

- MEET AND GREET

“There was nothing I could do.”

Teddy sat and watched the man opposite him, the man who was clawing at his face with his fingers, raking at the skin as if trying to satisfy some great itch.

“I tried, I swear to you I tried.” The man’s words were mumbled, his mouth drawn, lips wet from spittle. Teddy had never seen anything so pathetic, so... *theatrical*.

“You let him die,” Teddy stated, his own voice clear and devoid of emotion, like the voice of a recording on the end of a telephone.

“No, no, I swear, I did all I could but there was just no hope, there just wasn’t...”

The man was crying again, hot tears dripping down his face, marking his red skin with their salty tracks. His finger nails were digging deep into his flesh now, moving dangerously close to his eyes.

“There’s always hope.”

Teddy watched to see what effect his words would have.

The man lifted his head for a moment to stare at Teddy, the colour in his eyes washed away by the tears, and then sunk back into his hands again, crying harder, sobs rattling in his chest. It was remorse, it was sadness and it was guilt, all combined to exert a physical force on their bearer. Yet Teddy could find no pity within him.

“Jason,” Teddy said softly, the man raising his head upon hearing his name.

“You killed him Jason.”

“NO!” Jason shrieked, thrusting his body upwards off the chair, propelled to his feet. He stood towering over Teddy who sat beneath him, whose own body was calm and subdued, his eyes black and cold betraying nothing.

“I did not kill your fucking son,” Jason shouted, his scream echoing around the hollow room. “He died okay? He just died, that’s all.”

Jason remained standing but his strength was beginning to wane, his back bent over and his arms dangling limply by his side. His chest rose and fell heavily, forcing air in and then quickly out of his body as if it were toxic to him.

“You don’t just die, Jason, eight year olds don’t just die. They die from sickness, disease, violence. *You* were his sickness, his disease.”

Jason did not reply. His face was purple now, tears splashed across his skin as if someone had pissed on his face. But there was a rage growing inside him, a reaction to the painful guilt that was eating away at his heart. A rage that was promising to set him free, to relieve him of this suffering. It demanded to be let loose on Teddy.

“Fuck you,” Jason whispered but his voice had no more strength than that.

Teddy smiled, a horrible, weary smile that smacked of sickness, the kind born of a desperate need to find humour in a world made of pain and heartache.

“You’re the one who’s fucked.”

Every muscle in Jason’s body tensed, his arms flexing into steel rods, his stomach compacting into a tight barrel, ready to defend his precious organs against outside assault. For a moment Jason was lost to the world, his eyes rolling back into his head and disappearing off to that place that lay in the back of his brain, the sticky swamp where all you could smell was the slow decay of death and all there was to see was murky water and parasitic plant life. It was a dangerous place to be and Jason quickly pulled himself away from it, the muddy waters sucking at his feet as he departed, eager to swallow him down into their dark depths.

Slowly, Jason sat back down on the chair, the hard plastic biting into the back of his legs. He eyed the other man across the table, unsure of what to do or say next, his body still deciding on a ruling emotion to hang onto.

“Whatever you think of me now,” he began, “I never meant any harm.” He was calm now, his hands still in his lap, no longer desperate to get at his face; the tears had dried on his cheeks and were now beginning to harden from the small breeze blowing from the air conditioner.

“I tried to help, whether you want to believe that or not, I did. I know that and you can’t tell me otherwise.”

Teddy glared at the man across from him. The man who he knew as Jason but had called so many other names over the last two months. So many names born from hatred, from loathing, from fear. Bastard. Monster. Hellion. Devil. Now he had a face to go with the name, Jason somehow seemed the most appropriate moniker.

“You killed my boy,” he said, the words simple, falling from his lips like drops of rain, natural and unthinking.

“I’m sorry.”

Those two words struck Teddy like a heavy blow against the back of his head. All of a sudden his mind felt fuzzy and he could feel his thoughts jumble together, colliding as their set path had been disturbed. What was he supposed to do with those two words? How was he supposed to react? With compassion, forgiveness, relief? What did those two words want of him, what did they demand?

“Sorry?” Teddy muttered the word, rolling it around his mouth as if to try and extract a taste from it.

Jason nodded.

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

Images flooded through Teddy’s mind then, figures in black coming up to him, grasping his hand and whispering words of comfort into his ear, words of sorrow and regret. *I’m sorry, we’re sorry, it’s so awful, what a terrible thing to happen, why did it have to happen like this, why did it have to happen at all? I’m sorry, sorry for your loss.*

Teddy shook his head to try and clear his thoughts, the words echoing through his mind. So many different faces and voices saying the same thing, and now here was another one, someone else offering their condolences. The same someone who had caused the pain to begin with, who had set it all in motion.

Teddy leaned back in his chair to get a good look at who was in front of him. The file had said that the man was twenty eight years old, although he looked nearer eighteen. He had a thin trim of facial hair that spread from one ear to the other, but it was patchy and fine, like that of a teenage boy. His face was covered in hard skin, laid over cheeks that were sunken, a nose that was pointy and eyes that looked black in the fluorescent light overhead. His hair was thick and greasy and came down just past his chin, kind of like a rock star, one who hadn’t showered for several days.

He wasn’t a big man, no real height or bulging muscles behind him. He sort of reminded Teddy of a whippet dog, all thin and taut but tough and wiry at the same time. There were lots of things that Jason reminded him of.

It wasn’t who he expected. That was all he could think about; this was not who he had expected to see when he had been trying to picture the man on the drive down here this morning. For the whole of the two hour drive, different faces had flashed into Teddy’s mind, old, young, fat, thin. He thought he had tried them all, but this one, this face he was looking at now; it hadn’t been one of them.

Jason chanced a glance at the clock on the wall, squinting to make out the time.

“It’s not over yet,” Teddy said, his eyes following Jason’s. “Not yet.”

Jason nodded solemnly, the previous attitude having fled from his system, his anger subdued once more.

“Why?” Teddy asked, the silence ruptured by his voice.

“Why what?”

“You know.”

Jason sighed and ran his fingers through his hair, parting the layers of grease.

“I told you, I did all I could.”

“That’s not what I asked.” Teddy’s voice was finally starting to show strain, his earlier composure slowly starting to disintegrate.

“I can’t answer that question,” Jason replied.

“Why?”

“Because I don’t know the answer. For the most part, I don’t even remember.”

“But you remember trying to save him, doing all you could to save him. Is that right?”

“I remember the phone call.”

Teddy snorted.

“I called an ambulance. I can even remember what I said to the operator.”

“But you didn’t stick around to help, to look after him?”

“Would you have?”

Both men sank back into their chairs, exhausted for the moment, their eyes locked.

Teddy had so much he wanted to say, so many questions still floating around his head left unanswered. But he couldn’t bring himself to ask any of them. What was the point? Besides, he hadn’t come here to ask questions, he had come to finally get a look at the instigator for the last two months of hell.

“What kind of person does that to an eight year old?” He asked.

“Me.”

There was no following up on that, no reasoning, no argument. There was sadness there within this man, in those eyes, in that voice, even in his body, it poured out of him from every orifice.

The air between them was heavy, feeling somewhat dead, the silence pounding down on both their heads.

“What else have you got to say?” Teddy asked, his mind too confused to carry on with his questioning, too busy reeling from finally putting a face to the name that had haunted him for so long.

“What else can I say?” Jason replied. “I tried to save him, I tried as best as I could, given the situation.”

“The situation?”

“Yeah, you know the situation. I did all I could.”

The curtness of the man’s replies was starting to get to Teddy. He could feel his frustration growing, egged on by the man’s willingness to try and worm out of it.

“How does it feel?” He asked, a sneer crossing his face.

“How does what feel?”

“To have a boy’s blood on your hands, to have felt his warm blood flow across your skin, watching the light go out in his eyes. You bastard.”

At this, Jason hung his head, his eyes now rooted to the table between them, glaring into its hard metal surface, trying to see past his own reflection.

“They never come clean,” he admitted, his head dropping lower. “I can still see it on them now, covering them. It looks a little like strawberry jam, its sticky like it too. But it wouldn’t come off, probably never will.”

“I hope not,” was Teddy’s reply.

“I still see him you know,” Jason continued, his hands now clasped together on the table, his eyes staring at them. “At night, in my cell. He stands in the corner by the sink, staring at me with those big eyes. He watches me sleep, or try to sleep.”

A single tear began to trickle down Teddy’s face, slowly descending through the air to splash silently on the table top.

“He never says anything, just always stands there, staring, watching me, judging me.”

A thought pried its way into Teddy’s head just then. The image of his boy lying on that cold, steel table, naked except for the wounds he bore; so many cuts, so many purple bruises spoiling his delicate skin. Teddy’s heart wretched with sadness.

“I see him too,” Teddy added, his eyes still trying to see into the man’s face. “He always comes when I’m in the kitchen, cooking. He stands and watches me make dinner, he used to love the smell of fresh cooking, used to watch me all the

time, even tried to help in his own little way. It must be a hard habit for him to break.”

Jason’s head suddenly snapped up, his dark eyes shining, looking directly at Teddy.

“Why the hell are you here?” He asked.

“I wanted to see you,” Teddy replied, “to see what you looked like, since I didn’t make it to your day in the spotlight.”

Jason gave a short snort of laughter.

“So what do you think?”

Teddy was quiet for a long time, his face blank as his mind worked. Tiny beads of sweat were gathering around his temple.

“Why can’t I hate you?” He finally asked, his face haggard, lined with age.

“I don’t know,” Jason replied, “you should.”

A buzzer sang shrilly in the background and the burly guard in the corner started to walk over.

“Time’s up,” he said to Teddy, waiting for the man to get up and follow him. Teddy dutifully rose from his chair, the legs scraping back with a screech against the linoleum flooring.

As he left, Teddy took one last look over his shoulder, one last look at the man who still sat in the plastic chair watching him leave. The man who had killed his son.

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