looked down to see absolutely nothing.

"Got ya." Frank winked.

"Behave." Gladys glared at Frank, her eyes warning him of the dire consequences that he would face later if he didn't listen. Frank backed down and shot an apologetic smile at Archer.

Archer straightened and walked into the room, crouching down next to Frank's chair. "What happened?"

Two of the four cops were looking around the room, chattering away to each other whilst a third was checking the locks on the windows in the dining room. He had no clue where the fourth was, but he imagined she was doing something also vaguely cop-like. Dusting fruit or putting

little bits of tape on things. Yeah, so maybe he wasn't a hundred percent sure what cops did when they got inside a residence.

"Oh it was terrible Archer. Someone was in the house. It was so scary, like all those movies you see about the young girl babysitter being stalked by those big guys with axes and knives."

Archer's mouth gaped open as he looked to Frank for a bit more of an explanation, but surely she can't be saying what it sounded as if she was saying. Someone had broken into their home? Whilst they were in it?

"Come on Gladys, I mean first is that I think the girl in that is usually a 16-year-old slip of a girl and you are..." was all Frank got out.

"I'm what?" She pinned him with a deep stare.

"You know you are... I mean that they are very you know... By that I mean you aren't very... Archer?" Archer turned around, whistling and finding a point on the ceiling extremely interesting.

"Anyway," Frank said quickly, "there was someone hiding in the pantry; we don't know how long they had been in there. Gladys scared them away."

Archer turned around to see Gladys smiling, but looking very shaken. Throwing an arm around her shoulder he led her to the identical chair next to Frank's. He knew they had an excellent supply of liquor in the light brown armoire behind them. Taking out two small glasses, he poured two glasses of scotch and handed a glass to each of them.

“Mrs Lithgow,” a small voice sounded behind Archer. Turning around, he spotted what must have been the fourth cop, a petite lady of around 5 ft 6. A loose red bun at the back of her head, tendrils of auburn hair falling around her face. Pale white skin with ruby red lips. Shockingly bright green eyes set underneath dark black eyelashes. If Archer were interested in women, then he imagined this was what perfection looked like. “I’m Officer McKinney, can I just ask you some questions?”

“Sure my love,” Gladys smiled, offering Officer McKinney a seat. The cop smiled and accepted the seat; pulling out a small black notebook, she rested it on her knees. Her eyes narrowed at Archer, and she looked across to Frank for some kind of explanation as to who this new guy was.

“This is our neighbour Archer,” Frank offered. “He stops by sometimes to lend us old folks a hand.”

McKinney eyed Archer and then nodded, flicking through her notepad. “So you say that you had been home all day, you hadn’t left to go anywhere?”

Gladys shook her head, “No we don’t get out much, we did some gardening but then we came right back inside.”

“And you are sure that you had your back door locked?” McKinney’s face was scrunched up in confusion.

“Yeah a hundred percent.” Frank nodded.

“Ok, the only reason I ask is that there are no signs of forced entry at all, no broken glass or busted locks. Nothing looks to have been tampered with on any of the doors or windows and the cellar access is still bolted closed.” McKinney scribbled away in her notepad.



“Oh shit.” Frank mumbled.

“Oh shit what?” Gladys nudged him.

“The spare key.” Frank slapped his forehead with his palm.

“What spare key?” McKinney asked, cutting off what seemed like an identical question from Gladys.

“Well I was always forgetting my keys all the time, and so was...” Gladys grunted. “Gladys wasn’t forgetting anything.”

Gladys smiled wide.

“Anyway, I bought one of those fake rock thingies and put it in the yard.”

“Do you mind showing me sir?” McKinney stood, clearly more of a command hidden by a sweet request. Frank followed her out of the room, leaving Archer, Gladys and the two cops whom he assumed were checking for tiny intruders in the carpet since they seemed to be parting the carpet pile with the toes of their boots.

“How are you doing Gladys?” Archer asked. He had never seen her this shaken before, her face suddenly showing her advanced years.

“It’s just so awful.” She bit her bottom lip, and he saw tears begin to well in her eyes. “Your house might be big or small, noisy or quiet, it can be a lot of things, but one thing it mostly is for people is a safe place. It’s the place where you come home every night and kick off your shoes and let it all hang out, you know?”

Archer winced at the idea of a naked Gladys and Frank prancing around the house.

“That person took that away from me. It just doesn’t feel like home anymore.” Gladys looked around the room at all her worldly possessions. Archer knew at that moment that a countdown clock had begun until he would be saying goodbye to Frank and Gladys. He hated whoever had done this to them, the person who with one move had ripped the rug out from underneath an older couple who’d wanted a bright and cheery home to live out the rest of their years together. He felt like another thread of his life was being pulled away from him.

Frank and McKinney came back into the room, Frank plonking himself back down in his seat. He rubbed his fingertips against his temples before giving Gladys a sad smile. “I’m sorry Sweetheart, it seems that he did find the key and that’s likely how he got in.”

“I’m not sure how he managed to find a stone in a rock bed. I mean, aren’t they designed to be inconspicuous?” Gladys voice was exasperated and tired.

“Ah well that’s the thing see, “ Frank mumbled, “You know how my eyesight isn’t what it used to be? Well I kept forgetting where it was so I painted it gold.”

“You did what?” Gladys’s voice dropped a few thousand octaves.

Archer bit back a laugh and turned towards the window so Gladys wouldn’t see the inappropriate smile on his face. Gladys leaned over and smacked Frank on the back of the head.

“So yeah,” McKinney said, the twitch in her jaw telling Archer she was also biting back her own inappropriate laugh, “so we know how they got in.”

“McKinney!” a deep voice called from the kitchen.

“Excuse me for a moment.” She smiled before departing the room.

Frank looked everywhere at the room but at Gladys, whilst Gladys’s stare bored into the side of Frank’s head. If she kept this up his head might burst into flames. Eventually Frank turned around to meet his wife’s accusing glare.

“Sorry?” he tried quietly.

“Oh you will be.” Gladys smiled at him, the type of smile that no one wants aimed in their direction.

“Mr and Mrs Lithgow, can I ask just a couple more questions?” Gladys and Frank both turned to fully face McKinney who stood in the archway. “Would you say you have any enemies? Anyone who would want to wish you harm?”

“Oh Heavens no!” Gladys screeched. “I mean old Myrtle down at the county fair thinks I stole her marmalade recipe around ten years ago, but I don’t think she would hire someone to terrify us.”

“Can you think of anyone at all?” McKinney pressed again, the concern on her face making Archer’s pulse kick up a notch.

“No love,” Frank smiled. “It’s probably just a hobo looking for some food, but Gladys scared him off before he could

tuck in.”

McKinney looked down at her feet. “I don’t think so Mr Lithgow.”

“What makes you say that?” Archer asked, his breath coming in short bursts.

“We found some items in the pantry that would indicate that this person may have had intentions to do you guys harm. We found some heavy duty trash bags, cable ties and black gloves in a small black leather bag, as well as a knife.”

“Oh dear lord.” Gladys’s hand flew to her mouth.

“The knife had blood on it I’m sorry to say. Our officers have just done a rapid test and the blood is human. I’m sorry Mr and Mrs Lithgow but your house is now a serious crime scene.”

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### *Three Months Later*

Archer watched as the moving van pulled away from the house. He had said a tearful goodbye to Frank and Gladys earlier in the day. They had left a few hours earlier. He had offered to let the movers out and lock up the house before passing the keys to the realtor. The neighbourhood had definitely lost some of its appeal to him. He would miss having them around, having them to take care of, and them taking care of him.

He had initially tried to convince them to stay, but he understood that what they both needed was to feel safe in

their own home. It was a feeling they had not managed to get back in the weeks following the break-in. Cops had been around asking questions amongst the neighbours for a few weeks after. Now everything seemed to have gone quiet.

Frank had told him that they had not managed to find any fingerprints on the knife, the pantry or anywhere the intruder had been. He figured it would be one of these cases that would just go away. Eventually people would stop looking and it would become an urban legend within the community.

“You ok babe?” Finn asked, kissing the shell of Archer’s ear.

“Yeah I’m ok.” He faked a bright smile on his face. He knew that Finn was not a big fan of the Lithgows and he really didn’t want to get into an argument if he was about to make some *Good Riddance* comment. He was not in the mood for a fight.

“Wonder who the new neighbours will be?” Finn’s arms wrapped around Archer’s waist, his hand sneaking under the hem of the t-shirt and rubbing against Archer’s stomach.

Archer couldn’t even begin to process someone else living in that house at the moment. For the time being that would be Frank’s and Gladys’s house in his head, until he was forced to greet the new neighbours. God he hoped it wouldn’t be some loud fucks he would have drama with.

He couldn’t process anything at the moment, especially with Finn’s hand travelling down under the waistband of his shorts and wrapping his cool hand around his ever-

hardening cock. Archer groaned and pushed into Finn's grip, trying to find the friction he needed.

"I love how hard you are for me." Finn whispered in his ear. "I can see you're a bit down, so I'm gonna suck your eyeballs out through your cock ok?"

Archer chuckled, turning around in Finn's embrace, pressing a kiss to his mouth, before reaching up and pushing down on his forehead until Finn was crouched at his feet.

"You gonna fuck my face baby?" Finn asked up sweetly through thick eyelashes. Not needing to be asked twice, Archer reached down, threading his hands into the hair at the side of Finn's head and gripping two handfuls.

"Take out my cock." His voice was gravelly even to his own ears. Finn bit his bottom lip, reigning in a huge smile. Sliding his fingers back under Archer's waistband, he pulled his shorts and underwear down his thick tree trunk thighs. His cock sprang forward, the tip swiping upwards, almost hitting Finn in the face. Pulling Finn's head slowly forward, he fed the length of his dick into his mouth. Archer's eyes rolled back in pleasure as he felt a warm tongue circling his shaft and head, whilst the moist suction made his knees weak.

His cock slipped out of Finn's mouth. He looked down to see his boyfriend's face filled with lust, lips swollen and saliva coated. "Please I need you to use my mouth, I can already feel I'm so close." Archer nodded and pulled his head back down onto his hard length. He watched as Finn pulled his own dick out of his jeans and started to quickly jack himself off. With his other hand he reached round and

placed his hand on the small of Archer's back, pulling him closer. Archer felt his dick sliding to the back of Finn's mouth before slipping into his throat.

Groaning, he felt his cock swell even larger. He knew what Finn wanted and he was more than happy to give it to him. He began to pick up the pace, his hands tightening in Finn's hair, pistoning in and out of the warm mouth and deep into his throat. He enjoyed the teary-eyed, blissed-out expression on his lover's face as he quickly jacked himself to the edge and back.

"Baby I'm gonna cum really soon," Archer gasped. He felt Finn's hand urgently on the bottom of his back trying to pull him deeper. Taking that as an *Ok to go*, he reached one hand up to tweak his own nipple hard whilst ramming his entire dick to the back of the inviting throat. He felt a tingle build in his balls, the familiar tenseness in the base of his spine, the sensation of awareness in his fingertips and toes.

"Oh fuck!" was all he managed before his orgasm exploded within him, and he was shooting load after load into Finn's throat. Finn groaned around Archer's dick as he spilled his own seed onto the floor below. Finn took time to carefully clean Archer's dick, running his tongue along the shaft and around the head, lapping up any stray cum that he might have missed.

He lay with his cheek pressed against Archer's thigh for a few minutes before standing up and stretching. "Well as much as I like the taste of you in my mouth, I'm going to be catching coffee with a few friends in town in about an hour, you wanna come with?"

Archer smiled and shook his head. “Nah, I have some things that I need to catch up with for work.”

Finn nodded and moved towards the door, stopping for a moment to turn back around. “I love you, you know that.”

The now familiar warmth spread through his chest, Finn’s vulnerable side breaking into the icy parts of his heart that he had assumed, before meeting Finn, had long since died. “I love you too.”

Finn left, and a moment later Archer heard the shower come on.

A mobile phone rang from across the room, Finn’s jeans which he had apparently discarded mid-blowjob the source of the noise. “Finn your phone,” Archer called into the bathroom.

“Can you get it babe?” Finn shouted back. “It’s probably Jas asking me for a ride again, tell her she is a lazy fuck, but ok I’ll be there in half an hour.”

Archer smiled and went to retrieve the phone. Digging into the jeans pocket, Archer pulled the phone out, only for Finn’s wallet to also fall out and tumble to the floor.

A few of the cards in the tattered wallet scattered around, as well as some small polaroid photos stored in one of the pockets of the leather wallet that Finn had owned ever since Archer had known him. Archer had tried to get him to use any of the new wallets that Archer had bought him, but the wallet held some sort of sentimentality for Finn, which meant that ditching the old wallet was not going to happen.

Nestled amongst the credit cards and store cards was a



plain white business card with a familiar logo that caught his eye. Stooping down, he snatched the card from the floor and brought it up close to read.

A cold shiver passed through Archer, he would recognise this business card anywhere. Not only did he help design the logo on it whilst butt-naked in front of a fire in a cabin in Vermont, but the name on the card was Mark Fisher. The same Mark Fisher whom Archer had dated before being unceremoniously dumped out of nowhere.

What the fuck was Finn doing with Mark's business card? And more importantly, why was the back of the card stained red?



## Chapter Six

“It was in your fucking wallet Finn!” Archer shouted across the island in the kitchen, the white business card on the marble surface between them, dotted with specks of dark red and brown.

“What the hell were you doing going through my wallet?” Finn’s eyes went wide. “Are you fucking snooping on me again?”

“Again? What the fuck are you talking about?” Finn opened his mouth to respond before Archer cut back in. “That’s beside the point Finn, what is my ex-boyfriend’s business card doing in your wallet?”

Finn gestured wildly at the stained card between them. “I have no fucking idea what you are talking about! This is the first time I’m seeing this.”

There are coincidences and then there are just glaringly obvious lies. As far as Archer was concerned, Mark had dumped him a few weeks prior to him ever meeting Finn. He was also using the word ‘dumped’ in a very loose sense. He and Mark had been on a break; they had been trying to make it work until Mark had one day sent a series of cryptic texts.

***Mark: You’re a fucking liar!***

***Archer: Baby? What’s wrong?***

***Mark: I’m what’s wrong obviously, why does this keep happening to me? Why do guys think that I’m worth nothing?***

***Archer: Mark I don't know what's happening, please can we just talk?***

***Mark: I don't think that we need to talk again Archer.***

***Archer: What do you mean? Things were getting back on track.***

***Mark: Yeah me too, I'm a fucking idiot aren't I. You're a liar and I don't want to ever see you again. If you have ever cared about me at all, lose my number Archer.***

***Archer: Mark, I love you!***

There had been days where all of his calls went to voicemail, until one day the operator's voice told him his call could not be connected. Mark had blocked his number. A mutual friend had told him a few days later that Mark had left town and didn't plan to come back. When he had asked what had happened, she had told him to ask Chris. Chris was another mutual friend of theirs who worked with him at the Butterfly House. Strangely enough Chris had refused to speak to him and had quit his job a few days later.

"Finn, fucking business cards covered in *god knows what* don't just appear in your wallet. You best start fucking talking, right the fuck now."

Finn clenched and opened his fists at his sides, his face becoming red, his eyes narrowing. "I don't know what you are accusing me of, but I'm not a fucking liar ok!" Turning on his heel, Finn stormed out of the kitchen.

Picking up the card, Archer turned it over in his fingers. His heart clenched at the thought of Mark and all the plans

they had made with each other, the trips they wanted to go on. They had both decided that they would be one of those gay couples and go to Venice and take pictures on a gondola and post them on their social media accounts to make all their friends jealous. They had made a future plan to go to Machu Picchu before they got too old to do it, as Mark had said.

They had also planned a large family. Archer's time in the foster care system had shown him how many young kids there were out there looking for families. Family and love that he and Mark had both said they could give. Hot tears stung Archer's eyes.

"Motherfucker," Archer laughed, realising he was being a stereotype of the heartbroken lover wailing over the last remnant they held of their long-lost love.

It was the specks of what he presumed was blood that played on his mind the most. After the shit that had gone down at Gladys and Frank's house, he had spoken to Officer McKinney about the weird noises at his house, the shadow outside the bathroom and Frank seeing a figure in the window.

She had concurred with Finn's point that Frank didn't have the best of vision, as proved by his need to paint a rock gold, which in turn led to their security being not so secure. She had agreed to take a look at the CCTV camera footage set up in the neighbourhood as one of the cameras overlooked his house. She had been dismayed to learn that with the development being so new, the cameras hadn't been tested properly and the footage appeared to be corrupted.

She had told him to give her a call if he thought of anything else that could help. She had contacted the Lithgows a few weeks after the break-in to tell them that no further leads had borne any fruit; even the blood on the knife, whilst definitely human, didn't really bring them any closer to find out who the creep was.

“Hey Princess.” Declan’s voice sounded from behind Archer making him jump and turn around. “Wow it’s so moody in here.”

Declan saw the redness around Archer’s eyes and pulled him into a tight embrace, “Holy shit man, what has he done now?”

Archer pulled away from him and wiped his eyes with the back of his hands. “It’s nothing to do with Finn really.” He handed the card over to Declan. “I found this.” Declan took hold of the card between his fingertips; noticing the stains on it, he scrunched his nose before his eyes focused on the name.

“Holy shit is this Mark’s card?” Declan’s eyes went wide as he handed the card back to Archer. “Dude these stains, is that blood?”

Archer shrugged and slipped the card back into his pocket after taking one last look at the name of his former lover. He nodded over at the bar stools at the island, and both of them took a seat facing each other. Archer rested his head on his hands and heaved a deep sigh.

“Where the hell did you find that?” Declan asked, rubbing a hand over Archer’s back. “I thought you got rid of all his stuff.”

Archer's eyes were trained at the ground. "I found it in Finn's wallet," he eeked out quietly.

"What!" Declan's voice went up about a hundred octaves. "What is that creep doing with Mark's card?"

"Declan," Archer's voice warned.

"Ok I'm sorry," he grumbled. "Newsflash, Finn's not my most favourite person in the whole world."

Archer snorted out a laugh. "Which is odd cause cute gay guys are normally the only people you find tolerable."

"I just think you could do a whole lot better." Declan held his hands up. "I mean you have had guys the likes of Mark," he said, indicating to Archer's pocket where the business card was currently sitting. "I miss Mark."

Archer smiled remembering how close Declan and Mark used to be. At first Archer thought it was odd how affectionate they used to be with each other. If they were having a movie night, Declan would sit with his back to the arm of the sofa with his feet in Mark's lap, wiggling his toes until Mark would give in and rub his feet. Eventually though it normalized; Mark and Declan were like brothers. Declan had been the biggest cheerleader of his and Mark's relationship.

"You miss your little buddy?" Archer laughed, patting Declan's knee.

"Yeah you should get back with Mark!" Declan whined, making Archer laugh even more. "Hot, rich and all dat ass."

"Hey!" Archer gasped, pinching Declan in the side.

Archer jumped off his stool, moving around the kitchen grabbing cups off shelves and pouring them both a coffee from the carafe. He passed a cup to Declan who snagged some milk from the fridge as well as sweetener from the cabinet.

“That stuff will kill you.” Archer nodded at the sweetener.

“Then why do you keep buying it for me then?”

“I want your vintage baseball card collection,” Archer put simply.

Declan seemed to get lost in his head for a while, staring blankly into the distance. It gave Archer a minute to reflect. Why would Finn have anything of Mark's? Finn did know about Mark; he had never made a point of hiding anything from his past. But Finn always got a bit growly at the mention of Mark's name, like merely invoking the name would somehow make him appear. A part of Archer appreciated the possessiveness.

Archer remembered the day when he told Declan things between him and Mark were over. He chuckled remembering how upset Declan had been, how he had sat with Archer for hours during the times Archer had been unable to stop crying, thinking of ways that they could win him back.

“So what are you going to do about the card?” Declan said suddenly, dragging Archer from his memories.

“I'm not sure what I can do,” Archer said, looking at him expectantly. Almost waiting for Declan to give him the answers to life itself.



Don't you maybe want to let the cops know that you have a business card of your former boyfriend, that you found in the wallet of your current boyfriend and it is covered in what looks like old blood. Maybe that?" Declan shrugged, his mouth tilted down in a sarcastic grimace.

Archer pulled the card from his pocket and studied it again, his blood running cold. "You don't think it could actually be Mark's blood do you?" The card suddenly became a harbinger of some possible future doom.

"Only one way to find out." Declan chirped, snatching the card from between Archer's fingers.

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Officer Mckinney sat back in the armchair in Archer's living room, scribbling away in the same notebook she had at the Lithgows, either that or she bought them in bulk. Every now and again she would use the end of her pen to push away a stray curl that would fall over her face.

"May I just say Constable, you are stunning." Declan gushed, his hands covering his mouth.

"I'm not a constable, but thank you." McKinney smiled awkwardly at him.

"I'm sorry about him." Archer smiled sadly, slapping Declan in the arm. Declan laughed, rubbing it with his finger softly.

"So, Mr Paul, you say that you haven't seen or heard from Mark in over a year?" McKinney, never looking up, continued scribbling notes in her book.

"Draw me like one of your French girls Jack," Declan

gasped, swooning back on the couch.

Archer bit back a laugh, but turned round to stare pointedly at Declan. “That’s right, yes. It’s been over a year now.”

“But his bloodsoaked business card just shows up at your address randomly out of nowhere?” This time she looked up to face Archer. The *bullshit* was clearly evident on her face.

“Well not exactly out of nowhere,” Declan mumbled.

“Shut up!”

“No, I think I need to know what he is talking about.” McKinney pointed at Declan with the pen. “You talk.”

Declan held his hands up like the pen was a gun. “Hey, I’m just here to look pretty.”

“What he is so eloquently trying to say is that... well that I... what I meant to say is...”

“Today Mr Paul?” McKinney let out an exasperated sigh.

“I kind of found it in my boyfriend’s wallet,” Archer rushed out.

McKinney stood up from the chair and paced across to the window, looking out across to the Lithgow’s old house before coming back to her seat. “So what you mean to tell me is, you found your old boyfriend’s bloodstained business card, in your *new* boyfriend’s wallet and you are just now thinking to tell me that?”

“Inspector that’s almost what I said,” Declan smiled and pumped his fist in the air. “Almost verbatim. Maybe I

should be a cop?”

“Stick to I.T.” Archer smiled at him before turning back to McKinney.

“I’m not an inspector either.” McKinney’s eyes narrowed. “I think you might be reading too much Sherlock Holmes sir.”

“I don’t think it’s anything,” Archer blurted out. “I know Finn and he wouldn’t do anything like this.”

“He did say that he hated the Lithgows as well, didn’t he, and wished they would leave the neighbourhood.” Declan smiled innocently.

“Is that right?” McKinney started scribbling wildly in her notebook.

“Can you stop fucking helping?” Archer pleaded. Declan mouthed a *sorry* before walking out of the room.

“Mr Paul, can I ask, when you thought you had a break-in before the Lithgows reported theirs, why didn’t you report it?” McKinney tapped her pen against her chin.

“You know I can’t seem to remember, I think it was...”

“Mr Paul.” She stopped writing and looked him square in the eye.

“Well Finn said it was a waste of time and that the old couple couldn’t really see and it was just the sound of the house settling. He was probably right.”

“Mr Paul, I think I’m going to have to take a full statement.” Reaching into her bag she pulled out a tape recorder. Archer sighed, he was going to kill Declan.

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“The police?” Finn said, the door slamming as he came through the front door. “You called the fucking police on me?”

Archer moved quickly from the living room into the hall. “Finn?”

“Yes Finn,” Finn smiled sarcastically, “the person you had taken to the police station to make a statement, also the person who they asked to volunteer this.” He raised his hands to show black smudges on his fingertips.

“They took your prints?” Archer’s eyes widened in surprise.

“No, they actually came to my fucking job, asked me in front of co-workers and patients to accompany them downtown, which was in the back of a squad car, then I was questioned and then I had my fucking prints taken.” By this point Finn was waving his arms around wildly.

“Oh my fucking god.” Archer’s hand flew to his mouth.

“Yes, my boss asked me to come see her in her office first thing in the morning.” Finn’s voice became irate, his voice cracking on the edge of tears.

“Baby I...”

“Don’t,” Finn yelled, “you don’t get to call me that anymore.”

“What?” Archer’s voice was meek, barely a whisper.

Finn hurried past him and carried on up the stairs, taking

them two or three at a time. Archer followed up after him quickly to find Finn grabbing a duffle bag from underneath the bed. His heart started racing, a prickling sensation at the back of his neck. A Spidey sense informed him he had fucked up big time.

“Ba...” Finn glared at him. “Finn. What are you doing?”

“What does it look like I’m doing?”

“It looks like you’re packing your stuff together.”

“Give him a prize ladies and gentleman.” Finn’s voice grumbled under his breath.

Panic coursed through Archer’s veins, his skin feeling tight and itchy. This was all so fucking wrong. This was not how this happened. “You can’t go,” he blurted out suddenly.

“Watch me.” Finn’s voice was sad and small, like the whole conversation was too exhausting for him. He threw the duffle over his shoulder and went to walk out the door.

This couldn’t happen, he couldn’t allow this to happen. This was all a big fucking mistake. It was a goddamn business card for fuck’s sake. It could have come from anywhere. It could have been hiding under the sofa or a side table, or in a drawer all this time and got mixed up when Finn’s cards fell everywhere. He couldn’t lose his fucking world over a goddamned fucking business card.

Archer moved in his way, tears threatening to fall. His vision went blurry. Finn’s form was still visible, like from under the surface of a thin pond. “Please you can’t just go like this.” His hands gripped Finn’s biceps. He tried to go for the duffle but Finn pulled away.

“Archer, get out of my way.” Finn sounded like he was on the verge of tears, but his voice also carried a tone of robustness to it that Archer found terrifying.

Archer fell to his knees, wrapping his arms around Finn’s waist, pressing his cheek into his stomach, breathing in the scent of him deeply. What if this was the last time he got to hold him? What if this was the last time that he got to smell the man he was in love with? Archer’s gasped sobs caught in his throat, threatening to suffocate him.

“Please baby, please I’m so sorry. Please. Please don’t leave me.” His words were broken and tortured. He felt Finn’s fingers thread through his hair, massaging his scalp softly. Finn had to still love him, he just had to.

“I’m sorry, I just can’t,” Finn said before pulling his hand free and moving around Archer quickly. He heard Finn moving quickly down the stairs and out through the front door. Archer stayed on his knees in the doorway, tears streaming down his face as he wondered if he would ever be able to stop.



## Chapter Seven

“I mean good riddance right?” Declan’s voice sang at the end of the line. It had been about an hour since Finn had left; he had not responded to any of the calls or texts that Archer had barraged him with since he had walked out the door. His messages had been left on read which in some ways was more frustrating than if he’d never read them in the first place.

“Don’t Declan,” Archer warned, the weariness making his voice cold and distant.

Declan didn’t immediately reply. Under any normal situation Archer would be able to reply with some retort; he would have told Declan to go fuck himself or change the subject, however, this cold emotionless voice was not something Declan was used to.

The night had drawn in quickly, the humidity however still making the air sticky and oppressive. Archer had stripped down to boxer briefs and had left a thin string vest on to preserve whatever modesty he had left since his cock and balls were basically on display in those underwear. Finn had always liked them and inevitably wearing them meant that Archer got his dick sucked whenever he wanted.

Archer felt emotionally drained, like he had cried himself into a state of severe dehydration, where there were no more tears left to cry, and instead he was left with a hollow sinking feeling that he had fucked up in a way that there was no coming back from.

“Ok I’m sorry,” Declan whispered, his guilty voice going some way to making Archer think he wasn’t a total dick.



“So you think he is staying with a friend or just holed up at a hotel?”

“I don’t know, I don’t know where he is.” Archer put the phone on speaker, placing it on the coffee table in front of him. He rested his head in his hands and sighed deeply. “I just wanna talk to him, you know? I wanna apologise.”

“Why the fuck would you apologise?” Declan gasps, “You found your ex-lover’s card amongst his things with blood stains on it. I mean you don’t have to be Nancy Grace to figure out something weird is going on.”

Archer rested his head on the back of the sofa and rolled his eyes; his best friend was getting to be a total pain in the ass. “We don’t know anything Declan. It might not have even come from his wallet. It could have been under the sofa and I just picked it up at the same time.”

“Well,” Declan whistled, “it’s with the cops now. It’s out of your hands. Let them handle it.”

Archer stood up from the sofa, restless energy building up within him as he paced around the table, wiping bits of dust from picture frames on the fireplace, straightening up the magazines on the shelf under the glass-topped coffee table.

“You there?” Declan called.

“Yeah I’m here.” Archer’s voice sounded smaller than Declan had ever heard it.

“What is it?”

“I just wish they hadn’t gone to confront him at his job. He

works so fucking hard there. His clients and the other patients love him. Do you know that there is this old lady there, Rosalie. She was a nurse back during the war, one of the best apparently but she just completely forgot to retire. She is older than time itself but still needs to feel useful. Finn stays behind for nearly two hours every night to do rounds with her, he fetches her the medication and the charts and she signs it all off.” A tightness in his chest had Archer soothing the spot with the heel of his palm.

“I mean that is kinda sweet,” Declan sighed. “Stop trying to make me like him,” he whined.

Archer looked at the phone and smiled. “I have wanted you guys to get along for so long that I’m kinda getting used to the fact that it’s never gonna happen. It just sucks cause it makes it so hard for me.”

“Graaaaaah!” Declan moaned down the phone. “Fucking fine, if you two work things out and he isn’t a complete psycho I suppose I can try harder.”

“That’s all I ask,” Archer laughed.

Archer picked up the phone and sank back down into the couch, his feet coming up to rest on the table. A knock at the front door had him groaning loudly before pushing himself back to his feet.

“You ok baby bear?” Declan asked.

“Gross, don’t call me that,” Archer chuckled. “There is someone at the door, people should learn it’s not the nineties where you can just stop by anymore, you have to call ahead.” Archer worked his way through to the hall and flicked the switch to illuminate the dark hallway.

“Oh baby bear is grumpy today, and also sounding old as fuck.”

“So you’re ok with people just showing up to your door unannounced?” Archer laughed.

“Fuck, now, what is this Pleasantville?” Declan gasped.

Archer stopped in the hallway, the porch outside dark and quiet. Which was weird since he’d had motion detectors installed a few weeks earlier. A cold shiver raced up his spine, making the tips of his fingers tingle.

“Hello, who’s there?” Archer called towards the other side of the door.

Silence greeted him which in a lot of ways felt much worse than if someone had tried to break his door down. None of this felt right, being alone in the house, having some crazed weirdo prowling the neighbourhood, breaking into people’s homes and scaring people away.

“I said who’s there?” he called again.

“Are you having a Jamie Lee Curtis moment?” Declan chuckled down the phone. Looking down at his underwear and shirt combo, Archer realised he was in fact dressed like most 80’s and 90’s babysitter horror movie victims. Wincing, he grabbed a hoodie from the coat rack, pulling it over his head and clocking himself in the mirror. *Oh great now I look like a gay jock horror movie victim.*

“Erm ... no?” Archer whispered.

“If no one answered, maybe no one knocked, maybe it was a trash can falling over outside or something. Happens to

me all the time.” Archer shrugged, and conceding he might be slightly on edge, he returned to the living room.

“You probably need to get out of the house for a while, you know. Why don’t you come over here for a bit or go for a run and clear your head.” Declan’s voice took on a light tone. He always had to be the fixer when it came to Archer, wanting to solve whatever problems Archer had before he even had a chance to stress about them.

“Yeah maybe you’re right I should.”

### ***Knock knock knock***

“Ok that was definitely a knock,” Archer gasped, jumping up from his seat and rushing out to the front door. Switching the hall light back on, Archer moved towards the front door, reaching out to grab the doorknob.

### ***Knock Knock***

Instinctively he pulled his hand back away from the door.  
“Hello who’s there?”

*Silence.*

“Don’t go out there,” Declan whispered in his ear.

Slowly moving back towards the door, Archer’s hand moved inch by inch towards the gold doorknob. His fingers encircled the cold metal, turning the doorknob, the creak of metal on metal deafening in the silence as the bolt slid out of place.

“Archer...” Declan whispered.

He slowly pulled the heavy door towards him, the groaning

of the wood echoing in the silence of the house. His heart raced, his back muscles tense and twitching. His leg muscles were taut as he pushed his feet firmly against the floor. His bicep tensed and he prepared to throw the door open, hopefully surprising any potential intruders, but hopefully not freaking out some visiting neighbour.

“I’m just going to see who’s there.”

**CRASH!**

An almighty smash sounded from the kitchen behind him; running through the house into the kitchen he found the back door wide open, one of the panels in the door frame shattered, glass spilled onto the tiled floor.

“Holy shit my fucking door!” Archer whined down the phone.

“What the fuck is going on?” Declan shouted impatiently.

Archer rushed to the back door, looking out into a deserted backyard. A warm but stiff breeze whipped around some empty plant pots. One of the things you had to get used to, living in a place like Missouri, was that it could get fairly windy any time of year, Kansas City being one of the windiest places on average in America.

“My fucking back door blew open and shattered one of the panes of glass.” Archer grumbled, grabbing a sweeping brush and pan and clearing up the debris.

“Back door? I thought the knocking was from the front door?” Declan asked, obviously confused.

“Yeah it was, but I guess the wind was just blowing the

knocker on the door or some shit,” Archer bit out. “Hey I’m going to have to go and get this cleared up and patch up this window until I can get someone to come have a look at it.”

“You sure you don’t need me to come over?” Declan asked.

“No, I’m good, honestly. I think I’m just gonna go to bed soon.” Archer yawned as if to make a point.

“Ok well call me if you need anything,” Declan said, trying to keep his tone light.

“I will, thank you Declan. You’re a good friend.” Declan grumbled some noncommittal response which made Archer chuckle. He knew that Declan hated any direct praise as it made him uncomfortable. “Bye.” Clicking the phone off, he placed it on the island before retrieving some tools from the storage cupboard next to the back door.

“If you were a piece of plywood, where would you be?” Archer sang as he searched the shelves on the storage cupboard, picking up some screws and nails. Finding the small sheets of plywood hiding behind a plastic storage bucket, he reached across to pull them up.

### ***Knock Knock***

Startled, he fumbled with the screws and hammer before dropping them on the floor. The hammer missed his bare feet by inches.

### ***Knock***

Turning around quickly to see what the actual fuck was

going on in his house, a sharp pain shot up from under his foot. "AH! Holy fuck!" he screamed, stumbling out of the storage room into the kitchen. Grabbing onto the nearest stool against the island, Archer lifted his foot and looked down. There, he saw the head of a two-inch nail sticking out of the bottom of his foot.

"Son of a fucking bitch." Reaching across he grabbed a dish towel from one of the hooks on the side of the unit and pressed it around the nail. Gripping the head with his fingertips, he slowly slid the cold metal out of his flesh. A burning pain lanced up from his foot through his leg as the nerve endings meet steel.

Once free, he pressed the cloth against his foot, wincing against the burn. The cloth quickly stained red as his blood pooled at the surface. Archer rummaged around in one of the drawers, grabbing a first aid kit and applying a band-aid to the area.

Archer put a tentative foot on the floor, biting his cheek against the sharp sting as his injured foot rested on the cold surface of the tile. He moved slowly through the house towards the front door. He turned into the hallway to see the light now out. He stopped dead in his tracks.

*Shit did I turn off the light?*

The front door stood wide open, the porch light on, the space empty but ominous. He moved slowly towards the door, moving though until he stood alone on an empty porch. He looked out over the lawn to the neighbours' houses across the street. Various houses still had their lights on, the glow of televisions lighting up some of the upstairs rooms. He looked across to the Lithgows' old

house and frowned. If they'd still lived there, he could go and tell them what was going on, he knew they would give him a strange look but bring him in anyways and feed him cookies and coffee till he was ready to go home.

Archer wandered down the garden path, kicking stones from the border that had blown onto the paved pathway back into their ditches. The lights on the exterior of the house illuminated his presence. Archer noticed some footprints on the wet grass leading around to the back of the house. He thought for a moment whether they could have been made by him. He had been out a little earlier in the day and had taken the empty trash cans back around to the rear of the house.

He thought for a moment that that must be it, but then again it had only just rained. These footprints looked fairly fresh. He made himself calm down, a million extreme scenarios running through his head, of faceless shapes in the dark, waiting for him to turn his back. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end.

*Fuck this*, he said to himself. He was a grown ass man. This was his house and he would be damned if he was going to be scared away by some fucking knocking and footprints in grass. Straightening his back, he limped across the grass towards the back of the house. Passing by his living room window, movement caught his eye. He moved to take a closer look, but nothing appeared out of place. Remembering the front and back doors were now open, he realised it was not beyond the realms of possibility for there to be some cross breeze moving a picture or closing an internal door.

Carrying on to the back of the house he encountered



exactly what he would expect to encounter. Absolutely nothing. Going in through the back door, he closed it firmly behind him. Collecting the tools from earlier, he hammered a board over the space where a pane of expensive glass used to be, and he grumbled as he hammered the piece of wood into place. He made a mental note to contact the glaziers in the morning.

After he cleared away the last of the mess and made sure the front and back doors were securely locked, he started his nighttime ritual of turning off all the lights, checking each room to make sure he hadn't left any candles burning or lights switched on. It was something he had done for as long as he could remember. He knew it had something to do with how his parents had died in a fire, but he didn't like to spend a lot of time thinking about them. To him they could be these ephemeral figures of pure good who'd watched over him long enough to get him to a family who would better look after him, rather than the meth head junkies who couldn't wait for their next fix and got themselves killed cooking a bad batch.

Shaking away his verity he collected his phone and charger from the living room before heading towards the stairs. The creaking of the stairs gave him his normal nighttime heart flutters. He couldn't shake the feeling he was being watched, the familiar itch at the base of your skull that meant someone had their eyes on you. Moving more swiftly up the stairs, a panic seized his chest. A feeling someone was following him had him breaking out into a full-on sprint up the stairs, and each time he landed on the wound on the sole of his feet, fire shot up his leg.

He rounded the bannister, panting heavily and turning just in time to see absolutely no one. Laughing through

laboured breaths, Archer shook his head. He really was living out all of his living alone nightmares in one night.

Bypassing his bedroom, Archer made his way straight to the bathroom. Remembering he had left some pyjamas in there earlier today, he figured he would shower first, get the grime off his skin and wash out the foot wound properly which by now probably had mud, wet grass and rain water mixed in with it. Yay for possible infections.

After cleaning out his wound in the shower and applying a fresh band-aid, Archer pulled on his sleep pants and turned the bathroom light off. Grabbing his phone and cable, he walked towards his bedroom, slipping the phone into the pants pocket. This would be the first night sleeping alone as a possibly single guy, something which he didn't relish the idea of. Just a good night's sleep would solve a hundred problems.

Yawning, Archer pushed his bedroom door open and ground to a halt. His cable slipped from his fingers and bounced on the carpet by his feet. Struggling to breathe, Archer took in the sight around him. His bed had been stripped bare, the sheets and pillowcases shredded into pieces, the duvet in a mound in the corner of the room, feathers from its innards floating on the air. Pictures had been pulled from the wall, scattered over his mattress. He moved forward to see the faces on each of the photos have been gouged out and torn into pieces on the floor. The entire contents of his dresser and the drawers had been pulled out and thrown across the room. A vase he had bought with Finn on a trip had been smashed against a wall, the pieces littered the floor below. The most terrifying of all was the message scrawled in red on the mirror of his dresser.

Two words that burned into his memory.

You're Mine.

A single tear escaped Archer's eye; unable to move, unable to breathe, he looked around the room for anything that hadn't been completely demolished. In the corner was his standing mirror. Unscathed and standing proud amidst the chaos. It should be comforting, it should provide some level of ease. The only thing it provided however was a hiding place for the figure standing behind it. Archer's eyes widened as the boots moved slowly to the side. The figure inched out bit by bit, coming more and more into view.

Archer felt like his heart was about to explode out his chest. In the darkness of the room, Archer made out a black mask, a single eye peered at him from circles cut crudely out of the black cloth covering its face, a wide smile sneering at him making his blood run cold. Neither of them moved, both frozen in time, staring at each other from across the expanse of the room. Archer's hand shook whilst his body trembled; he had to get out of here, he had to run, he had to go now. He couldn't move, it was that dream where you wanted to go, but your feet sank into the ooze and you were trapped. His breath caught in his throat as the terror consumed him.

A quiet chuckle came from the figure in the corner, the sound dark and ominous. A laugh that carried violence. The figure made a move. It was enough of a shock that it had Archer's feet spinning and carrying him down the landing, turning onto the stairs. He could hear the footsteps following him closely behind, he knew if he slowed down for a second that a hand would grab him

from behind and it would all be over.

He made it to the stairs, rounding the corner, his feet on fire as they carried him almost on air down to the bottom. *Shit Fuck!* Remembering he had locked the door and left the keys in the living room, he made his way through the house and into the kitchen. Not looking behind him for a moment, he opened the latch on the kitchen door and ran out into the night.

\* \* \* \* \*

Twenty minutes later he was waiting on his neighbour's porch across the street as red and blue lights illuminated the night air. Sirens pierced the silence as they screeched to a stop in front of his house. Jumping out the lead squad car, Archer recognised McKinney and rushed over to her.

"There is someone in my house, upstairs. They tried to chase me but I got away, I think they still might be in there," Archer gasped through panicked breaths.

"Sir, please I know you're upset, but please calm down. You're safe now. Tell me again what's happened." McKinney laid a hand on his shoulder, guiding him towards the car.

Once settled in the back of the car, he noticed a number of officers enter his home, guns drawn and flashlights aimed forwards. He saw the flashes of light in the house as they moved past the living room.

"I'd been home all night," he told McKinney. "There had been some knocking on the door but I thought it was just the wind or the trash cans knocking over you know?"

McKinney nodded, took out the damn notepad and pen and started scribbling away.

“The back door window was smashed and I was trying to patch it up. I walked around the house but everything was fine. I came back inside and went to bed. When I got to my room it had been completely trashed, like everything destroyed. There was a guy hiding behind the mirror, he laughed as I watched him. He chased me and I ran out of the house.”

“Oh dear,” McKinney sighed, “did you get a good look at who this man was?”

Archer shook his head. “He was wearing a mask.” That goddamn laugh though, that voice would stay with him.

“Listen, you stay here ok?” McKinney closed the door while Archer still sat in the police car, an officer posted just outside as she made her way into the house. He had never known terror like what he had felt this evening; he had lived through some stuff but he had never known fear like this. On one hand he wanted Finn, he wanted the man’s reassuring arm around him. On the other hand he was glad Finn was far from here; he didn’t even want to think what would have happened if Finn had been home. What that creep could have done to him.

About five minutes passed, the tension never leaving Archer for a single second. He wondered if he would ever feel normal again. He breathed a sigh of relief as he saw McKinney exit the house. She stood at the front door rubbing her temples and glancing across to her car. Shaking her head, she came over and knocked on the door before opening it.

“Archer right?” He nodded. “Do you mind stepping out of the car?”

This didn't feel right.

“Do you mind accompanying me into the house Archer?” she said gently.

He froze for a moment, panic gripping him again, sweat forming on his brows. “I don't know if I can go back there for a while. I don't feel safe.”

She eyed him curiously. “We have swept the house and I can assure you that it's completely safe inside that house.” Which Archer thought was an odd way to put it. She swept her arm towards the house and looked down at her feet. Moving towards the house, Archer looked up at the structure he had once thought of as cosy and forever, but now held a feeling of dark foreboding and panic.

As they moved into the house, McKinney came to stand next to him. “So you said there was some damage to your room when you went inside?”

“Yeah,” he sighed, “it's gonna be a bitch to clean.”

They walked up the stairs in silence and stopped outside his bedroom door. McKinney put a hand on his arm to halt him. “I'm not sure what's going on here Archer, But i'm going to find out.”

Archer squinted at her, the words she spoke were saying one thing but the intention was obviously something completely different.

“I really hope you do,” he muttered slowly.

“Good, then do you care to explain this to me?” With a single arm she pushed the bedroom door open to reveal a completely immaculate room, bed made, pillows plumped, pictures on the wall, dresser untouched with a sparkling clean mirror.

## Chapter Eight

The steel table in front of Archer seemed so clinical, like something that you might see in a morgue holding up a dead body. A small hook, seemingly buried into the table top near the edge, stopped him from fully resting his forearms against the table. He wondered for a moment why the hook was there. It suddenly hit him. That's where they secured people in handcuffs to the table when they were being interviewed.

Archer looked round the cold room, empty save for the table and a few metal chairs around it. He wasn't exactly sure why McKinney had left him in one of these rooms, but she hadn't really given him much of a choice when she had said, *I'll take your statement in here, you don't mind right? Thanks.* He wasn't sure why they couldn't have just taken his statement in his own home. Then again, did he really want to be in that house right then, on his own once everyone had left? Fuck no.

The drive from his house to the police station had been traumatic at best. McKinney had asked him to sit in the back behind the wire mesh divider. Whilst pulling away from the house, the flash of lights on top of her squad car had brought back some unwanted memories of childhood. A cop taking him to the station from school, the chatter of adults telling him that everything was going to be ok. Telling him that someone would look after him. He kept thinking to himself, *but Mommy and Daddy take care of me, why don't they want to take care of me anymore?* The social workers had told him that his parents had gone up to heaven, that there had been an accident but that everything would be ok. They were wrong. Nothing was ok



again for a very long time.

He fought back waves of panic and nausea in the back of McKinney's squad car for the whole ride to the police station. Now sitting there in that cold stark room, those feelings of emptiness and panic roared back to the surface. Archer's hand grew clammy, and beads of sweat dripped from his forehead into his eyes, the salt burning his eyelids.

Maybe if he banged on the door he could get someone to turn on the air conditioning, to get the room a bit cooler. He knew the room was already cold, the iciness of the table against his skin told him that.

The dull roar in his ears began to increase in intensity, small white pinpricks invading his vision. He brought the heels of his palms up to cover his ears and rested his head against the table. The roaring was like a waterfall across the mouth of a cave. Archer pressed his head against the table, trying to seek out the cold to cool down his burning skin.

A warm hand landed on his shoulder, shocking him upwards with a yelp of fright.

"Archer, are you okay?" McKinney stood next to him, looking down, her face filled with concern.

"What," Archer gasped, confused by her sudden presence. He hadn't even heard her come in. Looking across the table, he saw her notebook and two steaming cups in front of him.

"I said are you okay?" McKinney repeated.

Shaking his head and feeling a tinge of embarrassment, Archer plastered on a smile and nodded quickly. “Yeah, sorry I was just feeling a little queasy so I was resting my eyes.”

Frowning, she returned the fake smile and took a seat. She slid one of the cups across the table towards him. “Sorry it’s crappy station coffee, but that’s all we have.”

With a tight-lipped smile he reached out and wrapped his hands around the cup, suddenly cold and seeking the warmth of the drink. His temperature gauge appeared to be all fucked up. Guess adrenaline will do that to you, he mused.

Turning over the pages in her notebook, McKinney studied for a few moments before looking up and smiling. “So Archer, I know we went over it briefly at the house, but could you run me through what happened tonight.”

Archer spent the next ten minutes taking her through his conversations with Declan, Finn moving out, the knocks at the door that had apparently been made by no one, the smashed window in the kitchen, stepping on the nail, going upstairs and finding his room a shambles, before seeing the figure behind the mirror staring at him. Shivering at the memory he wrapped his hands back around the now-warm coffee cup and brought it to his lips for a drink.

“So you ran from the house and went to a neighbour, is that right?” Never looking up from her book, she scribbled down god-knows-what onto the pages. Archer narrowed his eyes, thinking that she must be writing ‘this dude is a fucking psycho’ over and over again.

“Yeah, I went straight there and got you guys out.” He

tapped his fingertips against the metal surface of the table, smiling in apology as he realised McKinney was staring directly at his fingers, her brow furrowed. Clearly he'd been a distraction.

“So did you call us straight away? Did you wait a while?” What the fuck type of questions were these, Archer thought.

“No, we watched a few episodes of Friends, then we had a card game and then I thought, oh yeah I best call the police,” Archer snapped.

McKinney rolled her eyes before resting her pen in the crevice of her notebook. “I’m just trying to establish a timeline is all.”

“Yes,” Archer huffed, “I called you straight away.”

Squinting again without really saying anything, McKinney continued to make notes.

“Why is that important?” Archer asked quietly.

“It’s just a bit odd don’t you think?” McKinney looked at Archer who only shrugged in return. “I mean the level of destruction you claim to have taken place in your bedroom, only to have it back to normal by the time we arrive. I mean that would take some doing to get that done.”

Archer did not like the way this was going one bit. “I guess, but that is what must have happened, because that’s what did happen.”

“Also you said that there was debris from the bedding on the floor, smearing on the mirror, torn up photographs.

How do you explain nothing being out of place Archer?" she continued, back to scribbling, but now sneaking glances up every few seconds, watching for any small changes in Archer's demeanour.

"I don't know how to explain that," he stammered, "I didn't think I needed to. I didn't realise I was on trial here." Archer started to stand but McKinney reached across and rested a hand on his forearm, stilling him.

"I really am trying to help Archer, but you have to admit it's pretty odd that there is no evidence of anything having happened." Eyebrows raised, she waited for him to respond.

He sighed and sat back down in his chair. "I don't know what's going on." A tear escaped and fell across his cheek. "Everything is just going wrong. First Frank and Gladys, then Finn leaves and now this. I feel like everything is fucked up."

McKinney pulled her hand back and closed her notebook. Crossing her arms in front of her she let out a small breath.

"Archer, I don't want you to get the wrong idea in relation to what I'm about to tell you, but I think it's relevant here." Archer nodded. "I did a bit of background checking into people in the neighbourhood a while ago when there was the break-in at the Lithgows'. I also did a bit of checking into your background, as you were on the property at the time of my visit."

Archer's gut clenched knowing what was about to come next.

“You have a record Archer.” McKinney offered a brief smile before reaching onto the seat next to her and lifting up a brown file. “It says here that you had some issues with authority and run-ins with the police during college. Three separate arrests for drunk and disorderly, one arrest for assault and one caution for harassment. Does that sound correct?”

Archer’s shoulders sagged. “You know it’s correct.”

“You maybe want to give me some more context here Archer?”

“Fine.” Archer took another sip of the coffee before beginning. “I thought I was managing what had happened to me, with my parents...” McKinney nodded, clearly also having read up on that too. “Well, I guess everything came to a head as you know during college. I had some issues with anxiety and depression. Started drinking heavily to chill out in the evenings, popping pills to stay awake and alert during the day so I wouldn’t get my ass kicked off the course. I got asked to leave bars on several occasions for getting too wasted, the police were called a couple of times and one time I took a swing at the bartender. Spent the night in the drunk tank for that one.”

“Sounds like you were going through a rough time,” McKinney said, her voice soft and kind. “Archer, can you tell me a little about the harassment charge?”

“Surely you have it all there in front of you?” Archer huffed.

“I want to hear it from you.” She smiled, reaching across the table to tap her fingertips softly in front of him, before drawing them back and leaning back in her chair.

“It was a few years ago,” Archer began.

*“I don’t understand what I did wrong!” Archer shouted through the apartment door. His boyfriend Jacob banged against the door from the other side, and the slight sob from the other side of the door twisted in Archer’s gut. He rapped his hands against the door once more. “Just tell me what I did baby and I’ll fix it.”*

*“Just leave me alone Archer,” Jacob’s deep husky voice was like a balm and a knife at the same time. It had been days since Jacob had stopped returning his calls, and left a box of Archer’s stuff outside his door with no reasoning as to why.*

*Things had been going great between the two of them. They had taken a short camping trip into Basswood in Platt City. They had lain at the lakeside, Jacob’s face lit by the fire they had built as they watched the stars flicker in the dark night sky. Jacob had turned to him and told Archer that he loved him, that this was forever. Archer had never felt so happy. He had pressed his lips against Jacob’s before making love to him right there, with the sound of the water passing by.*

*A few days later, he had finished work early, stopping by the market to pick up a few things to prepare for dinner. He’d gotten to the apartment to find a box of his things on the stoop outside, the locks changed with no explanation whatsoever. He had spent the next few days trying in vain to get in contact with Jacob to no avail. He’d resorted to camping outside his door one evening, hoping that given time Jacob would hear him out, or at least clue him in to what went wrong.*

*"I thought everything was working between us," Archer said, his hand pressed against the cold wood of the door. "You said you loved me." His voice was higher this time.*

*"Archer, I was stupid okay. I should have never said anything. I was blind. I was so fucking blind." The laugh coming from the other side of the door chilled him to his core, it was a laugh with no soul, a hollow empty sound that didn't belong in Jacob's mouth. "You have to leave me alone now."*

*The horrible finality to it made the hairs on Archer's neck stand on end. "No!" he bellowed. "I'm not going anywhere. I'm gonna sit my ass at your door until you fucking talk to me."*

*So that's what Archer did for the next three nights. He watched as Jacob stepped over him to go into his apartment, he watched him leave to go to work. He went about his day, went to his job only to return in the evening and do it all over again.*

*On the third day, Archer dozed with his back pressed to Jacob's door, his eyes drifting shut when he heard the door handle move. Quickly standing up he turned around to once again plead his case. As he started to speak he noticed the deep flush of Jacob's cheeks, the red-rimmed eyes and the dark circles underneath.*

*"Baby, what's..." Before he began, Jacob lifted up a finger to silence him.*

*"I'm sorry, but you just wouldn't listen," Jacob whispered. Archer looked at him confused until footsteps coming around the corner drew his attention. Two uniformed police officers approached cautiously, unclipping their holsters as*

*they came towards Archer.*

*“What?” He looked at Jacob imploringly, hurt and shame crushing his chest. Jacob’s gaze was trained to the ground as the two officers escorted Archer from the building.*

“So was that the end of things?” McKinney asked. She at least had the decency to look sympathetic, Archer thought. Most people would just label him as a creep and then write him off. Archer had come to the conclusion later that maybe he had come on too strong with Jacob, maybe he’d been too clingy after Jacob had told him that he’d loved him. Archer wasn’t exactly sure, but Jacob had been just another person in a long line of people to leave him.

“For him,” Archer smiled. “Yeah, we didn’t talk after that. It was kind of just the beginning for me. He had gotten some statements from a neighbour of his that I was potentially dangerous and he got a court order to stop me from contacting him again.”

“So why do you say that was a beginning for you?” McKinney resumed scribbling. Archer came to find it oddly soothing, the scratching sound of lead against paper, the way her head would slightly shake with the voracity with which she wrote, the way her bangs would fall across her eyes.

“Well my mental health took a nosedive after that, let’s say.” McKinney looked over to him expectantly; sighing, he continued, “I started having some issues with depression, anxiety, low mood. I was given medication by my doctor that helped for a while.”

Archer thought back to the day when he’d stopped taking his meds. Retrospectively he should have realised



something was wrong with him when he'd started hiding his medication. Declan had tried to help out but Archer had taken to lying to everyone. Work, his friends and colleagues.

"A couple crossing late one night found me up on the green barriers on Daniel Boone Bridge. I honestly can't remember, but they told the police that I was swaying, screaming, crying. I was a great big mess huh," Archer laughed, but it sounded hollow to even him. McKinney moved to the chair next to Archer and rested a hand on his back.

"It's amazing that you got through that Archer, most people don't." Archer smiled at her and gave a slight nod.

"Anyway, I spent a month in hospital under treatment. I got out. My friend Declan." McKinney rolled her eyes at the mention of Declan's name, obviously remembering his outlandish behaviour at Archer's house. "Well he kinda put me back together, gave me the kick up the butt I needed. I met another guy shortly after, Mark."

"Is this the same Mark from the business card?" McKinney asked, reaching for her notepad.

"The one and only." Archer thought back to the time he'd spent with Mark. He couldn't remember ever feeling so safe and looked after. Mark had cherished him and basically helped him manage his life. It was a period that was pretty stress-free as he hadn't really had to do anything for Mark except show up. There was a time when he would have gone back and done things so differently.

"Listen Archer." McKinney looked around the room, unsure of where to begin. "I'm not going to say I completely

understand what's going on. I'm also not going to say that the events of tonight didn't raise a few questions for me. What I will say though is that I'm going to take it seriously. I'm going to take you at your word that you really did experience what you said happened to you."

Archer chewed nervously on his thumbnail. All the talk of his previous issues raised a number of very important questions about his own current mental state.

"I need to ask you though, if you were looking at this from an external point of view. What would you think?"

Without even pausing for thought Archer began. "I'd think that I'm having problems in my relationship, that my neighbours who had become surrogate parents to me experienced something traumatic which essentially chased them out of my life. I'm having difficulty settling into a new environment, my job is stressful. I have a history of failed relationships, mental health troubles and run-ins with the police."

McKinney leaned over once more, rested her hand over Archer's and smiled. "That's why I'm helping you." Archer looked at her confused. "Crazy people don't know they're crazy," she winked. Archer barked out a laugh and nodded.

The interview had ended soon after that with McKinney promising to keep Archer updated. She showed him out of the room and asked him to wait in the bullpen at her desk. Archer people-watched for the next fifteen minutes. Watched as police brought in suspects and case files, poring over computer screens whilst pounding back copious amounts of coffee. If people thought that high school teachers' staff rooms stank of coffee then they

needed to spend five minutes at a police station.

A hand landed on his shoulder, giving him a small squeeze.

“Baby?” Archer spun around quickly in his chair to see Finn standing over him, smiling down but his face filled with worry. “Are you ok? Officer McKinney called me and told me you were here.”

Unable to hold back a sob, Archer’s face crumpled as Finn leant down to gather him in an embrace. Archer clung to him like a life raft. As if he might just float away if he let him go and leave Archer to drown. “You’re here.” Archer’s voice was small and frail.

“Of course I’m here,” Finn laughed, pulling his head back, “you’re my person.”

Archer beamed a wide smile back at him, hoping to convey his entire soul and love in that one gesture. “Come on, let’s go home.”



## Chapter Nine

“Go open the front door and I’ll be right in.” Finn pulled the car into the driveway of their home and tapped Archer’s arm.

“Where are you going?” Hating how panicked he sounded at the thought of Finn leaving him there alone again, Archer took in a deep breath to stave off the anxiety attack creeping up his spine, making his shoulders tense up.

“I’m going nowhere babe.” The endearment from Finn stoked the fires of hope in Archer’s stomach. He bit and lip and smiled at Finn. “My stuff is in the trunk, don’t wanna leave it out here.”

Okay, so bringing his stuff home was a positive first step. You didn’t bring your stuff back with you if you had no intention of staying. Archer didn’t voice his optimistic thought process in fear of breaking whatever spell Finn was weaving around his heart at the moment. Nodding, Archer unbuckled and walked up the path to the front door.

The house loomed large in front of him, the imposing nature of its size now feeling like something to fear instead of the warm feeling he used to get walking up the same path. The flower beds on either side of the path did nothing now to lighten the dark feeling the house now exuded.

Reaching for the door knob, his breath caught in his throat. A choking sensation put his whole body into high alert. His palms started to sweat as his heart pounded in his chest. *Come the fuck on Archer, don’t be a pussy now. It’s just a house. Perfectly safe.* He knew that mantra was not going

to be effective for quite a while.

A memory came to him of standing here long ago, the realtor opening the door and showing him around his potential new home. As he'd crossed the threshold, a strange feeling had taken hold. Something which he hadn't felt before, something which nearly brought him to his knees. The feeling of sanctuary, of belonging. Of home.

That feeling had stuck around every time he had walked across this threshold after that. It was not a feeling he was ready to let go of without a fight. This was his house and he was not going to let some fucking creep run him out of it like they had done his neighbours.

Steeling himself against the surges of anxiety, he reached out and grabbed the door knob. Twisting, he heard the creak of metal on metal as the lock disengaged. As he pushed forward, the door swung open to reveal the same thing it always did. His hallway, clean, crisp. The side table, still adorned by the flowers from the market he had put there in a vase a few days ago. There was nothing out of place. It was still his home.

Closing his eyes, he tried to let the warmth of the feeling wash over him once more. Suddenly a warm breath slid across his ear. Not again. His arm shot out and connected with flesh.

"Ouch!" Archer squinted and winced, hearing the familiar voice of Finn in front of him. "What the fuck was that for, I was trying to kiss you!" Opening his eyes, Archer saw a pissed-off Finn holding a hand to his cheek, his bags in a heap on the floor.

"Oh my god babe I'm so sorry. I thought it was..." Trailing

off, Archer rushed forward and wrapped his arms around Finn, embracing him tightly at first before pulling back, brushing Finn's hand out the way so as to get a look at the damage. Not finding anything but some slightly pinker skin, he pressed a kiss gently to it before placing his palm across Finn's cheek.

"Thought it was who?" They hadn't really spoken about what had happened; the police had asked Finn to come to the station but only as he was listed as Archer's next of kin. They had left very shortly after Finn had gotten there, and the car ride home had been fairly quiet, Archer stealing glances every now and again across the centre console to make sure he wasn't imaging it. He had been so happy that Finn had come for him, but the conversation with McKinney about his mental state had him spooked. Could have he imagined it all? Could it all have been the result of stress and depression?

"It's nothing." Archer tried for a bright smile, but Finn knew him too well, knew when he was putting spackle on the proverbial drywall.

"Archer." Finn's voice was firm and brooked no quarrel.

Hanging his head, Archer nodded towards the living room. They took a seat side by side on the couch. Archer sighed deeply and tried to think of where to begin.

Spending the next twenty minutes taking him through the events of the night, he dared not look at Finn for fear of seeing that same look in his eyes that McKinney had earlier in the evening. He told Finn about returning to the room with McKinney and finding nothing out of place. "So there you go." Laughing sardonically at his own craziness,

Archer shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

“That must have been so terrifying.” Archer’s head snapped up to meet Finn’s sympathetic gaze. Taking it as a win that Finn hadn’t called him nuts, he dared to hope for a moment.

“You believe me?” His voice came out shaky with a hint of disbelief.

“Of course I believe you baby.” Tears pricked his eyes as he watched Finn’s stare turn to confusion, as if he was baffled by the notion of not believing Archer. “You wouldn’t and couldn’t make that up.”

That was all it took to break the dam. Tears wet his cheeks and flowed freely as his hands came up to shield his eyes. Harsh sobs wracked his body as Finn moved across the couch and pulled Archer into his lap. Letting out the frustration and terror in one almighty pressure release, Archer lost track of how long he had his face pressed into Finn’s neck. He worried that Finn would be turned off by the crying mess he’d become, only to be comforted as warm lips pressed kisses against the side of his face and his forehead.

“I’m so sorry I left,” Finn’s voice whispered in his ear, “I’m so sorry you had to go through that alone.”

Archer pulled back from Finn’s lap and rested his back against the sofa. He pulled Finn into his side. “Please don’t apologise.” He couldn’t think of anything worse at the moment than this man, who was making him feel safe again, worrying about something that was not his fault in the least. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I didn’t just speak to you first about the business card and I spoke to the police instead. I



had no idea they were going to speak to you at your work. I would have never.”

“I have no idea how that card got in my wallet, Archer, I swear.” He studied Finn’s face for a moment. He wanted to believe him, he wanted to think that this man in front of him wouldn’t lie to him and wouldn’t do anything that would intentionally hurt him.

“I believe you.” It would take time, but he wanted that to be his truth.

Finn smiled wide, a look of gratitude on his face that tugged at Archer’s heartstrings. Moving back to the arm of the sofa, Finn lifted his legs and rested them over Archer’s lap. Finn seemed to study him contemplatively, an awkward silence taking over for a moment before he said, “Why didn’t you just come to me and ask me?”

He’d asked himself this question a lot and he didn’t have a good answer. Not one that would satisfy Finn, or even himself.

“I don’t know.” Shrugging was his only defence, which was no defence at all. “I was confused, it kinda threw me through a bit of a loop and Declan said...”

“Of course,” Finn said, pulling his feet back from Archer’s lap and wrapping his arms around his knees. “Of course Declan said.”

“Finn, come on I don’t want to argue. Declan is my friend.” He couldn’t go through this again right now, he couldn’t have Finn walk out on him again.

“It’s always going to be him isn’t it?” Finn said quietly, the

kind of quiet that struck terror in Archer's heart. The fear choked him for a moment.

"What do you mean?" He didn't have to ask.

"From the moment that I wanted this," Finn gestured between them, "to become an us, I knew I was kidding myself." Archer reached over to grab Finn's hands, to try and stop him from saying what he knew needed to be said.

"I was kidding myself because before there was an us, there was Declan. I've been here. The whole time. One hundred percent in this thing. With you every day. I just didn't feel it being returned, you know?"

That stilled Archer. As far as he was aware he had been completely open with Finn. He understood that Declan could be a bit intrusive at times, but no more than everyone else's groups of friends.

*Right?*

"This is really petty I know, but even when it came down to decisions that we made about this house, about vacations we took, about which fucking security system to buy we had to get Declan's opinion. It was like my opinion didn't matter, like I was just along for the ride you know?"

*He's right*, Archer thought. It had always been the way that he operated, ever since a cocky little boy called Declan had taken him under his wing and made him feel like a kid again. There had been a time when he'd been so young and worried about who would look after him, who would feed him, whether he would have a warm place to sleep every night. He'd known even back then that someone of his age shouldn't have those fears and anxieties. Then

Declan had come and taken those fears away. He'd known that even if everything went bad for him again, he would always have Declan. Maybe that reliance on his friend for stability was impacting all of his other relationships.

Archer looked down at his hands clasping each other on his lap. "I'm sorry Finn." His voice was small and frail.

"I don't want you to be sorry Archer." Finn stood, throwing his arms up in the air. Moving across to the mantelpiece he turned to rest his back against it, crossing one ankle over another. "I just want you. I want it to be me and you. I don't want you to lose your friend, of course I don't. But some stuff has to just be for us."

This was his chance, this was the time to show Finn that he was important and central. Standing up, Archer faced the guy who had shown him in so many ways how much he loved him. He had to do the same for Finn now. Reaching for Finn, he pulled him away from the mantelpiece, locking his fingers around the back of Finn's neck.

"I promise, from now on I won't let anything or anyone come between us. It's just you and me okay?"

Finn pushed forward and pressed his lips against Archer's. He had to keep this promise or he was going to lose everything.

\* \* \*

*A week later...*

McKinney stared at her screen, typing in her notes from her conversation with Archer earlier in the week and the

quick run-through of the house. She squinted at the harsh light of the monitor against the dimly lit bullpen. A dull headache formed at the back of her head, not pounding in her skull, but making itself known.

She hated cases like this, cases where nothing seemed easy. There were no solid leads and now on top of that, she was faced with the prospect that maybe a lot of this was a figment of someone's imagination. Something gnawed in the back of her mind though. Something that didn't sit right with her. She couldn't put her finger on it, but something told her Archer was in danger.

A package landed on her desk, the slap of its weight against the wood shocking her into an upright position. "What in the world!" The young desk sergeant looked back at her with a *apologetic* expression as he handed out the mail curated during the day.

Turning over the small brown parcel, she noticed the postmark stated it was from St. Louis. Turning it over in her hands, she frowned and peeled open the strip at the back. Pulling a note out of the parcel, she read the unfamiliar handwriting.

***Sorry it's taken so long but we have had a backlog here. Regards, June Burrows, Tech Services.***

Thank the Lord, she'd been waiting for evidence for three of her open cases to be processed for weeks now. Digging through the parcel, she pulled out a number of flash drives and deposited them on the wooden desk in front of her.

Right in the centre of the pile was the red flash drive she had sent off to the Tech department in the St. Louis office. The small department in Chesterfield had no hope of

springing for a Forensics or Tech department of their own, so they had to rely on the postal services getting their samples and hardware to and from St. Louis safely.

Wrapped around the flash drive was a rubber band tying a folded-up white note securely to it. Plucking out the note, she read the words she had been hoping to read. *Footage restored. Five separate camera angles now available to view.*

*Thank God*, she thought to herself. At least she could put something to rest tonight. She looked across at the stack of files on her desk. Ongoing cases that kept her awake at night. She closed more cases than most, but the whole department was severely underfunded, which led to caseloads like hers piling up.

Slotting the flash drive into the USB, she waited for it to load.

“Why are you not at home with a glass of Pinot in one hand and the remote control in the other?”

Forgetting the flash drive for a moment, she swivelled around in her chair. Standing over her with his arms crossed across his broad chest was Reiko Carlos.

She and Reiko had joined the departments around the same time a few years earlier. Fresh-faced and newly out of the academy, they had been the support for each other in a pool full of new recruits that would have stepped over your corpse just to get to the front of the class.

“Oh you know how it is.” She pointed to the stack of files. “If I don’t try and get shit done, then it’s just going to follow me home in my dreams.” Tapping the side of her head, she

wincing with a wry smile.

Crouching down until they were eye-to-eye, Reiko smirked at her and nodded. "I know what you mean. I have six open cases and two just about to go to court, one I'm pretty sure is going to get away with it."

Caught in his stare like a deer in the headlights, she stopped herself from raking her gaze down his form to his spread-open legs where she knew for an absolute fact she would find a mouth-watering bulge. Her stupid brain dragged her back down memory lane to the night they'd celebrated their first year on the force on top of her putting away two gang members who had murdered a family in cold blood just to steal their car.

She had drunk more than her petite body could handle and had been trying her best to stay on the bar stool whilst reaching for a bottle of water. Reiko had sidled up next to her and slid a small wrapped gift on the bar in front of her.

"Since you're Columbo now, then you only need this to complete the transformation." She had grinned at him before tearing open the wrapping to reveal a small notebook and pen. The pen had a shield with her number engraved on the side. "For good luck you know."

It had been happening slowly over the course of their first year together, but she had lost her heart totally to him at that moment. Reaching up to fist her hands in his shirt, she had tugged him to her and delved into his mouth with her tongue. His smoky flavour exploded in her mouth. She had groaned and pushed herself against him, her nipples and sensitive skin rubbing against her shirt as she pushed against his broad chest.

“Woah McKinney.” He’d pulled away but not completely, holding on to her wrists tightly, which had excitement bubbling up in the pit of her stomach, *interesting*. “You have no idea how much I want this, want you. But you’re drunk and I’d feel like a total asshole if I took advantage of you right now.”

“Take advantage. I want you to,” she had protested.

“I want to as well.” Leaning forward he’d pressed a soft kiss to her lips, a groan escaping her at the touch. “But come and find me tomorrow when you’re sober and tell me the same then.” He’d winked before pressing one last kiss to her mouth before leaving the bar.

Since she didn’t live in a romantic comedy, life got in the way. She was woken up early the next day to go on a call to investigate a domestic disturbance with a new recruit Lisa. What should have been a simple welfare call had turned into hell on earth, gunfire and screaming had left the suspect and his wife dead, a bullet through her own arm and one through Lisa’s eye socket. She had rocked slowly next to Lisa for a few moments, unable to comprehend anything before finally calling it in.

Her love life had been the last thing on her mind for a very long time. Reiko had moved on and had dated here or there, and it had never seemed the right time to bring up that night ever since. Looking at him now, crouching in front of her, his head resting on crossed arms on her desk, she realised they were both single and there was no reason to hold back with him anymore.

She turned back to stare at the computer, the small icon on the bottom indicating her files were ready.

“Hey Reiko.” Now or never. Turning around and grinning, she asked, “You got plans tonight?”

“If by plans you mean the stack of laundry I have to do and the leftover chow mein? Then yeah I have plans.” He bit his bottom lip as his eyes creased at the sides. The feelings roared to the surface, the need to taste him again.

A notification from her computer reminded her she also had a responsibility to her badge. “Tell you what, how about I pick up some dinner and meet you at your place in about an hour? I can help you out of your clothes. I mean help you out with your clothes. The laundry. I can clean your clothes. Well I can help you do it. I’m not your servant Reiko.”

He rushed forward and pressed a kiss to her lips, stealing her breath. “I’d like for you to help me out with my clothes, yeah.” Standing, he picked up his bag and slung it over his shoulder. “My place in an hour yeah?”

Worrying her bottom lip between her teeth, she nodded and smiled at him as he walked across the bullpen and into the lift.

*Calm down.* She would have to remind herself of this repeatedly so she didn’t get to his house and act a complete fool.

First things first though; she had a job to do. Opening up the video player, she loaded the first of the footage clips which were trained to the front of Archer’s home. Scrolling through the minutes she saw nothing out of the ordinary as expected. From the corner of the screen she could see the regular traffic of Archer’s neighbours moving in and out of shot as they passed by his house.



The second shot from the street which overlooked the rear yard and the window over the stairs again held no evidence that anyone other than Archer had been present at his address that morning. Just as she was about to move to the next clip, a shape took place in the window looking directly at the staircase. She couldn't be sure, but it looked like a figure moving really slowly up the stairs. Watching it over and over she still couldn't be sure; it could be a person or it could be a reflection of something outside.

She realised the last clip should be of more use, since it was taken at street level rather than from camera mounts at the top of the lamp posts. These cameras were situated on top of the traffic signals to the rear of Archer's home, and looked directly into his house. Quite intrusive really when she thought of it. She wondered how freaked out a lot of the citizens would be if they realised how many of the cameras around the town could see directly into their homes.

Playing the clip until the timestamp marked on the second one, she found her heart started to thud as a figure, all in black made its way from the bottom of the stairs, holding onto the bannister as it crept slowly second by second up towards Archer.

*Holy shit*, she thought to herself, *he was right*. She couldn't see much else as the footage didn't cover the upstairs area of the house. One of the things that spooked her the most though was that all three cameras covered the front and back of the house. However, she hadn't seen anyone enter the house. Someone had been in there all along.

Saving the clip, she opened it up in the police digital video software, watching the clip again and again, trying to find anything that could be of use in identifying who the hell this was. *There!* she thought, stopping the clip as the figure stopped and looked directly out of the window.

*Got you, you motherfucker.* Selecting the area of the footage, she ran the program to enhance the clip and zoom in. The seconds ticked by as the screen showed a minute until optimization was complete. Reaching into the folder she dug out Archer's personal information. She had to tell him he was right, she had to warn him.

Guilt pierced her chest as she was reminded of asking him about his past with mental health.

The computer sounded, the clip was ready. Placing the contact information and phone in front of her she played the clip. Inch by inch the figure popped into the screen. The face was smiling, looking out of the window, the cruel twisted features chilled her down to the bone.

*Holy fuck, it's him.* Pushing back from her chair quickly, she shoved the file and her belongings into her bag, opening her desk drawer and holstering her gun. She hurried from the office towards the car park. Unlocking her phone, she punched in Archer's number and waited as it rang and rang before connecting.

"Hi, you have reached Archer. Sorry I'm not..." She clicked off the answerphone message before ringing back, hoping that he was just rushing for the phone. She tried again and waited through the rings. "Hi, you have reached Archer. Sorry I'm not available to take your call right now, but if you leave your name and number I'll get back to you. Bye."

She would just have to leave a message and hope he got it before she got there. “Archer it’s McKinney. Listen, I’m really sorry but I’m on the way over. I had the CCTV fixed and it clearly shows someone in your house the morning you said there was someone there. I need to talk to you as I think you’re in danger. I’ll just be a few minutes.”

Clicking off her call she dialed another number. “Hello this is Detective Reiko Carlos. Please leave your name, number and a short message. If this is an emergency, dial 911.”

Well this didn’t really warrant a 911 call. “Reiko it’s me, I’m sorry I am going to be a bit late. I’m not blowing you off, but something came up in relation to the Lithgow case. I need to just drop by their neighbour’s house. I’ll tell you all about it when I get there. I can’t wait to see you. We have a lot to talk about.”

McKinney drove through the city, the lights lining the street giving the roads an amber glow. The drive out of town towards the new developments gave her a feeling of unease, the sparse lights along the country roads not detracting from the all-encompassing darkness of the countryside. Just another hour and she would be at Reiko’s eating food, and God willing, ending the night not in her own bed.

The new development shone in the distance like a city emerging from the shadows. A few minutes later she pulled into Archer’s driveway, the light from an upstairs bedroom making her sigh with relief. He might not be happy with the evening call, but at least it would give him some peace of mind about his own mental health and alleviate at least a fraction of her guilt. Movement upstairs

caught her eye as she made her way along the path toward the front door.

She knocked loudly on the heavy wooden door, loud enough that if he was asleep it should rouse him. She hoped to God that he was not asleep. After a few minutes she tried again, this time with a heavier knock on the door, one that should definitely catch his attention.

“Archer, it’s Detective McKinney.” She knocked loudly once more. Pressing her ear to the door she listened carefully for any movement. Hearing none, she took a few steps back from the door and looked up at the house. The light that was on previously was now out. Frowning, she stepped forward again and was about to knock when a small groan from the other side caught her attention.

“Archer?” she called, knocking again. She listened again to see if it was just her imagination. Nothing. She peeked through the window to the side of the door. A dark hallway revealed the set of stairs to the back but nothing else.

*What the fuck is going on?* she thought, irritated at the hairs standing up on the back of her neck. She brought her hand up to caress her throat as she tried to get a better look into the house.

She guessed that he was not much for unannounced visitors. There had been times when she herself had hid from unwanted guests until the knocking had stopped. Smiling, she pulled out her notepad, to write him a small note to ring her in the morning.

Just as she was about to slip the note under the door, the sound of a trash can falling at the back of the house had her snapping her head up like a meerkat. Unclipping her

holster, she drew her gun and rushed across the garden to the back of the house. Opening the back gate and moving towards the back door, she checked her surroundings. The darkness of the garden provided far too many hiding places for someone to creep up on her. Luckily as she neared the back door, the external lights clicked on revealing a completely empty garden.

Sighing with a sense of relief, she moved towards the back door. Reaching for the handle she noticed the door was already slightly ajar. Reaching into her pocket for her phone to call it in, she groaned realising she had left her phone on the front seat of her car.

*Rookie Error One, McKinney*, she scolded herself. Turning around to go back to the car, she froze as the small groan sounded again. Slipping the safety off on her gun, she pushed the door open. Her gun trained in front of her, she moved forward slowly, slipping a flashlight out of her pocket, shining the beam onto the floor. If Archer was hurt or in trouble, then she needed to be there for him now.

The door to the pantry stood open a sliver, the light from the window beyond casting shadows under the crack of the door. She moved slowly towards it, the beam of light trained on the door. "Hello," she whispered but there was no response. Inching slowly forward, her stuttering breath betrayed the cool and calm exterior she wanted to portray.

Closing the distance between her and the door, she wrapped her hand around the handle. The cool metal slid against her sweating palms. Deciding to give the door a solid push she tensed her muscles just as a car door slammed shut right outside the house. She turned around quickly. The window of the kitchen overlooking the front

garden showed Archer clambering out of his car, carrying a holdall.

“What the fuck,” was all she managed to get out as the pantry door behind her flew open, a dark figure grabbing her around the waist and throat, hauling her backward until she slammed against solid muscle. Terror permeated every cell of her body as she tried to scream. Her gun and flashlight fell from her grip and she clawed at the hand around her throat, the breath screaming to escape from her lungs.

The front door opened as she heard the sound of Archer moving around in the hallway. She was seconds away from discovery; she just needed to keep fighting. She shot her arm back, and her elbow connected with flesh as a heavy breath whooshed out of her attacker. The grip loosened enough for her to wriggle out of his grasp. She rushed from the pantry, seeing Archer in the hallway facing away. Spying earphones in his ears and the slight humming coming from him, she groaned realising he wouldn't be able to hear her shout.

Fuck that, she was going to try anyway. She took in a breath to make her call for help, but a hand closed around her mouth as a white-hot pain seared into her back. Tears stung her eyes as what could only be a blade pushed deeper into her lower back. She screamed against his hand, but only a muffled sound could be heard.

Once the knife was all the way to the hilt, she felt herself being hauled back once more into the pantry. The door closed in front of her. She crumpled to the floor as he stood astride her. Looking up she could only see darkness, no features visible in the dark room where she lay

bleeding. Suddenly, he leaned down towards her and placed a hand over her mouth. She struggled against him, but he reached around her and slid the knife from her back. Somehow the pain was worse.

“Please,” she whispered, “please.”

Only a chuckle sounded as the knife descended and moved swiftly across her throat. The pain slowly faded as the darkness seemed to creep in closer. Her hand moved up to her wet throat. The pain lessened, she just needed to sleep.

The darkness closed in as she thought:

*Reiko.*





## Chapter Ten

*Not again*, Reiko thought to himself. He'd allowed McKinney into his heart once before and if he was being totally honest, she had never really left. Pacing the length of his living room, he swiped up one of the glasses of champagne he had set down on the small wooden coffee table. Plucking out some of the fancy chocolates he had picked up from the gas station on the way home, or as fancy as you could get from a gas station, he chewed the soft caramel between his teeth.

Pulling his phone from his pocket, he pulled up McKinney's contact info and connected the call. *This is Detective McKinney, please leave your name and...* Clicking off the call, he sank back into the sofa, taking another mouthful of the golden liquid.

She had left him an answerphone message three hours ago, but what she had wanted to do should have taken no more than an hour. It was the Lithgow case, but he knew the couple had moved miles out of town. He couldn't imagine she would drive all the way out to see them without letting him know first.

Picking up the remote control, he turned on the TV. The annoying perkiness of infomercial actors assaulted his senses as some set of teeth with a pair of boobs and a beehive hairdo tried to sell the concept of a pan that seemed, for all intents and purposes, to be indestructible. He got non-stick pans, sure, but was there much call for a copper-plated pan that could be used to make sticky monkey bread during an apocalyptic war?

His mind drifted back to McKinney, not that that was any different from usual. Most days sitting across from her in the bullpen, he would get caught by his partner time and time again just staring at her like a lovesick puppy.

*“Hey dick!” Miles kicked Reiko’s chair, jolting him, “wanna act like more of a creeper?”*

*“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Reiko grumbled, “and don’t kick my chair.” He returned the swift kick to Miles’s own chair.*

*“Just go ask her out, worse she can say is no.” That was the thing though, he didn’t think she would say no. The only thing was that they had never discussed their close call. They hadn’t ever discussed why she had never shown any interest after that. He figured he would wait until she was ready, until things were on her terms. So he waited, and watched like a creeper.*

The infomercial switched to now two pairs of teeth, one dressed in a dark grey suit with a giant bouffant of white hair and the pair of teeth at his side wearing a heavy dress with neck ruffles and a skirt that flowed to the floor. They appeared to be some crazy-ass evangelicals spouting off about how the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ was coming back soon and that to show their devotion, his followers should sow seeds. Who knew that sowing seeds actually meant funneling hard-earned cash into a pastor’s account. Huh.

“Oh fuck this,” Reiko muttered to himself. Dialing McKinney’s phone again, he got the same answer message. He looked at the clock. Three and a half hours had passed since he’d last heard from her. A small part in

the back of his brain screamed at him that something must be wrong, but the logical side knew that McKinney was a strong, fierce cop. Stronger than anyone he'd met before. She could take care of herself. Which only left one option, McKinney had had second thoughts. Again.

Dialing her number once more, the familiar answer message played.

Pushing off the couch he strode across to the mirror and ran his hands through his thick wavy hair, looking at his olive complexion and strong jaw, a feature he knew that women just went crazy for. He wasn't super egotistical but he knew he was hot. Even the small scar on his upper lip that created a small silver streak through his tan skin drew the eye to his full lips. Pouting his lips in the mirror and attempting a smoulder, he stared at himself for a moment before barking out a laugh. Shaking his head he wandered through the house, tidying things away and turning off the lights to his home.

Standing at the bottom of the stairs, he looked back at the old grandfather clock that stood against the far wall near his kitchen. Ten past midnight. Scowling and running his hands through his hair once more, he fought against the rising frustration in the pit of his stomach. So he had been stood up by the one person who he wanted more than anyone else, so she had stomped all over his heart again. He was still young and hot. He could go to the bar down the street right now and pick up anyone that his dick took a liking too.

Turning around and slipping his shoes that had been discarded by the front door back on his feet, he decided that that was just what he was going to do. Grabbing his

jacket and wallet off the side table, he went out into the night air.

The second the cool breeze hit his face he knew he was full of shit. Okay, so the plan was to still go to the bar to get his dick wet, but first he would swing by the new development to see if McKinney was still in the area. He would tear her a new one for standing him up, and *then* he would go and find some sexy woman to warm his bed for the night, and his balls.

Half an hour later he pulled up outside the Lithgows' old residence. Killing his lights and switching off the ignition, he stepped out of the car. There was not a breath of wind to be felt against his face as he turned in a slow circle to take in the entire street. Some lights remained on in the upstairs of a few of the houses; other than that, everything was coated in darkness.

Why people lived here was beyond him. He had always felt this place was a little like somewhere you would find in *Stepford Wives*. It was too perfect. Too clean. Except now it just felt plain old creepy. Like he was being watched. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end, making him reach back with his hand to warm the area. He turned slowly to see the house across the street.

He couldn't remember the guy's name, but he remembered how freaked out the guy looked after he'd found out the Lithgows had had an intruder in their home. Looking around once more, he sighed deeply.

She wasn't there.

Climbing back into his car he drove past her place. Her parking space was empty. Panic started to rise within him.

Surely she would have called him if she had been called out by anyone. He thought to potentially call his captain to see if he had sent her on a case, and maybe she had no signal and couldn't let him know. Browsing the dashboard, the clock showed 1.40am. There was no way his captain would be cool with him waking him up in the middle of the night.

Only one more place to look.

He pulled into his space at the precinct. The cars of the night shift scattered throughout the lot. The town wasn't busy enough to staff a full shift, so only a handful of detectives would be working in any one night. He didn't spot McKinney's car, however there were two floors which she could have parked on.

Jogging across the dark lot, he tapped the button at the bank of elevators. He still couldn't shake that eerie feeling he had picked up at the development. A sense of wrongness, of something just off its axis. He still felt those eyes all over his skin. He took a brief look over his shoulder; the darkness of the lot remained as it always was. Empty.

The ding of the elevator car spooked him a little, making him curse at himself for being a doofus. The elevator doors opened into the bullpen. The glow from McKinney's desk showed her PC was switched on. However, McKinney was nowhere to be found. Striding across the room he sat down in her chair. He typed in the six digit password that unlocked her screen. He bit his lip against a smile typing in his own birth date.

On the screen a video player was loaded, the large grey

play button in the centre of the screen. McKinney had been watching something before she left. He clicked the play button and waited. Would this reveal where she had gone, what had been so fucking urgent that she had run out on their date yet again? He hoped so.

A message box appeared in the middle of the screen. *USB device missing, re-insert to load file.*

“Shit!” he bit through clenched teeth.

He tried her phone once more, and that stupid fucking message played in his ear. A full-blown panic overtook his thoughts as every possible horrible thing that could have happened to her played on a loop in his head.

Something wasn't right.

\* \* \*

“So, any idea what this is?” Light brown wings fluttered against the back of Archer's hands, tickling his skin gently. “Any takers?”

Looking at the small group of university grad students who had booked the evening tour of the butterfly house, he remembered how it was to be their age. To plan to do something you think might be cool, when what you really want to be doing is getting drunk at some club or back fucking some random on a futon that had seen more naked bodies than an ancient Roman orgy.

“Erm, is that a moth?” A young girl with pink tipped blonde hair grimaced. “Because gross dude, those things are disgusting.”

Archer frowned, giving her a tight-lipped smile. “Moths are certainly not gross. Up close they are some of the most interesting and beautiful creatures on the planet.”

“You do you boo.” The girl tipped her head his way making him chuckle a bit.

“But no, this isn’t a moth. You are correct in that a lot of people mistake it for a moth. It is however called Hedylidae. Its full name is *Macrosoma Albimacula*.” He stared at the delicate wings as they slowed down and tucked into the small frail stick-like body.

“Isn’t that one of the Unforgivable Curses in Harry Potter?” He turned slowly to look at a young kid who couldn’t have been much older than nineteen, and was essentially a mop of hair with legs.

“No?” Archer ventured, biting back a laugh. “It’s actually known as an American Moth-Butterfly. They come out at night and live in the dark.”

“That’s kinda cool, like vampires,” a goth kid piped up from the back.

“Just without, you know... the blood sucking,” Archer nodded.

“They’d make cool pets.” She sucked air in through her teeth. “You don’t happen to sell them here do you?”

Placing the butterfly gently back onto the leaf of a plant, Archer turned around to his tour group and shook his head. “No they aren’t for sale, and they would make terrible pets.”

That perked up Goth Girl who pushed her way to the front. “Why do you say that? Because they are different? Not all of us have to conform.” God save him from teen radicals.

“No, I say that because as adults they only live for ten days. They spend the majority of their lives spinning a cocoon around themselves then literally pull themselves apart and emerge a butterfly. Only to die ten days later.” Archer looks back sadly at the small butterfly still perched on the leaf.

Okay bud, try to keep it light.

The young goth girl seemed to have lost whatever interest she had found in the whole experience and had retreated back to the rear, her interest locked to her phone. “You know you guys, we are having a fundraiser here at the end of summer. We have some local bands coming to play in a big marquee we are putting up in the large lawn out back. Also I hear there will be a few surprise special guests.” Archer tapped his fingertips together.

Mop-haired kid perked up and stood on his tiptoes, “It’s Billie Eilish isn’t it, I mean it has to be. It’s gonna be Billie Eilish. Hey did you guys hear, Billie Eilish is playing here at the end of summer, we have to go.”

Archer’s head spun for a moment. “Whoa I don’t think...”

“Jack,” Goth girl spoke with humour in her voice, “this is Chesterfield, they ain’t getting Billie Eilish to come play in this little podunk town. The special guest is probably the guy who’s in those commercials on cable access TV or the local weatherman or something.”

Damn, one of out two weren’t bad, Archer thought. “Well



anyway, tickets are on sale at the front desk on your way out. Thank you so much guys for visiting us here today at the Butterfly House.” People mumbled polite thanks as they made their way back towards reception.

A small tug on his elbow had him twisting around to see Goth Girl standing behind him, looking down at the floor sheepishly. “Hey, I just wanted you to know that this was really cool. I know I probably didn’t look it, but I was super impressed.” Before he could answer or thank her for her kind comments, she swiveled around and loped off across the exhibit to meet her friends at the door.

*What a weird fucking group of friends,* Archer mused, chuckling as he wandered around the room turning off lights for the different displays. Kneeling down to pull the power socket to a projector screen near the corner of the room, movement caught his eye. Standing quickly, he walked toward the centre of the room. There sat a round shallow pool filled with lily pads and swimming tadpoles. In the centre of the ceiling a net canopy cascaded downwards, its hem landing barely across the surface of the water.

“No one can be in here now, we are closed,” Archer called across the room. Remaining silent, he waited for a response. Straining to hear across the expanse, he heard nothing but the hum of the air filters and heaters breaking the silence.

He could have sworn he saw something move, but working alone at night in this glass enclosure would be enough to creep anyone out. Nevermind someone who had just witnessed a guy standing in his bedroom, watching him from behind the mirror.

*Well done Archer, let's think about that while we are alone in a large dark room.*

He worked for the next half an hour closing down the Butterfly House for the night, noticing no more sights or sounds of anything that shouldn't have been there anyway. A cold chill seeped into his bones making his whole body shiver. Feeling the beginnings of a panic attack approaching, he knew what he had to do. Pulling his phone from his pocket, he fumbled with the screen, eventually unlocking it and dialing the one number of someone he knew would answer straight away.

"Hey gurl," Declan sang down the phone.

"Sweetie, you're not that gay," Archer said, barking a laugh down the phone.

"Tell that to the guy whose balls I drained last night outside the club." Declan, never afraid of a little direct talk, spoke the words as if he was reciting that he'd had pasta for dinner that night.

"Okay, please don't tell me about your seedy conquests."

"Why, you jealous?" The mocking tone was clear in Declan's voice, but Archer could sense a bit of truth behind the sarcasm. Archer paused for a moment to consider that. Was that something he might have wanted? Did he want to be the one leaning against the alley wall, whilst Declan was on his knees in front of him taking his warm load?

"Hey, are you still there?" Shit, he realised he had just stopped talking, making the situation much more awkward.

“Yeah sorry, just a bit distracted right now.” *Nice deflection.* That was not a thought he could entertain right now, now matter how much his dick plumped.

“What’s going on?” Immediately he could hear Declan’s voice turning alarmed, could sense his best friend raring to go. He knew some people had friends they could rely on in moments of crisis. Declan was on another level, ready to burn down the world just to destroy whatever it was that hurt Archer. Biting back a smile he carried on.

“Nothing, just alone at work. Night tour. Got a little spooked. Seeing monsters in the shadows.”

“I’m the only monster in the shadows,” Declan laughed down the line.

“You’re too sweet to be a monster Dec,” Archer picked up his satchel which he had left at reception when picking up the tour earlier in the evening. “So, what you up to this evening?”

“Oh you know, I thought I would balance my cheque book, do a shit ton of laundry, iron all my clothes and go for a run.” Declan sighed deeply. “You know, superhero type stuff.”

“So you’re going to grab a bunch of carrot sticks, hummus and wine and binge the Real Housewives of Atlanta?” Wandering into the staff room, he picked up a paper cup from the side and poured himself a pot of black tar that had once passed for coffee. Taking a deep gulp of the now-lukewarm liquid, he winced as the bitterness spread down his throat.

“You have no idea what it’s like. I watched Orange County

and New Jersey religiously. I didn't know how much more awesome Atlanta was! So now I have to catch up. I really think Nene is going to have Kim killed." In a vast majority of ways, Archer thought Declan would have been more at home in a pink velour tracksuit with 'Juicy' written across his butt, with a Brazilian blowout, applying paint to his acrylics. Rather than the beefy jock stud he was.

"You wanna come over? I think I have some Pinot left in the fridge. You can tell me how pretty I am whilst I watch the girls of Atlanta verbally destroy each other?" Part of Archer wanted a little mindless fun, but the other more needy part of Archer knew there was a very naked Finn waiting in his bed for him when he got home. His plump dick turned to a steel pipe in his trousers. He could almost taste Finn's lips against his own, the little moans he would make as Archer slid inside him.

"I think I will leave you and Nene to yourselves this evening," Archer said hurriedly, suddenly desperate to get the hell away from the Butterfly House and drive at questionable speeds back to his house.

"Your loss," Declan sang. "I'll try and survive without you."

"Ok buddy I'm gonna go and..."

"What the hell was that?" Declan's voice suddenly turned high-pitched. "Better not be that fucking neighbour's cat."

He heard Declan's muffled sounds, straining to hear for any kind of clue of what was going on at the other end of the line.

"That stupid cat is forever taking a dump in my garden and knocking over the trashcan. Will she do anything about,

will she fuck. *Cats will be cats, they are wild animals,*” he mimicked in a vaguely feminine voice. “Oh yeah, I can’t remember the last time I saw a lion in a documentary wandering around the serengeti with a collar that says ‘*this pussy is on fire*’.”

Archer shook his head; his best friend was going off on a tangent. “Where are you Dec?”

“I’m upstairs, I was gonna jump in the shower when we got off the phone. That is, until fucking Simba decided to make an appearance. Hang on I’m just gonna... Who the fuck is that?”

“Dec?”

“Hey this is private property pal, you’re going to want to get off my land.”

“Dec!” Archer barked.

“There is some fucking guy standing at the bottom of my garden looking up at the house like a fucking creeper.” The cold chill seeped back under Archer’s skin. His heart began to pound as he heard Declan move.

“Where the fuck are you going?” Archer snapped.

“I’m going to remind this motherfucker that you can’t just go traipsing over my land and get away with it.”

Archer tapped the phone against his forehead in frustration. “Stay in the house and call the police asshole!”

Rushing out the Butterfly House doors, he made his way to his car. It couldn’t be a coincidence. It just couldn’t be. Revving his engine, he gunned it out of the car park.

“Where are you?” Archer demanded.

“I’m in the kitchen. I’m looking out the window but I can’t see anything. I think he might be gone. I’m gonna go check.”

“Don’t be a fucking idiot Declan, stay where you are. I’m just five minutes away okay!” Running a red light, he sped through the town towards Declan’s house. A flash behind him made him aware to expect a fine in the post.

“Seriously I think he has gone, I’m just gonna...”

“Declan don’t leave the house,” Archer screamed into the phone. “Declan?”

An eerie silence echoed across the line. A void filled with panic, fear and dread crept into his gut, filling him and threatening to overtake him completely.

Pulling up outside Declan’s house, he sprinted up the driveway, letting himself in with the key he had been given the same day Declan had bought his house. Moving quickly down the hallway, he scanned the rooms he passed for Declan or any sign of life but found none.

“Declan?”

“I’m out here Arch.” Breathing a sigh of relief, he made his way into the kitchen to find Declan sitting at the small round table in the breakfast nook. His head was in his hands as he inspected something on the surface in front of him. Declan made no attempt to move, just sitting motionless. The hairs on the back of Archer’s neck now stood on end as he walked across the room to stand

beside his friend.

“What the...” Staring down at the tabletop in front of him, he struggled to comprehend the horrible vision in front of him. Several pieces of what appeared to be some kind of notebook paper had been taped together into a single sheet. Scrawled in what he guessed was dried blood were two simple words that turned his blood to ice.

‘Soon Archer.’