

i've got a dark alley and a bright idea that says you should shut your mouth
chapter 1 [wc 2817]

The gun feels heavy in Chris' hand. Solid metal, thicker than he had expected, steely grey and glinting softly in the fluorescent lights. His eyes move nervously toward Paul.

The older man is distracted, loading his own handgun with deliberate movements. Pick up bullet. Hold it up to the light. Examine, fingers running along the smooth edges. Gently slide it into the chamber.

Chris clears his throat. Breathes out. "What am I doing here, exactly?" His voice is shakier than he'd like.

Paul doesn't bother to look at him. "You can't tell, ya big dummy?"

Adrenaline courses through him, and he clenches his free hand into a fist. "I mean, why me?"

With a final satisfied *shnk*, Paul slots the last bullet into his gun. He flicks his wrist in a practiced move, the old-fashioned round chamber swirling shut.

It only takes two long strides until he's looming over Chris, loaded gun propped on his hip like a toy. "Because, Chrissy, I like you." He slips his pistol into his belt, as if he's a kid playing American cowboys.

Now he's got two hands and over a foot of height on Chris and Chris realizes, suddenly, that it's after hours. They're alone in the shooting range. Not even Alex or Ross know where he is. His heart takes flight as Paul reaches toward him, vision whitening out at the edges. This is not how he wants to die.

A pleasant warmth against his hand grounds him. He blinks and looks down.

"C'mon, haven't you ever watched a cop show? That's not how you hold a gun." Paul's hands manipulate his, dragging his fingers around to grip the gun. He tries to slip Chris' index finger underneath the trigger guard, but Chris instinctively holds his finger straight against Paul's hand.

Chris almost can't believe his own gall, thoughts of retaliation whirling through his mind, but Paul only takes a step back and smiles at him, a lazy shark grin. "What's the matter, Chrissy? Scared?"

He is. Paul knows it. But as Paul's amused eyes meet his own, Chris feels a sick guilty feeling building up in his gut.

A debt is a debt after all.

He feels an uncomfortable strain on his wrist and hefts the gun slightly. His is a heavier model than Paul's. Newer, by the look of it. His takes magazines, not bullets.

Paul tilts his head, dark eyes not leaving Chris' face.

Chris shuts his eyes. Forces himself to breathe. If Paul wanted to kill him, he would have already. Instead, he's doing ... this.

Chris pictures his friends, fast asleep when he'd left them, snoring faintly in the quiet bedroom. They'll be waiting for him once they wake up.

He opens his eyes.

Chris doesn't look at the older man, quickly stepping up to the firing range. Plants his feet apart, as he's seen on the cop shows. Moves his right hand up to grasp the gun as well. Lifts it, and --

Bang

He's surprised. After all that, it only took a twitch of pressure from his finger. Like when he'd had sex for the first time: he'd expected to feel different, older. He'd only ever felt the same, just ... there was a gun in his hand.

Bang Bang

He lowers the gun slowly, the reverberations of the final shot tickling at his eardrums. The target is marked now, three black holes torn through the paper. Two in the middle rings and one nearly skimming the bullseye. He steadies himself with a protracted breath, and turns around to meet Paul's eyes.

Paul's smile has turned gentle now, calm affection softening the lines of his face. For half a moment Chris imagines Paul is his father, looking at him with pride won by devotion.

Chris blinks, and the moment is gone. Before him is a murderer, a drug dealer, a gang leader. His jeans hang loosely on his thin frame, belying his wiry strength. He's coiled like a snake, superior satisfaction in his eyes, and Chris just knows he's waiting patiently for the moment to strike.

This is the man he can't, and will never be able to say no to.

~

Alex would have died.

He'd always been the reckless one, blustering and intimidating where he couldn't outright dupe. But the streets were no place for a young liar. Alex's luck had finally caught up with him, in the form of five wannabe gangsters and their shivs.

That was when he had first met Paul. The older man had stepped onto the street, all quaint Canadian charm with a Sig Sauer in his pocket. A short show of intimidation, and the young punks had scattered. Alex had thanked Paul, grudgingly, all too aware of the debt he had just incurred. Paul had only patted the other man on the shoulder and said: "I'm sure you'll think of some way to repay me."

Chris blamed himself.

He'd known Alex for many years. He knew what Alex was like. What had possessed him to let Alex go out on his own that night? Nothing good could come of it.

At least, Chris should have woken Ross. Together, they should have followed Alex, and maybe, just maybe, the three of them could have scared the attackers off. Then they never would have met Paul. They never would've gotten into the mess at all.

But Paul does seem to value them, doesn't he? He found them an apartment to live in, pays the whole rent. Got them food, clothes, a TV. All for the low, low price of endless devotion and loyalty.

The older man's endless charisma frightens Chris, somewhere deep in his animal instincts. But unlike the stray dogs that skirt the alleyways, he knows better than to run. Everyone on the street has heard of Paul. Everyone on the street has heard what he can do.

He wishes he could've let the others escape. But Paul had turned down his offer for a trade, smiling that coy smile and shaking his head slowly. "Chrissy, Chrissy, Chrissy. What do you take me for?"

~

Paul takes him home. Ostensibly, it's to make sure he has somewhere safe to keep his "present". Chris suspects something behind his ready answer, but he knows better than to ask.

Paul follows him up to his apartment, footsteps louder and slower than Chris'. It's still early, not yet six o'clock, and the sound seems to echo through the silent stairwell. Chris hopes the other two are already awake.

"Jeez, Debbie downer, what's got your goat?"

Chris pauses, foot halfway up to the next step. With the night's lack of sleep wearing at him, the absurdity of Paul's word choice hits home. He can't help but let out a short laugh. When had his life become such a shit-show?

Fuck it. Paul isn't going to gun him down in his own apartment building. "It might have something to do," Chris begins, resuming his walk, "with the fact that you don't warn me that you're stealing me away in the middle of the night to go play with firearms."

"Aw, but then it wouldn't be our little secret."

"I'm not going to lie to them."

"Of course you're not," Paul says smoothly. "But you have to promise me nobody else is gonna use that gun."

Chris' steps falter to a halt. Of course. Alex would never let him keep it.

God damn it all.

"For their own safety," Paul adds sweetly.

"Alex can fire a gun better than I can," Chris says.

"Do you think it really matters?" Paul takes two more steps and their feet are level. "I guarantee that bad boy's nothing like what he or Ross are used to."

"So you chose me."

"Did you think you were special, Chrissy? Disappointed I don't like you best?"

Chris grinds his teeth but doesn't dignify that with a response. Grabbing the stairwell handrail, he begins jogging up the steps. He can hear Paul behind him, the same slow, steady footfall.

"Put on a cuppa when you get up there, eh, Speedracer?"

When Chris enters the apartment door he can't help a sigh of relief. The comforting scent of home envelopes him, relaxing worn-out muscles.

That's when he notices the main room is silent. The breath halts in his lungs. Chris makes his way to the bedroom door on tiptoes. The door glides open under his palm and -

Those useless twats.

They're fast asleep, much in the same position he'd left them. They hadn't even noticed he was gone for, what? Five hours now?

"They look so cute like that, aww."

A violent shiver passes through Chris, and he whirls around to see Paul leaning in the open doorway behind him.

No way in hell. They're unconscious, defenseless --

He blocks Paul's view with his body as best he can. "Get out," he hisses.

Paul smiles coyly, but obeys. "Meet me in the kitchen once you're done. Oh - be sure not to interrupt their beauty sleep."

Chris wills his body to calm down as the bedroom door swings shut. That didn't mean anything. That means nothing. They were asleep, and Paul, like the viper in the fox den, had stood and watched with beady eyes; but it didn't mean harm would come to them.

In that moment, Chris hates himself more than anything. More than he hates Paul. Why didn't he shut the fucking door behind him? Why is he so *fucking* useless? Just a piece of shit who can never get anything right no matter how important it is--

He feels like the room's spinning and he can't feel his arms or his legs and he can see sparkling lights playing at his eyelids and he breathes

in

and

out.

He comes to in moments, used to diffusing panic quickly. His hands are in white-knuckled fists, nails digging jagged crescent moons into his palms. He forces them to relax. Breathing.

Okay. It's now or never. Chris wants Paul out of the flat and he wants him out now.

The gang leader is in the kitchen like he said he'd be, rustling through abandoned cupboards. "What do you guys even eat?" he asks as Chris enters. "I mean I expected at least a box of macaroni for shit's sake."

"What are you here for?"

Paul holds his hand out to Chris, palm up, and waves his fingers impatiently. Chris stares.

“Ya big dumbo, the fupp’in’ gun.”

Chris startles. He’s forgotten about it. He reaches into the cavernous pocket of his jumper, pulling the gun out, muzzle first. He puts it in Paul’s hand, but the man only wiggles his fingers again. Chris reaches into his pocket and manages to pull out the loose magazines Paul had given to him: four in total.

Paul slides open a drawer, the bottom one, and dumps the pile in. He slots an unobtrusive plastic loop over the handle, and drops a tiny piece of plastic in Chris’ hand. “Looks like a childlock, but it isn’t,” Paul says.

Chris opens his mouth to speak, but Paul drops his hand heavily onto the shorter man’s shoulder and gives him a nudge. “Couch,” he says, eyes focused unerringly on Chris’. It’s all too easy to fall in step with him, his hand a reassuring weight radiating warmth.

“You know how much I like you guys, eh?”

“Yes,” Chris says, hesitantly.

“I’d love to let you jabronis wander around wild and free, but I am running a business here.”

Chris drops down onto the couch, resting his forehead in his hand. His head is throbbing. This night is already too long by far.

“My friend has a job for you,” Paul says. “You think you’re ready for what he’ll have for you?”

Chris lifts his head, chewing on his bottom lip. “What do you think?”

Paul smiles, smaller than usual, but his eyes seem to match the emotion for once. “I’m sure you jokers will do just fine.” He reaches into his pants pocket and takes out a piece of paper. He steps forward, frame towering high above Chris, and drops the paper on the couch seat next to the younger man. “Show up at this address tonight at 9 pm, kay, bud?”

Chris nods, neck straining as he looks up at Paul.

“Now, you’re gonna keep our secret, aren’t you?”

There is a moment of hesitance. Paul’s presence bears down on Chris, shoulders seeming more broad, face cast in ominous shadow.

Chris sucks in a decisive breath. “I’ll do what I want.”

Paul reaches out, grasping Chris' chin and pulling up, tilting his head even farther. Ignoring the pain in his neck, Chris shuts his eyes as Paul leans down toward him.

His voice drifts out, quietly, silkily. "Oh, brave Chrissy. He's not gonna listen to mean ol' Paul? He's gonna make his own big boy decisions."

The feel of the older man's lips is sudden. Chris' entire body jerks, arms coming up to Paul's face, trying to shove him away. But Paul's weight pushes Chris until he's slumped against the back of the couch, legs parted for Paul to stand between them.

Paul digs his fingers into Chris' hair and wrenches his head away from Paul's own. "C'mon, c'mon. Aren't you gonna fight back?"

Chris' not sure if he's afraid at this point but his arms have fallen down by his sides and he can't feel his lungs. He hears his breath, ragged and gasping, but he can't feel his lungs move. A dull ache starts up in his throat.

Paul lets go of his hair, hands landing firmly on Chris' thighs and pushing his legs apart, to the point that pain lances through the tendons. An involuntary whimper escapes his lips.

"Aren't you at least gonna call for help? You know your ass-lickers are right over there, in the other room."

The air is still going in and out, but he can't feel it. He can't see Paul's face for all the white light.

He feels Paul's lips tickling at his ear. "You've got a helluva long way to go before you can say no to me, pal."

His mind is spiraling out and away, tendrils of black reaching from his peripherals, swarming before his eyes. He sees- he's above himself now?

Chris concentrates, looking down at his dusty brown hair. That is him. That is where he should be.

He tastes blood.

"Well, Chrissy," Paul says, his voice a distance away. Chris blinks to focus his eyes, finding the Canadian holding the front door open. "See ya tomorrow, then." And he's gone.

"Fuck," Chris mutters. He goes to stand, the leftover tension in his legs painful. His lip stings. He traces it with his tongue tentatively - feels the gash torn by his own teeth. "Fuck," he says again.

He fumbles his way to the bathroom. Switching the fluorescent light on, he finds that the familiar hum of electricity only causes pent-up frustration to coil tighter in his gut.

It's quite the stream of blood, down his chin and onto his light blue shirt. That stain is not going to come out. He strips the shirt off, throwing it into the trash can. Jeans and boxers off with quick, businesslike movements, laying them flat across the toilet seat. Grabbing a washcloth from the towel rack, he soaks it in the cold water from the faucet, enjoying the punishment of the icy water as wipes off the layers of sweat and fear and gunpowder. He tosses the soiled washcloth onto the shower floor and turns to go - but he's arrested by the sight of his own eyes, staring back at him through the mirror.

He looks so tired. Even he can see that. He reaches up with one shaky hand and traces the bags under his eyes, the feel of his fingers ice cool against his skin. He wonders what Paul thought as he had him pinned down against the navy couch: his gasping, paralyzing panic. What on earth did Paul see in him?

The answer is obvious. Chris scrubs at his smooth chin. Paul saw a child. Easy to manipulate. Malleable.

His hand drops to his side in defeat. He smiles bitterly at himself, watches as the lines around his eyes become more pronounced.

Fine.

He turns away and flips the light off, heading into the bedroom. He can just see Ross' hair over the curve of Alex's shoulder. The latter shifts slightly as Chris enters the room, but doesn't wake as Chris approaches his friends. Pulling the covers aside, Chris slips in behind Alex, and immediately settles close to his friend's warm body. He wraps his arms around Alex's bare waist and tucks his face into the curve of his shoulder. His breath ghosts out along Alex's skin, and the smell he draws in through his nose is comfortingly familiar.

And he sleeps.