

## Freeman by Clare London

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### Freeman - Prologue

I don't know how the hell he ended up sitting next to me. I sat in my usual place, out of the way. Clubs aren't really my thing, but after the pubs close, that's the only place I can get some company with my drinking. Not that I want something one-on-one; not even conversation. Just company in the background; noise; babble; bodies. I don't know what you'd call me. Observer, not participant. Anti-social, maybe.

He landed himself on the bench seat beside me, an invasion of gangly limbs and impatient breath, his dark hair falling over his face. Nearly as tall as me but very thin. Obviously much

younger. No-one shows that kind of energy and enthusiasm when they get older. Especially not in a dive like this.

"Got a match?"

It was a familiar line and I should have announced that - despite the club's lurid advertising - I wasn't here for that. But it was the end of the night and I'd worn out my discouraging grimace around midnight. Besides, he clutched a spliff and looked like he genuinely needed a light. Silently, I offered him my lighter.

He lit the joint and took a long, grateful draw. I sat in one of the darker corners of an already murky club, and watched the ring of burning tobacco light up his angular face for a second or two. Young, yes. Enthusiastic, no. His eyes were bright but artificially so - the lines round his mouth were deeper than they should have been at that age. Perhaps he saw me looking at him, because he grinned. It made him look young again and very striking.

"Want some?"

We shared the joint for a while. He seemed settled there and I didn't feel inclined to move him on. When I passed it back over to him each time, he took hold of my wrist to steady himself. It wasn't a come-on, it was just rather touching. He gradually relaxed but his eyes were still alert, continuously darting over the bar and the tablecloth-sized dance floor. Patrons were peeling away from the place by now, only a couple of hours before closing time, and the company I'd sought was sparse. But the guy he was watching for was still around, and I knew who that was.

Of course, I knew most people here.

"I'm with G, you know?"

I didn't answer him at first. It wasn't any business of mine, and I didn't intend to make it so. Everyone to their own.

"He's OK." The boy chatted on as if I'd asked him to. His voice was quite deep for a youngster. Now that he'd relaxed, his movements were less coltish, a little more graceful. I always admired the way that youth were so careless of their bodies and yet so artlessly sensual. Jealousy, maybe. I didn't give it that much thought.

He gestured towards the bar. "Been in the city a couple of months. He's looked after me. Shown me the ropes. You know?"

His question was rhetorical and we both knew it. There'd been plenty of boys like him; that was one of G's hobbies, as was common knowledge. I watched another couple of club members weaving their way across the beer-soaked carpet towards the exit, arms round each other's torsos, on their way to find another place to tryst. I could only hope for their sake it was more salubrious, though the odds were against it.

And then the boy turned directly to me and stared. I was startled. His hand waved the last dregs of the joint at a point in the unidentified distance; his look was stark. "You got anything else? I've got money. Some."

I stared back into rich, brown pools of frightened awareness. It was like all of his humanity had parked up in his eyes, leaving the rest of his body a shell that drove on automatic under the buzzing neon lights. He was very attractive in a pale, gamine kind of way. He was no girl, I'd give him that. But he had a vulnerability that seemed to have soaked right through him to the core, not just a look that was put on with low-slung trousers and a fashionably cropped tee shirt.

"I don't have anything," I said, which was true.

He frowned slightly under my scrutiny, his gaze shifting away. "Maybe I don't have the money, either. I could do other stuff to pay for it, if you had something. Whatever you like."

I just shook my head. He didn't make the bargain sound very enticing, but for one, I wasn't in the market tonight and secondly, I knew that the weariness wasn't his fault. I'd seen his slender form arrive with G's much bulkier body earlier in the evening: I'd also seen them together later, though the circumstance didn't allow me to see the boy properly. I'd quickly realised what was going on and I didn't particularly want to watch it, but my attention was caught.

G had a regular table over by the bar, behind the dance floor and set apart from it on a raised platform. His entourage sat around him most of the time. I'd seen the boy there with them, just a brief view on my way back from the toilets. I'd registered his much more delicate face; a youngster in amongst some considerably uglier, older, muscle-bound men. Of course, it wasn't anything new to see G's latest trophy on display. I had no desire to linger, believe you me, but this boy was different: he captured my interest.

When I'd glanced over again a little later, the boy's face was gone from his seat. The view of G was obscured behind the other men, ranged around the table like columns around an amphitheatre, their backs turned to me as if shielding him. One of them was laughing; another one leant in against G, as if whispering into his ear. Like some damned religious painting. It took me a moment to realise what else was odd. They were all looking at the same spot, some place down around G's seat; all watching what was happening there.

I watched as G's head went back; his back arched. I saw the shine of his carefully pressed, brilliantly white shirt under his open jacket. His hand weaved into view, hovering just above his lap, resting on a dark, moving object between his legs.

The boy's head. He was obviously on his knees, under the table, sucking him off. G was directing operations like the despot he was. A broad hand; long, strong fingers; a touch that owed far more to pressure than guidance. Pushing the boy's head up and down, dictating the pace to his personal satisfaction. The table remained largely shrouded behind the dance floor: all the players moved in and out of my line of sight and, like I said, I had no desire to waste my evening watching the sordid scene. Before I looked away again, I saw two slim hands snake their way up towards G's hips, fumbling at the buttons of his shirt, grasping a handful of expensive silk. G nodded once, and the guy seated on his left grabbed the hands and lifted them away. Even from my distant position, it looked more like capture than caress.

I'd been surprised at G's nerve, though he was infamous for taking what he wanted, exactly when he wanted it. It went on for a while, so maybe he had some problems getting off in full view of the patrons, despite their disinterest. Maybe the boy was shuffling round under the table, playing some disgusting game of roulette with the whole group. No-one else in the club seemed to notice or care. The whole place was squalid and neglected, a few guys dancing listlessly to '80s hits and the barman wiping beer glasses that would always remain smeared. I'd seen the top of the boy's head a few more times but never more than a hint of his face, drifting like that of a pale, dispossessed ghost, his distorted features darting in and out of the fitful light.

I mean, there were booths out the back for it. Of course, that presupposed that G had the decency to be discreet.

I'd thought about doing something; about stopping it. To be honest, from what little I could see and hear, the kid hadn't looked unwilling. But there are a hell of a lot of stages between rape and relationship, and I knew that better than most. The decision was finally made for me when the group broke up, some of the chairs being pushed back, men leaving the table and money being pushed about for more drinks. A slim figure had emerged in the seat to G's right; its head was bowed, down towards the table top, the features hidden by tousled hair. One glance at G's laughing face and I'd turned my back on the lot of them. My last look had seen no casualties. Not

obvious ones, anyway.

Now I caught the boy's eyes on me again and realised that he knew what I was thinking. All of it. I wasn't used to such close connection.

"I'm OK," he said, with some of that defensive swagger that's also innate in youth. "It's my choice. He doesn't own me." Neither of us said any more, but 'yet' was both implied and inferred. I sighed.

"Sure," I said, no judgement in my tone.

His eyes flickered over me and he yawned widely. "Just want to rest for a bit now. That OK?"

I nodded. Even so, it was a surprise when he slid a little closer to me on the seat and rested his head on my shoulder, like a pillow. He didn't ask for anything else but when I felt his body begin to sag against me, I slid an arm round behind him and held him securely while he slept.

I looked around the emptying club but I knew that no-one would bother us. I was known here. I was known in a lot of places. There might be trouble about it tomorrow, but the boy wouldn't be going home with G tonight.

I looked at my empty glass on the table in front of us and settled back into my seat, the boy gently snoring in the crook of my arm.

## Freeman - Chapter 1

The guy was half an hour late for our appointment and it was wet and cold out in the alleyway. I pulled my coat closer and watched the air steam angrily away with my outward breath. I decided to give him another few minutes, but only because I had nowhere else to go tonight. Also it had been a quiet month and I'd welcome the new contract.

A small group of kitchen workers stumbled out of one of the doors further up the alley. It was the back entrance to a rather pretentious restaurant. I'd eaten there rarely, and when I had, I'd found the service poor. A gust of hot air and noise followed them out and the door slammed shut behind them. One of them was laughing very loudly and there was plenty of jostling as they handed round a packet of cigarettes.

I watched as the boy at the tail-end of the line caught the packet, tipping it up on end to jog out the last cigarette. Someone called for a lighter, who had the lighter, for fuck's sake? The boy with the packet in his hand turned, looking down the alley towards me. I didn't think I'd done anything to attract his attention but his eyes caught mine with no hesitation.

"Shit," he said, softly. I heard the word very clearly over the grumbling and joking of the rest of the group. His eyes narrowed and he tilted his head slightly to one side, his dark hair curling against his slim neck. One of the other youngsters spoke to him and he turned back briefly to throw him the lighter. Then he started to walk towards me. The ground was damp from the earlier rain and the uneven paving stones glinted under his oversized trainers.

Even in the shapeless white kitchen overall he moved with an unusual, sensual grace. It was a swagger, showing his youth and his arrogance, but also his uncertainty. I stood and I watched until he was only a foot or so away. I could smell the cooking smells on his coat; see a spattered stain on the left lapel from a tomato-based sauce.

"You," he said. It wasn't a question or a statement, just a noise he made because he probably couldn't think of anything else. His voice was low but clear in the still, humid air.

I nodded at him; pulled my coat around me further. Behind me, the neon lights of the small warehouse flickered intermittently.

"The other night," he began. His eyes opened wider and the lights slid their reflection across his pupils. He bit his lower lip under small, white teeth. Two of them on one side were slightly crossed. "You know."

I wasn't bothered about answering but it seemed that he expected something. "I know. Sure."

"I had an early shift," he hurried on. He gazed straight at me, not nervous – more wary. That suited me, for my look probably gave the same message. "Had to get away. I took a couple pieces of bread and a tea, that's all."

"And a shower," I said, calmly.

I saw him flush, the poor light rendering it a grey shadow on his pale cheeks. His face was long and angular, classically so, his lips full. I was fascinated again by his beauty. I wanted to believe it was less fragile than it looked.

"That a problem?" he growled, rather belligerently.

"No," I said. I'd lain in bed listening to him fumbling about in the kitchen and then groping around in the early morning light, trying to find the bathroom and then get the shower to work. I heard the first sharp hiss of the water running and what sounded like a sigh from him as he stepped underneath. I lay there, still unmoving, as I heard him slopping his way out on to the lino, dragging towels from the cupboard and getting dressed again.

The click of the front door had been at its quietest – he'd been careful in leaving. When I finally got out of bed for my own breakfast, I found that he'd half folded my spare blankets on to the arm of the couch and carried his dirty plate and mug back out to the kitchen counter.

He was looking up at me now, bolder because he guessed I hadn't come to chase him up for something. Maybe that's what he was used to. "What the hell are you doing here anyway?" His eyes ran swiftly from my collar and tie to my expensive shoes. He frowned slightly.

I didn't have to answer him, of course, but I did. "Business," I said. "A business meeting."

He raised an eyebrow and smiled. His whole face abruptly changed, the lines around his mouth lifting from sulky to stunning. "Yeah, right. At quarter past midnight. That's the sort of business that G -" He paused and his expression darkened again. He ran a nervous hand up through his hair, letting it fall back carelessly over his forehead.

"Yes," I agreed. "The sort of business that G does. But I'm not him. I have a client who works nights. I'm planning to manage his car fleet. This is a convenient time for us to meet up."

He stared at me, maybe trying to see more in that than I offered. "Pays well, does it? Your business?" Look at your clothes, his expression said. Your flat, your car... I'd seen him sizing it all up when I'd taken him home that night. Many people think they can measure me like that. I don't disabuse them.

I smiled back at him, slowly. "Good enough. For a business that's legal, that is."

He tilted his head to one side again and his smile returned, matching mine. There was none of the wide, stretched disorientation in his face like before. He looked alert, the shine of intelligence

and humour in his eyes, and it was a far more pleasant sight. "Better than washing dishes for the price of a packet of fags, right?"

"Right," I replied. There was composure between us. It seemed that neither of us worried about the words that weren't being said, neither of us intruded on the other. I hadn't felt that ease for a long time.

A door slammed somewhere in the distance, but it wasn't my client arriving. I decided I wasn't going to wait much longer, he could call me in the morning if he wanted to make something of it.

"He didn't say anything about it, you know," the boy said, abruptly. "G, that is. Said nothing about me sleeping over your place that night." His gaze was calculating, trying to provoke me. "Why's that?" Who are you? he was trying to say but didn't quite have the nerve.

I shrugged gently. "He knows me. That a problem?" I deliberately turned his words back on to him and saw the flicker of recognition in eyes that were far sharper than before.

He didn't answer me, asking his own question instead. "So what's your name?" The boys at the back of the restaurant were calling to him; their shared break was over.

"Freeman," I said, knowing that someone at G's would have told him already. Wondering what else they may have told him. "What's yours?"

Someone shouted more loudly, calling for the 'Kid'. I watched his mouth tighten, biting back sudden anger. "That's what they call me," he said quietly.

"That's not a name," I said, without accusation.

He shrugged, looking uncomfortable. "Don't have a name. You know? Not one I want to use."

"Kit," I said. "That's a name."

"Huh?" He frowned at me, confused.

"A name," I repeated. "Easy to remember. Better than an animal's name."

He tilted his head again. "That your name or something?" The words were aggressive but his tone was softened in the night's damp, steamy air. I looked steadily back at him.

"No," I said. "It's just a suggestion. A working title."

His feet shifted on the wet paving, a trail of rain water rippling out from the movement. "Whatever," he said finally, rather listlessly. "If you like." He started to move sideways, backwards, half a step at a time. I buttoned up my coat and glanced at the way back out to the street.

When he put his hand on my arm I was almost surprised. "Left something behind," he said. "At your place." For the first time, he didn't meet my eyes. "I can come round tomorrow and pick it up. Lunchtime session finishes around four."

I listened to the glib little lie and wondered about it. "Sure," I said. "I'll be home then."

He took a deeper breath as if a job were now done, and he began to move away, his step more purposeful. "Kit," he repeated as he went, shaking his head and smiling again. "If you like."

It'll do, I thought. Everyone should have a name, after all.

## Freeman - Chapter 2

By nine o'clock, the roads outside my building were quiet: the warm rain had fallen persistently all day and was now keeping most people at home. The night was dark, the pavements shadowed by the diffused gleam of the street lights. Occasionally I would hear a car go past, raising a spray in the gutters, and its headlight would arc across my window blind.

The boy came round about ten minutes later.

The knock on my door was tentative and I took my time walking down the hall to answer it. He was on the step, stamping his feet though it wasn't cold out there. I looked him up and down, noting the habitual jeans; the peaked cap pulled deep over his forehead; the hood of his jacket pulled up over his head.

He coughed. "Said I'd come round, didn't I?"

I breathed in carefully and nodded. I opened the door wide and stepped to one side. He sidled in like he was a fugitive, head down and not looking behind him. When we were both in the hallway and I shut the door behind him, he unzipped his jacket. His jeans were obviously his own, well worn and fitting closely to his slender legs. But the tee shirt had a loud, bright yellow logo on it from the local courier firm.

He saw me looking and shrugged. "Can't live on washing up," he muttered, defensively. "This pays better. Not committed to it, you know? Just odd jobs now and then."

I nodded. We'd all used that firm one time or another. I knew G did, regularly. I led the way back into my lounge, the boy's trainers bumping into the back of my heels a couple of times. It wasn't that large a flat, though in an exclusive part of town, but it stretched the full depth of the building. All of the rooms were set off from the central hall, except for the combined kitchen/living area where I spent most of my time.

He looked over the lounge, obviously seeing it in full light this time around. He glanced at the small table, pushed up against the far wall and covered in papers. Three cups were piled haphazardly at the back, one stained around its handle by the spilt trail of dark, strong coffee. My open laptop sat there, too: the screen was blank. "You working?"

"Yes," I replied, but I didn't give him any more details. "Do you want to search round first or sit down for a while?"

"Search?" He stared at me.

I smiled, gently. "You left something here, you said."

He caught his lower lip under his teeth, then let it peel out again slowly. I suspected this was his strategy to buy time. His gaze didn't waver but I could see the thoughts flickering like a background of startled butterflies.

"Yeah. Under the couch, probably."

"I'll clear up here, then," I said. "While you're looking."

It didn't take long to slip the open papers into a couple of files and turn off the laptop. It had been a quiet day for me. In the morning, the client from the previous night had called and made excuses for not making his appointment. He'd been 'unavoidably detained'; maybe we could do

some business 'some other time'. I'd listened with tolerance, but not much. There were many reasons people in this town either wanted or didn't want to deal with me. He fell somewhere between the two and I had neither time nor appetite to discover what his real reasons were for backing off. So I'd spent the rest of the day making some calls; re-establishing some alternative contacts; finding enough business out there to keep me busy over the next couple of months. By the time four o'clock had come and gone with no visitor, I'd reconciled myself to an evening of catching up with admin and paperwork.

There was a shuffling noise behind me by the couch and the boy heaved himself up from off his knees.

"Like I said, it was here." He shrugged. "See?" His hand opened and closed swiftly so that I had barely enough time to see the glint of a gold hoop that had once been in an ear, presumably his. Of course, I'd never seen it before in my life.

"Sure," I said, calmly. "Good." I shut down the lid of the laptop and stepped away from the table, now clear of anything to do with my work.

He glanced up at me, but didn't move. There was a weary tension to his limbs, as if he never dared be off his guard, but had forgotten the reason why. He looked very tired, his legs shaking a little, and I wondered how much longer they'd hold him upright. It must have been a long day for him. To my eyes, he was less of a boy than something tossed out into a sudden wind.

I turned away as if to go to the kitchen counter. "I'm making supper," I said. "Join me."

I didn't need to see his face to know that eagerness would flicker in his eyes. He didn't look like he'd eaten enough or properly for a long while. He glanced over to the kitchen area. Then his head dropped forward and he made a sound of frustration. "Have to be round at G's. You know. Later."

"Later." I nodded. "But not yet."

I paused just long enough to see his head come back up. His eyes were brighter, even though he made sure his words were casual; a verbal shrug. "Sure. Might as well."

I smiled to myself, my back still half-turned away from him. "Take a shower first."

"I'm good..."

"No," I said. I turned back to face him fully and it startled him. My tone may have been too harsh but he needed to know that this was my place and therefore my standards applied. "You've been in the restaurant, then on the road." And God knows where else in between. "You wash before food. I insist on it."

He frowned, but at the same time he glanced back longingly at the door to the hallway. I remembered he'd taken his time washing the other morning, even though he'd needed to leave quickly. It was a fine, hot, luxurious shower. I didn't know what digs he lived in, or whom he shared with, but I doubted he had facilities to match. Nor did I think he'd have the full run of G's properties. G rationed his personal loyalty as if it were a finite commodity. He liked his companions to be available for the brief moments that suited his convenience, but then to fade back into whatever holding pen he chose for them. Thus the boy's transient, flexible job arrangements. It was the way things were.

The boy shrugged. He flipped his cap off on to the couch, and left the room. He knew the way.

I started making some pasta with a pesto sauce and lightly fried pancetta. Nothing fancy, but warm and filling and easy to eat. In the background I could hear the water running and the rattle



of bottles as he searched for shampoo and body wash. By the time the pump stopped humming, the food was ready and the smell of it warmed the living room. I walked around the table, laying cutlery and water glasses. I didn't have any alcoholic drinks in the flat at the time, though I'm not sure I would have offered them to him anyway.

He walked back into the room, towelling his hair dry and with another towel wrapped round his waist. He wore nothing else. I looked up from spooning the pasta into two bowls and we stared at each other for a moment.

His face was flushed from the heat of the shower and he looked very young again. His wet hair was long, curling around his neck and throat, but he'd pushed it back from his face so that I could see his features in yet another context. This time, his eyes were wide and clear, and his full mouth was curved in a rueful smile. The elusive gold hoop was back in his ear.

"The guys are calling me Kit now, you know." He looked like he might laugh. "Maybe I'll keep it for a bit."

"It suits you," I said. "Sharp. Cool."

We both laughed, then. He reached up to dry his hair more vigorously and I watched him. The pasta steamed gently in the bowls in front of me, waiting patiently for attention. A few stray drops of water glistened on his shoulders and on the fine body hair of his chest. His nipples were brown nubs, like pennies on his pale skin. The muscles were well defined across his torso, suggesting that his slenderness was natural, not created by neglect, and when he moved, the skin creased gently at his waist. He had long legs, the calves and ankles showing beneath the towel, the feet slim and bony and already a full man's size. He moved with that sinuous grace that I'd seen in him from the first, though with a lanky energy to his limbs that both enhanced and fascinated.

It was bound to happen, of course. He twisted casually and the towel at his waist slipped down a few inches. Both of us followed the movement with our eyes. The bones at his hips showed sharply under his pale skin. The edge of the towelling fabric now perched precariously under the swell of his young belly; the top line of his pubic hairs curled out over the top.

I imagined that his skin would be smooth and cool. I already knew that his limbs folded gracefully in my grasp, from when he'd slept some time in my arms.

His eyes darted up to meet mine. He wasn't embarrassed, though he bit his lip again like before.

"Kit..." I started.

He took a couple of steps towards me so that we were only an arm's length apart. "You want to do it, Freeman?" he murmured. "That's OK. I'm good. I like it." The blunt words came easily from him. Too easily.

I reached out and grasped his chin, twisting his head round so that I could look at him properly. He had to tilt up a couple of inches to meet my gaze and he grunted with surprise, but he didn't resist. It wasn't abuse from me or acquiescence from him - we were somewhere in between.

He stared back. I couldn't identify all the emotions in his eyes. There was weariness there; calculation; cynicism. Maybe a passing flicker of excitement. I didn't flatter myself. It had been some time since I'd brought a flush to anyone's cheek, boy or woman.

"No," I said, gently.

Something flared brightly, fearfully in his pupils. Relief? Or offended, maybe, that I didn't want him.

"You live on your own," he said, haltingly, as if that explained anything. "I just thought. You know." He twisted his head sharply, pulling out of my grasp, though he didn't move away. "So you don't fuck boys."

My voice was still gentle. I didn't expect this boy to know or understand anything about me – and I didn't ask it of him, either. "Maybe I do." Maybe I did.

"You do? But then why..." He looked puzzled. His mouth twisted in a very childish way, like in a pout, or at the onset of tears.

"Supper," I interrupted. I let out a breath I hadn't been aware I was holding, and I gestured back towards the table. "Get your clothes back on and come and eat."

"Then...?" He was still puzzled.

"Then if you want to stay round, we can watch a film or listen to music." I pulled a chair out from around the table and sat down. I picked up a fork and looked back over at him. He was standing in the middle of the lounge floor, staring at me. His nakedness was no longer seductive; it made him look vulnerable and lost.

"Whatever," I said, keeping my voice calm. "Come on, it's getting cold."

### Freeman 3

Kit came around several times after that. He never called first, but then I'd never given him my number, so that was fair, right? Sometimes it was early, before the restaurant opened, and presumably before his first courier calls. He had the use of a small motor bike and I'd hear it phutting up the road and grunting to a noisy halt outside my apartment block. If he met other tenants, they assumed he was delivering to the building. If they took exception to the bike, he gave them the finger and walked on by. I'd seen him do it. It made me smile.

I was a tenant myself, but I often felt like an alien in their midst. Or maybe a wolf amongst the affluent, well-groomed flock. That sounds more apt.

"Why the fuck have you only got one name?" he grumbled, his only greeting as I opened the door. "Just says Freeman on your post box. Some old guy wanted to know who I was delivering to."

"What did you tell him?" I was interested to know how Kit might have spoken to the old guy who was actually a retired member of the House of Lords.

Kit shrugged. His hair was loose around his neck and his eyes were moist from the fresh air outside. His grin was infectious. "Told him I didn't give a shit if Freeman was the name of a company, a professional wrestler or a branch of Amnesty International, so long as I got a signature. Didn't bother me again."

I grinned back. I'd had my morning shower a half hour ago, though I was still walking round bare-chested and barefoot in nothing but my tracksuit trousers. I padded back to the kitchen to start breakfast, Kit following me. I could feel his gaze on some unidentified point between my shoulders.

"So why just the one name?"

"You're just Kit," I replied, calmly.

He grimaced. "That's different." I've got something to hide, is what he meant. A name... a history.

I let it pass.

We went into the living area and he slung himself down on the couch, the cushions bouncing underneath him. His cap with the courier logo was tossed carelessly on the arm.

"Eggs?" I asked, moving around behind the kitchen counter, fetching out a pan. "I've got plenty. I know you like them with bacon."

"And I know fuck all about you," he said, softly.

I glanced over. He was staring at my half-clothed body, and his eyes flickered quickly up from my torso. I grabbed a clean tee shirt from a pile of laundry on the counter and tugged it on. I smiled, slowly. "There's no mystery. I'm just a guy."

Kit stared for a while longer: I could feel his gaze on me while I broke eggs into the pan and the oil fizzled noisily into the silence. "No mystery, right. A guy who lives in an expensive flat, on his own, with some weird neighbours. A guy who drinks too much coffee and has a job with an office in a back alley. A guy who watches strange films and listens to old music."

I grinned. "That's me," I replied. There'd been a time when science fiction filled the cinemas and soul music wasn't classified as old, of course. "You want to listen to some of that old music while you eat?" I lifted the eggs on to a plate for us both, piling toast and bacon up beside it.

He stirred and yawned. His eyes lit up at the sight of the food. "Sure, whatever. You got ketchup?"

Sometimes he came very late at night, though I was usually still up. The first time he arrived at midnight, he was high on something but groggy with it, as if it'd taken too deep a hold and he was well on his way to crashing out. I wouldn't let him in. He'd stumbled away, angry, and I'd thought that was the end of it.

He came the next night, though, and he was clean, or at least moderately so; nothing more than the faint smell of weed on his clothes. The rules had been set. The only bad thing he ever brought to my home was frustration and a bitter tiredness. And he was – so very often - exhausted. Sometimes he was too tired and too irritable even to talk. I never made conversation a condition of him staying. I had plenty of practice at being quiet myself. It wasn't the same as being alone.

The memory, the patina of sex was always there. We both knew it. Whenever he came late to the flat, I knew he'd been with G. Whenever he left after an early breakfast visit, shoving his cap with the courier logo into his pocket rather than putting it on his head, I knew he wasn't on his way to a genuine call. His only job was to wait for G's summons.

It was his business; it was up to him whether he wanted to talk about it. It was for him to rationalise. I don't get involved with other people's lives – not any more.

In the evenings, he was quieter; always more tired. And hungrier, too. He'd eat whatever I had, quickly and ravenously, and then he'd often doze off as we sat on the couch. His slim body would droop like a top heavy bough, and slide down towards me until his head rested in my lap. He didn't often move position, but slept like a stone, still and cool. Sometimes I lifted him to the bed in my guest room; sometimes I just sat there and let him rest while I continued watching the TV for another hour or so.

One time, when he'd been lying in my lap like that for twenty minutes or so, his head turned in towards my chest, and his chin burrowed deep into my crotch. For a couple of minutes, I watched the sporadic flickering under his eyelids; the soft puff of air from between his closed lips. I reached a hand to his forehead and brushed away some wayward hair. "I know you're awake," I said.

The muscles twitched at the side of his mouth. "It's good, though?" he whispered. He nudged his nose into me, playfully. His forehead nestled against my belly, his hand rested just a little too casually on my thigh.

"Yeah," I murmured, but I made no further move. My eyes followed the film on screen; it was a cult sci-fi film I'd always liked and yet tonight I couldn't remember its name. Kit's breath was hot and I could feel it on my skin, even through my clothes. His fingers traced a slow, aimless pattern on my leg.

"You married, then?"

It's both the attraction and the arrogance of youth; their belief in absolute black or white.

"I was married once," I said. "Not any more."

I felt him tense up. "You broke up because you wanted to fuck boys?"

I laughed. "No. It didn't happen like that. We had something between us – then we didn't. Other relationships came later." Memories teased at me, though I usually kept them at bay. Smiles; raised voices; skin soft and fragrant from a bath; muscles tensed in a passion too fierce for a peaceful life. The fascination for a man is a strong and consuming thing, I wanted to say. It didn't destroy my marriage - things had sputtered to a halt well before that. But neither did it bring joy and comfort in its wake. I hadn't gone seeking such trauma; I hadn't planned the way my life had gone so far. I wanted to tell Kit all of this, but I wouldn't.

"What about you?"

"What about me?" He sounded belligerent but he didn't shift away. His hair fell forward again, hiding him. Maybe he thought that if I didn't see his face, I couldn't guess his thoughts.

"Why did you come here, Kit? You're not local."

He huffed a bit. "All the guys come to the city, right? This is where the action is."

He was lying, of course. He hadn't come to the city for excitement; it had just been the place he ended up, escaping from something in his own world. A passive, not an active decision. He might not tell me that, but I knew.

"Fuck." His swearing was habitual and there was little passion in it, this time of night. He sighed and curled around on my lap, half looking up at me. "Just got bored. I was in the way. It was best I left home. Why do you care why?"

"Sure," I said. I looked back down at him, seeing the frown that creased the smooth skin of his face.

"He helped me," he said, abruptly, assuming I'd know who he meant. "Got me the jobs. He's the man round here, right?"

"Depends on your point of view," I replied, but I held his gaze as firmly as I could. It wasn't his fault he was under G's protection, or so I assumed. "He's not a charity, though."

"I know that, I'm not stupid!" Kit wrenched his head up, out of my lap, away from my scrutiny. He sat up abruptly. "Fuck, Freeman, it's only sex. That's all he wants." He was panting slightly, still sitting beside me but with his head turned away. His shoulders were rigid. "I'm going to be someone, be rich, be famous, whatever. If he can get me there quicker, that's great."

"You want to be like him?"

He growled. "Don't be a dickhead about this. It's my life. I'm not a kid."

There was silence between us for a moment. He reached a hand back, feeling for the seat of the couch and finding my hand instead. He let it rest there; we both did. His palm felt smooth against the rough creases of my own. I doubted he'd ever done manual labour; doubted he'd ever used his fists to get by.

"Freeman..." His murmur was a soft, almost mischievous sound. "Is that what pisses you off? Me and the sex?" When I didn't answer, he tightened his fingers around mine, still not turning to look at me. "Couple of blowjobs, that's all. Some other stuff. No problem. Try me for yourself. It's good. I'm good."

When you know people want you, it makes you powerful, makes you believe in invincibility. Kit's voice was as seductive as his looks, and he knew it. His tone was low, pure, and delicious with the sweet taste of youth. It promised something rich, something to bury deeply into and to forget about the future or the past. I wondered if he practised the effect or if it were completely natural.

"I'm good," he repeated, but with less certainty. "Freeman, it's not like it'd be hard for me. I like the look of you. You're..." He shook his head, irritated with himself perhaps, or with me. "You can look really hot, you know."

I moved then. I slipped my hand out from underneath his and I got up from the couch. His head whipped round, a startled movement.

"Kit," I said. "It's very late."

He frowned at me. For what? his eyes said. He wriggled on the couch, his cheeks flushed. "I'll go, then."

"No," I said. "I didn't mean that. Stay if you want, it's fine by me. It's just that I have to sleep. I've got an appointment at eight tomorrow."

He looked up at me, his expression full of suspicion. I looked back. Finally, he spoke. "In an alley?"

"What?"

"The appointment." The muscles were twitching at the side of his mouth again; he seemed to have relaxed. "That's where you do your business, right?"

I grinned back. "Yeah. Right." He settled back into the couch and I realised I'd relaxed again, too. "The guest room is clear when you want to sleep," I said, turning to leave the room. "Good night."

"Same to you," came a quiet reply.

Of course, G didn't come personally to see me. God forbid that should happen. We hadn't spent more than a few hours in the same building together for over five years – and, in all that time, never more than ten minutes face to face. It suited us both that way. So when he had things to say to me, he sent a messenger.

I opened my door to a far more familiar face.

"Freeman," was the greeting, accompanied by the easy smile that I had seen work its magic on the most hostile of people.

"Miki," I replied, though that was only because he'd spoken first and I knew that civility was often the safer way. The man on my step was only a few years younger than me but with the face of one who'd weathered the years far better. Understand me, I'm not complaining. I've done well; I'm fit enough; I have the trappings of modest success. It was just worth noting that Miki looked immaculate, impeccably dressed like the young business man he'd always aspired to be. I could imagine only too well what that had cost him, but then he'd never balked at paying the price.

"You going to let me in?" The minute I'd opened the door, he'd pushed his foot into my hallway. I could have put him straight on that, but it was still morning and maybe my tolerance was unusually high. I shrugged and walked back towards my lounge with him following. As I passed each room off the corridor, I made sure all the doors were firmly shut. My visitor saw nothing but wooden panels and tastefully bland decoration. A man's castle is his own, after all.

Miki strode into my living area with familiarity and threw himself down on the couch. "Same furniture, same look, Freeman. Like you'd never been away. Creature of habit, eh?"

I didn't think that required any answer.

"How long have you been back? Three, four months?" While he kept up his rhetorical questioning, I glanced quickly over the room. There was nothing for him to see; no work documents; no personal items; no mess left over from an earlier breakfast. There was nothing provocative and no possible interest for him anywhere. I stood beside the table, reluctant to sit down again.

I was aware of his dark eyes on me, sharp and cunning. "You never called me, Freeman. It's been a long time, no see."

"That works for me," I said, dryly.

"Don't be petty," he snapped back, unfazed. He sighed and settled more comfortably on my couch, crossing one leg easily over the other and stretching out his arms. He'd slipped the button of his suit jacket, exposing a bright white silk shirt, open at the neck. He was lean and sensual, his body movements like those of a wild animal, and one only partially tamed. There'd always been that sense of feral brutishness about him; I believe that's what attracted most people in the first place.

However, when he spoke again, his voice was surprisingly gentle. "I admit I thought you'd come back before now. I thought you'd want to see Stella."

"Stella and I have separate lives, it's been that way for long enough. If she needs me, she can contact me." I marvelled at how I kept my voice so calm.

"For me, then?"

I stared at him. I stared at the slim body in its expensive suit; the elegant hands; the smooth, dark hair tucked behind his ears. I saw the bright, intelligent eyes - the witty, but so often cruel

mouth. I concentrated on showing him less in return. My pulse beat too quickly, but that was a concern for me alone. Miki had never been able to see into the heart of me; though, of course, he'd never tried. For him, the success of an experience was whether it had been fast, fun and - ultimately - fleeting.

"For you?" I smiled, without much humour. "I thought I was probably a little too... vanilla for your tastes."

He frowned and the colour on his high boned cheeks was deeper than before. "You misjudge me. You always did. I like variety - I never lied about that. I like to play games... I like to experiment. You made it pretty clear you had your limits." He paused, then continued, more softly than before. "The others were only ever a distraction - never anything serious. They were willing... they understood the rules. Things could still have worked with us, Freeman, it's just that you never let me explain properly. Always so very sure you were right, so very sure yours was the only way..." He made a tsking sound and shook his head slightly, as if to shake off an unpleasant memory. For the first time since he arrived, we were in accord. "Anyway, I don't think you're in any position to criticise me at the moment, are you? It seems that your tastes have broadened somewhat."

I sighed. I let one of my hands rest on the table top, keeping me steady. "And so now we discover what this visit is really about."

Miki grimaced slightly, as if my scepticism were an ugly, unfair thing that offended his delicate sensibilities. "When did you get so stressed, talking about the old days?"

"When did you get so stupid, still working for him?" I could hear the sudden sharpness in my tone.

"Let's not go there, Freeman." There was an edge to his voice, too. The two harsh tones, echoing off the bare walls of my lounge. There had been other times like this, other arguments. "Where do you get off, telling me what I should do, telling G what he should do? If that's all you came back for, you need to reconsider your options."

"Pass on the message from him and leave," I said. I felt suddenly weary.

Miki unfolded himself gracefully from the couch and stood up, brushing off a small cotton thread from his trousers. "You're paranoid, Freeman. Always were. And getting response from you is like trying to bleed a stone. It's fucking difficult to live with, you know that?"

He'd never been sunshine and light himself, but I wasn't going to be baited. Not any more.

His head tilted sideways suddenly, as if he listened to a distant voice. His eyes darted to the doorway, then back to my face. I continued to stare at him, unmoving, and he sighed. "Be like that, then. Seems that you've struck up a friendship with one of G's trainees."

Trainees? I wondered in which subject the graduation would be.

Miki came a step nearer and his hand lifted from his side, as if he wanted to touch me. "Leave him alone, Freeman," he said, in a low, urgent voice. "That's all. You want company, you know where else to look. But the kid is G's and it pisses him off when you mess with something of his."

"It always did," I said.

Miki's smile was genuinely warm, as if we shared a private joke. "Yeah. It did, didn't it? But I'm hoping you've learned from that."

I didn't answer that. "Leave now," I said.

For another moment he stood there, and we stared each other out.

"You know to call me if you... want me to come round again, right?" He sounded uncertain. It didn't sit well with his image.

"Is that another message?" I said.

"From me, this time," he replied, quickly. "Just me." His body was tense and his eyes were very black, the pupils wide and bleeding into dark brown irises. I couldn't tell whether their turmoil came from anger or passion. That was another thing that attracted people to him; the sense of danger in disguise.

I'd known this day would come. Hell, I'd been waiting for it ever since I came back to the city.

"I do know," I said. I took a deep breath, my chest hurting. "But it won't happen."

"Freeman... things were bloody good, you know. At the beginning." His smile looked strained. He looked genuinely disconcerted.

"Fuck off and leave me alone," I said, my tone far milder than the words.

I watched as he turned abruptly and left the room. I heard the sharp tap of his heels on the polished wood of the hallway, steady strides all the way. I let him walk the length of it on his own and let himself out, while I stood beside the table for another two minutes, waiting for my heartbeat to settle, waiting for the saliva to return to my dry mouth.

Then I heard the door to my guest room slide open and I tensed again. More steps in the hall, softer this time, and a slim body appeared in the doorway to the lounge. "Freeman? He's gone."

"Yeah," I replied, though it hadn't really been a question. "He's gone."

Kit stood there awkwardly, like he didn't know what to do. One of his trainers scuffed aimlessly at the door frame, his eyes searching my face for clues.

"Kit," I said, slowly. "It seems it would have been a very bad idea to be found here. With me."

He frowned. "How come? I'm just visiting between shifts, having breakfast." I didn't say anything. "This is just... a place," he added, hurriedly. "Just a place. This is on my own time, isn't it?" It was a stupid question and even as he spoke, he knew it was. There was no own time for him, not now; not yet.

"That was Miki," he continued, unnecessarily. There was a hint of awe in his voice. "He hangs around G a lot, but he's been OK to me, one of the better guys. Gives me money; gets me weed. Sometimes he takes me places, wherever G says. Like my minder, you know? Like my mentor."

His words jarred against the mounting pain in my head. I didn't need any of this. I'd got over all that shit, months ago. Hadn't I? I struggled to keep anything from showing on my face.

Kit was staring at me. "Freeman, I never saw you look like that. Why'd you make me hide? Seems like you know each other pretty well." He peered at me, suspicious now. "You scared of him or something?"

I couldn't answer. I reached for the back of a chair and lowered myself into it. Miki's slow, charming smile danced in front of my memory's gaze.

Kit was watching me intently. I felt naked in front of him. He shook his head, still frowning. "No,



that's not it. You're not scared of him. I don't see you scared of anyone. So what the fuck is he to you?"

"Nothing," I said. And I meant it. "Nothing at all. We worked together once, that's all."

The boy walked over and crouched down beside me, his tight jeans stretching over the muscles of his legs. I could smell my shampoo in his fine, dark hair. "You look like shit," he said, bluntly. "You want a smoke? I got some stuff."

I shook my head. I couldn't move. I couldn't find any more words because the pictures in my head were too busy.

Kit touched me, awkwardly at first, then his hand felt firmer on my thigh; patting me. "I'll go now, then."

I shook my head again. I wanted to tell him to stay, but I didn't. "Not your fault," is all I said. My voice sounded cracked and hoarse.

"Sure," he replied, but I knew he was only saying that for the sake of it. He didn't believe it. He stood up again and gave a nervous cough. I didn't want to look up at his face because there'd be suspicion and confusion still there.

"Watch yourself," I said, abruptly, and now my voice sounded cold. The pain in my head was chilling me; saturating me.

"Huh? With Miki, you mean?"

"With all of them," I said. "Watch yourself very carefully."

## Freeman - Chapter 5

The club wasn't the place to be on a Saturday night but I was there, nonetheless. I sat in my usual corner booth, the one that no-one else liked because the overhead light had a strange greenish tinge, the seat covers were ripped, and the waiters rarely caught your eye.

That suited me just fine.

Kit slid in beside me during a particularly noisy burst of dance music. He nodded to me; words would have been nothing but empty mouth movements. He clutched a beer glass in his hand with barely an inch of liquid in it, but he put it on the table beside mine with exaggerated care. His hair was tousled and sweaty on his forehead; there was a mark on his cheek, maybe from an over zealous fingernail. A bright spark flickered in the centre of his pupils that had little to do with the strobe lighting. He'd been taking things tonight.

"You shouldn't be here," I said, when the volume had dipped a little. His thigh was pressed against mine. Even with the spaced out gaze and the dark circles under his eyes he looked beautiful. He was wearing the tight black jeans that I'd often seen him in, with a thin cotton vest on top. It clung across his torso but was loose around his waist as if the fabric had been stretched too many times. A lock of hair was stuck at the corner of his mouth – he brushed it away aimlessly. The movement of his fingers was sluggish, like a slow-motion replay, but it was still fascinating to watch.

"They told me stuff about you, Freeman."

"Well, there you are," I said. There was an unpleasant taste in my mouth that owed nothing to the weak, over-priced beer.

"You gonna tell me if it's true?"

"I don't know what they told you."

Kit leaned back in the seat, resting his head on the torn padding. "You worked for G, years ago. You were his number two, but you ran out on him. Let him down. Fucked him about."

I took a sip of my beer and put the glass back down. "I worked for him, that's true." I waited for him to wriggle back out of the seat but he didn't.

"It doesn't figure," he said, slowly. "The thing about you letting him down. Not to me, anyhow. Doesn't sound like you." He blinked his eyes sharply a couple of times; exhaled noisily. I didn't know if he was on his way up or down, or how alert he really was. His words were carefully enunciated, bitten off clearly, one by one, but the tone was a strange sing-song. "And it's funny, you know? He told me you were shit and stuff, but he was lying. I can tell – I mean, he's a mean guy most of the time with other people, but he's actually fucking awful at lying."

I was startled by his perception. I let my eyes drop to the table top; watched my fingers tense up around my own glass. "G spoke to you about me?"

Kit nodded. "Yeah. Plenty. For him, anyway. He's not much of a gossip. Just when we're... you know." He shrugged. "When he's fucked me. When I've done the dirty talk right for him, when he's relaxed. He talks to me then."

The boy's blunt frankness disturbed me but his news about G did an even more thorough job.

The music blared out again to a slightly different track and Kit suddenly lurched out of his seat. "Got to go. See you, Freeman."

He didn't wait for any answer but weaved his way across the dance floor and vanished into the bar and toilet area. He didn't look back. I sat and stared at a beer that held no interest for me anymore. It was only a few minutes before my next visitor arrived, lowering himself on to the very same seat. I wasn't surprised to see him.

"Yeah, I know," said Miki, though I'd not spoken. "I could choose better dates for a Saturday night."

I stared at the table, not acknowledging him. I watched his hand fold around my glass and move it out of my reach.

"Hey, Freeman," he protested, leaning in against me so that I would hear him more clearly. "At least tell me to fuck off or something. You're as good as ever at that."

"Didn't want to steal your script," I said, tersely.

He grinned, his even teeth shining white in the dim lighting. "You read my mind. Or G's, anyway. Go find another club to sit in, at least for a while. Leave now and I guarantee there'll be no problems. It's not like you weren't warned, is it?"

I stared back at him, at the handsome, confident face, at the perfectly poised and groomed body. "So what's going down, Miki?"

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I've been back for months, working where I can, living as I like. I've not been hiding under a stone or anything. Now suddenly everyone's watching out for me. I'm in everyone's way. What's changed?"

Miki's eyes went very still as if he tried to hide any expression. He was, of course, a damned fine actor. "It's just a personal thing between the pair of you, Freeman, you and G. Don't make a drama out of it. You leave the boy alone, you can probably come back after a while. Plus you get left alone yourself. Deal?"

I stood up slowly with no answer. His eyes flickered up to me, still wary.

"I'm leaving anyway," I said. I made sure he heard every single syllable. "My choice." Miki pushed himself upright too, trying to meet me face to face. The first rule in any confrontation, I thought, is that of physical advantage. Both standing, we appeared reasonably matched. However, there wasn't a lot of room between the bench seat and the low table and he was too close for comfort for either of us. I could feel his minty breath on my cheek; I could see the deliberate effort it took for him not to clench his fist. Miki often struggled with his temper.

"That's fine," he said. He seemed confused that I was going so amicably. I took a step forward to move past him and leave the place, but he didn't step back. Instead, his head dipped slightly and his hand settled on my upper arm. "Freeman..." he said, more softly. "You look good."

My body was rigid. "No," I said.

"You were the only one I cared about," he murmured. "That's the truth. I was sorry we finished, you know?"

"No," I repeated.

He ignored me. He slid his hand up to my neck and tugged my head towards his own. His fingers were cool. As his mouth reached mine, I moved my head sideways. His lips brushed against my jaw, though even that made me shudder. His exhaled breath hissed both frustration and pleasure. "I was younger then: didn't know the value of things. I still want you," he whispered in my ear. "Is that such a surprise?"

I didn't answer. "We could have it all again," he continued, more eagerly. "Let me make it good for you, like it was. Like we were. All that excitement, all that pleasure... all over again. It's what I want, too." His hand was tight in my hair, his nails scraping the nape of my neck.

I nearly bit through my cheek, gritting my teeth. "And what do you think your employer would think about that?"

Miki's shrug was careless, his breath getting shallower. "He's not bothered what I do with my own time. And even if he is, it's no problem to me."

"But it is to me," I said, sharply. I grasped his arm at the wrist and lifted it away from my body. Then I held it, for several seconds longer than necessary. I didn't loosen my grip in any way. And all the time I met his heavy-lidded gaze with my own, cold stare.

"Bastard," he said at last, wrenching his arm free. The word was harsh and I saw the anger flare up in his eyes. "I'm not done with this yet, Freeman."

"But I am," I said, as calmly as I could. I stood there until he stepped back, letting me out from behind the table. I could feel the tension in his body as I passed.

"Just go," he muttered.

"I'm allowed to go for a piss first?"

Miki's face had fallen under the reflection of the dance floor lights; neon stripes cut diagonally across his pursed lips, giving his skin an unearthly glow. He stood like the statue of a young god; arrogant; confrontational. He glanced across at the nearest toilets, then back to me. "They're out of order," he said, rudely.

"They weren't an hour ago," I replied.

His eyes narrowed. With the sharp lights on his face, his expression was strange and wild. He stared at me and shrugged. "Suit yourself, Freeman. You usually do." He turned with me, following in my wake as I walked towards the toilets where I'd seen Kit go. There were a couple of G's security men outside the swing door. They looked past me and over my shoulder, presumably at Miki, then gazed back at me. Impassive like statues themselves, but far less personable.

"Out of order," one grunted. I wondered how long it'd taken him to learn the phrase.

Miki appeared at my side, waving a hand at the men to stand back. "The man wants to look inside," he said to them. He looked straight at me and once again I saw the black pools of his eyes that hinted at things too deep and dangerous to identify. "Like I said, Freeman. You suit yourself." He pushed at the door and it nudged open; he held it just far enough ajar for me to see into the brightly-lit toilet area.

Kit was bent face down over a sink, his jeans round his ankles, his buttocks bare and white in the fluorescent light reflected off the tiles. He gripped at the taps, his head bowed, his hair falling over his face and obscuring it from view. His vest was pushed up tightly under his armpits, exposing his waist and lower back. Guess that would explain the stretched fabric. That can happen, after a few times.

G stood behind him, suit jacket unbuttoned, his trousers still on but obviously undone. His hips were pressed up against Kit's arse and his knees bent slightly as he thrust into him. There were beads of sweat on his forehead; I saw them with exaggerated clarity, like small drops of liquid crystal. I preferred to look at them rather than at his expression. A couple of other men stood behind him, their attention on the grotesque tableau rather than my intrusion. G didn't turn around either, but I knew he was aware of me.

His hand curled into the long hair at Kit's neck, tugging the young head up and back. He leant down to murmur something into the boy's ear. I think he was smiling.

Kit grunted, his knuckles white against the stainless steel, his body jerking underneath G. "Fuck me," he said, softly but clearly. I knew his voice, of course, but was surprised how different it sounded here, like this. "Make me feel it," he hissed. "Make me cry. Make me hurt." G thrust harder, and Kit's thighs slammed against the enamel pedestal. He whimpered.

Just as Miki let go of the door and it started to slide shut again, Kit turned his head towards me. His young, dark, disorientated eyes caught mine. "Please," he whispered, though I knew the word was for G's ears, not mine.

I stepped back. One of the security men was grinning. I didn't think now was the time to take the matter up with him, but I would at a later date. Miki moved forward, pushing me to one side. He slipped quickly through the last open space of the doorway, joining the others in the sterile room. He glanced back at me once and his smile was thin yet triumphant. He was unbuttoning his own jacket as he went.

The door slammed shut behind him. I was staring at a wall of human security and a black swing door that had closed me out.

In so many ways.

## Freeman - Chapter 6

When I came out of the supermarket, Kit was sitting on a bench in front of me. He was facing the exit but his head was dropped down, so he didn't see me at first. He had earphones on and his left leg swung aimlessly in time to whatever music he was listening to. He wore a sleeveless vest and long shorts. He looked like a normal, casual teenager.

He looked up and caught sight of me. His eyes widened. He flipped out his earphones and shoved them into a pocket, nodding to me. I nodded back.

"You haven't been home much," he said, abruptly.

I shrugged. I wasn't answerable to him. I didn't tell him that I'd spent the last few evenings cruising the city in my car, deliberately staying out of my flat. Then when it got late, I'd return to the building. I'd park across the road, hidden in the shadows in the way I'd learned over the years, and watch the sporadic activity around the entrance. Young, drunk executives coming in late from work; single men and women swaggering in with shopping from the 24-hour deli; some young couples, enamoured and entwined, who could afford the rent on a double income salary.

And for the first few nights, a lithe, dark-haired young man leaning too casually on the wall outside, waiting for someone specific to be at home.

I'd also seen the surveillance that followed him. They were good enough for him not to notice, but not good enough to escape my notice. Nondescript cars; darkened windows; quiet engines. They'd watch too, until he got bored, then he'd lever himself from off the wall and start walking back towards the town. I'd wait until their car had slipped out of sight and I was sure there was no back-up, and then I'd go home.

The flat was cool and dark and quiet, but I was used to that. In the end, Kit had stopped coming round; stopped waiting. That was for the best, of course.

But now he was here.

I sat down beside him on the bench, dropping the couple of shopping bags at my feet. I could have had the groceries delivered, but I'd wanted to walk around the town – thought I'd make good use of idle time. It was quiet today, just after the lunchtime rush, but there were still plenty of people about. Shopping; laughing; living. I glanced round a couple of times, but there was nothing to alert me. "How are you doing?"

He crinkled up his nose, dismissive of the small talk. "I'm good. You pissed off with me?"

I blinked. "No." He looked angry but nervous; the emotions lit up his face. His hands were clasped loosely on his lap, but his body was tense.

"You haven't been to the club, either."

"No," I said, again.

"Miki scared you off?" he asked, softly, provocatively.

I frowned. "You're not stupid, Kit. You're the one at risk here, not me."

"I can look after myself," he snapped back. "But you..."

I stared at him.

"I don't know what this is all about, Freeman." He looked away, flushed. A child ran past us screaming, its face dirty with cake crumbs, its sibling shrieking after it, half in play, half in genuine pursuit. "You and G. They don't tell me shit, but I hear it anyway. You were the man around here, a few years back, same as G. You were going to take over from him one day. But something went wrong and you ran off. Got yourself lost for years."

"Yeah," I said. "Something went wrong." Many, many somethings.

"Tell me," he said. There was an urgency to his tone. "Don't give me that shit about it's better I don't know. Aren't I more at risk, the less I know?"

"Yes," I agreed, marvelling again at his perception. "Maybe I'll tell you a few things. But not now, not here."

It was his turn to frown then, but he didn't pursue the point. Neither of us moved from our seats. There was a squeal of brakes behind us as a van swerved suddenly to avoid some shoppers crossing the road. A group of teenagers passed us, giggling over a message on a mobile phone.

"I listen," he said, suddenly. "I listen to them when they think I'm out of it. I hear all kinds of things. What they're doing. What they want." He turned sharply, glaring at me. "I need to know what you want, Freeman."

My hand reached instinctively for him, grasping his arm. "What I want is for you to watch out for yourself."

He grimaced. "No problem. They only see me when they want to, you know? Rest of the time, I'm just a kid. Not worth the trouble. But meanwhile I can be places, hear things."

I shook my head. "That's a dangerous game, Kit."

"You play it, though, don't you?" He challenged me, his mouth set in a determined line. "They want to know why you've come back. No-one knows why you're hanging around. They're shitting themselves about it, though G gets mad if you're even mentioned. You need to watch yourself."

I took my hand off his arm and put it very carefully back by my side. "Thanks, but I intend to." There was another short silence while neither of us moved.

"What about you and me?" He sounded belligerent, but the nervousness was back.

I sighed. "It's been good knowing you, Kit." But it was a bad idea of mine to take you home. Bad for both of us.

He growled. "So you just want me to stay there at G's, doing what I'm doing. Smoking and smiling and taking it up the arse when they get bored of the girls."

I winced. "What do you think? But it's your life."

He laughed then. A couple of passers-by half-turned at the playful sound, then carried on walking. "It's just sex, Freeman. I like it. And if I don't, it's not so hard to think of other stuff while they get on with it." He seemed amused by my stony face. "But that doesn't mean I don't want other things; other friends."

I looked at the sparkle in his eyes and the grin on his lips. He wasn't wearing the courier uniform today. It was like he'd shaken off the whole organisation with the change of clothes. It was a day off from it all for him.

"So Freeman, what do you actually do?"

His question caught me by surprise, but he looked genuinely interested. I don't explain myself to many people; I don't give many of them the truth. If there'd been anyone watching us, or if Kit's eyes had been clouded with drugs, or even if it'd been nothing but a polite comment, I'd have turned away. Maybe he wanted to know for himself, maybe for someone else. But he genuinely wanted to know.

"I find things for people. Source them. Cars, properties, retail goods, collectibles. Information – research. Whatever they want and will pay for."

Kit tilted his head in the way he had when he was thinking. "Sounds pretty lame. You get them money – loans?"

I shook my head, smiling. "Nothing financial. Not my area of expertise."

"Guns? Drugs?"

I shook my head again. I didn't smile this time.

"You smoke stuff yourself." It was a statement.

"Sure. Now and then. But just for me. And nothing harder." I kept accusation out of my voice. We were talking about me, not him. I don't dictate other people's lives, either.

"Miki does the harder stuff. Lots of them do." He was baiting me: I could hear it. Maybe he didn't know what he might find.

"I know." I sighed again. "I know all about Miki."

Kit smiled back at me: a wide, youthful grin. He seemed completely relaxed again now. I had to admire that in youth, too - the ability to shift from drama to comfort in a moment, as if there'd never been any concern in the first place. "Miki and the drugs," he said, softly. "I hear stuff about that, too." Pushing his hair back behind his ears, he waited for me to answer, but I was silent. "There's something else going on, something weird, something big. But I don't know enough about it yet."

"How do you know something's going on?" I was careful with every word.

He shrugged. Maybe he heard something odd in my voice, and was wondering whether he should have kept his mouth shut. A spot on the pavement between his trainers was suddenly of the utmost interest. "I've been around. I know."

I bit my lip. "If you think it's something criminal, maybe you'd better go to the police."

He let out a snort of derision. "Is that what you are, Freeman? A cop?" He stared back up at me, suddenly intense.

I gazed back. "No," I said, drily. "I'm not a cop. I've done too many things in the past that wouldn't look good on an application form."

"But you're not one of them, either," he said, meaning the inhabitants of G's world.

"No." I seemed to be saying that a lot. "Not any more."

He frowned. "You source things..."

"I get people what they need," I said, quietly. "If I take them on as a client, I get it for them. Whatever it is. Whatever it takes."

Kit didn't seem to want to take it further. He shifted on the bench and sighed. "You go your own way."

I nodded. It was a fair summary. I curled my fingers around the handles of my shopping bags, gathering them together, ready to get up and leave.

He cleared his throat: looked down at the pavement again. "Can I come round again? To your place?"

I grimaced.

"You cook good eggs, you know." He pulled a face at me, embarrassed, but there was a plea in his dark eyes that spoke far more eloquently than his joke.

"Anyone can teach you that," I said, gently.

"So you teach me," he fired back. "When I come round." When I hesitated, he put his hand on my shoulder. "You don't want to stop seeing me, do you?" It was so typical of him; swagger wrapping itself around uncertainty, seeking to protect it like a shield. I knew how fragile that bluster could be. He could be hurt so easily, though I doubt he admitted it to anyone, not even himself.

But he spoke some truth, too. His hand was gripping me: I felt the pressure of his fingers through my jacket.

I smiled. "OK. Come and help me unpack this stuff and we'll have some lunch."

He leapt to his feet, grinning. "Then you can tell me about it all, right?"

"Maybe," I said. "But first —" His eyebrows rose, watching me, suddenly cautious again.

"First, you can learn to cook the eggs," I finished, firmly.

## Freeman - Chapter 7

We both sat at the table in my lounge, relaxing. The afternoon had drifted into evening without me really noticing. It had been a pleasant time and we'd both found enough to do so that we avoided getting under each other's feet. Kit had folded some laundry for me, half-watched a couple of films. He'd always been fascinated by my vinyl collection and spent some more time on his knees by the shelves, browsing through. I hadn't done any work, but it wasn't a problem. We chatted occasionally; aimlessly. He was waiting his chance, I knew.

The lunch invitation had become an early supper, and the plates were now cleared. I was eating some fruit and Kit was still working his way enthusiastically through the bread basket. He'd made



us both a fine omelette, with herbs and mushrooms. Of course, the kitchen looked like a small thermonuclear device had been set off in there, but I'd live with that.

He saw my eyes flicker over the mess by the sink. "I'll clear it up," he said, ruefully. "I'm a fully qualified washer-up, you know."

We both grinned. "In a while," I said. "No rush."

We picked our glasses up off the table and went over to sit on the couch. There was some reality show due to start on TV that he'd said he was following. "It was an excellent meal," I said.

"You're taking the piss," he growled, but he was still grinning.

"I'm not," I protested. "When you live on your own, you have to learn to do these things properly."

"You mean cook eggs?" He wrinkled his nose.

"Everything," I smiled back.

"But I don't live on my own," he said. The information startled me, like a slap out of the blue.

"Sure," I said, slowly. Of course. "I didn't know." I wouldn't, would I? I'd not wanted to know anything about his domestic arrangements before. I'd kept my secrets, and so had he.

He flushed. "Well, not exactly. I mean, there are other guys in the place, though I've got my own room." He glanced up at me, defensively. "I mean, it's crap, really small, but it's mine. I've got a key and everything. It's near the club. I think G owns the building..."

"Yeah, he does." I knew it. It was where his new staff stayed until they got lodgings of their own. He didn't often house his boys there, though, the turnover being rather more swift. And it seemed a public flaunting of his screwing around which I knew his family wouldn't approve of. That included his wife.

"You look weird, Freeman," Kit said. His voice was tight. "Tell me what it is between you two. I don't know what to think about you, half the time."

"You wanted to see the programme..."

"I don't give a fuck about the programme," he snapped. "Don't treat me like a kid."

I drew in a sharp breath. "Is that what I do, Kit?"

He scowled. His eyes looked even darker and his face was flushed. "Shit. No, you don't. Fuck, you're the first one who doesn't. But you make me mad. You know what I mean."

It wasn't a bad apology. And I had been patronising. I drew a careful breath.

"I worked for him, seven or eight years ago. When I first moved to the city." It felt like I was describing another time, another man. Once upon a time... "My wife found me the job – she knew G, knew he needed some help setting up a computer network for his new business."

"You good with computers?"

"Good enough." I took a drink from the glass of water and wished for a moment that it were something stronger. "Then there were other areas I helped him with; logistics; accounting; security. We did it all together, got everything up and running."

"Cool." Kit's voice was a murmur. "Partners."

I nodded. "Yeah, it was good. We all got on OK together." Whatever anyone said about G – and that included me – the man had a talent for getting things done. He begged and borrowed and sometimes stole, creating a small chain of offices across the city, offering complete logistic packages for corporate businesses. We'd transport anything; clear anything; protect anything. Full operations control, full security. Expensive, but exclusive.

And while we were waiting for turnover to grow, we offered other services, too: anything that'd get us exposure with potential clients. We cleaned offices, we patrolled car parks, we ran couriers across town on old bikes that broke down every five miles. But everything carried the company logo, everything came with G's personal pledge. And we made sure everything got done faster, better and more boldly than any competitors.

We won the contracts and the business started to grow. It had been a frenetic but exciting first year. And it gave G the access to many board rooms – many influential people.

And me? I'd learnt a hell of a lot about many things, business and otherwise, some of which were less palatable than others.

"So... you ran it all with him. You were a great success. Were going to take over when he moved on to something new." I turned abruptly to Kit and he flushed. Bit his lip, like he was worried he'd distracted me from my flow. "Sorry. I mean, that's what they said about you. You tell me what happened, Freeman."

I leant back into the couch and let out a breath. "Lots of things happened. Yes, it was a good time for us, business-wise. I liked the challenge; I was well paid and it was all coming together. You'd have thought it a good life. But G didn't want to stay with just the logistics business. His diversification continued." His contacts had tempted him; drawn him into other lucrative areas. His mission statement had moved from personal achievement to pursuit of profit – with ethical and legal issues following a poor second.

"I didn't always agree with his strategy – didn't always like his methods. Our friendship started to fail." Kit was frowning, but this was my tale and I'd tell it at my pace. "Then I broke up with my wife, too. All in all, things didn't look so good here in the city any more, not for me."

"That's when you left?"

"No. I stayed on for another year, despite it all."

Kit peered at me; curious. "G wanted you to change your mind and stay?"

"No," I said, sharply. Kit tensed up on the seat beside me but didn't speak again. Despite his youth, he was sharp enough to know the time to keep silent.

"It wasn't like that, Kit. G and I... things were already bad between us by then." It was obvious to me far earlier than it was to G that our business ethics were drastically different – so much so, that it soured both friendship and business partnership. Things had been fine when we were both struggling to establish things. But our ambitions started to diverge, and neither of us seemed willing to step down. Bloody-minded, both of us. He and I started to disagree on most things, and strongly.

The conflict and tension in my life hadn't been the main reason my marriage collapsed, but it can't have helped. After all, we'd all started as friends – all had a stake in the business. But everything seemed to unravel in a very short space of time. G and I continued to work together, but I was far from a model employee. I was a pain in the arse, actually – challenging him, confronting him, thwarting his more dubious ventures whenever and wherever I could. I took

great satisfaction in it, too. He ended up spending a small fortune buying and bribing lawyers to work on getting me out of my stake.

Change my mind and stay? Hell, if it hadn't been for all the things I knew about the organisation, G would've packed my bags and - like some itinerant gunslinger in the movies - run me out of town.

How much should I tell the boy? Why the hell should I have to censor my history, when it had been recalled so vividly to memory?

"I stayed mainly because I had a new relationship with someone and I wanted it to work. He was here, in the city, and so I had to be too. For a while, things rolled along smoothly enough to hide all the cracks."

Kit was very still.

"And then it didn't," I sighed. Just like that. "My new relationship got fucked up, too, and I'd had enough of G. I just went." I'd left town one night, just like that aforementioned gunslinger, and no-one was bothered enough to follow my tracks. That had been fine by me. "It was around five years ago, Kit. Old news. It was best for everyone."

There was silence for a while. I wished Kit had turned the TV on after all. Then he started to inch his way along the couch towards me; I think he thought I might need sympathy. I didn't push him away, though I didn't encourage him either. I couldn't remember the last time anyone had considered 'sympathy' and 'Freeman' in the same context.

"It's OK." I smiled reassuringly, not sure whether I carried it off. "Like I said, it was a long time ago. I've made my money, had my success. Just not with G. And I didn't do so badly on my own." Better, actually.

"This place... you lived here before?"

I nodded. "I kept it on at first because I didn't want to come back here to sell it. Then I kept it on because it was mine and I'd earned it. And now I'm back in it to live. For a while."

"And G..."

"Leave it, Kit." I said. "I just want to get on with my life. We no longer have anything to do with each other, and that suits us both fine."

"He thinks -"

"I don't give a fuck what he thinks," I said, maybe too sharply, and maybe unwisely, at least in front of the boy.

"What he thinks is that you're fucking me," Kit replied, just as quickly.

"Right," I said. "I wouldn't expect anything less of him." I looked down at the empty glass in my hand. "I'm not so used to talking about myself. It's tiring."

Kit nodded like he understood, but I didn't see how he could. I needed to be alone for a while, but I also didn't want him to go. It was a damned confusing way to be.

"Freeman, you want a smoke?" It was his first response to any problem, but for once I was glad of it. I nodded and he started rummaging in his pockets. He scattered some stuff on the couch cushion between us and I watched him roll the paper expertly. I reached over to the TV unit to find my lighter and was distracted for a moment so I didn't anticipate his next question.

"You ever going to make it up with the guy?" His voice was soft.

I frowned. The stab of pain and anger in my chest had caught me unawares. Kit waved the spliff in front of me and I lit it. The paper hissed quietly. "The guy? Kit, you know who it was. Don't be coy."

He wrinkled his nose like he didn't know what I meant. Maybe he'd never heard the word before. "You going to make it up with Miki, then? Seems like he might want to."

"Miki..." I took a slow and careful draw on the joint: let it slide its soothing tendrils through me. I didn't have to tell Kit any more, of course, but I would. "It was Miki's choice for us to split. Maybe I provoked it; maybe we both did. But he was the one who said it wasn't working. I didn't take it well at first, but after a while, I was glad he'd made that choice. We were different enough for it to be exciting at first - but we weren't so similar we could make it work." I didn't want to explain anything else about that fierce, infuriating time to Kit. I didn't want to explain it to anyone. Wasn't sure I could.

He sat back beside me for a while, sharing the smoke. "What about your wife? Any chance of getting back with her?"

I laughed then. It was a pleasant, mellow sound and although it startled Kit, he started to smile in reply. "What's so funny, Freeman?"

"You know a lot, but not enough," I laughed. "Else you'd never expect a happy ending to this sordid little soap opera." It all seemed very funny, when of course it really wasn't. I didn't even know why I was laughing. I must have been a little vulnerable to the joint; maybe a little disturbed by the forced memories. "There's no chance of that, Kit. We're friends, I hope, but we'll never be anything more than that again. Her name's Stella, by the way."

"Stella?" Kit tilted his head. His eyes widened. "That's the same name..."

"As G's wife," I finished for him. My head was starting to hurt again now; the memories flared like a lurid movie trailer. I half closed my eyes and waited for the lunacy to settle down around me. "She married him after we split up. Small world, eh?"

## Freeman - Chapter 8

The voices from inside the closed office were too loud for polite conversation but not loud enough to hear all the words, at least not out in the waiting area. There were three or four voices – I knew all of them bar one, just by the tone. The girl behind the reception desk had ignored the rising volume at first, carrying on with her fairly listless typing, but the loud thump of a hand hitting a desk startled her. Her thin blonde hair fell from behind her ear as her head whipped up. She stared at the door of G's office, obviously in two minds as to whether to say something. Then her head swivelled back to peer at me.

I flicked over another page of the tired old National Geographic and sighed theatrically. "Guess you're used to this kind of negotiation, eh?"

She frowned. "Sorry?"

I looked up at her and gave her my best smile. "He's a tough guy to do business with, or so I've heard. I assume his meetings are often lively. Heated. Especially with Robberts involved as well.

He can be just as volatile.” I could feel her puzzlement as a tangible thing in the air between us. I turned up the wattage in the smile. “That’s no bad thing nowadays, right? You have to be tough to succeed.” I gazed into her vacuous blue eyes and wondered if that concept would ever give her a sleepless night.

“Mr Robberts isn’t...” She paused, maybe looking for an easier word than volatile. She frowned again. “What time did you say your appointment was? If it’s not in the book...”

I stood up and put the magazine carefully back on the low table. “It’s OK,” I said easily. “Lacey took the message over the ‘phone. It probably never got entered. I can see he’s busy now, so I’ll call later to reschedule.”

“Lacey’s out,” the girl said. “I can’t ask her to confirm that.”

“I know,” I said. “I mean, like I said, that’s OK.” I smiled again. I think someone once told me my smile had a naive charm, but I don’t want to remember who. I put a hand casually on the desk and leaned over both her and her keyboard. “When Lacey gets back, I’ll call her. Thanks for your help.”

She flushed. “That’s fine, sir. I ought to take your name just in case —”

“Sure,” I said. I swept up some paper from her desk and held out my hand for a pen. She passed one over and I made sure I held her eyes. I started to scribble something, then tutted in frustration. I scrunched the paper up in my hand. “Well, there’s no point really. You see, he owes me money — and I know he doesn’t really want to see me. Guess I was just scamming my way in, but you’ve caught me out. It’s probably for the best that he doesn’t see me today.”

The girl’s eyes were wide and nervous now. “Oh yes, I think that’s for the best. I don’t think he’ll want to know anything about that at all. Maybe I won’t even mention it to him?” Her eyes darted over to the door and back again. The argument seemed to have abated, or at least someone had found the volume control and turned it down. “It’s not really my place, is it?”

“No indeed,” I said. “They can’t expect you to take that on as well. We’ll pretend I was never here.” I grinned and watched her expression turn to one of relief. Then I gave a half wave and left the office, whistling cheerfully all the way to the lifts.

It took me a couple of blocks into town before I relaxed properly. By then, I’d seen no evidence of either pursuit or ambush. I stood for a moment by a parade of shops that serviced the nearby offices. There was a warm aroma of freshly brewed coffee coming from a small café on the corner and my stomach growled. I’d forgotten breakfast that morning. I seemed to be losing the motivation to cook for myself nowadays.

I went into the café, got a coffee and some toast and eggs and sat down in the corner of the room. I could see the whole of the shop and the door from my position. I chewed on the thick brown bread and waited.

He slipped inside about ten minutes later. His head was down, the hood up, his hands deeply into his pockets. But his firm step belied his apparent carelessness. He knew where he was going, and he knew why. I watched him buy a tea at the counter then turn, as if looking for a seat.

I stretched my leg under the table, and pushed a chair out with my boot. Its uneven legs scraped over the lino and he looked sharply over to it.

“Sit down,” I said. He walked over and lowered himself into the chair. “Now tell me why you’re following me.”

“Who says I am?” He peered up at me, his look defensive, but I doubted either of us needed to

answer that. He glanced over at my plate and he sighed. "You going to eat those eggs?"

I pushed the plate over to him and watched him cut them up eagerly with my knife. I caught the eye of the girl at the counter and gestured for some more toast and drinks, with cake to follow. Kit looked his usual starving self. We didn't talk for a few minutes, while the girl brought over the food and Kit ate every last scrap, including cream on the cake.

"Why did you go to see him?" he asked at last. "I saw you coming out of the block."

"There are other offices there, you know."

He snorted. "You told me once not to be coy, Freeman. So why should I take that shit from you?"

"Fair enough." I nodded: stirred my coffee again, though there was no sugar in it to dissolve. "I went to G's office but I didn't see him."

Kit frowned at me. "What did Lacey say? She knows you, right? She's been there for ever."

"She wasn't there. There was just a temp, filling in on the desk."

Kit raised an eyebrow. "Lucky, that."

"Yeah," I said. Let him draw his own conclusions.

"Not part of your soap opera then, is she? Every other fucking management person seems to be."

He had a point. I shook my head, my grin rueful. Lacey had been with us as company PA since we first started business in this city. When I left town, she'd stayed with G. She'd chosen her loyalties accordingly, and good luck to her.

"So what'd you find out?"

"Kit," I said.

"Fuck off," he said, but without heat. "Tell me what's going on or I might just mention your visit to Lacey as soon as she gets back. Just to be polite, right?"

I was silent.

"Freeman," he wheedled. "Look, I can help you. Didn't I tell you something was going on in there? I can find out more." When I stayed silent, his voice started to crack. "I want to help you, you bastard. Talking to you... fuck, I know what they mean when they say it's like pulling teeth."

He looked miserable. He also looked stubborn, like he wasn't moving on any time soon. I reached into my pocket and pulled out a crushed ball of paper. I put it on the table and smoothed it out carefully.

He peered at it. "What's that?"

"It's a shipping manifest," I said. "A delivery note. There was a whole pile of them on the girl's desk. It looks like a shipment of sample goods – a taster, with a reference to another, much larger order."

"Drugs?"

I shrugged. "Powdered baby milk, Kit, what do you think?"

He frowned. "Hell, Freeman, everyone knows he passes stuff around town, it's no big deal nowadays..."

"A much larger order," I repeated. My fingers traced the data on the computerised print-out. "Much larger."

Kit's eyes stared at me. He looked paler than usual. "What're you going to do about it?"

Now it was my turn to frown. "It's not my business, Kit. I go where a client asks me: I'm not in the market for following a personal whim. Anyway, no-one could do anything unless they knew who the supplier was – it's just a numeric reference here. Or details of the delivery and the distribution network; or what the hell the stuff actually is. Maybe I'll pass this on to the cops and they can look into it."

He just kept staring. "Maybe you won't."

"No," I said, with a sigh. "Maybe I won't."

We both stared down at the table again for a while. My coffee was too cold now to drink, and Kit seemed unusually quiet. The café was almost empty and all I could hear in the background was the occasional car passing and the chatter of a few shoppers.

"Doesn't bother me," he said, abruptly. He shifted awkwardly on the plastic chair. "People can do what they like, so long as they don't piss me off. It's a free country."

I took a long, quiet breath. "No, it's not, and you know it." I lifted the paper and scrunched it up again, the sound rasping in my ears. "Not with stuff like this, it isn't. This is a step up from some occasional recreational use; this is dealing in its widest sense. For profit – not for fun. How many kids do you think this'll reach?"

Kit scowled. "You think G should be stopped." It sounded more like a statement than a question.

I couldn't answer it, either way. I'd thought G should be stopped over five years ago, and no-one had agreed with me then. I doubted anything would be different now. In those days, he'd been a supporting player. His dealing was, like I'd said, recreational. His bribes had been modest; his trade restrictions almost charming. His first steps into the world of illegality and fraud had been cautious. But those years had passed, inevitably bringing plenty of development opportunities - and he was never a man to miss out on those. I'd been away but wherever I'd gone, I still had ears for news. G's control spread widely nowadays; he was rich and he was well represented by influential friends. His main rivals, on the other hand, were either very tolerant, willing to sell out their businesses to him, or - occasionally - mysteriously missing. He was no Mafia Don, but I wasn't sure anyone - apart from me - had ever dared tell him that. Whatever else, he was a powerful man. Willingly or otherwise, many people lived under his protection. Too many.

"So maybe I could find out some of that information you need." Kit fidgeted at the table; he looked eager to be gone. I was worried about his reasons.

"It's not your business either," I said. "You mustn't take sides." You're one of those people, under G's protection...

"But you will," he snapped. He pushed back his chair and rose abruptly to his feet. "Fuck you, Freeman, it's always one rule for me, another for you."

"And you know why that is?" I growled back. "Because I don't live in his house, because I don't live off his payroll –"

"Because you don't let him fuck you?" Kit's face was extraordinarily white now. "Why did you come back, Freeman? They say you ran because you were washed up and scared; so what the fuck's changed?"

I stood up as well, my hands clenched, biting back the anger that flared white-hot in my head. Maybe he'd call that fear, too, but it wasn't for myself. The girl at the counter lifted her head from her washing-up, alerted by the sudden movement over at the far table.

I was alerted too, but by a different movement, one at the door to the café, something fast and brief that registered only at the very corner of my sight. By the time my eyes flashed across the room, whatever it was had gone. Or whoever it was.

Kit was peering at me, frowning again. His eyes looked moist, a glint between his lashes. "What is it? What's up?"

"Who's watching you, Kit? How many of them?"

He gaped at me. "Huh? No-one is. I come and go more or less as I please. I'm just a kid. For fuck's sake, why would they watch me?"

I let my heartbeat slow down. I discovered I was gripping the spoon to my coffee as if it were a weapon and I placed it back down on the table with exaggerated care. "You tell me, Kit," I said, softly. "But they are."

And they were better at it than I'd expected.

Freeman 9

I shifted awkwardly on my perch, crouched on a platform overlooking the warehouse floor. I was propped against the guard rail, looking down through the mesh covering. For the last twenty minutes, my left calf had been cramping from the uncomfortable position and the inactivity. The night outside was damp and dark and there was barely any light through the high, smeared windows, but I could watch the whole of the area from my vantage point.

Not that there'd been much to see. One wall was covered with bare shelves and racking, and there were several forklifts in the loading bay. Beside them were piles of wooden pallets, but they were all empty. There was discarded packaging about, but no stock. No workers; no activity. Maybe I'd come too early.

Or too late.

I needed to cough - to stretch out my limbs. The place was cold and dusty, and I wished I'd worn a warmer jacket. To paraphrase what someone had once said - I could choose better dates for a Saturday night.

Then the half doorway in the metal shutter creaked open and I saw a couple of men climb through. They muttered together in low voices, in what may have been a foreign language. I kept very still in the shadows and watched them stub out their cigarettes, rubbing their hands together to get some warmth back into cold digits. They'd obviously been waiting outside for instructions of some kind.

I'd not heard a phone ring or a messenger bike, but things had still progressed.



When the hand came down on my shoulder I couldn't help but jump. I tensed, ready to strike out.

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

I drew a deep breath. Of course it would be him.

"I've been in the office for the last half hour," Miki continued, his hand still tight on my shoulder. "Watching you here. Did you think you wouldn't be seen? You should have checked other access to the warehouse – there's a back staircase that leads straight up here. Very careless, Freeman. Not as thorough as you used to be. Maybe G was right – you are washed up."

I stood up slowly and carefully, aware of him behind me; of where his hands were. "Maybe I am. So I'll be off now and be sure to tell everyone what a hero you are."

Miki laughed aloud. One of the men down in the warehouse looked up at the platform, startled. Miki leaned over and gestured something to him and the two men moved away. He turned back to me. "You haven't answered my question. What are you doing here?"

I shrugged. "Looking for a job."

He raised an eyebrow, scorning the lie but with a smile still on his lips. "Do you have any relevant experience?"

I looked back at him, steadily. "Plenty. In many disciplines."

"Yes," he replied. "I think I can vouch for that." We stared at each other for a moment. The tension in the air around us bit as surely as if it had teeth. I had been to interviews at one a.m. before now – but not many. And this, of course, wasn't one of those occasions.

"So how did you find this place?" His eyes narrowed; they flickered over my dark, nondescript clothing. "Maybe you followed me. You're stalking me." He smiled, his teeth showing fine and white against the dim light. He didn't look tired, despite the hour; he looked as cool as ever. In contrast to mine, his clothes were elegantly casual: Miki would never look anything less than smart. He smelled clean and sharp, like citrus.

"Yeah," I said, coolly. "Stalking you. In your dreams."

He grinned, unfazed. "Is that it, Freeman? You wanted to see me again. Get me alone. Hell, we both have expensive flats of our own and plenty of space and comfort to do each other justice. You don't have to follow me to some seedy warehouse to fuck me. Unless that's what turns you on, I guess."

I sighed slowly and deliberately. "Miki, you're not amusing. Nor that irresistible."

"But you told me I was, Freeman," he hissed, his smile tightening. "Many times. Remember?"

"No," I said, carefully. My heart was pumping extra adrenalin around my body. His shirt was open at the neck, and at the base of his throat a drop of sweat glinted dully. I knew how it would taste. Salty... tart. I remembered telling him how magnificent he was, how much I wanted him. It had been in the early days and I was flattering him at the time – I was damning myself, too. I remembered it all too well. It was an old, deeply buried memory, and I wanted it to remain so.

He was watching the expression on my face. "Liar."

I shrugged again. I'd said what I wanted to on the matter.

He drew me away from the guard rail, towards the dark, shuttered office. His hand was on me at

all times, holding me captive. I could have remedied that easily, but it seemed wise to go with the flow. Miki was volatile, but he wasn't to be underestimated.

"So who's the one being distracted here, Freeman?" His tone was sharper now. "Maybe you're not here for me. Maybe you're here, being your old interfering self, getting involved when I'm sure you said you weren't going to do that again."

"I'm not," I said.

"- and when you were warned not to."

I glanced at the office window but the blinds were down. I didn't know what Miki had been doing in there before he decided it was more entertaining to watch me crouching in discomfort on a metal platform.

"This is nothing to do with you, Freeman." Miki's hand slipped down from my shoulder and gripped my upper arm. His other hand was flat against my chest, the fingers splayed. "You made your choices when you left town. When you ran away. G told me it was the condition of letting you go, that you kept out of things for good. You can't just dip in and out of this world when you choose – when you need us."

"Need you?" My eyes may have narrowed.

Miki growled. "Things are slow for you, I know; people don't want to do business with you. And you've been warned about messing with that kid, but maybe that's just for something to do. You need to get it together, Freeman. Move on."

"Yeah. Move on," I repeated.

He peered at me, warily. "It's bad news for you, being found here, and you know it. When G gets to hear about it -"

"If," I said.

Miki's eyes clouded slightly. "You're in no position to ask for that. You think I'm just going to let you back off now?"

"That'd suit me," I said.

He laughed softly, but he didn't let me move away. Instead, he pushed me even more firmly, pressing me backwards against the partition wall of the office. I could feel his heart pounding in his chest as he leant in against me. His breath had a background flavour of alcohol. "Miki!" I snapped. "For God's sake, back off yourself."

He laughed. "If you want to leave quietly, you need to remember who holds the keys. And I can't let you go without searching you, Freeman. I really ought to be able to trust you – but I know I can't. Consider this my warning."

When he kissed me, his lips were hot and slightly swollen, his tongue forcing my teeth to part and let it into my mouth. His hands were inside my jacket now, sliding down my sides, plucking at the skin inside the fabric of my shirt. He sucked greedily at my lower lip – his kissing had so often been only one step away from aggression.

I gave a small whimper of protest but he ignored it. I think it encouraged him, to tell you the truth.

I tilted my head slightly to the side to let him fit against me better. It had been a long time since I'd been this intimate with Miki, but they say it's like riding a bike, right? You never forget how. I

slipped my own hands around his waist, gripping him hard. I felt the muscles under his shirt tighten and he groaned a little. I stroked at his hips, my fingers snagging on the pockets of his trousers. I could hear both of us panting a little. His saliva was hot in my mouth and his jaw ground against my own. We'd always been well matched in size.

He was impatient – another thing I remembered about him. His knee forced its way between my legs, nudging them further apart, and his hand moved down swiftly to grab my crotch. His fingers curled around the half-turgid shape of my cock. It was a fierce, exciting touch - the physical memories surfaced in my mind, rich and vivid, and my body shuddered against him. The sound Miki made in the back of his throat was a combination of laughter and demand.

That's when I punched him; punched him squarely on that handsome, sculpted jaw. Hit him hard enough so that his head rocked up and he stumbled backwards, releasing me suddenly, his arms flailing. It was some time since I'd hit anyone, and I felt the shock of pain in my fist. There was no sound from either of us, just his sudden gasp in the cold, still air.

There was only a second's delay before he hit me back, and it was a hell of a lot harder. I slammed against the wall and tumbled down on to my arse. I rolled quickly to the side, nursing my bruised knuckles, hugging my arms into my body and turning away from him.

He was furious. Guess I would have been, too. "Shit, Freeman, what the fuck's that about? Slapping me like some teenage virgin bitch!" I huddled against the edge of the partition, panting, with no explanation or excuse for him. My jaw ached from his blow. "Get the fuck up!" he hissed. He stood over me, a couple of feet away, swaying on the balls of his feet but coming no nearer. "Get up and let's see you try that again!"

It took me a while to get up on my feet. I swayed a little: I trailed my hand along the studded floor of the platform, getting my balance. I could feel Miki's stare on me. When I finally looked him in the eye, I saw the fury I expected, but also contempt.

"Miki," I said, hoarsely. "I said to back off."

He glared at me. His fist was still clenched. There was the shadow of a bruise on his cheekbone. "What's happened to you, man? You've really lost it. Shit..." He rubbed at his jaw, shaking his head.

I swallowed hard. "It's been a while. I'm sorry."

His eyes widened. Guess he hadn't heard that from me a hell of a lot. "You're a bastard. A fool."

"Yeah," I said. I stuck my hands in my pockets. Looked pretty woeful.

He made a noise of frustration, smoothing back his hair, and tucking a loose corner of his shirt back into his belt. He patted his trousers then looked around until he found a pen and a set of keys on the platform floor, fallen from his pocket. He bent easily and quickly, scooping them up. I watched his movements, fluid and sensual as always, even after our pathetic little scuffle.

"Get out," he said. He was still watching me but now his look was pitying. It was pretty unpalatable. I walked over to the metal staircase that led to the ground floor.

"Keep out of this, Freeman," he called to me as I gingerly made my way down. "Next time you won't get away with just a verbal warning."

My mouth felt dry inside; my lips still felt the pressure of his. The adrenalin coursed through me, a thread of quicksilver mixed with the blood in my veins.

"Shit. I didn't want to see you like this." Miki murmured the words behind me. He sounded

disappointed, but I didn't think he was looking for a response.

The other men had moved to the back of the warehouse, out of my view, but I felt eyes on me all the way to the exit. I clambered outside and drew a long, deep breath.

Just at that moment, I was pretty sure that none of this was compatible with 'keeping out of it'.

## Freeman Chapter 10

"Hi Freeman." The woman smiled down at me, her expression both wary and welcoming. "This seat taken?"

"Stella."

I smiled, too, and gestured her into the seat opposite me. It had been the line I used to pick her up in another cafe, all those years ago. I'd just enough student grant left for two cheap coffees; I was waiting to get paid from my evening job. I'd been petrified in case she wanted a sandwich as well. Her bright brown eyes had looked right through my clumsiness and she'd said just a coffee would be fine.

We'd been friends all through college. The assumption had always been there that we'd graduate and then we'd get jobs and get married. There'd been enough fooling around between us to know we were attracted to each other. I didn't spend much time analysing any confusion I may have had about what kind of man I was, sexually. I daresay Stella knew better than I – it took me quite some time to extend that honesty to myself – but even so, after we'd done the graduating and a couple of years of the jobs thing, she accepted my slightly drunken proposal with grace.

We always had fun; we were always respectful to each other. But we should have appreciated the friendship we had and foregone the romance. I, for one, wasn't ready to think in terms of a couple - maybe I was never going to be. I continued to go my own way, with or without her. Didn't take me long to realise a partner needs more attention than a friend; more generous portions of time and consideration. I just may not have expressed that often or well enough.

I didn't regret a minute of the brief ten months we'd spent as husband and wife - I just hoped sometimes that she felt the same.

"Long time, Freeman," she said. It didn't sound corny when she said it. She put her coffee and a plate of pastries on the table and settled herself down.

Stella had always been a beautiful woman. She was happy to look like a woman rather than an emaciated model; she was bright, too, having achieved a damned sight better degree than her ex-husband, but confident enough not to boast about it. I watched her now, pleased to see her at close quarters again. The clear skin; the slightly uneven nose; the wide, full grin. She looked well and had put on some weight. Her dark hair still lay unevenly over the left side of her forehead. When she used to get up in the mornings, it'd look as if an indulgent parent had tousled just half her head.

Those were past, sweet memories.

"Good to see you," I said. I had seen her briefly around town over the last few months, but we hardly moved in the same circles any more. I was glad, though, that she'd sought me out; glad that, to some extent, she also went her own way. I wasn't bothered about any other agenda,

though inevitably she'd have one.

Seemed like they all did.

"Walked into a door?" she asked, her eyes flickering over my jawline. I'd seen the red patch in my own mirror that morning.

"Easily done," I said, calmly.

She grinned. "You going to ask how the family is?" she prompted.

"No."

"We were all friends once, Freeman."

"Yeah." Once.

She nodded, and smiled. "Same old Freeman. Same old chatterbox. So I guess you didn't come back into town just to mull over old times with me?"

I smiled at her so she'd know I was still her friend. "No."

"Not because of G, either?" When I didn't answer immediately, she reached over and grasped my wrist. "I don't care what you say or don't say to anyone else, but don't lie to me. Are you here because of some business with him?"

I met her eyes steadily. "No. That's not why I came back."

She let out her breath with relief, though she still looked troubled. "He thinks you're here to settle some score."

"He would," I replied, calmly. Not that there weren't scores to settle, but I didn't lie to her. I hardly ever had.

She bit absentmindedly into a pastry and frowned. "So don't get involved again, Freeman. Stay away from the club, from the office, whatever. I thought you left us all before in quest of a quiet life."

I stared at her more carefully. "I thought that was everyone else's objective."

She shrugged, her shirt creasing across her slim shoulders. It was beautifully cut: an expensive fabric. "Maybe the others thought that. But I missed you."

"I called you," I said, gently. "Now and then. Not a lot more I could do, in the circumstances."

She flushed, and smiled again. "I know." She offered me a pastry but I shook my head. "So what's changed with you?"

I took a deep breath: toyed with my own cup of coffee. "My life was still quiet enough until a few weeks back. I wasn't out to change anything. I move around a lot; maybe I would have moved on from here again."

"But -?"

"G's business ceased to interest me five years ago, Stella," I said. "But he seems to expect my attention again now. I'm just intrigued to know why, that's all."

She stared at me. "He's worried, Freeman. You turn up here after five years away, and he can't help but think you've come back to cause more trouble."

"Do you think that too?"

She sighed, and brushed a stray thread of dark hair back behind her ears. The earrings were diamonds, I was sure. "I don't know what to think. You were the bright one, the golden boy of the organisation – you know that. You were quicker, smarter, more charismatic than anyone else he had around him. When you turned saboteur, it was shocking. You can't blame him for feeling defensive."

My silence was probably enough answer for her.

"And there's the boy, too," she said, more softly. "That's an added complication."

I looked at her closely, searching the deceptively calm gaze. "I don't like to talk about that with you, Stella."

"Freeman, you..." Her voice trailed off but her blush wasn't from anger. She sighed, almost wistfully. "You used to drive me mad, you know? Never knowing what was really going on in your head. Always worrying about the wrong things; caring about the wrong people. That's how it seemed to me. Maybe time tells me I was wrong."

"Stella..." Neither of us wanted to go there, but it looked like that's where we were headed.

"I know what G's like," she said. "What he likes." Half a pastry lay abandoned on her plate. She was looking at it, but at the same time she wasn't. "And he's always been like that – I shouldn't be shocked. He says it doesn't affect how he feels about me, and weirdly enough, he genuinely believes it. And sometimes I think it's better that he fucks his rent boys rather than I lose him to some other woman."

I bit my lip. "Maybe," I murmured.

She laughed, but without humour. The sound was harsher than I remembered. "Freeman, like many men, you try to say the right thing – and then it's wrong. No, it's not better, but it's part of the deal."

Maybe she caught sight of my face because she frowned. "Shit. And I didn't mean... about the rent boys. Maybe they're nice kids, some of them. You know... him."

"Kit," I said, gently. "He's using that name, I believe."

"I believe," she mocked my careful speech, but also gently. She knew more about me than any person there'd ever been, and so I tolerated it. "So, Kit, then. This is a strange bunch of trouble, eh? You and him. Him and G. The whole damned lot of us, tumbling back in together. Would it do any good to tell you to keep away from us?"

"Stella, are you speaking for yourself or for him?"

This time her natural anger flared. "What do you think?" she snapped. "Shit, you always were a prick where G was concerned. Have I ever tried to make trouble between the pair of you because of where I am?"

I held up a hand, trying to placate her. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

She stared. "That's rare. The maverick Freeman apologises."

I smiled. "Right. So make the most of it until Christmas comes again."

She grinned back. The banter had been good, for a lot of our time together. "Like I said, I missed you, you bastard."

I waited to speak until she'd sipped some more of her coffee and seemed settled again. "Are you happy, Stella?"

She looked up at me steadily enough, a brave and honest woman: too good for all of us, anyway. "You mean with G? I'm happy enough. Though the last few years have been... well, he's changed."

"He doesn't hurt you?"

"God, Freeman, ever the gallant." She was teasing me. "No, he doesn't beat me up, if that's what you mean. Just drives me a different kind of mad. Hurt is a word that covers a multitude of actions." She fisted her hands on the table and her knuckles were white against her gold rings. "He's not the man he was when I met him – he's not the husband I thought he might be. Maybe you saw that coming before all of us." She glanced up at me, quickly – maybe fearfully. "I'd never say that to anyone but you."

"I know." I smiled at her. "So will you stay with him?"

Her eyes opened in surprise. "I have to. I want to. Now that he's made provision for me and the baby."

Baby? She must have seen the shock on my face because she laughed. "Hey, your grapevine missed that snippet of news, right?" She leaned forward, more serious now. "It's good news, Freeman. We're both thrilled. He's gone back to calling me his 'starshine'; he's home more often than not. It'll be a new bond between us."

"I'm pleased for you," I said. It was what she'd always wanted; and what I hadn't.

She leaned back, looking more relaxed. "So what about keeping away from Kit, instead? Are you waiting for him here, Freeman?"

"I haven't seen him for several days." I know it wasn't the answer she was looking for, but I thought she'd understand.

She was peering at me, curiously. "What do you do with him, Freeman?"

"Do?"

She grimaced. "Save me the sordid sexual details, I watch enough daytime TV to join up the dots. Just... I don't know why you're wasting your time on a kid like that."

I looked away into the distance. I answered her because I realised I wanted to talk about it, not solely because she demanded. "We cook, eat, watch TV. He likes to relax after work, have a shower, put his clothes through the washer. We argue about rock music; I bore him about movies he's never seen." I paused: let my eyes focus again on her pretty face. "No sordid details at all, not for anyone's entertainment."

There was a moment's silence between us. The background noise in the café faded to a light buzz. Stella's eyes seemed very large; she moistened her lips to speak again. "Freeman, I haven't seen you smile like that for a long while."

I couldn't answer. Things felt disturbed inside me, and I didn't want that seen on my face.

"This boy's unusual, Freeman." Stella had dropped her voice slightly, though we weren't being overheard by anyone I could see. "I have no idea why and you'll understand I don't want to. But G keeps him close. You'd better think seriously about your cosy times together."

"I will," I said. I do.

She scowled. "For God's sake, don't give me that look. If you have to meddle, choose something else of his, anything, anyone."

"Except you."

It was good to see her blush again. "Yeah, you bastard, except me." Some other thought struck her suddenly and she reached to the chair between us for her bag. "Hey, look, I found this again recently." She pulled out a small square of card – a photo. "Here we all are, when we first came to the city. Small town kids, coming to see the big lights and work for our fortunes."

I took her hand and together we looked at the old photo. It was a social occasion, maybe a party or a birthday celebration. We were all in casual clothes, but smartly dressed and grinning stupidly for the camera. Stella looked as lovely as ever, though the hairstyle was wilder, the clothes less elegant. G stood with us, too, the picture of the protective mentor to us both. I think I'd known he was fascinated by Stella, even then.

"You don't look so different now," she mused. Her eyes ranged over me, as we were drawn closely together. "The hair's still blond, you obviously still work out. The shirt looks good, I like you in green." She caught my eye and laughed, self-consciously. "It wouldn't have worked for us, Freeman, not long-term. We were only kids then. And I'm not exactly your type now, am I?" Her eyes softened the words; she didn't mean me to take offence. "Just took you a while to decide which side of the track felt more at home for you."

"You were always special," I said. "Always will be."

"Fuck you," she grinned. "Sometimes you men try to say the right thing, and it's right."

"I wanted it to work, Stella."

"I know." We both pulled a rueful face. Her eyes flickered back down to the photo, laid on the table in front of her plate. "Miki looked good that day, too, eh?"

I felt my chest tighten. "Genetic good looks," I said.

Stella looked back at me. There was sympathy in her eyes. "Sorry, Freeman, that was cruel of me. He can be such a bastard, I know. But he's not all bad."

"You can say that," I replied, "because he's your brother."

She grimaced. "You were good for him, for a while at least. When he left home after me and came to join us here. You know that's why he joined G's organisation as well? He wanted to be like you – be close to you."

My turn to grimace. Miki liked to be close to anyone who would give him what he wanted; sexual or otherwise. It was right that Stella had a blind spot for him, but I wasn't part of the family any more; I didn't have to cultivate the same.

"I wish you could have stayed, Freeman." It was almost a whisper.

"For his sake?"



"Freeman, I know how unfaithful he was, I know he dumped you. I know it all, remember?" She was impatient with me. She had the same sensuous, animated looks as her brother, though her character never had Miki's sharp edge of violence and danger. "It's just he's... even more arrogant now. Even wilder. Sometimes I think he's too close to G - not able to cope with it like you were." She glanced up at me, almost coyly. "Can't you just be friends, like you are with me?"

"No," I said, sharply. Too much passion between us; too much anger, and she knew it. My jaw still ached.

"You seeing someone else then? You haven't been around town with anyone."

"Are you checking up on me?"

She smiled as if I joked. There was a thread of new tension between us. "No, I'm not. Sometimes we go to the same places, but at different times. Then people are always very keen to tell me they've seen you. Always the trail of Freeman, following me around..."

"I see a lot of people," I said. But not that way.

"Miki wants you back." For the first time I wondered whose offer she was bringing to the table.

"But as we both know..." I replied, "Miki wants a lot of things." Miki had wanted me, true – but he'd wanted many other people, too. His want had run me ragged. The time with him had been a madness for me: rich and fierce and consuming. But now it was over.

I was glad.

And then Stella laughed again. She pushed away her half-empty cup and reached for her bag, ready to leave the café. "I'm glad you're over him, Freeman. He's bad for you, always was. A hell of a wild ride."

"Yeah." I smiled. It was good to be with her again; with someone who understood so much.

She left enough money on the table for both our coffees, and refused to take any contribution of mine. "Keep the photo, too," she said, slipping on her jacket. "I heard you're still in the same flat. Rent must take an arm, a leg and one of your kidneys nowadays. So you did well while you were away."

"Well enough," I replied. Despite what G and Miki may have told you.

"You look good, did I say that? I'm pleased things are going OK for you." Her eyes met mine; her hand shook slightly as she wriggled on a leather glove. Her expression said many things her words avoided. "Why'd you come back, Freeman?"

I shrugged. "This is where I live."

"The kid doesn't." Her voice was harsh again. "He's passing through. Let G have his sordid fun, it won't last. Back off from both of them."

There was something in her tone that made the threat burn brighter. "Are you scared, Stella? For me?"

She frowned at me. "You've never been scared of anything, Freeman, maybe that's why I think I have to do it for you."

"So..." If not me, was it for G?

She wasn't saying any more; she was edging away from the table. "Just keep away. I don't give a fuck about one of my husband's toys – but I care for you."

I stood up abruptly and caught her arm, before she could move out of reach. "Care for him, too," I said. "For Kit."

She gasped. The urgency in my voice surprised me, too.

"What the hell are you asking, Freeman? Why should I do anything for him?"

I stepped back; released her arm.

"Watch out for him, if you can," I said. When she frowned at me again, I could only shrug. "For me."

## Freeman - Chapter 11

The knock at the door was more of a thump: the sound of something falling against the wood. It was around two a.m. and too late – or early – for legitimate visitors. I checked through the spy hole before I opened up – and even then, I thought twice about it.

Kit was slumped against the frame, his torso bent over and his head hanging down. As the door opened, his fingers slipped off the handle and he unbalanced, nearly falling over. There was a small zipped-up sports bag at his feet which probably helped keep him upright. He cursed, the words nothing more than a mumble.

"Go home," I said, my voice curt. "I won't see you here like this."

He didn't move; I wasn't sure he could. He clutched at the frame like a drowning man might grasp a plank of driftwood, his slender body swaying. "Freeman..."

I started to push the door closed on him, but then he lifted his head and his eyes caught mine. The pupils were dilated, glittering with the reflection of the morning light through the corridor blinds - deep and yet full of blankness. An expression flared up in his eyes that stank of fear; cried out with distress.

"Can't go home," he muttered. Speaking was obviously an effort: the words were thick and awkward from his young mouth. "Just got out. Gave back the keys." He tried to focus on me but he was too disorientated, and his hair was sticking to the sweat on his forehead, getting in his eyes. He tossed his head to dislodge it, but it just made him more unsteady. He glanced back over his shoulder; moistened painfully dry lips. "No keys," he repeated, with more urgency. "Freeman. Please. Nowhere to go..."

That was enough for me. I opened the door wide again and took hold of him under the arms. He felt ridiculously light. I lifted him into the flat, kicking the sports bag ahead of us into the hall and pushing the door shut with my foot. I carried him quickly to the guest room and laid him on the bed. He groaned when I peeled his creased shirt up and over his head, and then started to examine his arms. He was clean of needle marks. I gripped his shoulder, holding him down, while my free hand tilted up his chin and peeled open an eye lid. He made a strangled protest.

"Fuck off. Want to sleep. Leave it..."

I ignored him. "Kit? Do you hear me? Don't sleep yet – tell me what you're on." I looked into his flickering eyes, seeing enough awareness there to calm some of my angry panic.

He grunted and tried to push me off. He barely had the strength to move my arm. "Fuck off. I'm OK now. Nearly. I'm... Please. Waited as long as I could to come round." He struggled to sit up. "Fuck. Dizzy..."

I got a glass of water and sat on the bed beside him, supporting him while he drank it. He had calmed down again, and he lay against me, limp and sleepy.

"Kit? Where have you been? What have you been doing?"

He slipped away from me and fell backwards on to the mattress. "Can't remember."

"Can't remember?"

He grunted. "Don't care. Couldn't keep walking... no more. Came here. Sleep."

I got nothing more from him and so I let him sleep. I peeled his jeans off, too, and his trainers. He had no socks on. He lay on the bed in nothing but his briefs, snoring lightly.

And I just sat there with him.

I needed, of course, to see that his breathing was steady, his body was calm, and there was no further physical risk to him. Then I sat there just because I wanted to.

He lay on his back, his head turned slightly away from me into the pillow. His full lips made a small 'o' shape every now and then, as if he blew out a smoke ring. I'd sometimes heard him talk in his sleep but he was too deeply unconscious this time for that. His legs were slightly bent, as if at any moment he would curl up like a child. But he's no child, I thought to myself, as if this were some kind of a revelation. Young... but a well developed young man. Bright. Arrogant. Unruly. Remarkable.

I'd known danger of many kinds but this was something unusual.

I continued to watch him, his shoulders relaxed now and his left arm flung out across the sheets. His right arm was resting loosely across his torso, the slim hand half cupped in his lap. His cock lay nestled against a thigh: I could see its silhouette under the fabric of his briefs. It looked half aroused.

I lifted the top sheet to cover his body but I paused for a moment. He stirred, still deeply asleep, and the movement of his body was sluggish and heavy. His skin was flushed. The clean bedding brushed gently at the bare flesh of his long legs and he stretched with instinctive pleasure. His hand curled possessively around his cock and he stroked it a couple of times. If I'd been a more imaginative man, I might have heard a name as he murmured around a lazy, sleepy smile.

I let the sheet crumple slowly down over him and I left the room.

I didn't go back to sleep. I sat on my couch with a mug of coffee in front of me that slowly went cold. I let an old TV movie flicker across my eyes without seeing a single frame clearly. My mind was elsewhere; my emotions under scrutiny. I wasn't fit for anything else. I sat like that for several hours until I heard more vigorous stirring in the other bedroom and the muttered grumble of Kit waking up again.

It was mid morning. The dawn had arrived brightly, then blended into the stronger, smoother light of day. Not that I'd noticed until then. I heard Kit stumbling across the corridor and in and out of the shower. I got up myself to make fresh coffee and to keep an ear out for any problems in the bathroom. But Kit managed as usual and a few minutes later he appeared in the doorway to the living area, dressed again but with damp hair that he was still towelling off.

"Food?" I asked.

He screwed up his eyes, testing how he felt. "Yeah. In a minute. That'd be good."

The eggs and bacon took a lot of concentration. Kit made a lot of noise getting cutlery together. We managed not to knock into each other at any time, which was no mean feat in the relatively small kitchen area. When we sat down to eat together he still didn't meet my eyes.

"How do you feel?" I asked, mildly.

He bit his lip. "Not so bad." He'd already drained one carton of juice. He reached for the second, pouring out another glassful and gulping it down. "Tired. Very tired."

"Can you remember what happened?"

He frowned, and shook his head slowly. It wasn't just evasion. "Not much. Why the fuck is that?" I watched his expression as he struggled to work it out. "What did they give me?"

"Tell me what you can remember," I said, in a tone I considered was fairly calm.

"Look.." he started, then paused. "Freeman, I know you hate it. Me taking stuff. But this time..." His eyes flickered up to me then away again. "I can't remember taking much at all. But I kept waking up in strange places – in the end, I was wandering around town, lost, I think. I didn't know where else to come. I waited as long as I could."

He meant he waited for the worst of the symptoms to wear off. "It's OK," I reassured him. "But what about your own place?"

Kit grimaced. A flush of colour appeared on his cheeks. "Not mine any more. I gave the keys back. I remember that. Told G's guy that I'd be moving out." He stared up at me, almost as a challenge. "I've had enough, you know? All the things G was going to do for me... better jobs; introductions; training. Nothing doing." He sniffed. "I'll tell him I've had enough, I'm out of here." Then his face twisted in a sudden moment of panic. "Or did I already tell him? Fuck, Freeman, I can't remember anything past handing over the keys –"

I put a hand over his, pressing it down on to the table. He was shaking all over. "Keep calm. It's over. Where were you going to go? Your real home and family?"

Kit's shoulders tensed sharply. "No way. They don't want me back. They have the golden son - the firstborn. I'm just an afterthought, the mistake, the misfit – a disappointment all round."

"I doubt that..." I began, but he ignored me.

"A fucking failure, Freeman, that's what I am to them." I'd never heard him speak anything about his family and home before. The words now spilled out of him; spat out of him. "I bunked off school; failed my exams. Can't get a respectable job like him. My hair's like a wild man's; my clothes are indecent; my friends are slob. And shit, you know what's worst of all? I can't even find a nice girl like he has, because I prefer men. Makes me a faggot and a freak, as well." He suddenly seemed to remember where he was and glanced over at me, slightly breathless. His eyes were unnaturally bright. "You still wondering why I left home?"

"So where were you going to go?" I repeated.

His eyes were misty. "Don't know. One of the guys, I expect – someone would put me up. There's always a back room at the restaurant I could camp out in for a while." When I was silent, he rushed on. "Freeman, I thought about you. All the stuff you say and do. It was no good there,

right? At G's?"

"Right," I said, softly.

"So I got out." He shrugged, as if it were no big deal. I stared at him. So he just got out. If things weren't so messed up, I might have smiled.

"So talk me through," I said, gently. "Remember what you can." I lifted my hand from his to pour out some juice for myself. My palm felt chill from losing the contact with his warmth.

He sniffed again: ran a hand through his drying hair. "I gave the keys back, hung around a while. The courier firm owes me some money but there's hardly ever anyone there to sort it out." He was frowning again, trying to clear his mind. "I sort of remember G's office. Yeah, I went there about the money, that's it..."

Suddenly his eyes widened and his body tensed. I was pleased his memory was returning slowly – but I was damned angry it was causing him pain.

"There was a kind of party in his office, well, a few guys around with drinks, no girls. G invited me in – he's got private rooms there as well, you know?" It was a rhetorical question, but it was obvious from my expression that I did know. "I think I told him I was moving out but he was cool with it." He screwed up his eyes with the effort. "I think he was. I don't remember the conversation. But they were smoking and everyone was smiling, and it felt OK." He looked sideways at me again. "So I smoked some, but nothing more. I haven't touched anything stronger for ages, Freeman. Honestly."

"Drink?"

Kit shook his head. "Don't really like it. And you shouldn't mix stuff, should you?"

"No," I agreed, calmly. "And then?"

Kit's eyes flickered, as his mind rested back at G's office instead of at my breakfast table. His breath grew shallower. "It was Miki. He arrived with something else. Something new, he said. G said it'd be good. Better. New," he repeated. The word seemed to have embedded itself in his confused memory.

I was quiet.

"G said I must try some of it. Must. Not should, not asking me. Just one, though, you know? Freeman, don't look at me like that, seems to me you know what G's like better than any of us."

He was right. I nodded for him to go on.

"I... don't remember exactly what it was like. It must have been cool, though, because I don't remember any trouble. I felt good; relaxed. I think someone was having fun. There was plenty of laughter." His gaze briefly shifted away from me: he knew what I thought of G's idea of fun. "I felt sick at some stage, and very tired. G told Miki to hold me tight, I wasn't to leave yet." He screwed up his face, obviously still trying to remember. "I wasn't scared, Freeman. Just wanted..."

"To leave," I said, gently.

He nodded. "Yeah. G wouldn't let me. He had things he wanted me to do, he said."

I suppose I must have made some movement, because Kit snapped back at me. "They weren't rough, Freeman. Miki was OK with me. I'd remember if he wasn't, wouldn't I? But next thing I

knew I was half asleep in some doorway down from the office block with my shirt buttoned up wrong and I'd lost my socks. At least I still had my bag - it's got all my stuff, my clothes in. I rested a bit; tried to walk around. Found myself somewhere else near the church. Rested again. Started to make my way back here..." His voice tailed off.

Something was coiled tightly and fiercely in my chest and I had to take another breath to be able to speak. "Are you hurt, Kit? Do you know if you're hurt anywhere?"

He turned to stare at me but his attention was somewhere else. I certainly hadn't seen any bruises or marks on his body when I undressed him. His eyes were suddenly wide again, as if something had startled him. "Freeman, chill out, it's OK. But I've just remembered more..."

"What?"

"Fuck," he breathed. He looked very confused; he curled his hand up into a fist, gripping at the edge of the kitchen towel I'd brought to the table with the hot plates.

"They filmed me."

## Freeman – Chapter 12

"Filmed you?" I sat very still on my chair.

Kit's face reflected his confusion. His dark eyes were unfocussed; his hand was still fisted on the table. "There's a webcam thing in G's office, he uses it for security, I guess. It's weird..." He stood up from the table, suddenly.

"Kit." I didn't want him to force anything, but he waved a hand at me, irritably, expecting me to listen and not to argue.

"I can see it in my mind... got to get this clear." His hair was dry now, silky from the washing: he tucked it quickly behind his ears, concentrating hard again. "Miki's standing on a chair, turning it around to get the right angle... G's got the remote in his hand. They're grinning and chatting, just like we're all in the fucking park or something, taking holiday snaps." He yawned and stretched his arms up, flexing the muscles - he linked his hands behind his head and cracked his knuckles. It was a graceful, lazy gesture. "They're taking off my shirt - shit, it's cold here!"

I looked sharply up at him, my own hand clenching tightly beside my plate.

But he didn't seem distressed by his memories, just bemused. "They're moving me around, making me smile. What the fuck are they up to?" He grimaced, but not from any amusement. "They want me to do a couple of poses with..." His eyes flickered down to mine then away again. "With G. Whatever. They're saying I have to look happy about it. Can't make out what shit they're saying to make me laugh, but it's working, because I can hear myself. I'm cackling, like some kind of maniac. Everything's very loud."

I stood up as well, the chair scraping loudly on the kitchen floor. "Kit, if they made you do something against your will -"

"Hush, Freeman," he said. His voice sounded a little dreamy. "It's not that. No-one's having sex with me. No-one's bothered about that. It's fucking cold and I feel like a shop dummy but it's just

business. The laughter is... dry, you know? No-one's really having fun..."

He paused for a while. Had I lost him?

"All change," he said, abruptly. He'd gone much paler. "Suddenly they've just lost interest. The room's very quiet, they've all gone. There's a couch in the corner. Suppose I'm meant to crash out there until someone comes back." Maybe he saw me tense up, because he looked across at me, a sharp glance.

"But you didn't."

"No." He was gazing straight at me now, and his eyes were clearing. He looked his age again; young; nervous. "No, I knew I shouldn't crash out. Needed to get up, to get water, to get over it."

"Whatever it was."

He wrinkled up his nose; his eyes were wide and he was upset. "It was that new stuff, wasn't it? Like we saw on the paperwork. Like you said G was shipping in. Some kind of date rape thing, I've read about that, makes you pass out, lose control of your body, you lose your memory -"

I took his arm, as firmly as I dared. "We don't know. It sounds similar, but we don't know for certain. And you're OK, right?"

Instead of throwing off my touch, he relaxed a little; he leant against me. His head came on to my shoulder and I could smell the shampoo from his hair. I put a hand around his waist to support him. He didn't feel as thin as when I first knew him: his muscles felt more developed.

"Freeman..."

"Yes?"

"You said about the drugs – you'd need to know more about the shipments, to be able to do something about it."

"I said someone would," I corrected, gently.

He grunted. "The courier firm – the one I worked for, you know? I was thinking about it - all the trouble I have trying to find someone there, someone who knows what's going on. So few bikes available, hardly any paperwork..."

I nodded. "They're using the courier firm for the drugs deal. Just a local firm and everyone's used to seeing the bikes around town, so no-one would suspect the cargo of being anything other than documents and commercial packages. They're using them as the first stage to distribution across the country."

Kit laughed softly; his body shivered against mine. "You knew already. And the supplier?"

I smiled into the top of his head. "I know enough about them, too." There'd been plenty of identification on the discarded packaging in the warehouse the other night, even if I hadn't also known that Robberts – G's recent visitor to his office – dealt extensively in pharmaceuticals.

"So... you going to do something about it, Freeman?" His tone added, Are you going to get involved after all?

I didn't answer him.

He wriggled a bit, reaching deep into the pocket of his jeans to grab something. "Found this when

I got dressed again. Don't remember how I got it – I must have sneaked it away when Miki wasn't looking. Maybe I thought you'd need another piece of the jigsaw." He moved away from me a couple of steps and looked up into my face. He uncurled his fingers and I could see a small, pale yellow tablet nestling on his palm.

"Kit," I said, startled. Did they see him take it?

"You can pass this on to someone, right? Find out what it is, like you say, for certain. Find out what they're dealing. Freeman, you listening to me?"

I took it from him. His palm was soft and a little damp. I nodded.

"That's the whole package of evidence, Freeman." He was gazing at me. He was still very close, the pair of us standing by the kitchen table, the meal now forgotten. "Are you going to go to the cops now?"

I didn't – couldn't – answer him.

"Hey," he said, quietly. "Talk is that you're nothing but a snoop; just a troublemaker. Miki says you're a bit of a fool nowadays. A loser." He moved back to be right up against me and he slipped his arm around my waist. He laughed against my shirt. "A loser, huh? I thought you said they knew you, Freeman."

I smiled. The way he spoke was refreshing. When he slipped his other hand on top of mine and shyly laced the fingers together, I didn't push him away.

"I had to come round," he murmured, barely above a whisper. He glanced up at me. "I wanted to come round. I know you hate it when I do stuff -"

"It's fine," I said. "You did the right thing."

The relief on his face laid him bare. "I wanted to be here. I wanted to see you. I wanted –"

"But why, Kit?" I asked, softly.

"Huh?" He looked puzzled.

"Why did they film you?"

His hand twitched against mine. I didn't release my grip. "Don't know. Perverts, maybe. A game, whatever. I don't know." He shrugged, but his body was tense.

"Is that what you think? You were the one said there wasn't any sexual interest in it." I wanted a response from him beyond the shrug. "Was it something they wanted from any victim – or something they wanted from you?"

"I told you, I don't know." His tone was suddenly defensive. "Maybe I remembered wrong. Maybe they do it to all the boys. I'm no-one special." He glared at me. "No-one special, I told you that, didn't I?"

I listened carefully for any undertone in his words, knowing I'd get no more explanation if I pushed him now. He sounded honest; he sounded bitter. Whoever and whatever other people might think he was, Kit himself thought he was no-one special.

I lifted my hand off his and stepped back. Reluctance tugged at me like something sticky. I looked over to my coat, hanging on the back of the couch.



"You're going out?" Kit followed my gaze and frowned. Maybe he was still nervous; maybe suspicious of me.

I nodded. "I've got work to do today."

He let out a short breath, like he'd been holding it. He looked restless again. "I thought... you might be... you know. Going back there."

"Work," I repeated, calmly. "Just work."

Kit smiled, brightly. "I'll come with you. Help you out with..." For a second he looked sheepish. "...your work. Whatever."

"No, you won't," I said. "You need to rest. I'll give you my mobile number and you'll be safe enough here until I get back." I regretted using the word even as it escaped my mouth, but he didn't seem to notice.

"I can stay?"

"Yes, of course." The pleasure in his face lit up his eyes and broadened his smile. I walked over to the couch and pulled on my coat.

"Freeman?" I turned back to face him. He'd moved behind a chair, as if he needed distance between us. Protection. "The sex business... you know? With G. It's over."

"Over?"

He bit his lip as I'd so often seen him do. "After... well, last time you were in the club. After that, I told him I didn't want it anymore. Didn't want him fucking me." He rushed on, maybe afraid that I'd say something provocative about G. "He didn't seem bothered, actually. Just sent me off to work as usual." He shook his head gently: a different kind of confusion. "Don't know why he didn't ask me to return the keys to my room right then. But he let me stay on, regardless."

I let out my breath, quietly. I was imagining his conversation with G, delivering his terms.

"I want to clean up my act, Freeman." He sounded belligerent but his eyes pleaded with me to understand. "Want to start again."

I nodded. "That's good. Good for you."

He moved out from behind the chair and started to close the distance between us again. "Not doing it just for me. I'm doing it for you, too."

For me?

"Freeman, I don't just want to be here, I want to be here with you."

I think I was shaking my head, though I wasn't moving out of his path. "It's your decision what you do with your life, Kit."

He laughed, still walking across the room, only a couple of feet from the couch by now. His slim body swayed with the easy, graceful movements. "Yeah, seems like that's your style. Don't tell a person what to do, but when you don't approve, your face looks like you swallowed a wasp and don't want to tell anyone it stings like fuck."

I laughed aloud, then. He seemed pleased. "That's true, right?"

"True," I agreed.

"I know it's my life, my decision." We were laughing together as he came close enough to put an arm out to me. "Hell, if I wanted to, I could fuck a different man every one of the twelve days of Christmas, right?"

I was still laughing when he slipped both arms back around my waist and pressed his belly against mine. He looked up into my face. "But none of them would be you, Freeman. I want you."

I was silent – the laughter dried in my throat. I looked down into his face and all I could see were those dark, wide eyes. His expression was an equal mix of terror and determination. He looked like the fragile Kit I'd seen in the club on the first night I met him – like the aggressive Kit who'd argue with me whenever he felt like it – like the surprisingly mature Kit who'd grin at me without prompt and talk to me without pretension or suspicion. They were all there, challenging me. I could hear his soft panting breath – I could smell him, smell the body wash from his shower and the freshness of my clean linen and every small, warm, human, bodily pulse that I'd come to recognise from him.

He lifted his chin with both defiance and nervousness. "I don't know how to get you, Freeman. Don't laugh at me. Don't get mad. I just don't know what to do." He flushed, and then before I could answer him, he leant up and forwards, and with a slow, hushed inevitability he kissed me.

My heart may not have stopped physiologically but it did emotionally. I felt the pressure of the soft, damp lips and the bold little tongue licking at mine. I opened my mouth because I was startled, and his tongue slipped in greedily to explore me.

No – I was lying to myself, the worst sin of all. I opened my mouth because I wanted him, inside me. I wanted to taste him – to plunder him – to explore him, too.

My hands darted up to grasp his shoulders – to push him away – but somehow they lost their way and became entangled in the hair at the back of his neck. It slipped through my fingers but I got enough of a hold to tug his head nearer, to tilt him so that we fit better together. It didn't take much. I felt as if we breathed the same breath, shared the same gasp.

"Freeman..." His murmur was in my ear, his delighted laugh like a caress. "Fuck, you taste good..."

We kissed some more, because now it truly was a mutual pleasure. I pressed his head back as I leaned in to him, ran my fingers along the line of his jaw, watched the convulsive jerk of his throat as he swallowed. His eyes were half-closed and so I gazed at his face, following each line, each stretched muscle, each flickering eyelid.

I kissed the sides of his mouth; I kissed the rich, full softness of the middle; I kissed the skin of his cheek, just below his ear. He tasted just as I'd imagined he would – cool and hot; sweet and piquant. Remarkable.

He kissed me back, hot and eager and clumsy, his tongue licking at the tendons in my neck, his lips sucking at mine. I could feel his heartbeat speeding up, thudding against my torso. He made soft, gasping noises as his mouth moved against mine.

We broke for air, long before I had any trouble breathing but long after we could have called it a momentary distraction and laughed it off.

Kit's eyes were gleaming. I saw his chest heaving underneath his thin shirt. His fingers played with the hem as if he were getting ready to peel it off.

"Wow," he whispered.

"Kit," I murmured. His name sounded different to me, somehow.

"Wow," he repeated, and laughed shakily. "Shit. It's so different. You. This. I wanted to do it – but it's not what I thought."

I frowned and he flushed. "No, Freeman, I mean it's good! So very, very good. Better. But it's like an ache... inside. Hurts me." He laughed again, his hand against his chest, his voice shaky and self-conscious. He looked like he was searching for something more articulate, but whatever he said, I already understood.

"I won't hurt you," I said. My voice sounded different, too. Hoarser... richer.

"I know you won't," he replied quickly, grinning. He was shivering again, but he seemed pleased about it. He started to pull up his shirt, like before.

"No," I said, gently. I slid my hands down from his shoulders and grasped his wrists. "No, Kit."

His eyes grew much wider and the pupils dilated. It may have been shock; maybe anger. "You don't want me. Shit, Freeman, I've really fucked up –"

"No," I said, again. I had a lot of practice with that word. "Just – not now. Not like this. You need to get yourself together. Think about it carefully."

He frowned, but he relaxed in my grip and I released my hands. He tugged at his shirt, smoothing it back down. For a moment we were silent, looking at each other. Neither of us could help our eyes straying to the other's mouth.

Then Kit yawned, widely and noisily. He stepped back: blinked and laughed. He was embarrassed. "Still so tired, Freeman. Sorry."

I smiled in return. My lips felt sore, though not in a painful way. "Get some more sleep. We'll..." I paused: began again. "I won't be long. I'll be back this evening."

He nodded, and started retreating, moving back into the room; did some more of the lip-biting. "Still OK if I stay?"

I nodded. I pulled my eyes up from the glimpse of his small, white teeth to find him staring back at me. His eyelids were sleepy but the gaze beneath them was intense. "I'll start the supper later on," was all he said. "You got chicken? Pasta?" He turned before I could answer and he collapsed down on to the couch. He flipped on the TV, looking for a film to watch, yawning again and plumping the cushions up behind him.

"Whatever you want," I murmured, though he didn't hear me. I went to the guest room, printed my mobile number on a slip of paper and tucked it halfway into the side pocket of his sports bag.

Then I gathered together some papers that I didn't need, and looked for keys that weren't really lost, deliberately wasting a half hour or so until I knew Kit had fallen asleep on the couch. I watched him half-following the film, then saw him smile, and yawn even more, and finally twist into a more comfortable position to sleep. Finally, I felt able to leave the flat.

But first, I made a call.

One of Kit's trainers was lying in the middle of the hall. I stepped over it and went to my room, flipping open my mobile. It wasn't an easy call for me to make. After a client's preliminary briefing, I rarely call them back except to report completion – or to close down something that's no longer viable. While I'm working, my time and my actions are my own – I report to no-one.

And I'm successful. Usually.

"Yes, there's been some initial success." I found it difficult to talk over the excitement on the other end of the line. "But I can't take it further." It was impossible to explain the reasons. "It's more complex than I first thought."

I listened. I heard again what desperation sounds like: I recognised futility, too.

"No, I don't have another client," I reassured. "It's not that." Maybe that would have been an easier explanation to offer up. "Let me find you someone else to help you." Let me withdraw from this...

Please stay in place, my client urged. Please. You must see this through.

I couldn't make myself understood; I couldn't explain it either to my client or to myself. Then I thought I heard some noise out in the hallway and couldn't risk being overheard.

I hung up.

And I went out as planned.

## Freeman Chapter 13

Seemed like no-one had improved the central heating arrangements in the warehouse since I was last there. I was still cold, but at least this time I was in the private, furnished office. There was carpet under my knees as I crawled under the desk to reconnect the PC, and an expensive office chair to lean back in when I booted up the system. Not that my comfort was the issue.

I found the usual selection of office applications; the usual spam in the email inbox. Of more interest were the documents protected by password. The dates went back several months, showing delivery manifests and payment schedules; the circulation addresses alone brought many more players into the game than I'd originally thought. I flipped my memory stick back out of the PC, feeling its warmth in my palm; it had been well-used.

The low voice behind me sounded amused. "You weren't thinking of taking anything away with you, were you, Freeman?"

I stiffened in my chair. I turned it around slowly; there was no rush to greet my new visitors. G was over by the door, Miki beside him. There was a heavy-set man behind them for... protection? I wasn't particularly flattered.

G was smiling. I didn't feel heartened, either.

"Freeman." Miki pushed forward past his employer. His smile was more of a sneer, the familiar arrogance underlying it. "You're making this a habit, being taken from behind."

I raised an eyebrow. "And I was thinking you were just too scared to look me in the eyes."

He growled gently in the back of his throat. I stood up, so as to be at the same height. We stared at each other across the small area, our bodies tense.

G sighed, exaggeratedly. "Enough, gentlemen. We have no time today for your posturing." His voice carried easily across the room: we all turned to look at him. From the way he stood, it was obvious he was used to that. Tall, more stockily built than either of us, he'd put on weight in the

last few years. I'd seen him in the last few months, of course – couldn't avoid it, both of us working in the city – but rarely up close. Still the same strong features, sharp eyes, patrician nose. He was wearing his hair longer than when I first knew him, with flecks of silver at his temples, and he always dressed impeccably, though less fashionably than Miki. The ten years or so between our respective ages showed itself in some ways. He wasn't traditionally good looking but in a crowded room he caught people's attention – and held it. It was an innate attraction; an instinctive fascination. He was the embodiment of success and confidence, wearing them as comfortably as the well tailored suit. People wanted to stand beside him; wanted to be noticed by him.

Not all people, of course.

The heavy behind him was grinning at his comment, though I didn't think the humour merited it. I glanced over G's shoulder at the man; that leering grin was familiar, too.

G's hand pointed towards us, the well-manicured movement barely disturbing the air. "Whatever he has there, Miki, take it away from him. I believe we can legally call it my property."

Miki stepped up to me, to snatch the stick from my hand. I frowned and my fingers started to close over it, but it seemed he was too fast for me. My palm closed on empty air.

"Been copying your homework, Freeman?" Miki half grinned at me.

"Destroy it," said G, sharply. He was watching the flicker in my eyes; the half-step I took further forward as if to follow Miki. "I have a full backup of the system, of course. Whatever he's taken or copied, I'll restore in the morning."

Miki glanced at the stick then frowned back at his employer. "You think we ought to see what's on it?"

G shook his head. "I can tell you what it'll be. It'll be information that Freeman thinks he can use to cause me trouble." He walked towards me, his eyes holding mine. I saw his protector square up his shoulders behind us but he stayed where he was. "Isn't that how it goes, Freeman? You take information and you twist it; you try to use that information to undermine and incriminate me."

"You know those strategies well yourself," I replied, quietly.

G laughed then, a loud and relaxed sound. His head fell back and his mouth broadened with his smile. The clear grey eyes lit up and he looked many years younger. He gestured to Miki and I watched my stick dropped to the floor and crushed under Miki's boot.

It seemed symbolic in a rather clichéd kind of way.

Miki glanced back up at me. "Freeman, what the hell did you think you were doing here?" He sounded puzzled.

I shrugged lightly. "Enjoying the peace and quiet. Seeking some quality time. Looks like I lost on both counts."

G laughed again - a reminder of his undoubted charisma; his desire to draw people's attention to him. "Oh, Freeman, do you really think that's a tenable position, when caught in the midst of both trespass and theft?"

"Like I said," I murmured. "You know those strategies well."

He frowned. "You've become so very sanctimonious, hidden away in your self-imposed exile. So

you never did anything illegal yourself? Nothing that overstepped the mark; that might have shocked even me? No-one gets rich without some skeletons in their filing cabinets."

"I'm not rich," I said. I didn't elaborate.

He tilted his head to the side, as if to trying to catch words from my silence. "Are you telling me you didn't enjoy your time with me? The excitement, the pressure? The success? You had a fierce enough appetite for it in the beginning."

"I lost it," I said. My appetite.

He shrugged. "You were always your own worst enemy. I had no complaints when you were on staff - you worked well and willingly, and you should remember that. Your naivety is irritating. I'm just a businessman, after all, nothing more sinister than that."

"What you are isn't in question," I said, softly. G's eyes were hooded, watching me; assessing me. "It's your choice of business that I take exception to." Always have done. "Whatever I may have done, I don't deal in things that harm. I put only myself at risk."

Miki was looking between us, eyes narrowed. He had been part of G's organisation for almost as long as I had, but had rarely been involved in the decision making. After a while, of course, neither had I.

"Right... putting yourself at risk. That's what you've done today, isn't it?" G pursed his lips. "I'm very interested to know why."

"How did he get in here?" Miki sounded belligerent. "There's no sign that he broke in. And only you and I have the keys." G glanced at him and then back to me. He smiled.

I looked at Miki and shrugged. "Thanks," I said.

His eyes darkened and a vivid splash of colour appeared on his cheeks. His hand moved instinctively to his pocket, confirming the shape and weight of his keys. "Mine...?"

"He took an impression, obviously," G's amusement was now obvious. "At some stage he got close enough to you to have hold of them – it only takes a few seconds if he has the materials to hand. Something to remember for the future, Miki."

Miki's fury had started at his eyes: now it slid through every taut line of his body.

G ignored him. His eyes were still on me. "And the computer network? You've entered there, too." For the first time in many years, I saw a tinge of regret in his expression. "You used her, Freeman."

I shook my head. "You use the same structure as always, the same security prompts. I set them up for you originally, remember? I was far into your system before it even asked for your personal password."

"But you hacked that, too." His voice was low and deceptively soft. It slid across my nerves as if abrasive. "With the help of my wife."

Beside him, Miki gave a start. "What are you two talking about?"

G looked irritated at having to explain to him. "The current password – it's my nickname for Stella. Starshine. Freeman has learned this from her, it seems."

"She has nothing to do with this!" I was sharp. "If I used her, it was without her knowledge. My

own decision.”

“I know,” he replied. It was the one fragment of agreement left between us. Stella was the one thing we still shared care for; still protected. “She’s been an arbiter between us in the past, I know. But that must stop, Freeman. Her loyalty is to me, and that leaves you out of the cosy threesome, I believe.”

“I don’t understand,” Miki blurted out. “What is it between you two?” He turned to me, dark eyes deep with turmoil. “What turned you, Freeman? One minute you were working with us, then –“

G lifted a hand again and Miki bit back his words. “Freeman moved out of step with us all.” His voice was cold.

“Better than a step too far,” I replied, my own voice low.

G growled in response. “Freeman developed a heart that bled at inappropriate moments, Miki. He forgot who had given him his first break; who’d welcomed him to this very city and given him his position; who still paid his wages. Who gave him trust –“

“Trust?” I couldn’t hold back the protest. “And did you care about the trust all those people had placed in the hospital charity? In you?”

Miki muttered beside us, confused. We were using him as our audience, without really acknowledging him.

“One of G’s companies had control of a hospital charity and its funds,” I said. My voice sounded as if it came from a far distance. I sounded much younger. “Many people relied on it; children, mainly. Lives depended on it.”

G sighed. His face had a heightened colour. “We did a lot of good for the community. Many of those lives were saved because of its work, I believe. We had great success over several years.”

I nodded. “Yes, until you got greedy. Until you used the fund to launder money from your other, less ethical operations. When the Fraud Squad moved in on you, the whole charity was brought down – the whole fund appropriated in the investigation. It was never fully restored.”

“No charge was brought against me.” G’s voice had hardened.

“What happened to the patients?” Miki was staring at me, though I thought I’d kept my emotions hidden from my expression.

“They suffered. Some of them died.” My gaze was back on G. “Some children.”

He stared back. The grey of his eyes was dark, the gleam of flint in shadow. “They weren’t yours, were they?”

“No,” I said.

He shrugged as if vindicated. “And so you threatened to betray me, Freeman – I think melodramatic words of that sort were used. You were younger then, of course.” He was only a few feet away from me now, Miki standing to the side of us. “You were going to the authorities.”

“I didn’t.”

“No.” He smiled, tightly. “A wise move, in the end.”

“No,” I echoed, sharply. My head was starting to hurt again. “I was inexperienced then. Now I

wish I had.”

G’s eyes flashed. I saw his minder tense up behind him. Miki let out a harsh breath.

“How many times have you done the same thing since?” I said, softly, though they could all hear me clearly. The air in the room was hot with our breath; cold with our emotions. “Run your business at the expense of others?”

“You know what?” He leaned in towards me. His patience appeared exhausted. “You need to grow up, Freeman. Shit happens.”

“But I don’t have to be an accessory,” I snapped.

“Ridiculous!” he growled. “You can’t hide from life. Is that what you tried to do, running away?”

“I can hide from yours,” I hissed out. Or at least I’d thought I could.

G let out a grunt of anger. “You want to leave here with your pension plans intact?” His voice was perfectly articulated, and laced with threat. “You should go now.”

Miki shifted impatiently as if to hustle me out. I didn’t move.

“What about the boy, G?”

“The boy?” He raised an eyebrow. He didn’t insult us both by pretending ignorance. “You mean the child who comes to tell me what I must do, to tell me he doesn’t want my… patronage any more?” He smiled with an amusement that didn’t include me. “Now that is naivety. To think that he might return to whatever life he had before, without change or disturbance.” He shook his head with feigned disappointment. “No, he’ll stay with me a little longer, I think, one way or another.”

“He’s left your place now.” Your life.

G’s expression didn’t change but his eyes narrowed. “What’s your interest? A boy, that’s all he is. His childish behaviour must be rubbing off on you. Do you have nothing better to do with your leisure time than harass me?”

“A man can have a hobby.”

G barked a laugh. “Don’t interfere, Freeman. I’ve tolerated it so far, because I know how misguided you can be.” But no longer, he implied.

“You can’t hold him against his wishes.” I could hear the thread of fury in my voice. Hopefully no-one else could.

G frowned. “I wouldn’t dream of it, Freeman, why would you think that of me? But he’s been with me of his own free will, as you know. He wanted to see the city, to see my world. He chose to be with me.” He paused; met my eyes. “Maybe that’s been difficult for you to cope with.”

“Why him?” I didn’t expect an honest answer, but asked the question regardless. “Why encourage him? You see boys like him all the time, trying to make it here, trying to be things they’re not. Following you, looking for a mentor.” Not knowing any better. “Why keep hold of this one?”

Miki made some noise behind me but I didn’t turn.

G glanced at his watch and tutted. It was a deliberate gesture, calculated to annoy. “He’s a



companion for me. I like his looks; I like his enthusiasm. I don't have to explain or justify myself to you, Freeman – and you'd be the last person on my list if I did that by choice." He glanced back up at Miki, and then the minder, gathering their attention back to him. "Call it my hobby."

Miki flushed; he was watching me from the corner of his eye. The minder grinned. Again.

"A disgusting one," I said.

G's gaze snapped back to me. He looked startled. "You think I care what you think? Though it's astonishing to hear you express your opinion in such a way." He stepped back towards me, came within an arm's length. He was slightly taller than me and his breath brushed my cheek. It had the same minty smell as Miki's. "One might think you never felt emotions, Freeman. You so rarely deign to step into real life and share them with us." He smiled, his eyes flickering to my mouth and back up again. "Maybe we're not speaking altruism here. You want to keep hold of him yourself?"

The minder moved, then. He stepped up close behind G and I could see his face over G's shoulder. I wasn't aware I'd done anything provocative, but Miki's eyes were wide. He glanced down my body, and I knew my fists were clenched.

"So tell me why he's different from the others," I hissed.

"Shouldn't you be the one to do that?" G growled back. His neck was flushed. "Don't play games with me, Freeman. You made me sweat once and I disliked it intensely. Now it's my turn to return the favour."

"G...", Miki was hovering, offering assistance that I knew G didn't need and wouldn't welcome.

G leant forward and hissed back into my face. "I will have my way this time, and without obstruction from you. The boy is your weakness, not mine. You know that, don't you? I only have to follow him to find you – and vice versa."

I stepped back. So did he. The tension in the room drew a second breath.

G's voice had calmed again. "So what are you doing nowadays, Freeman? Business good?"

Miki glanced at me; I didn't reply.

G shrugged. He made a small hand movement and the minder lumbered backwards towards the door. "I hear your clients are far and few between."

"I manage," I said.

He tilted his head again. "I could help you, of course. Would you consider me as a client?"

I took a deep breath. "Never."

He laughed. His equilibrium was restored; or maybe he was as committed an actor as the rest of us. "Then you're a fool, too. Misguided principles won't make you a successful businessman."

"Leaves me more time for that hobby, then," I said, quietly.

He flushed. "It's over, Freeman. You're on your own, and we all know you need contacts: you need allies. You'll never get on in this city."

"You'll see to that, will you?" I countered. I knew how much he wanted to say 'my city'. He knew I knew.

"You didn't come back for this, did you? Just to piss me off?" His tone was still light, but he looked sly. "That's what she tells me."

"No," I said. "I didn't."

He didn't ask the question that everyone else did – or wanted to. He asked another. "So why bother now? Back off and let me get on with my business. Or is there another agenda..." He paused. "Last chance, Freeman."

I frowned. For what?

"To come back in with me," he continued. "If that's what you really want. Come back. I can find you a place again."

Miki's gasp was almost comical. G ignored him. "This has been fun – in a warped kind of way. Like the old days. I can't say I wouldn't want you back. You were good for the business."

I wondered if he'd ever said that aloud. Ever believed it.

I looked at Miki: saw the twisted reactions in his eyes. G watched us, that earlier amusement returning to his face. "Miki's fine, aren't you, Miki? He works well for me. He has the passion that you lack, Freeman. But he doesn't have your brain."

"Fuck you," muttered Miki. It may have been aimed at either – or both – of us.

"No," I said, again, in reply to G. There were times I embraced the word.

"Shouldn't that be, no thanks? You want to think about it first?" When I stayed silent, G shrugged. "So that's that, then. I won't offer again. And I don't want to see you around any more – neither your face, nor the offensive echo of your interference. Get out of here."

"You're just going to let him walk out?" Miki sounded both furious and confused.

G laughed. "There's no point chasing him, Miki. He's not interested in your bedroom eyes any more. Besides, I can find him any time I like – reach him any time I choose." He watched me start to walk towards the door. "Isn't that right, Freeman? I can find you... and anyone you think you protect."

My throat was thick with bile. Even if I'd wanted to reply, I couldn't have formed the words. I walked slowly, but no-one moved to stop me. When I was a few steps from the door and G's human shield, Miki crossed the room hurriedly and put his hand on my arm. I paused, reluctantly.

"That thing with the keys, Freeman." He didn't seem to know how to go on: whether to be angry or awed. "You fucking bastard." I looked at him and wondered what he saw in my expression, because he flushed heavily. "OK, so I'm mad as hell, but it was... good. Clever, the way you played me. Right?" His mouth twisted as if he were about to grin. "And you taste as fine as ever, too."

I grimaced. He was watching for my reaction but all he did was shrug in response. "You have it bad for that kid – you think I can't see that? But he's messed up; he's not a free agent. He'll bring you down with him. Listen to me, Freeman, for your own good."

When I tugged my arm away, Miki didn't resist. I felt the chill all through my body and it wasn't because of the temperature in the office. I needed to leave, but my last steps to the exit were blocked by the minder, occupying the open doorway. He moved suddenly, surprisingly graceful for such a large man, and he swung for me. Maybe he had some kind of misguided agenda of

his own, to punish me because I didn't laugh at his employer's poor humour. Or maybe this was the usual farewell gesture for G's unsolicited visitors.

I moved sideways, my own gracefulness a surprise to him as well. His punch carried him past me, connecting with nothing but a hiss of blank air, and he stumbled awkwardly, his weight unbalanced. I stepped behind him, turning very slightly, just enough to get the right angle as I lifted my foot and brought it down sharply on the top of his calf. I felt his knee buckle and his top-heavy body slump forward, toppling through the open doorway.

He was maybe too shocked to cry out immediately, but I knew he would when his steroid-enhanced bulk hit the metal floor of the platform. That's what even strong men do when their kneecap shatters. I just stepped past him and left the echo of his screams at my back.

He was, of course, the man who'd laughed at me, that time in the club when Kit was with G in the toilets. He'd not be grinning again for a while.

Shit happens, as someone just said.

I left the warehouse knowing I was followed; knowing I'd been watched on my way here as well.

The chill saturated me.

#### Freeman Chapter 14

I made only one stop on the way back. I pulled into an electronics store that opened until late at night and went in to buy a replacement memory stick and some other computer accessories that I didn't really need. The place was big enough for me to snatch some privacy but busy enough that I was relatively sure I wouldn't be overheard on my mobile. Then I drove as fast as safety and legality allowed, back to the flat.

I let myself in, quietly. I didn't know what I might find. It had been a hell of a day.

The hallway was dark but there was a shallow pool of light from the living room doorway: the blinds had been left open as the evening drew in. I hadn't realised how long I'd been at the warehouse.

I walked along the hallway; there was no sound other than my boots on the wooden flooring. There was an aroma of cooked chicken, mingled with roasted tomatoes and basil, but the smell was only lingering, as if the cooking had passed through many hours ago.

The door of the guest room was ajar, so I looked in. The bedside lamp was switched on, but there was no sign of Kit except for his sports bag on the bed. It was unzipped and I could see the edge of paper in the side pocket that I'd tucked there earlier. The room was cold with absence.

I wasn't sure what my feelings were, but the strength of them shocked me.

I sat down heavily on the bed. There was still the faint smell of another body on the linen: or maybe that was in my imagination. But I've never considered myself as an imaginative man.

I ran a hand along the handle of his bag, glancing at the few items of clothing that he carried. They were folded surprisingly neatly. On the top of the clothes there was a pile of mixed papers and I thumbed gently through them. There were some flyers from the courier firm, ready to be distributed as marketing; some slips from the club announcing happy hours and forthcoming DJ

attractions. Then there was a fax confirmation sheet with half of a bank statement showing, the paper crumpled as if it had been picked out of a bin and smoothed out. I turned it over and found on the back a scribbled phone number, a number I knew to be a credit search agency. It looked like Kit's writing - I recognised it, because a couple of times when I'd been out, he'd pushed a note under my door. I still had those notes among my papers.

I pushed everything carefully to one side and found a photo underneath, lying on top of one of his shirts. It was a group shot - just for a second, it felt as if I were trespassing into a family's life rather than just looking at a picture of what was obviously a mother and two sons. The younger of the boys was so clearly Kit, although it wasn't a recent photo. He was shorter and not as slim: over the last couple of years he'd grown up in many ways. But the eyes and the smile were the same.

"What the fuck are you doing?" The sharp voice behind me made me jump.

I turned around slowly. The feeling of relief was so vivid that it raised goose bumps on my arms. Kit was in the doorway, dressed in nothing but loose sweat pants. His hair was matted on one side as if he'd slept heavily on it, and there were crease marks on his belly. He scratched absentmindedly at them.

He was angry, too.

"That's my stuff, Freeman. Who the fuck said you could go through it like some private snoop?"

I moved away from the bag a foot or so, but I didn't get up from the bed. "I'm sorry. I thought you'd... left. I thought there may be some information here I needed to know."

"Yeah, right," he snapped. He walked over to the bed, bare feet padding over the hessian rug on the floor, and he snatched the bag away. "I'm fine. I kept falling asleep on that fucking couch and it was easier to get comfortable there than come back in here." He dropped the bag on the floor at the far side of the bed, out of my sight. As he passed me, I smelled the soft warmth that skin has when its owner has been in a deep sleep.

"Where were you?" he asked, belligerently. "I left supper for you. It'll be spoiled now."

"You've eaten?"

He shrugged. "Some." He ran a hand through his hair and winced as he tugged some of it back to lie properly. "Still pretty tired, though." He yawned on cue; his anger seemed to have faded. "You want to heat up the food? You do that sometimes when you come in late."

"Yes, I do." I wanted to smile for all sorts of reasons, some of them not sensible. "But I'd rather you talked to me."

He frowned, puzzled. "About the scene at G's? What else?"

"No. About you. About your family."

His eyes darkened and he bit at his lip, reflexively. "Fuck you. You shouldn't go looking through a guy's things. Should you?"

I didn't answer that. "You have a brother?"

He frowned at me. "You never ease up, do you? Yeah, I've got a brother."

"The golden child. The first born," I said softly. I wanted him to know they'd been his words, not my mockery.

He grimaced. "That's what I called him, isn't it? He's smart and good-looking and she loves him best."

"No," I said.

He huffed sharply, as if he were tired of my stubbornness. "Whatever. I lived there, remember? You don't know what it was like; what she was like."

I breathed slowly and carefully. "Your father's gone?"

He nodded. He stood at the side of the bed, a foot or so away from me, his knee nudging at the edge of the quilt. He didn't meet my eyes. "Went when I was born. No problem to us, though. We can look after everything without him."

I nodded, though he didn't see it. "You don't get on with your brother?"

Kit laughed: it startled me. "Shit, no, he's great. Why wouldn't I? He's always my friend, you know, we're pretty close, pretty much feel the same way about things. It might've been OK at home if he'd been there more often. But he was away so much when he was in training, and when he moved out to be near his job and everything-" He stopped suddenly, cutting off the stream of information. His eyes darted to mine. "I already said fuck you, didn't I?"

"Yeah," I replied, and I smiled. "So what does your brother do, Kit?"

But he shook his head. "No, I don't want to talk about him any more and - guess what? You can't make me."

I nodded because he was right. I sighed gently. "Do you need to go back to sleep? I'll move - I'll go and make myself something to eat in the kitchen."

He didn't answer me. Guess the habit was contagious. "So where were you, Freeman? I bet I know; I bet I guessed right. You went to see G - and Miki. Did you find out anything about the drugs business?"

I nodded again. He was obviously waiting for me to say more, but I didn't. He made an angry noise. "Look, we could go and have another look at his office or somewhere -"

"Leave it," I said, sharply. "This is my business."

I waited for him to argue, but he didn't. "Was there trouble?"

I shrugged. "Plenty." But it'll pass.

He came and stood over me, then. It was a strange feeling, to have him looking down on me as I sat there. My head was level with his hips; the drawstring of his sweat pants was loose and frayed at one end, like it had been chewed. There was a small bead of sweat glistening in his navel. I lifted my eyes to look at his face.

"Was it me?" he asked. "Trouble because of me?"

"No," I said, and I meant it. "It's all because of me."

"Freeman," he said, softly. His eyes were very bright, very wide. I dropped my own gaze. "Freeman," he repeated. His voice sounded very young. "There's all this stuff with you and G and Miki that you won't tell me. You keep people out, don't you?" I heard him take a swift breath. "Me, too."

I shut my eyes briefly. "It's best for you, Kit, that's why. It's safest."

For a few seconds we were both silent. I could hear him breathing. His hand was clenching and unclenching gently at his side.

"No-one's been worried about that for a long time," he said at last. "About me." He grinned mischievously. "Anyway, who says I like safe?"

I laughed. That was so like him - the words; the boldness. I looked up to find him staring at me with those bright, sharp, lively eyes. Suddenly it was all about Kit; all about him. All I could think of, all I could want and need. It was as if I were sinking; drowning, but with no attempt to save myself. My sense stepped outside my body, gently shaking its head, watching as my heart beat faster and my blood turned from sustenance to desire.

When Kit reached down and put his hands around my face, I let it happen. His eyes had widened, as if he could somehow see what was happening to me. Stranger things have happened. "Did you like it?" he whispered, knowing I'd understand what he meant. "Looked like you did. I've been dreaming about it. I want to kiss you again."

I started to get up from the bed, but he moved more quickly, plumping down beside me, his hands still holding me and his knee pressing against mine. Despite his eagerness, his touch was more tentative than before. I'd expected him to be more confident. Maybe he thought I hadn't liked it.

But this time, it was my mouth that took the initiative; my hand that lifted and gripped the hair at the nape of his neck; my tongue that thrust into him, tasting the remains of his sleep and his surprise and his pleasure. When I fell slowly back on to the bed, he fell with me. He kissed at me as if he were hungry, as if he were desperate - it took my breath away.

The quilt crumpled underneath us as we rolled over; I leant over him, dipping my head down to kiss him more, feeling his hands gripping around my back and his knee nudging between my legs. He made that gasping sound again, his mouth opening as if to bite at me, then the teeth closing gently on my chin, teasing me. His tongue flickered against my skin, his breath was warm on my throat.

The whole room felt warm, now.

I trailed my lips away from his, kissing over his cheek, down under his jaw, lapping at his Adam's apple, feeling it jerk against my tongue as he swallowed. I suckled gently at the flesh below his ear, tasting it, not marking it, though I wanted to.

I wanted a lot of things at that moment.

"Freeman..." He gasped and arched up as my mouth nuzzled the base of his throat. "Shit. So good."

I pulled back from him a little, watching how his face creased with the beginnings of disappointment. I reached for the hem of my shirt and pulled it off over my head.

"Freeman?" His eyes were alight again and he was panting a little. His gaze ran over my bare torso; he licked his lips quickly, reflexively. "Oh yeah. Yeah." He wriggled underneath me, one hand pulling at the drawstring of his sweat pants.

I reached my own hand down between us and stopped him. "Wait."

He stared up at me, puzzled; needy. I could see the erection swelling under his pants - I could

feel my own, aching inside my own clothes.

"Don't rush," I murmured.

He bit his lip. His other hand was on my back, the short, blunt nails tracing some pattern on my skin, the fingertips pressing into me. "OK, so you said you wanted me to be sure. I am. I am sure, Freeman. I..."

"Good," I said. My voice was husky. "Because I am, too."

I bent down and kissed him again until the protests stopped bubbling in his mouth and his lips felt like they melted into mine. He was panting heavily now, and I could taste the laughter escaping from him. I slid backwards, moving off the bed to kneel on the floor, and I tugged his prone body after me until his legs hung back over the edge, either side of me. He started to sit up, but I put a hand on his belly and he fell still. His flesh was warm under my palm; his pulse throbbed through it.

I loosened the drawstring and tugged the sweat pants gently over his hips. They were loose and they fell down easily, the soft fabric crumpling around his ankles. He wore no underwear. He grunted quietly and lifted one foot so that I could slip the pants off it, then he kicked the other foot free himself. He was naked now; his skin was pale and warm; I could see the muscles of his slim thighs tensing up. His hands were open, his arms reaching up from the bed, but I was too far away for him to touch and they fell back on to the quilt.

I moved closer to the bed, in between his outstretched legs, and bent my head over his groin. I moistened my lips and licked gently at the crown of his cock. He groaned, and it jerked out at me, bobbing at my lower lip. He was fully erect already, his arousal curving up and back towards his belly, the tip swollen red and shining with the first beads of clear fluid. He tasted...

Remarkable.

I sucked slowly and very selfishly - I could have tasted him for far longer than it would take to bring him off. I slipped my hand under his balls, balancing them in my palm, feeling them nudge against each other; crinkle; swell. As they started to tighten up and his whole body tensed on the bed, I stretched out a finger and stroked the taut skin behind them.

"Fuck!" He sounded very startled, and his cock jerked and throbbed between my lips. "What the fuck is that? Freeman, Freeman - " He pulled himself up on to his elbows, watching me between his legs, his face flushed. He looked astonished. He started laughing, then stopped, then threw himself back down on the bed again, his head arching back into the quilt and his knees gripping against my shoulders. "No. Shit. I'm going to come, no - wait - no -"

"Yes," I hissed around him. I want you to come, Kit. And his dick spasmed inside my mouth, spitting out the first burst of cum. His climax was speechless, his back rigid, his legs shaking, but the warmth pumped into my mouth with its own welcome. I could hear him gasping: his groan was guttural. This time when he reached out a hand he could tangle it into my hair, and he tugged me to him, thrusting his cock in and out of me as his pleasure ran its course.

When he was done, I slid him slowly out of my mouth, letting the softening flesh trail on my lower lip for a moment's extra pleasure. My knees felt sore, cramping on the slightly abrasive surface of the rug. I stood up, stretching my legs, and looked down to find him relaxing on the bed and looking back up at me. His chest heaved gently and there were trails of sweat on the smooth skin of his belly. His pupils were still dilated.

"Wow."

I smiled. It was a word that I only ever heard from him. I didn't know if he were behind or ahead

of the street fashion with it, but it sounded good to me. His eyes flickered to my own trousers, tented rather obviously around the groin.

"Join me," he said, his voice hoarse. His hand patted gently at the quilt beside him. "I'll return the favour."

I smiled again, but I shook my head. "My bedroom's more comfortable."

His eyebrows raised but he grinned back. He pushed himself up to sitting and levered himself off the bed. I was very close to him and he bumped against me, still shaky, but that just meant that the brush against my bare skin was gentler; more tantalising.

His nakedness didn't cause him any embarrassment. He slid his arm around my waist and lifted his mouth to kiss me. I felt his hot tongue in my mouth, and his skin pressing against mine, slightly sticky with sweat, touching me all the way down to the waistband of my trousers. His fingertips brushed against my nipple; it was so erect that his caress was almost painful. His dick swung gently between his legs, still half-aroused and rubbing against my own clothed erection. That was more than painful - it was an ecstatic agony.

"Lead the way, then," he whispered into my ear.

## Freeman - Chapter 15

I walked along the corridor to my room a little unsteadily. The blood was pumping thickly around my body, making it difficult to breathe; to think clearly.

And Kit walked beside me, nudging up against me, kissing at my neck, touching my bare shoulder. He laughed; whispered; shifted his steps to match mine. He was excited. He was naked.

At the doorway, I flicked on one of the side lights, but then he grasped my arm and we fell forwards into the room. I was laughing by then, as well. We tumbled on to my bed: it was larger than the guest room bed but seemed covered all too swiftly with Kit's limbs, his hoarse words, his hungry movements.

The cool, solitary room had become something very different.

I couldn't stop kissing him. His hair was tangled in my hands and I used it to hold him to me, his head close to mine, letting his breath flow into my open mouth, my throat swallowing his words. The taste was intoxicating. I rolled on to my back, pulling him with me. His slim leg nudged between my thighs, parting them wider, and he slipped the button of my trousers. I shifted to one side, allowing him to unzip me and push the clothing down my thighs. I toed off my boots, then kicked the crumpled fabric off my ankles. His hands were swift and eager, stroking my legs, my hips, his fingers brushing through the hairs at my groin. My cock swelled, bobbing against my belly. The warmth of his flesh touched my own cooler skin and I shuddered.

"Kit..."

"Please, Freeman," he broke in, breathless. "Hush. Let me." What did he think I was going to say? He wriggled on the bed to lie beside me, his knee bent over my legs, his reawakening cock rubbing its heavy dampness on my thigh. He licked at my nipple, flicking his tongue over its tip, tormenting me. My chest was heaving, my breath shortening. Even without that, he knew what he was doing to me.



When he knelt up on the bed, straddling me, I looked up into his eyes. They looked fevered. "Lube?" he whispered.

I gestured towards the bedside cabinet. "There's a condom, too," I said.

He reached over to slide the drawer open, his thighs pressing around my hips as he balanced himself. "I'm clean, Freeman," he said, over his shoulder. "Never done it without. And it'll be better, won't it -?"

"No," I said. My hand trailed gently over the muscle of his calf. My eyes ran the length of his naked body as he stretched across me. "We use a condom."

"Whatever you say," he murmured back, surprisingly submissive. He straightened back up, a bottle of lube in one hand and a foil packet between his straight, white teeth. He watched me watching him, as he tore the top across and plucked out the contents. I was wondering how long the damned thing had been in there, because I'd not gone searching in that drawer for many months. He smiled at me, but there was nervousness in his eyes. "Whatever you like, Freeman. Whoever you like. Any name, any person – I can be that for you."

I frowned.

He didn't see, crouching down over me, squeezing out some lube from the bottle on to his hand and fingers. "Keep watching," he hissed. He reached between his legs and started to finger himself, easing his entrance, preparing himself. I watched, because I couldn't have done anything else. His cock was fully aroused again, jutting out from his groin, its curved shadow bobbing against his belly as he twisted. The shine of sweat on his skin looked silver in the muted light of my room; the smooth lines of his young body twisted gracefully over me, displaying himself. He knew how he must look; he enjoyed it, too.

"Freeman..." My name was an urgent whisper on his hot breath. He bent forward at the waist and licked at my ear. The desire shot through me like a flame. "I want you to fuck me."

"Kit..." I didn't know why I couldn't say anything but his name. Maybe I was afraid of what else I might say.

He reached underneath him again but this time it was to take hold of me. He ran his fingers up and down my cock, making it jerk with need in his palm, smiling when my hips thrust up instinctively towards his ass. He nestled the condom on the tip, rolling it down slowly over me. It was a smooth, confident move.

"Let me," he murmured, again, and he began to sway gently over me. His hand around my cock was loose, but he held my erection upright. The sweat on his palm slipped around the lubricated sheath, pumping me intermittently. His ass moved over me, brushing slowly back and forth as if seeking for the right spot. "I want you. I need you." He was panting, softly. "So I'm not the one you want, but it'll still be good."

"Wait," I said, even as my body ached for him and my hips thrust up again, wanting to possess him. "Kit... talk to me."

He was talking, but not the way I wanted. "I know you want him, don't you?" he hissed. The edge to his voice jarred with the soft words. Some of his speech sounded like it came from a script he obviously knew too well. "Tell me what you want. Tell me what you liked. Whatever he did for you, I can do it too -"

That was enough. I ran my hands up his arms and grasped them tightly at the elbows. His body stopped swaying and I felt the muscles of his legs tense up. I pushed him backwards as gently as

I could, until he slumped back down on my outstretched legs, his dick bouncing against the top of his thigh, his pale-skinned knees bent up in front of him. His eyes were wide and startled. "I'm sorry," he said, very quickly, like the words were spilling out. "I fucked up. What is it you want, then, Freeman, whatever it is, I'll do it -"

I released one of his arms and pulled myself up to sitting. I wondered how the hell he could possibly know what I wanted when I hardly knew myself - and I also wondered just how cruel he imagined I might be. My body felt stiff: I ached. My mouth had suddenly dried.

"Stop this!" I snapped. He looked shocked, and he flushed deeply. I spoke again, slowly and carefully, in the hope of making some sense; in the hope that he didn't think he was at fault. I knew I needed some water but I didn't want to lose his attention - not now. "You're wrong. I don't want Miki." It sounded strange, saying that aloud, but it was accompanied by great relief. Mine.

"He was madness for me, Kit - I needed to get away from him. The last thing I want is that all over again. Do you understand?"

His eyes were still very wide and his hands waved at his sides as if he didn't know what to do with them.

"It's you I want, Kit." I needed that water, but I knew that my voice would still have sounded hoarse.

He looked confused. His eyes kept darting to my body then back up to my face. "I understand," he said, and I wanted to believe that he did. He ran a hand over his forehead, nudging back the loose hair. Then he pushed himself back up on to his knees and leaned over me. The hair all fell over his face again, brushing against my bare chest. "I'm sorry."

"No need," I hissed. It wasn't him who should be apologising. "Look." I struggled to say more when his mouth was on my nipple and my best vocabulary escaped me. "This... I mean, soon I won't be able to stop." He stared up at me, his eyes glinting under rich, dark lashes. Why would I think of stopping, when I could see him like that? "I want this, but I can't play games. Is this what you really want?"

His confusion passed swiftly - the flash of anger returned to his eyes. "Stop treating me like a kid," he hissed back. "Just now, was that how you saw me? When you were sucking me off? Just a kid."

"No." Never.

"So shut the fuck up!" His voice was just a growl. His anger made his torso vibrate against my own. "You're not my family, telling me what they think I want, telling me what to do. Is that how you see it? You're not old enough to be my father. So who do you want to be? Brother? Minder? Fuck, I don't want you like that."

"I'm sorry," I said. My turn to apologise, and I meant it. His eyes were so very bright; so very passionate; so very angry.

"Shit." His anger filtered into a more general passion; his voice softened into a sigh. "Freeman..." He took a deep breath and when he exhaled, it rippled over my skin. He licked away a drop of saliva at the corner of his mouth and his throat bobbed as he swallowed. "You don't own me - you don't owe me, either. I do what I want, and this is what I want. You." His eyelids were growing heavy again: his hands stroked between my legs, reaching for me. He licked his full lips, an instinctively sensual gesture. "Take me."

My skin crawled with the anticipation, but I still held him at bay. "I don't want to be any of those things to you," I groaned. "But I don't need a whore, either."

He tensed up as sharply as if I'd hit him. I heard the grating intake of breath. "You're a real bastard, Freeman."

"No..." My voice was a whisper. "I don't mean you're one. Just your pity. I don't need it."

"A fucking bastard," he repeated, and I could hear the hiss of tears underlying his fury. "You think this is a pity fuck? You think I'm after something, just like with G? You think this is like that -?"

"OK, no, this all stops now," I said, sharply. I also thought I was being a bastard, and I didn't like the role any more than he did. "I'm sorry," I said, repeating myself, "I'm sorry, Kit." I folded my arms around him and pulled him to me. I kissed him again. And again, until I felt his anger ebbing away.

"You're..." My words hesitated, tripping me. I spoke into his mouth; I whispered across his lips. "You're beautiful. I'm a fool. All you're after - all I want - is this."

His lithe body was pressing against mine, his lips were on my throat. My cock was aching; nudging between the cheeks of his ass; swollen thick with need.

"Too much talking," he gasped. His voice was shaky but there was a smile on his face again. "Too many words, not enough fucking."

I smiled, too, and nodded. I agreed.

"Back," he hissed, pushing me back against the pillow. "So lie back and shut up."

He straightened up and reached between his legs again, positioning me at his entrance. His thighs were tight around my hips and my hands sank into the flesh of his buttocks, holding him there. Then he pushed down against the crown of my cock. He put his hands on my shoulders to steady himself; his eyes were half closed. There was a small bead of moisture at the outside edge of his eye, and he was whispering; moaning; his words barely directed in my direction, but I knew they were for me. "Do it. I want it." My cock slipped slightly in an excess of lube, but even touching him consumed me with excitement.

"Freeman...yes..." His head went back and he sank down even further - I felt the shock of his muscles resisting me, then peeling open like a bud to let me in. He slid down on me, tortuously slowly. I thrust back up into him, needing to be deeper. He sighed - a long exhalation of breath that sounded part relief, part delight.

There was a quiet moan in the air, and it was mine. My hand gripped at his hips, but I didn't know if I were encouraging him or trying to guide him. Not that he needed guidance. He pushed himself up and down off my shoulders, arching himself against me, moaning each time he sank down and took the whole of me, then sighing as he eased himself back up a little.

My whole body felt the sensations: I'd never known anything like the aching heat that shuddered through me. I watched his flushed face; his sleepy eyes; his tongue as it moistened his mouth; his lips as they stretched in wordless sounds. His skin was warm and damp with sweat as it nestled in my groin, and his fingers dug deeply into my neck and shoulders. "Freeman..." he whispered. His eyes flashed open for a second, sparkling amusement and shock at me. "Shit. So good."

I nodded again. Talking was far from my mind. I was desperate for release: I wanted it to go on forever. The contrast shocked me.

The final few thrusts undid me - I couldn't hold it back any longer. I stared up at him, seeking his attention, trying to explain. He was grinning at me. His pupils looked dilated, but from natural

reasons this time.

"Let it go, Freeman." He was gasping, and he paused for a second to lift one hand from my shoulder and fist it around his own weeping cock. I could hear the slick sounds of his pumping; I could feel the sudden contraction around me as I swelled even further inside him. I looked up at his body, straddled above me, moving very gently now, just enough to slide on and off the top of my cock, just enough to drag the sweeping, rushing ecstasy up and out of me.

I cried out as I came. My room hadn't heard such a sound for a long time. I moaned and I shuddered and I grabbed at him. My hand gripped his hip, fingers biting into the taut skin there, and I arched up off the bed. My vision saw colours then a bright white, then just brightness.

When my senses returned, I could hear my panting. I was laying flat back on the bed: my skin felt damp. I peeled my fingers from his flesh, apologetic, but he laughed as if it were nothing to him. He was still kneeling over me, my cock still deep inside him. He was slowly slicking his hand around his own dick, huffing out his breath as his own climax approached. I watched him – watched his eyes cloud and strands of his hair catch between his damp lips. I watched his fingers curling too tightly around the shaft, watched the head peek in and out of his fist and the glimmer of cum already oozing.

His eyes were glazed but he smiled at me. "Now," he mouthed.

I smiled back and nodded. His eyes widened with pleasure. His body shuddered and his hips ground down into my groin, keeping my softening dick inside him for a little longer. His own cock jerked fiercely in his hand and he groaned. The cum spat out in bursts, running down his hand to his wrist and dripping excess on to my belly. It was warm, and its stickiness clung to the hairs on my chest. I followed its trail with my eyes but I wanted only to watch him – his face; his grimacing mouth; his expression, mixed between relief and something that was almost astonishment.

He finished: his hand stilled and his head fell forward. For a moment, he was sheltered by the shadows in the room and his hair hid his face.

"Freeman," he sighed – not a question, not a sentence.

"Yeah," I whispered back.

His eyes peered at me through damp lashes. "Wow," he said, breathlessly, and grinned.

## Freeman – Chapter 16

In the small hours of the morning, I turned in bed and felt him there beside me. Kit lay nudged against me, naked and sleeping; snoring slightly. The shock was sudden, and then I was awash with pure delight. There was little light in the bedroom, but I could see the paleness of his skin, and follow the line of his body as it stretched out under the sheet. I watched him sleep with the careless abandonment that I'd seen in him before. I didn't disturb him.

It had taken a while for us to get to sleep in the first place. After we'd had sex, I took my turn in the shower, but he interrupted me with laughter and determination, squeezing into the cubicle beside me and dropping to his bare knees on the tiles. When I protested – albeit halfheartedly – he slipped soap-slicked hands around my legs to grasp my buttocks, and he sucked my cock into his mouth. I'd been limp and soft and he managed to take me in down to the wet hair around my balls. Very shortly afterwards – not surprisingly – I was fully erect and he'd withdrawn his mouth, gagging and spitting out spare hairs in protest.

I didn't listen to such complaints, not even from him. I drew him back up on to his feet, turned him to face the wall and parted his cheeks. He leant forward, his ass tipped up towards me and his arms against the wall to steady himself, and he cried out with pleasure when I thrust my fingers into him. The water cascaded down over my head and over our shoulders as we locked ourselves together there, the rivulets warm and sensual on my skin. I twisted my touch inside him, making him groan with need - I was careful with him, but so very eager that I was lightheaded with it. His head hung down between his arms, and the water ran down from his soaked hair, hovering in drops on his nose and chin. As I grasped him around the waist and teased even more at his prostate, his head jerked back and the drops skittered off his face, falling to the tray beneath us along with the rest of the wash.

It had taken him longer to climax this time, but not much. His youthful stamina was a delight to us both. He pumped his cock vigorously, wriggling back on to my hand, and the water made the skin of his ass slippery and soft in my grip. It was a new frisson to the joy of caressing him, of having him in my arms. He called my name several times as he came, shaking and gasping, then he coughed when the water ran into his mouth and I laughed. We both did.

When he turned back around and slipped his warm, wet hand around my cock, it took an embarrassingly short time for him to bring me to climax, too. My come dissolved off my belly into the streams of water, and he swallowed my gasps into his mouth.

We dried off and kissed some more and although my skin still shivered with pleasure, I knew neither of us could go again quite so soon. I fetched us glasses of water and we lay on my bed in the half-light, talking for a while, though I can't remember much of the detail. Kit was yawning again, and got up to make himself a sandwich. I hadn't eaten any supper but I wasn't hungry.

He came back into the bedroom awkwardly, balancing a plate of badly-cut bread in one hand with some fruit and tomatoes in the other, and what looked like a packet of crackers under his arm. I didn't remember ever buying them, but he did sometimes bring around his own supplies. He stumbled slightly and cursed under his breath and laughed again. He always ate a lot; tonight, he laughed a lot, too, and when he did, his belly tensed up, the muscles tight and strong. I watched his naked body weave its way back to the bed, full of an energy and liveliness that was only partly exhausted by the late hour and our sexual exercise. His hair was still slightly damp, and his long, athletic legs stepped their careful way over discarded clothing. His lower lip was caught up in his teeth as he concentrated on keeping all his snacks together.

He caught my eye and frowned. "What are you staring at?" Then he grinned, too.

Did I say I wasn't hungry? That only applied to food.

He'd fallen asleep soon after eating and had barely stirred since. I would have woken if he did, and yet I'd slept soundly as well. I wasn't sure what had woken me this time: maybe the alien feeling of another body in my bed.

"Freeman?" Kit stirred and gave a sleepy yawn beside me: his voice was low. "You OK?" His eyes glinted at me in the darkness.

"Fine," I said.

He sighed and rolled over on to his back. He sounded more awake now. "That's you all over, Freeman. Why make conversation when one word will do?"

I smiled, but more to myself than to him. "Go back to sleep. It's too early to argue."

He made a soft, snorting sound. "Right. Last night... you were different."

"Different?"

I felt him nod, the pillow dipping under his head. "I never heard you speak like that before... make sounds like that." He uncurled his hand, fisted up loosely in his sleep, and laid his palm on my thigh. His touch was very gentle. "It felt... like you opened up."

I was silent. His hand was warm on my skin. When he rolled back against me and pressed his mouth to my shoulder, I slipped an arm around him and held him close.

"This is... all different," he whispered. "Not like anything before. Not for me, anyway." He sounded confused again, though not distressed.

Me, too, I thought. I turned my head and kissed his face. Some of his hair tangled around my ear; his breath was hot, and flavoured with sleep and the previous night's food.

"Last night," he murmured. "It felt like I saw more of you."

I couldn't speak. I hoped he didn't feel the shiver that ran through me, but maybe he did - I was startled when he pulled away from me. He hitched himself up on one elbow, lying on his side and staring at me. He looked strained: half angry. "You sorry we did it? Sorry we fucked?"

I sighed, sharply. "No."

He nodded. "OK." He paused before continuing, and now his voice sounded nervous. "So until I find somewhere new to live... can I stay here a while?"

He didn't say with you, but the words hung in the air, regardless. I felt the tension in my body, tightening my limbs. "What about your family?" I said. "The people in the photo. You might go back."

"No," he said, just as sharply as I had. "I don't like going back. I want to do new stuff. I want to change things. Make them better."

I knew exactly what he meant, but we were talking about him, not me. "It's not always bad," I said, gently. "Going back."

His eyes dropped to study the mattress between us. "You got family, Freeman? Where would you go back to?"

I shrugged. "I wouldn't. My family are long gone. Instead, I've got people I care for and people I like to see, but I don't have to be with them all the time. I move around a lot."

"You came back here," he said.

We were both silent for a moment. Our breathing had fallen into the same rhythm. "Yes, I did," I replied.

There was a distant sound outside the building - a plane overhead, probably. We both listened to it until it had gone. Then he gave a small sigh.

"So you're telling me you'll move on."

"I can't say what's going to happen," I started to say. "Not for me; not for you. We'll just have to wait -"

"No," he said again, breaking in. "I don't want to wait until other people think it's OK - until other people make things happen. I want life to start now - to happen now. I want to make it happen."

He exhaled, a frustrated sound, and his head twisted to stare up at the ceiling. "But you're right, I guess. Now's good enough for me." His voice grew hoarser. "So you're not sorry we fucked. That's cool. Let's do it again, right?"

"Kit." I just said his name. His abrupt words cut across the cool night-time air of the room; they made excitement spike through my veins. "Look. It's fine for you to stay here for a while." I want you here, I thought, but I didn't say it aloud.

He nodded again, not replying, as if it no longer mattered to him. Instead, he leaned forward and kissed me. He started gently, then his tongue started to thrust into me. He slid a hand over my shoulder and down my arm to my wrist: he pinned it down on the mattress, his body poised over mine. His chest was heaving with shallow breaths, and his cock swung down, hot and heavy, nudging between my thighs.

"Fuck me," he hissed. "How do you want me? Or shall I fuck you, instead? I don't know if you like that, Freeman." He was excited, I could tell, but his body was trembling, too. His lips trailed across my ear and down to my throat. "You were so good, I came so hard. You can make me come like that again, I want you to -"

I slapped my hand over his mouth this time, gripping his jaw. His eyes narrowed, glaring at me over the edge of my palm. I threw off the grip he imagined he had on my other wrist, and put that hand more gently against his cheek.

"I said, no games." My voice was low; tense. "Don't say what you think you have to. Not for me. Do you hear me?" He nodded to me. He could have wrestled away from me but he stayed there, his eyes fixed on my face. "Only say what you want to," I continued. "Be yourself. Nothing more – and nothing for the sake of it." I released his mouth, and then held his face with both my hands. I could feel dampness on his cheeks that I hadn't noticed falling from his eyes. I brushed it quickly away with my fingertips.

"Fuck you," he said, but from reflex rather than passion.

"One day, maybe," I said, and I smiled. "But for tonight, I want to fuck you."

He frowned at me, but I pushed him on to his back and dropped my head to his torso. His nipples were like brown pennies on his pale, unmarked skin and I licked them like the treasure they were.

He moaned softly, and wriggled underneath me. He looked like he wanted to smile, but was afraid to. Maybe he was still confused. I didn't set out to do that to anyone, but I know it often happened. He was gulping air and making fractured noises that made the goose bumps rise on the back of my neck. The sounds were both exciting and unnerving. Of all people, I'd not want to distress him.

"Relax," I murmured. "Be yourself... say what you like... tell me what you want." I spread his legs, wanting to go down on him again, but he reached up suddenly and grabbed me by the upper arms. His legs gripped tightly around my hips.

"Get the stuff," he gasped. "Do me. Quickly!"

I didn't understand his panic, but I reached over him and into the drawer for the lube and another condom. I pressed his legs further up against his chest and he sighed loudly. His body was arching up, welcoming me, but his cry was a strange, guttural noise. "Kit?" His eyes were closed. "Kit," I said. "What's the matter? Look at me!"

He opened his eyes and they were wide with fear. "Did you do this with Miki? With others?" His voice sounded high and very young. "All this about being yourself... saying what you like... You

played some games, right?"

I frowned. "Some," I said slowly. "But I don't know..."

"And I don't know what to do," he whispered. His breathing was laboured: I put my hand on his chest to calm him. "Just me and you. I don't know what I'm meant to do. I only know the words they like me to say; I only know how it goes when it's just sex. That's cool... that's easy."

I stared at him, shocked. "It's fine. There's nothing you're meant to do. I'm the same, Kit – I'm the same." I spoke to reassure him, but I knew it was the truth. I had no template for this.

He was shaking his head, his hair tangling on the sheet beneath him. "Like fuck, you're the same. You've had it good before, Freeman. You were in love with Miki."

"No, I wasn't," I broke in. I sounded fierce and I startled myself. It was never love, though, was it? "We won't talk about him. You said it, yourself – this is just you and me."

"Last night..." He gripped me harder and his eyes closed again. This time, I did see a tear that ran down over his cheekbone. "You were good, Freeman. I never... had it like that before. Everything you did - we did. Fucking good." He laughed, shakily, at his joke.

I bent and kissed him. In a moment, I'd slide into him and feel again that keen, indescribable pleasure. First, I needed some other feeling; some other emotion to guide me.

"No games, you said." Kit was whispering again: his mouth reached up to kiss me back, swift and possessive. "That means you, too, Freeman."

I sank over him and into him and held him close, rocking us both together.

That was the truth, too.

## Freeman – Chapter 17

The lounge was cool and quiet in the early morning. Not even the muted sounds of commuter traffic outside reached in. I sat on the couch, sipping a second mug of coffee: Kit was still asleep. It was usual for me to be quiet at breakfast time around my flat, and I didn't want to disturb him. He needed the rest.

I'd given in to the temptation, though, and looked in on him after I showered and dressed. He lay sprawled out on my bed, half the sheet tangled around his legs. Despite the tousled hair and the flushed skin, he looked totally relaxed and fresh. Beautiful. I pulled the door closed on him as quietly as I could.

My mobile phone rested on the cushion beside me. When it rang, I answered quickly, wanting to maintain the peace. I was apprehensive, too. There was only a handful of people who had this number: a couple of them hadn't spoken to me for a long while, and another one lay sleeping in my bed. That left few other choices.

Her greeting was terse. "Freeman, you bastard."

"Stella." I bit back a greeting of my own. "What is it?"

There was silence for a moment. I thought I could hear a choked sob, which was upsetting.



"Stella, is there trouble?"

"You know there is." Her voice grated. "Because you fucking sent it, didn't you? You sent the police around, to wake me at some godforsaken hour; to crawl through my house like vermin; to harass me about where my husband is, where he's been, what he's doing right now."

I drew in a sharp breath. "Are you hurt?"

"Jesus, Freeman!" Her laugh was like a bark. "Not physically, of course not! But I've had better wake-up calls. All the time they were here I was thinking that you had to be the one who'd stirred it up – you're the one who wants revenge on G - and you were the one I'd ring as soon as I could get rid of them, and threaten to rip the guts out of for ruining my peace -"

"Stella," I broke in. "Sweet, that's not how it is."

There was a sudden silence, though I could hear her breath, harsh and heavy. When she spoke again, she sounded very weary. "Freeman, you shit, you haven't called me that for over six years."

I frowned. The pet name had been instinctive. "I didn't mean to upset -"

"No," she interrupted. She sighed, but very quietly. "I know. You wouldn't do it deliberately, would you? You're a manipulator, Freeman, but not like that. I'll give you that."

"Are they still there?"

She grunted. "No, just left. I was too angry to wait any longer to call you – I hope I got you out of bed, you shit, I hope I ruined your sleep the way they ruined mine."

"And G? Is he there with you?" I asked. I remembered the look on G's face, the last time I'd seen him, watching me turn tail and run.

She laughed again, just as harshly. "No. Things had been getting better, Freeman, honestly they had. But now he's away again, all the time. I could tell them that without any fear of a lie."

"You're not telling me the police haven't been around before," I stated, quietly.

She sighed. "Don't fuck with me, Freeman. Of course they have. We all know where we are on this – we know what he's like. But things have been quiet for a long time. Why did they come this time? What the hell's this about?"

I glanced towards the lounge door but there was no sound from the bedroom beyond. "Has he told you anything about his current projects?" Things may have been quiet to Stella's eyes and ears, but G's ambitions were never the modest type.

"What the hell are you talking about? He tells me very little. It's not like the old days. Shit, I shouldn't have to tell you that." She sounded far more bitter than when I'd last talked to her. The old days in G's business had been both good and bad - at least we'd all been involved, then. We'd all been part of the management. Now both Stella and I had been relegated to other roles - some less palatable than others.

Though maybe that was the good thing, now.

"Stella?" There was something in her tone that spoke above and beyond her fury. "Maybe he tells you little - but I'm guessing you know plenty. Who's fucking with who, now?"

She sucked in a breath - I heard the hiss down the line. "Look, I can't get involved. I can't afford

to. Dear God, you worked with him, remember? You know what he's like. I just let him get on with it: I let him run his little empire; play with his occasional boys; respect me the way he thinks he should..."

"So what's changed now?"

There was that sob again. "This is different. This is more serious. He's worried, Freeman, you know? He has been, since you got back - especially recently. OK, so he doesn't always come home, but he usually calls me. Last night, he didn't."

I'd left him at the warehouse in the early evening. He hadn't been uppermost in my thoughts since then.

"Are the police watching the house as well?"

"Probably," she sighed. "So maybe he's keeping away. He's stressed out. It makes him..."

Dangerous, I thought. "What were they looking for?"

"The police?" She sighed, again. "Documents; papers; illicit goods. I don't know. To be honest, the search wasn't very thorough. They missed most of the usual tricks."

I smiled to myself. Her voice was warmer, now, just as I remembered it in those old days. "And you'd know about that, of course."

She started to protest, then paused. She gave a rueful laugh, relaxing a little. "OK. So, yes, I would. Like I said, you're a bastard, Freeman. You know me too well."

"You've always kept an eye on things, Stella." I meant it in many ways.

She sighed agreement. "Sure. I need to know what I'm dealing with. Especially..."

"With him," I finished for her.

"Yes." She fell silent again.

"So what do you know about it?" I kept my voice soft. "Did you find something yourself?" She would have wanted to know what they were searching for; what G may have kept secret from her. She would have wanted to know.

She didn't answer directly. "I want to be angry with you, Freeman, for so many things. Do you realise that?" When I didn't reply at all, she continued. "I'm angry at you storming off all those years ago - for cutting us all off like you did. I want to be angry because when you return, everything goes to hell. I want to be angry with you for putting me between you and my husband - even between you and Miki. It's not fair on me."

"No." I agreed with her, even though I would have argued that it wasn't all my doing. "I don't like asking you to be disloyal -"

"But you will," she interrupted.

"And you'll tell me to go to hell, I expect," I murmured. "But Stella, it's like you said - things have changed. This is different. This time he's gone way over the line."

She was silent again, then spoke sharply. "I know."

All my senses were alert now. I wanted to question her, but it was my turn to keep silent. This

had to be at her pace.

"He rarely brings work back home." She spoke slowly; wearily. "He keeps the two worlds very separate, and – let's be honest - I'm grateful for that. But in the last few weeks, he's been transferring things back here - papers; disks; legal documents. There are samples, too. Packages; envelopes." She gave the softest of sighs. "It's a sign of how disturbed he is."

"The police didn't see these things?"

She laughed. It wasn't a happy sound. "Of course not. They opened the safe, they had a warrant for that – but, well, let's just say that these things weren't in that safe. Hell, they could have pursued the search, but it seemed to me they weren't trying very hard. One glance around, and then they were off again."

I breathed carefully. "Did they say where they were going next?"

"No, but I expect it's to the office."

I waited for a few more seconds, listening to her laboured breathing. I glanced at my watch. "Stella..."

"It's drugs, isn't it?" Her voice was stumbling. "I'm no fool, Freeman, I know he deals. But he's small-time, he's petty. He likes the money and the power – but he's not a user, and he despises those who are. That's partly why Miki never gets on with him the way you did -" She paused, then started again. "But this deal... I can't believe the sums involved. There are names he's never mentioned – places I'm pretty sure he's never been."

"It's a new kind of... product," I said. My voice sounded strained. "It's fast and easily administered. He tried it out on Kit, and the effects were disgusting."

"Are you saying you wanted the police to find it all?" She sounded very harsh. "To find him?"

I didn't answer that. "Is G at the office?"

"As far as I know," she snapped. "Miki's probably with him, as well. You're going there, too, presumably, despite your assurances to me that you didn't come back specifically to fuck us all up."

"Stella..."

"Yes," she said. "Dammit, I know." And she hung up on me.

I waited another couple of seconds while I listened to the echo of her voice in my ear. The flat seemed very quiet. I fancied that if I listened even more closely, I'd be able to hear Kit's breathing from the bedroom. My hands opened and closed gently, as if the touch of his body had been imprinted on my palm. In my mind, I could see his eyes shining; hear his laughter; hear his soft, stuttering gasps as I thrust in and out of him. I looked at my watch again.

Ten minutes later, I let myself out of the flat as quietly as I could. The traffic was light as I drove across town, though I parked the car some way away from G's office and walked back. It gave me the chance to check I wasn't seen, and to think about ways to get myself invited in again. I doubted I was in his day's diary.

I waited for half an hour or so, looking for an opportunity, but in the end, I didn't need to get inside the building at all. I was several yards away, on the opposite pavement, when I saw him through the glass doors of the foyer. There was a cluster of people around him and they paused by the front reception desk, some discussion going on amongst them all. I stayed on my side of

the road, slipping back into an alleyway between another office building and a private, gated car park. The security office at the entrance to the car park shielded me from view, although the angle allowed me to see across the road into G's block.

There were around a dozen people there, though most of them were huddled at the back of the foyer, and the main discussion was between G and a younger, dark-haired man. This man was speaking to him, and G was nodding along with it. He was smiling, although his visitor wasn't. They talked for ten minutes or so, and continued talking when they started to move slowly towards the doors that led back on to the street. Another man in the group came forward, speaking heatedly, but the dark-haired man waved him back with a sharp movement of his hand. G laughed, and I could hear the faintest echo of it across the street. He was the picture of perfect charm, of hospitality, inclusive of those whom he favoured.

Maybe I was the only one there who could recognise the tension that held him upright; that made his fists clench and unclench at his sides. He'd be satisfied when this meeting – whatever it was – was over.

The group paused again at the doorway, where they were in my clear view. I recognised a couple of G's minders in the background: I also saw a slim, pale, blond youth standing a foot or so behind him, moving at the same pace, his eyes never leaving G and his progress. G didn't acknowledge him in any way, though as he'd moved across in front of the reception desk, his hand had brushed at the boy's arm. It looked accidental, but I had seen that possessive touch before.

The visitor and his associates were taking their leave, though there was some further delay. The dark-haired man was obviously the one in charge of the group, and he was leaning in to G, questioning him further about something. A couple of the minders shifted restlessly behind them, though everyone was maintaining the illusion of casual bonhomie. G's smile never wavered, but a look of calculation passed over his face. He reached inside his well-cut jacket to pull out his wallet: he held it open for the other man to see, though it was artfully shielded from the remaining people there.

The dark-haired man went very still. I could see his expression tighten; his body tense. G never spoke or moved away. After a few more seconds, he closed his wallet carefully and slipped it back into his pocket. He held out his hand to shake the other man's, in obvious dismissal.

I watched the dark-haired man's face as he stared at G. He didn't return the handshake: instead, he turned away and pushed his way out through the glass exit door.

I watched him, not G, as he walked down the steps to the pavement outside the building. He was tall and moved confidently like an athlete, though his walk was stiff now, as if he held something in check inside his body that pained him. He was very handsome in a rather tousled way, and dressed in a smart suit and tie. They were obviously chain-store clothes, but he wore them with a certain amount of personal style. His companions were similarly dressed, appearing to any passer-by like business men or office workers.

Of course, that's not what they were.

As he and his group moved towards a couple of parked cars, I glanced back into the building. G still stood there, the blond boy at his side. He was smiling again. The visitors drove away: G relaxed a little, and turned to go back to his office, waving his own men off to wherever they mimicked legitimate work.

The blond boy tagged along at his heels. There was no sign of Miki. The receptionist watched them all disperse, but she looked faintly bored with the whole thing. Within a minute, the foyer was deserted again.

I tried to calm my breathing, to ease the anger that coiled tightly in my chest. There had been no shocking drama; for G, it continued to be business as usual. I knew some things; I suspected others. What I had expected, hadn't happened. I wasn't entirely sure what had.

My drive back to the flat seemed slow, though I think I ran a couple of red lights. The pain in my chest didn't stop.

In some areas of my life, I was pretty successful; there weren't many times that I got things wrong. This didn't feel like any of those times. When I let myself back into the flat, it was still quiet. It felt as if days had passed, instead of an hour or so.

The silence had no pulse. There was no sign of Kit.

I walked through the flat twice, though I knew already that he was gone. The rooms were cold and the air echoed with emptiness. His bag had gone from the spare bedroom, and a crumpled towel lay on the bathroom floor. In my room, the plate that he had used for his snack last night had been knocked from the bedside table on to the floor. There was a single, crumpled sock at the foot of the bed, half hidden under the overhanging sheet.

On my bed lay a photo. I didn't need to pick it up to be able to see what it showed me.

It was of Kit: bare-chested and facing the camera. He looked very pale, with wide eyes, the centres of them too dark to see his true expression. He was smiling in a strange, grim way. His body was draped back across a couple of men whose faces weren't shown, but I could recognise them easily from their shape. I'd know them in far less obvious circumstances. One of their arms stretched across his torso, pinning him against them, and another hand rested almost casually at the waistband of his jeans. The buttons of his fly were undone.

The quality was poor, though clear enough: it was obviously a copy from the film they'd taken. Maybe there were other copies out there, too.

G had a cruel taste in calling cards.

And Kit had gone back to him.

## Freeman – Chapter 18

It was early afternoon and I was still at the flat. Kit had been gone for over twenty four hours. I'd made some calls and completed some research: there were things that had to be done, though I struggled to make them my priority. I might have appeared cool to anyone else: my time might have appeared full of pragmatic activity. My sense, however, stepped outside my body, looked at the mess inside my mind and heart, and hung its head in despair.

When my mobile rang, I was at the laptop. For a second, my throat closing with unfamiliar emotion, I hoped it was Kit. It wasn't.

"Freeman?" Her voice was quiet, as if she didn't want to be overheard. "It's me again. They've been here."

"Tell me," I said.

Stella sighed. "G came back last night, very late. He said there'd been some problem at the office, though it was all sorted out now. He put some more documents in the safe, took supper in

his private room, and crashed out there. There were a couple of telephone calls for him, but he wouldn't take them. And before you ask, he wouldn't talk to me about any of it, either. This morning, Miki came around early and G left with him." She fell silent, though her tone implied she wanted to say more.

"Kit was with Miki." I stated it, to save her the trouble.

"Yes." She sounded cautious. "Freeman? Look, I don't know what's going on. The boy wasn't being forced or anything – I wouldn't have allowed that. He didn't come in, just waited by the door while Miki went to fetch G. He was quiet, but I thought that maybe he's always like that."

"No," I said. My voice sounded as if it were miles away.

There was a pause. "I must admit he didn't look entirely willing, either. He looked... resigned. I offered him some breakfast, actually, he looked like he needed it. When I suggested some eggs, he looked at me very oddly." She sounded puzzled. "Anyway, he refused. Said he had places to go, though I knew he meant G's places, not his own – and he knew I knew. He was saving me the embarrassment of having him in my house, I think." She laughed, suddenly and sharply. "A respect I don't get from G, perhaps. The boy's young, Freeman – but not a kid."

"No," I repeated. "He's not a kid." I didn't seem to be able to find anything else to say.

I heard her breath catch. "Dear God, I never heard your voice like that before. Not even when things were at their worst with G. Not even when Miki..." Her words trailed off. "Freeman, if I didn't know better, I'd think you were scared."

"Where did they go?" I asked. The words felt thick in my throat.

"Freeman." She didn't scold – she didn't pity me. But there was plenty in her tone to let me know she was shocked. "It's him, isn't it? You're scared for him; you've fallen for him. I didn't really understand before..."

"Stella... please."

"He's beautiful, it's true. And there's something about him that's very different. Sets him apart." Maybe she relented, hearing nothing more but silence from me. "Am I right?"

What did she want me to say? "Yes," I said. "He's very different."

"Hell," she said. "You've got it bad. Of all the boys you could meet... Strange, the coincidences that life throws up, right?"

"Right," I said. Where did they go? I would find them, regardless, but there was little time before everything started to fall apart.

"You're not going to let this go." She stated it, quietly. Her voice trembled.

"No, I'm not," I replied. "Stella, you can hang up now. I don't want you in any more trouble."

She ignored me. "Did you tell him?" she demanded. "Damn you, and the boy - did you tell him how you feel? You're such a close bastard. You never told me your feelings, except in jest, though I -"

"You knew them," I sighed.

"Yes," she agreed. "I did. But you never talked to Miki, either, when you were with him. You never told him such things."

There was another silence, rich with the memory of fierce, hollow passion. "With Miki, I would never have meant them," I whispered.

There was another silence. She spoke first. "Freeman, you remain one of the best, cleverest, kindest men I know. And also one of the stupidest."

"Right," I said, my voice dry. "Thanks."

"I'm telling you nothing new." She sighed again, and her voice changed to something both softer and more brittle. "Guess I'm as bad as you."

"No," I said, firmly. "No way."

She laughed, though I didn't know what she found amusing. "I thought I did the best thing for us all, marrying him – for me and Miki, at least. And maybe for you, too, Freeman. He left you alone, as soon as I agreed. He barely mentioned you again."

A chill shivered through me. "Dear God, Stella, I thought he was what you wanted -"

"Oh, he was," she interrupted. "The whole package was. There was no coercion. What did you think, I was some kind of modern-day sacrificial lamb? That's not my style. No, I was happy enough to be with him. He was smitten with me – they all said that – and he can be very charming, Freeman, you should appreciate that." When I was silent again, she sighed down the line. "I'd already made one misjudged marriage, remember, though I'm not saying that time was the worst of my life. Freeman, do you hear me?"

I smiled, despite myself. "Yes, I hear you." It wasn't the worst of mine, either.

"So marrying G seemed to fit everyone's expectations. It was the path of least resistance." She laughed again. It was more hollow than before. "It's not been all bad, but the resistance just got postponed, I guess. Now it's time for me to decide where my loyalties really lie."

"Sweet," I said, softly.

She tutted at me. "Enough about me, Freeman. You wanted to know where they went – I think they're at the club. It's where G goes when he's avoiding trouble. He can be protected there, and he rarely takes calls. It's also where he..." She breathed deeply and continued steadily. "Where he uses his boys, believing that he avoids upsetting or humiliating me."

"Stella." I didn't think we had discussed enough about her. "What will you do?"

She made a gentle hissing noise. "It's over for me, isn't it? My marriage – my comfort. If this blows over, he'll never forgive me for calling you about it all. And if it doesn't – you'll take him down, whatever way you've planned. You said you didn't come back for him..."

"It's true," I said.

I couldn't see her, but I knew she shrugged. "It's the same result, either way. I understand, Freeman. I never would have called you today if I didn't. I've been fooling myself for too long and it's time to cut my losses. I would have done it before, maybe, if it hadn't been for my own pride – and the baby."

"Don't worry about anything," I said. "I'll look after you both."

She laughed: she sounded surprised, but pleased. "Maybe I'll need you, that's true. But you've got other things to do first."

"Thank you," I said. "For alerting me. For watching out for him." For watching out for me, I wanted to say.

"I've made my choices," she said. "I'll live with them." There were tears behind her voice. I knew my words weren't enough consolation for her, and that hurt.

"Freeman, you still there?" I grunted that I was. "I'll be moving out, so call me on the mobile when you need me. Or... whenever. OK?"

"OK," I replied. I was already pulling on my boots and reaching for my jacket. "Stella ..?"

I thought she'd gone, but she answered me, her voice quiet. "What do you want?"

How did she know? "A favour. Just one."

She let out a breath. "If it's to do with G, I'd be mad to help you any further. Or suicidal. Wouldn't I?"

"I promise," I said, quickly. I meant it, too. "I promise that I'll look after the two of you. He won't hurt you." He won't be allowed to. I told her what I wanted: it wouldn't take much of her time. She didn't say yes or no, just listened. "Stella?"

"I'll do what I can," she said. "Don't pin any hopes on it. And, Freeman – about the boy -"

"What?"

"Try not to fuck it up," she snapped. "Any of it. All of it." And she hung up on me again.

I closed down my laptop and shredded a couple of papers that I'd been working on. I stood in the lounge and drew a slow, deep breath. The whole flat felt cold and suddenly alien to me. I looked around, no longer sure what I was looking for. I could hear the echo of another voice; see the disturbance of another body at the corner of my eye. It was all in my mind. It was time to go: there was no need to delay it any further.

I looked in on the other rooms on my way to the front door. I'd left the towel on the bathroom floor and the crumpled sock by the bed: I'd slept the night before on the couch and touched none of it, only disturbing the kitchen for breakfast. I stood at the door to my bedroom for the longest time, still imagining the smell of him in the air. The smell of us.

I closed the door to the flat behind me with a firm hand.

## Freeman – Chapter 19

I didn't expect to be welcome at the club, but I was met by very little security. Of course, I used the back entrance which wasn't exactly signposted. The couple of doormen I met on the way in looked startled, then stumbled back into other corridors. I presumed they had other work to do, though I doubted it'd be anything constructive. Maybe G would complain about not being able to get the staff nowadays.

Mind you, I'd heard that the guy I dropped at the warehouse was never likely to play team sports again. Maybe the men on the door had heard that rumour, too.



I climbed a short flight of stone stairs and let myself into the main bar and dance area through an unlocked fire escape door. The room had that sour, seedy atmosphere that clubs have during daylight hours. The décor was dark red and black: the paintwork was chipped, its surface shining unevenly under the cheap lighting. The furniture was mismatched and badly scarred, and there was a strong, underlying smell of spilled alcohol and smoke. The bar was against the far wall, but there were few staff around at this time of day. A lone young man in an apron rubbed a cloth along the counter, listlessly. He didn't even look up when I came in, and he left the room soon after.

I couldn't see G anywhere. Several more of his security men were hunched around a table in one of the booths like befuddled animals abandoned by their herdsman. A couple of them looked disturbed, fumbling with their mobile phones. I didn't have the time to give them a lesson in how to use them.

"Can't keep away, can you, Freeman?" Miki's murmur at my ear startled me. I should have heard him coming. In a far distant time, I'd have waited up all night to hear his footsteps. He walked past me now, until he stood between me and the others.

"Where's G?" I asked. Sounded civil enough to me, but Miki frowned.

"Somewhere he doesn't have to see you," he said, bluntly. "Why haven't you moved on?"

I stared at him. He looked good today, in pale suit and charcoal shirt. There were dark smudges under his eyes, but they enhanced an already handsome face. "Guess I haven't had time," I said. "Or maybe I still have housekeeping to do. Where's Kit?"

Miki laughed. He watched my eyes flicker over his shoulder, searching the room.

"Guess I know the real reason you stick around," he mocked. "Guess I know what's been occupying your time."

I ignored him and stared at the boy approaching slowly from the far side of the seating area. He'd been hidden from view in one of the far booths. He passed the group of minders but they didn't seem interested in him. Miki wasn't surprised to see him, either, but that was because he'd brought Kit here himself.

"Stay there, kid," he called, sharply. Kit stopped walking, pausing about three feet away from us. The other men were muttering amongst themselves, engrossed in a call that was coming through for one of them. One glanced at the three of us, then another one started growling angrily and their interest was distracted away.

Kit's head was bent forwards so that he didn't meet our eyes, but his body was rigid with tension.

"Are you all right?" I asked him, directly.

He peered up at me, then, his eyes wide and dark and puzzled, as if he were trying to read my mood from those few words. "Yeah," he said, quietly. He glanced at Miki and shrugged: he looked pale and tired. He pushed some hair back off his forehead. In my opinion, he didn't look remotely all right, but I respected his reply. His eyes told me more than his words. I saw fear there; surprise at seeing me; something warm; something sorrowful. All kinds of emotions.

"Freeman?" He looked confused, as if he didn't know what to say next. He was cautious of me. Or cautious for me?

"It's OK," I said, and I meant it. I wanted him to understand that. He watched me closely, his eyes widening: he caught his lip between his teeth.

Miki cleared his throat, loudly. I looked over at him. He folded his arms, leaned back on his heel and gazed at me.

"Freeman, enough of the lingering looks, I'm going to heave. Why the fuck are you here? Surely not just for him. You've only been playing with him, I know – and so does he."

"You're wrong," I said, calmly. "So very wrong that it's laughable."

I glanced back at Kit. He flushed and something sparked in his eyes.

Miki hissed, as if his breath had caught on something sharp as he exhaled. "Right. So how come when I called at the flat, he was on his own?" He glanced between us, smiling gently, including both of us in his entertainment. "Did you wonder how I got in to your sanctuary, Freeman? After all, I'm not the type to go breaking down doors."

"Depends how mad you are, being told you're not welcome," I said.

His eyes narrowed. "You don't mean that. Anyway, I didn't need to - the kid let me in, willingly enough. You'd left him, Freeman, without a word. He had no idea where you were – no idea what you were doing."

"Fuck you, Miki!" Kit's voice broke in, surprisingly strong, and we were both startled by it. "You think I'd have told you, even if I did?"

Miki was angry, now: I knew the signs. "Shut up, kid. Seemed to me you couldn't wait to pack your bag. Couldn't wait to leave."

I remembered the fallen plate; the discarded sock. All the signs of a hasty exit, for whatever reason. I spoke sharply, pulling Miki's attention back to me alone. "What did you say to him so that he went with you?"

Miki glared at me. "I just explained things to him. How things really are. Time he grew up, you know? It couldn't last - playing happy house with you; pimping his ass to you. Using you as some kind of rock to crawl under every time he has a kid's nightmare."

"No," hissed Kit, "not true!" but neither of us looked at him.

Miki moved closer to me: he lowered his voice, though it was still loud enough for Kit to hear every word. "If you wanted a good fuck, Freeman, I was always here." His eyes glinted like the reflection on a blade. "I told you that. You know that's what you really want – what you need. Someone who knows what he's doing. Someone who can make you cry out your need; someone who can make you ache to fuck, and be fucked, through every nerve of your body. You know it's true. Don't you?"

I took one step nearer in return. I looked into those dark, angry, fearful eyes that no longer moved me. "Crap," I said.

He paled. "Don't be pathetic. Lying to me, just because your pet is listening."

I shook my head. I never let his eyes leave mine. "No. I don't need to lie. You sound like you're in a cheap porn novel, Miki, and one I'm not interested in reading. You do what you like, but it's time I grew out of that puerile stuff."

His fists tightened at his sides. I don't know what would have happened – G came into the club right then.

"Freeman," he called over. "I suppose I should have expected you'd turn up." He paused in the doorway, looking between the three of us. He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Come for that job interview after all?"

I turned my back on the others. I could feel Kit's eyes on me. "I came for Kit," I said. "You have nothing else that interests me."

G laughed, softly. Out of the corner of my eye I saw one of the minders stirring from his seat, trying to attract his boss' attention. Maybe that engrossing call had been for G, rather than the thug who now grasped the phone in an over-large paw. But G frowned at him, refusing to be distracted, and walked on over towards me, stopping a couple of feet away. Behind him trotted the blond boy I'd seen before, though G seemed to ignore him. I glanced between his thin, pale face and G's robust smile.

"Seems your interest has shifted elsewhere, anyway," I said. "So we'll be on our way."

"No," said G. "You'll wait." With his gaze locked on my face, his hand reached for the blond head and grasped the boy's hair, loose and long on his shoulders. G tangled his fingers slowly into the locks, and clenched his fist, still not looking at his captive. I looked at him. He was close to tears.

"I'll decide whether you can go or not," G said. "Just as I do with Danny, here." He sounded quite amiable, though his hand moved sharply, tugging Danny's head around. The boy gave a soft whimper and G's face twisted with a mixture of distaste and excitement. I started forward, but then G seemed to lose interest again. Obviously, the moment had passed. He let go of the boy, who stumbled awkwardly back over towards the booths and the other men.

G looked briefly at his hand as if he wanted to wipe it, then glanced back up at me. "Whatever it is you want, Freeman, the kid stays with me. He's with us."

"Not any longer," I said. "He left already."

G's gaze didn't waver. "And then he came back. It was his decision, Freeman: he knows this is the place he has to be. And you know why, don't you?"

Miki had moved back into my line of sight, his hand around Kit's wrist. They stood halfway between G and me. If this were a re-make of High Noon, I'd have said they were taking up position for the shoot-out.

"Yes," I said. "I do know." At last.

Kit gave a small gasp.

G nodded, apparently satisfied with my answer. His eyes were fixed solely on me. The tension hovered there, suffocating us; enclosing us like a bubble that existed in just this one place. Miki and Kit watched from the sidelines; the security men remained in the background, still absorbed by the mysteriously troublesome telephone calls. Seemed I was aware of everyone else's position: was less sure of my own.

"You always were the brightest one, Freeman. The sharpest. The most inquisitive." G's eyes seemed warmer, but it had been many years since that look had fooled me.

"Let him go," I said. "You'll have to, in the end."

He shrugged. "Maybe. Or maybe he'll decide that he has a passion for this way of life. That would be interesting, wouldn't it? Let's see how we both feel when this current business deal is concluded. But for the moment, he stays. He's my insurance, you see."

I glanced at Kit. His eyes were bright with tears and anger. He bit his lip, staring at me as if trying to say things without words. I felt some of his anger was directed at me.

"Tell him," said G, imperiously. "Tell the kid you know why he's back here."

"His brother is a policeman," I said, slowly. I didn't speak directly to Kit: my attention was on G. "He's the detective who came to your office yesterday, to ask you about that current business deal that you just mentioned." The resemblance between the two young men had been striking; impossible to miss. Just as impossible as it had been to miss the way that G had dismissed him.

Miki was startled: he growled at me. "You were there? Dammit, G, he's been stalking us..."

G waved a hand, silencing him. He looked back at me, eyes dark. "You're right, Freeman. Too right, I think, for your attendance there to have been a coincidence. Did you tip them off in the first place? I have to admire your persistence, although you are sadly outclassed. Don't you think it a little childish, this mischief that you seek with my business?"

"Your business belongs in the gutter where it began," I said. "Drop the whole thing and get out of here while you can."

G stared at me. He laughed. "Dear God, do you really mean that to be taken seriously? It is, indeed, the stuff of melodrama. This deal is the biggest thing I've ever done, and you're just the very smallest part of it. I've only tolerated you this far because of old times, and... old friends."

"The police will break this up," I persisted. "They have enough to investigate the warehouse; the paperwork; your other businesses."

G was still smiling. He looked as if he were humouring a rather disobedient young relative. "They don't have the time, Freeman. The deal concludes in a matter of days. And you have a touching – albeit misplaced – faith in our law enforcement agencies. They've already searched my house and my premises, as it seems you know only too well. They found nothing incriminating."

"They'll search again -"

This time, his expression hardened. "Don't be naïve. That's why I have the boy!" He turned quickly to look at Kit, who flinched away. G laughed: the sound cut cruelly through the tension. "Apart from the obvious benefits, of course, provided while he was still to my taste." He turned back and his eyes were colder still. "As I told you, he's my insurance. While he's here, the police don't only lack the time to pursue me, but the appetite, too. Searches will be cursory – evidence will be mislaid. I know this for a fact, and these delays will mean that my business can continue unhindered."

"You're blackmailing his brother, to suppress the investigation?"

G grimaced with distaste, as if I'd spat on the floor in front of him. "You can be so crass, Freeman. It was often your style. Let me explain it to you, that the boy came into my club of his own free will: he sought a new life, and I was the one who offered it to him. I don't keep slaves, just... students."

I felt bile rising in my throat. I could see Kit's face out of the corner of my eye. It was even paler than before.

G continued. "But to find out that my new companion had a brother in charge of the local drugs squad was an unexpected bonus. The young detective is new to the role – ambitious. He first met me in less provocative circumstances, some months ago. A charity event, I believe, sponsored by one of my enterprises, and attended by the local police. The charity deals with youngsters who are in... difficulties, and he let slip that he was concerned about his own, missing

brother. I saw the resemblance at once. I was able to reassure him that his young brother was, coincidentally, under my protection, and that he had no need to worry."

"I'd say he had every need," I said, flatly.

"Please," tutted G, shaking his head. "You understand how my business works, Freeman – you always have. I remember that for a while, you were happy enough to enjoy its benefits. I thought it only fair to let the detective know the situation, too. The protection of the kid was contingent on leaving me to lead my life as I wished: to trade in whatever field I chose. Live and let live, I say."

"He agreed to that?"

"In the end, yes." G smiled. "He was wise enough to see that he had little choice, short of taking his own brother into custody. The boy had been with me for some time: he had accompanied me to many negotiations; worked in many of my own and my colleagues' establishments. Of course, he was only a distraction, he was never part of the management, but the implication was there, had I chosen to labour the point. The young detective was eager to avoid that potential humiliation. Their mother, it seems, is a fragile sort."

I saw Kit's body shudder. "I didn't know," he muttered, to no-one in particular. "I didn't know he'd met Arran. I didn't know."

"You didn't need to," G snapped at him, though his eyes remained on me. "Your brother and I had... an understanding. I would keep you with me – and he would keep away. It suited us all."

"Until Kit wanted to go his own way." My voice was harsh.

G sighed. "An unfortunate development, yes, and at a very sensitive time for my business plans. I really can't afford any disruption to the status quo, at least for the next few days while the final deliveries are being made. So Miki suggested we use a rather blunter instrument to concentrate the mind of both brothers. He suggested a few visual mementoes of the kid's time with me, to be available. Just in case."

I turned on Miki. "In case of what?" I spat at him. "What gangster movie is running on in your warped mind? People can't be bullied and held captive in this way."

He glared back at me. "It fucking worked, didn't it?"

I stared back, speechless for a moment.

G cleared his throat with the pretence of civility. "It did, indeed. When the young policeman arrived yesterday, full of fresh enthusiasm for his job, having apparently forgotten the agreement that we had -"

"He was persuaded otherwise," Miki interrupted. His neck was flushed: he was still angry, with me or Kit, or maybe both of us. "Persuaded to fuck off and leave us alone."

Kit wriggled against his grip, suddenly animated. "You showed him the pictures!" He sounded shocked and furious. "Fuck. The pictures of me. With you, that night, when you gave me the drugs. You must have done, or he'd never have gone away, like Danny told me he did..."

G turned around sharply. "Silence! This is nothing to do with you, do you hear?" I saw Kit's face go suddenly blank. It was a shock, to see the light fade from his eyes. "It seems that Danny has a loose tongue: that is a failing of so many of you young people. But he told you the truth. Your brother was very interested in the pictures of you with your friends. It was obviously a pleasant time. A rewarding one for us all. I'm sure that's what you remember – or maybe you don't." He smiled, softly, and Kit shuddered again. "It doesn't matter," G murmured. "He could see for

himself that it must have been good; you were smiling so willingly.”

Kit’s eyes were wide, the pupils dilated. “I didn’t know... “ The repetition seemed to be his only mantra. The tone of his voice snagged my heart like barbed wire.

G tutted with irritation. “Your brother needed to know that you were happy where you were. He understood it’d be a pity to jeopardise that, for the sake of a malicious tip-off. Everything is settled again.”

I stared at Miki. “It’s just a photo. It’s obvious it’s been staged.”

He shrugged back at me, dark eyes glittering. “Who bothers looking that closely? It’s on the system: it can be emailed anywhere in seconds. To the brother, to his family – to other police. They can all see what the kid’s been up to.”

“And with whom,” I murmured.

G nodded. “They are both bound to me now,” he said, softly. “Now, and for however long I want. Until the final deliveries have been made, and the debts collected in. The police will not stop me.”

“Then I will,” I said.

There was a sudden silence. Miki gave a short, scornful laugh.

G frowned and turned his head, as if to check on the men behind him.

Then several of the mobile phones started to ring, all at once.

## Freeman – Chapter 20

G’s eyes met mine, dark with sudden suspicion. I looked steadily back at him. He opened his mouth to speak, but he was distracted by the bleating of his men. They were stumbling over from the booths, calling to him, one of them waving his mobile like a trophy, another still yelling into his own.

“What the fuck’s going on?” Miki looked bewildered.

“Trouble at the warehouse,” grunted one of the men. He looked scared. “Bad fucking trouble.” Miki glanced at me as well, then he let go of Kit and went over to join the huddle around his boss.

I was left alone with Kit. I looked at him, and he stared back. He was flushed. “I had to come back,” he said, quickly. “Freeman, I didn’t want...” He bit his lip; swallowed deeply. “Miki told me they had something on Arran. Said they’d ruin his whole career. You know how they are. Didn’t know the thing they had on him -” He paused.

“Was you?” I said, softly. “Yes. They’ve played you off against each other.”

He peered grimly at me, as if he thought I might do the same. “Yeah. I’ve fucked up. Fucked all of us up.” His voice was shaky.

"No, you haven't," I said, but I'm not sure he believed me. In the background, Miki's voice was loud over the general confusion; calls were still ringing in. "Didn't you follow your brother here, to the city? Why didn't you go to him, explain it all..."

Kit grimaced. His neck was red. "Not that easy, Freeman. Never fucking is. OK, so I came here, same as he did, but I've never called him. Doesn't know I'm here - well, now I find he does, but it's too fucking late, right?"

I breathed carefully. "Why didn't you call him?"

Kit bit his lip. "Shit. You know. Had this big argument at home, one of many really, ever since he took this promotion. He told me to fuck off, I wasn't good for anything, couldn't survive on my own. The usual stuff." He scuffed the toe of his boot against the floor.

"You told me you get on well together..." I began.

Kit shook his head, impatiently; he looked distressed. "Sure. Usually. I mean, if it had just been him, maybe I would've tried earlier to make it up. But..."

There was always a 'but'.

"We had a fight this time. A real one, hit each other and everything. Mum screamed at me, some really bad stuff, said she agreed with him..." He frowned; turned his head away from me. "Look, it's done now. I just thought I'd really do it, leave home - show both of them I didn't need them." His mouth pursed; the words dried up.

I sighed, softly. "When did G tell you he knew who you were? About your brother?"

Kit didn't want to talk to me, and yet he did. I saw the conflict struggling in every line of his body. "I guessed. One of those times I told you about, when I was keeping quiet and just nosing around." He laughed, very softly. "I heard Arran's name mentioned. Then, the night they took the film of me..." He turned his head even further away - a childlike gesture that had a painful poignancy. "They talked about him. They told me they knew we were brothers; they laughed about it. Things sort of started to come together in my mind." He swallowed. "Bastards. I just... didn't know what to do about it. They've been threatening him all the time. Using me. Using him."

That seemed to cause the greater distress to him - the abuse of his brother, not any abuse there might have been of him.

"Kit," I said. I had little comfort for him, not here, not now. "It happens."

He threw his head back suddenly. Moisture shone in his eyes. "Yeah," he said. He sounded very bitter. "It does. And so does all this shit. You'd better get out of here."

I didn't move. "With you, I will."

He tensed up. "Stupid bastard. You and... me. It was good, right? But I'll stay here. It's my mess, my responsibility. When it's all over, maybe that's when I'll sort things out with Arran." And you, too, it seemed like he wanted to say.

"It's over already," I said. "Come away, now. Kit, do you hear me? Look at me." But he wouldn't.

Suddenly Miki was back, moving between us, pulling Kit back over to one side. The security men scattered like clumsy wooden ninepins as G strode back through them towards us.

"What the fuck's happening, Freeman?" he demanded. His tie was loose, his hair a little dishevelled where he'd obviously run a hand through it. He was angry, maybe the angriest I'd

ever seen him. "Don't tell me you didn't have a hand in this."

"I'm the very smallest part of this deal, quote, unquote," I said, quietly.

"Fuck you!" he hissed.

"What's going on?" Kit looked from Miki to G. Miki answered him, though he barely looked at him.

"The computers have gone down at the warehouse, the whole damned network's crashed. We can't get at the distribution schedule – no contact lists – no paperwork at all." He glanced at me: there was a glint of something dawning in his eyes. "They've been trying to fix it but no luck. Meanwhile, there's chaos at the docks. Customs won't let the stuff through without documentation; the couriers are getting nervous, they want out of there; and the damned 'phones are ringing off the hook, anywhere and everywhere G has business."

One of the other guys hovered behind him, mobile to his ear. The voice on the other end of the line was shouting so loudly we could all hear the tinny echo. "Everything's gone down at the office, too," the minder said, excitedly, nodding idiotically in response to the garbled, panicking sounds. "None of the passwords work – Lacey says there's crap all over the screens..."

G turned sharply and snatched the mobile away from him. "Get my diary from the back room!" he barked at the man, including any others that were unwise enough to be within earshot. "Get me the number of the docks supervisor, and Robberts, too, he arranged the supply. They all need to be contacted, this needs to be sorted out, and damned fast -"

"Don't bother," I said, raising my voice only slightly.

Everyone stopped talking and heads spun round to look at me. It was almost comical.

"Keep out of it, Freeman," muttered Miki. His eyes were wide with concern: for whom, I wasn't sure.

I ignored him. I looked straight at G. "The documents are gone," I said. "So are the files – all of the history. The customer lists and the stock tracking. Everything on your computer system. It'll take you many days to pull it all together again, if it's even possible. Meanwhile, without proof of ownership or the proper clearance, the shipments will be impounded at the docks. Then they'll be opened and examined, regardless of any spurious description you may have given them on the manifest." No-one else was speaking; tension cloyed around us like dirty smoke. "We all know what will happen when the true nature of the cargo is revealed."

"The crap on the office screens..." breathed Miki. He looked shocked, his dark eyes very bright. "You didn't steal anything at the warehouse that night, did you?"

G turned sharply towards him, frowning. "What are you talking about?"

"We thought he was hacking in to steal information," hissed Miki. "But he wasn't taking – he was giving. He planted some kind of virus."

"Impossible." G's expression didn't change, but he paled.

"It's spread throughout the whole network. We're fucked."

"No," said G, his voice suddenly hoarse. "It can't be. I have access security."

"Which I set up for you in the first place," I said, steadily. "And which – as I rightly assumed – you haven't updated regularly enough. Your password changes are infantile and easily hacked. All



security has been disabled.”

“It’s all gone,” muttered the guy in the background, staring at his mobile as if it were a live, albeit alien, being. “Lacey’s crying. She says she can’t boot up again, or something like that. Can’t hear her properly over all the phones ringing in the background. She’s crying,” he repeated, unnecessarily.

I took a step towards G. He was the only one I was interested in. “You should have got out when I suggested it.”

He was truly white, now. I’d seen men turn that shade before – the bleached colour of fresh parchment, but with the hollow shadows of a skull beneath. “It’s not all gone,” he said. He was controlling his voice with a great effort. “I will get that information together elsewhere. I have manual records. There are paper trails in my organisation...”

“Too late,” I said, relentlessly. “Every name on your customer list has just received a very informative email, alerting them to the problems your system is having. Their email correspondence is being bounced back; their ‘phone calls are the ones causing your assistant such distress.” I stared at him, watching his pupils dilate even further. “All of your customers know you can’t continue to trade. Certain specific customers also know that the contract terms of this particular deal will never be met.”

“Shit,” breathed Miki. The security men were looking dazed.

G’s eyes narrowed. He’d never been a man to surrender easily. “Freeman, this is pathetic, you can’t get away with this. I won’t allow you to. Someone go to my house,” he turned around, seeking Miki or someone he could send. “Go to my house and fetch the backup tapes.”

“Don’t bother,” I said, again. “They’re not there.”

G whirled back to face me. “What the fuck are you up to, now?”

“I have them,” I said, slowly and clearly. He looked as if he might not be entirely coherent at the moment. “Or rather, my bank has them. They were lodged there this morning.”

This time he allowed the panic into his expression. “That’s impossible.”

“You said that before,” I answered. “It’s a rather melodramatic assessment, don’t you think? Obviously it is possible, and I’ve done it.”

G stepped forward, shakily, but with menace in his eyes. Miki hovered at his side, the other men in the background. The minders were confused and suspicious of the whole thing – I didn’t think many of them would want to get involved in what looked to be G’s downfall; they would turn tail and leave. I just wasn’t sure how soon that would happen.

“You couldn’t have done it,” G hissed. “But I know who could.”

The silence fell again, but this time there was a sinister edge to it.

“I did it,” I repeated. “I took them. No-one else is responsible.”

“What’s going on?” muttered Miki. He looked between us. His own face was pale, now. “G, you can’t mean -”

“She handed them over,” said G. His voice was cold as ice. “My wife. Or the woman I thought of as that. Handed my private goods over to the troublemaker – the traitor.”

"No, she wouldn't!" Miki looked appalled. "It's a mistake. She's wouldn't get involved in all this."

"She wouldn't," I agreed, rather too quickly. "She isn't." It wasn't often that Miki and I were in full accord.

G shook his head, slowly. "Liars, both of you. I will deal with her later."

The chill through my body was a physical wash, but my next move was pre-empted. Miki moved suddenly, awkwardly, pushing himself between me and G. He reached out, grabbing at G's arm.

"You won't touch her," he said, his voice low and harsh. "Do you hear me?"

G stared at him, startled. He glanced down at the grip on his arm, then back up at Miki's face. "Let go of me at once. I will do whatever I please. Who the hell do you think you are, to talk to me like that?"

"Keep Stella out of this," Miki persisted. I was startled myself, at the passion in his voice. He'd been very close to her all those years ago: I guess I hadn't considered whether that was still so. "You think I don't see what's going on between you two, how things have been getting worse? Since you took on this deal, you've hardly been home – you don't look after her. Shit, I told her -" He bit off his words, but G was leaning back into him by then.

"You told her, what? Not to marry me in the first place?" He saw Miki's face twist with shock. "She told me that, dear boy; did you think it was a secret between the pair of you? She told me that her brother was worried about her, and I told her that he was a weak fool, that he was only trying to grab the attention for himself - not that we should have expected anything else from an usher who was drugged to the eyeballs all through our wedding service and had already fucked three of the assorted waiting staff before we cut the cake."

Miki flushed very deeply. I couldn't catch his eye. I'd never known that he opposed Stella's marriage; it was a strangely heartening thought.

"You're a bastard," Miki hissed back. "A bully. She's always been loyal to you, and I've worked my fucking balls off for you."

"What the hell do you think this is, happy families?" G looked disgusted. "This is a business – you're an employee. Every scrap of respect you have, I granted you: everything you have, I gave you."

"No," Miki interrupted. He glanced at me. "Not everything, you fucker." He straightened up suddenly, turning away from me, pivoting swiftly on the balls of his feet. He swung his fist up from his side and across his body and punched G squarely on the jaw. The movement had an awesome grace of its own.

G stumbled back with a grunt, his hand flailing up towards his face: there was a second's shocked silence. I heard a gasp from Kit, somewhere to the side, out of my line of sight. Then there was a rush of activity, accompanied by angry shouts and cries. G flung his arm out in Miki's direction and three of the minders surrounded him, moving with surprising speed. Miki was grabbed, his arms wrenched up behind his back.

Things were chaotic and confused, as if the seriousness of the whole situation had suddenly crystallised. G was rubbing his chin, barking furiously. A couple of the men looked reluctant to lay into Miki – another couple looked between me and G, even less sure of their ground. One of the mobiles continued to buzz, its persistent, plaintive ring tone cutting through the human babble.

Kit moved to my side. "Freeman?"

"We should go now," I said, sharply. While there's distraction to cover us.

He remained where he was. When I turned to face him, his mouth was set stubbornly. "Stella – G was talking about Stella, wasn't he?"

I nodded. I glanced over to the back door where I'd entered: it was unattended.

Kit grabbed my arm and pulled me back around. I was startled: his grip was stronger than I expected. "He's not going to hurt her, is he? She's cool. She was good to me."

I stared at him. To me, too. "She'll be fine."

Kit's eyes were dark. He shook his head. "Shit, Freeman, you think you're the only guy who can see things clearly, don't you? G is furious. You've really fucked him this time, ruined his business. If he takes it out on her..."

"I'll look after her," I said.

G moved without warning, back in front of me. The skin on his jaw was red, but he was resisting touching it. In the background, I saw Miki had wrestled his way out of the men's hold: their attention was split between him and G, and their heart wasn't in the job. Several of them had already left the room, and I didn't expect them back.

"You won't look after anyone, Freeman," G hissed. There was panic and hysteria in his eyes. "What do you think you've achieved here? Mayhem and hate, that's all, and I'll return it to you, tenfold. You're as pathetic as that little shit, Miki - riddled with your own weakness. And I know all too well what that is." His eyes glanced off Kit's face, though he talked only to me. "All you've done today is to ruin the boy's life, and that of his brother. You have no room to bargain with me, now. Everyone will soon know what fun this little whore has been having, just as Miki suggested – and how his brother's been turning a blind eye to it all."

Kit was stirring at my side - I put a hand on his arm, to hold back any rash protest. "That's an empty threat, G. You can't use photos that have been wiped from the system, along with everything else. With no evidence, it'll be the word of a policeman against the obvious spite of a commercial - common - criminal. No, the investigation will be re-opened and you'll go down this time." He was gaping at me. "I should have done it before," I said, almost softly. "That was my weakness."

"I have copies -"

"No," I said. I was weary of this, now. I wanted to be gone. "They were with the tapes, so I have them all now." They'd be burned, along with the original film. Kit and his brother were free of it.

Kit was wide-eyed, a flush of relief on his face. "Freeman... thanks -"

"Later," I said. He shut his mouth, abruptly. "Get out, G." I hissed the words, matching G's own tone. "I won't say it again. And don't go anywhere near Stella."

The man glared at me. He was still a powerful character, even in defeat. "So how will you stop me, Freeman? Stop me going to my own house, to collect my own property – to inform my own wife what's happened?" Miki moved back over to join us, suit crumpled, rubbing at an arm that had been twisted and sprained. He was panting lightly; his body shook with tension. G glanced at him with disgust, then back to me.

"Will you use your fists, like this childish streetfighter whom you used to fuck so eagerly on my business's time? This is all your own show, isn't it, Freeman, nothing official. You have no other

recourse. You might think you're judge and jury here, but no-one else recognises that. I'm still a private citizen, with all the associated rights."

"You won't go near her," I repeated. "You'll never speak to Stella again unless she requests it."

There was something in G's eyes that was both more and less than fury: a kind of agony. "She chose me, Freeman. She's been with me for years. We have a life together. She's mine! You can't stop me living my life, and you won't make me run, I swear to you. I have powerful friends – I can have all of you dealt with, all of those you selfishly care about. And I'll recover this deal yet."

Miki was breathing very heavily, too close to me to ignore; Kit's eyes were burned into my mind – that stubborn stare.

I shook my head, slowly. I took a last, long, deep breath. "I assume you mean those men who – like you – deal in filth and pain, and prey on other people's vulnerability. I don't think you can call them your friends – unless, of course, they continue to remain in ignorance of your various investment strategies."

He tensed up: there was a sudden, fierce gleam in his eye. "Some last ditch attempt to scare me, Freeman?"

I shrugged. "Whatever it takes. I have a copy bank statement in my possession, too. It shows some large transfers of money out of the business to an account that I know is your personal offshore one – or one of your personal ones. Maybe that's just your way of safeguarding your customers' money: maybe the money can be recovered just as easily from those offshore accounts, should anyone request it, though I doubt it. But I'm pretty sure how the laundering of your business's proceeds will be interpreted by the Fraud Squad." I stared at him, my own anger thickening my words. "Despite that, I expect you to be more worried about your customers' reactions, when they discover that their goods are not going to arrive, and yet you've both cashed – and privately transferred – their advance payments. I doubt these men will remain friends, in the face of such sharp practice. In fact, you might even begin to consider these friends as becoming more like your enemies."

G was speechless. Miki was staring at me with astonishment. "How the fuck did you get hold of bank statements? He shreds them all."

I turned then, and looked fully at Kit. "I'm not the only one who can see things clearly." I watched his eyes narrow with shock. "I saw the papers," I said to him. "The ones you had in your bag, before Miki came to take you away. You had a copy statement there, or part of one."

"I didn't know what they were." Kit sounded stunned. "I picked them up when I was in his office – before they started the... filming. I just shoved them into my bag, thought they might be interesting one day." He was pale, but his voice was strengthening. He was staring at me: the animation had come back to his face. "I wanted to find out about G. Ever since we found out about the drug deal, and everything. You've got all those links and contacts on your system, and Arran told me once about being able to do credit checks – I was going to do that some time, see why G had been shredding all that stuff. Then Miki came to the flat, and I didn't have any time left at all. I had to get my bag, but I took the papers out when he wasn't looking – left them for you. Thought you'd know better what to do; you might find something to use against him." He flushed. "Didn't know if you'd even find them."

I smiled, very gently. "I did." They'd been folded roughly and thrust under the piles of egg boxes in the corner of the kitchen. He must have asked for a glass of water, or found some excuse to go into the kitchen, then put them where he could: in a place where I'd see some connection to him.

"Where are these papers?" G's voice had the edge of mania.

"Safe," I said. "I won't hand them over, though. Not if you leave Stella alone."

"Freeman..." It wasn't a plea, because I'd never heard G beg for anything in his life, but it was a painful sound.

I turned my back on him, catching Miki's eye, instead. "You as well," I said. "Get out of here."

"Fuck off..." he began, but weakly.

"Yeah," I sighed. "She'll want you to go, too." She'll want her brother to be safe, whatever he's done.

Miki looked to Kit, then me, his face twisted. "Is this why you did all this, Freeman? Is this why you came back? To ruin us all? Did you just want to start again, back here in town - to find some pretty new toy, some brainless kid who wouldn't know what a bastard you can be -?"

This time it was Kit who moved swiftly. His punch was far less graceful than Miki's, a sharp, thrusting uppercut that owed more to passion than technique. But it hit its mark, and Miki rocked back on his heels, a look of shock on his handsome face.

"Don't call me brainless, you fucking pimp!" Kit hissed. I'd never heard such venom in his voice. Miki must have bitten his lip with the blow: a trickle of blood welled up on his mouth.

I grasped Kit's arm and pulled him back. He was panting, too. He shook his hand out, impatiently, wincing as if the punch had hurt him more than he'd expected.

Miki looked to G, but I couldn't imagine he expected any support from his employer, not now. Miki's loyalty had been found wanting, the same as the rest of us. G didn't even look back at him. Miki turned, pushed past one of the remaining minders, and stumbled from the room.

There were the three of us left, and two security men. One of them held a set of car keys in his fist. Obviously, G had been persuaded that flight was now better than fight. I kept Kit close to me as they moved towards the exit. G paused by the door, despite his men shuffling on their feet, urgency and panic mottling their faces.

"Of course, I'm not the only one with secrets I'd hoped to keep, am I, Freeman?"

I didn't answer.

He grimaced. "Took me a while to find out, but Lacey is both thorough and tenacious – apart from having the woman's touch. Other women talk to her more easily. They tell her things."

"What's he talking about?" Kit's voice was only a whisper.

G's eyes flickered with what he must have imagined was triumph. "Miki, though stupid, had it right. He asked why you came back, if not to ruin us all. But we know the real reason why, don't we?"

"Fuck off," I said.

G smiled, then: it was a gruesome sight. "Oh, I'm sorry, maybe you've not told your companion here. Maybe you've not told the kid. Of course, you might not want him to know. It might... colour his feelings towards you. Spoil his gratitude: undermine his compliance."

"Freeman?" Kit sounded puzzled.

"I'll explain later," I said, but I knew it was already too late.

G laughed aloud. "Let me be the bringer of good news, especially since your contract is now successfully complete. I'm right, aren't I, Freeman?" He turned to face Kit, the hatred in his eyes compelling. "You think your meeting with this man was accidental – your relationship carried on of your own free will. Of course you do, you poor, naive child. But I can tell you that it's a lie. It's all been a lie."

Kit made a very soft sound that maybe only I heard.

"He's been looking for you from the beginning," hissed G. "He's been searching for you; seeking to befriend you; to lull you into trusting him; all of it, just to keep tabs on you wherever you go. Freedom has never been an option, boy, despite all your foolish rebellion." G glared at me. "Isn't that true, Freeman? You didn't find this boy through any interest of your own – you were paid to! And although I doubt that fucking him was in the job description, you've done that, too, safe in the knowledge that there's no better way to run a recalcitrant fugitive to ground than to keep him in your bed." His voice lowered even further. "Maybe there's a bonus for that, Freeman. You make sure you ask your client."

He turned and nodded to one of his men that he was ready to go. He glanced back at me only once. Maybe he was satisfied with what he saw, because he was still smiling. Then they strode quickly from the room.

The door slammed shut behind them, rocking on its hinges. There was a sudden absence of activity, the air stilling around us. The fluorescent light was harsh and over-bright in the shabby room. I could hear my breathing very clearly, and it was far too fast.

Kit turned slowly around to face me.

## Freeman – Chapter 21

"What G said..." I didn't want to sound defensive, but was afraid that I did. "That's not how it is. It's not all true."

Kit just looked at me. "So how is it, then?" His voice was soft, but with little expression. Somehow, that was worse than outright anger. "You tell me. What parts are true?"

I tried to breathe normally but the tightness in my chest was restrictive. "I was sent to find you, that's true. Contracted to find you – a runaway, someone I knew only by name and brief description." That's my job, after all. Find things; source things. But I don't always know what I'll find when I start.

His eyes were wide but blank, as if he'd shut off the emotions within. It was so unlike the lively young man I knew.

Thought I knew.

He teased his lip between his teeth. "So who hired you? The police? Some social worker or other? Arran?"

I kept my gaze steady. "Your mother."

It shocked him. "What the fuck -? No, Freeman, that's a lie to start with. She told me to get the fuck out. She said she wished she'd never had me. She said I was a selfish, aggressive little faggot and she wished I'd vanish off the face of the earth."

I grimaced. Those words were an almost exact match to the ones I'd been told. "And she's cried every night since she said them. She's sorry, Kit. Bitterly sorry. She's been afraid that you might never see her again: that you might put yourself in danger."

"So she sent you to chase me back home." His tone was harsh: he sounded much older.

"No. It's not like that. She asked me to find you, just to see that you were OK. That's all she wanted: not to argue with you; not to plead her case with you; not to try to make you go back." Just to watch over you. I remembered the woman's frightened tears; her distress. Her genuine love for a son she'd always clashed with - a son she didn't understand, and with whom she couldn't seem to empathise, but loved regardless.

It had moved me far more than I'd expected.

Kit was silent for a while. He took a few steps towards the booths, maybe looking for somewhere to sit down. He glanced over at the exit. He stopped, looked down at his feet. His breathing was quick and shallow.

Seemed that neither of us knew what the hell was going on.

"So you've known it was me, from... the beginning?"

"No." I shook my head, but he wasn't looking at me. "Not that first night. I wasn't actively searching when I came to the club: I genuinely didn't know you were the one I was looking for. It's just common procedure, to check out the nightclubs and the casual labour in the city - where the hell else is there to run away to? - and the next day, when I went back over some of the details, that's when I realised." His mother had sent me some old, blurred photos in the mail, asking haltingly for their return as soon as possible... photos of a laughing, joking, self-conscious younger son, in happier family times. "I saw the likeness. I recognised you then."

"You knew about Arran? Being a cop here in the city as well?"

"No. I never knew anything about the rest of your family until recently." The things I didn't know far outweighed those I did. But those weren't the things that mattered to him.

"But you knew who I was when you gave me my name."

It was my turn to be shocked. "Yes, I suppose I did. But you didn't want to use your real name, and Kit fitted you - it seemed good."

"And it's short for Christopher," he said. That was his real name, of course.

"You knew that, too," I said, softly.

He grimaced. "Don't push this back on me, Freeman. You're the one who lied; you've kept your identity hidden, too. Your motives, at least."

"I never -"

"Fuck off," he hissed, the anger flaring at last. "Oh, of course, you didn't lie, did you? That's too obvious for you. That's Freeman - he doesn't lie, but he never gives away enough of the truth to incriminate himself. Keeps it all to himself. No lies, but plenty of half-truths."

I didn't know what to say to him. No-one had ever faced me with that before.

"You've been watching me ever since. Spying on me." He sounded puzzled, like the time he'd been filmed. "Why? Why didn't you just tell her I was OK, and let me get on with my life?"

"I tried to," I said, truthfully. I'd never been personally involved before with a client, or a client's business. Until now. "But she wanted me to stay on it. She wanted to know if you had any plans to go home." Her breathless, frightened voice had asked me to stay on his track. She'd had no idea what she was asking of me.

"You told her about G? About my jobs?"

"No." I hadn't thought that was necessary, but then those very things had created my desire to keep a personal watch on him.

That – and the fact that I wanted him. The tension growing inside me was a tangible ache.

"Shit." Kit was shaking his head, like he was running through our last few weeks together and finding other, alternative explanations for things that had happened. "Why didn't you tell me?" He was really saying, You could have saved me from a lot of this.

I accepted that. He had a right to all of this, now. "I promised her I wouldn't. She was my client."

"So what the fuck was I?" he snapped. He flushed, deeply. "No, don't fucking answer that. I was just your meal ticket, right?"

"No, you weren't. You think I need her money?" I snapped back. I couldn't help myself. "But she still deserves confidentiality, same as any other client. And you wanted to lead your own life, didn't you? You're not some kid who needs a nursemaid. Right?"

He gasped. He looked angry, but there was pain in his eyes as well. "Right. Of course – my eyes were wide open, I knew what I was doing. I made my choices, even though plenty of them were fucked up. And so all that shit that G said about you, maybe that's true, too – about fooling me, getting me to trust you. Fucking me."

"Stop it," I said, sharply. "Believe me, that had nothing to do with the job."

"Believe me, you say. But why should I?" He laughed, though with little humour. He was challenging me and all I could do was stare at him. "Too many half-truths already, Freeman."

"No." I felt I was losing control: maybe that had started a long time ago. "It was just a job, Kit – something a little unusual, in that I don't usually go looking for people. But I told you once, I get people what they need. Your mother needed you. I had some spare time and she had a lost son, and a recommendation from someone she knew who'd hired me before. So I agreed to look for you." I hadn't particularly wanted to come back to the city, for obvious, personal reasons. But I still had the flat, and I'd reckoned I had to face up to my past at some time. So – like I told Kit – I'd agreed.

"Just a job."

"Yes," I said. That was all.

"Working for my mother. Working on their side."

"That's..." I swallowed. "Kit, that's not fair."



He ignored me. "You found me, too. Found me with G."

I winced. "Yes." A particularly hideous coincidence, though I should have known that a lot of young men followed that path.

"And all his business shit. The drugs. The deal. Meeting Miki again. Like old times for you, wasn't it?"

I felt punch drunk. "Kit, all that came later. I never intended to get involved in G's business again." So much of it had been circumstantial. "I didn't know why he wanted you around; why he didn't want me in the way. Gradually, that drew me back in. I tried to keep a distance, in the beginning – I tried to keep away." From you, too.

"Yeah, I remember." He was searching my face, trying to find something there. "But I followed you, regardless. What kind of moron does that make me, eh?"

I took a step towards him, and he took one back. It startled me. Hurt, too.

"It all became mixed up," I said. Like me. "I found you, and I'm sorry - professionally speaking, I should have backed off right then. But I didn't. Nor did you." I tried to calm my breathing. "I'm not sorry about that."

Kit was silent. "And then the situation with G flared up again," I hurried on. "That had nothing to do with you – that was my own problem."

"You stop it," he hissed. I was startled again. "That's how you always act. Keeping me out – keeping me on whatever 'need to know' list you've drawn up in your head."

"I don't think of you like that. It's not like that." Was it?

"I just wanted to be with you." He stared at me. "I wanted to help you out."

"You did help me. Hell, I couldn't have passed information on to the police if you hadn't helped gather evidence of the drugs. I couldn't have protected you and Stella if you hadn't found those financial documents."

Kit was still staring. It was as if he were waiting to hear something in particular. "That's all?"

Wasn't it enough? He'd been brave and smart and I meant every word. I could never have wrapped G up so tightly without Kit on the inside.

"You helped me." I didn't want it to sound like a shrug; like a dismissal. "But there's been too much danger for you. I didn't want you involved to that extent."

He nodded, slowly. If it was meant to reassure me, it didn't. "Yeah. Danger's the word. Did I ask you to make those decisions for me?"

"No," I said.

His voice was cold. "Right. Nor does that change the fact that I thought I was something to you – now I find I was something else."

"No." Why couldn't I find any other words? Any right ones? "Whether you liked it or not, I needed to keep you safe -"

"Don't," he interrupted. "I'm not interested. Seems to me you don't really need things, Freeman."

It wasn't true. Maybe I'd only recently realised that, myself - and it was a shock to find that I didn't know how to say it.

Kit frowned. He looked distant, suddenly, as if he was too weary even to be angry anymore. "Anyway, whatever. I don't need this shit, Freeman. I want out."

Out? "Will you go home?" I asked, too abruptly. "Will you see your mother?"

He sighed, softly. "I don't know. There's too much in my head. You know?" Then he frowned again, as if he regretted sharing that. "I'll make my own mind up about it."

"Yes," I said. "I know you will, believe me."

"Yeah?" he said, sharply. "So why don't you tell me why I should."

I was puzzled. "Why you should, what?"

"Why I should believe you. About anything."

I stared back. I didn't know what he meant. What he wanted.

"Right." He nodded, slowly. "I know that look, Freeman. Your sort of, closed for business look. You do it far too fucking well." He turned towards the rooms at the back of the club. "I'll get my bag, guess no-one's bothered about me coming and going now."

"Where are you going to go?" The plea burst out. My tone disturbed me.

Kit didn't seem to notice my agitation. "Don't know. I'll think about it. Want to think about a lot of things, really."

"Let me know if..." I began. He turned back to look at me, face pale; eyes dark. I bit back my words, and started again. "Let me know you're OK."

He peered at me, a curious expression on his face. "Sure. Maybe." He walked slowly backwards, like he had that night in the alleyway, when we'd met up again - when I'd found him a name that he didn't have - when he'd told me he'd come round to the flat. He walked away from me, still looking at me.

"Kit..." I didn't know what to say. I stood stock still, my eyes following him, my breath being tugged further away, out of my body.

He shrugged. "I'll be fine, Freeman." He paused at the door, his hand ready to push it open. "You know - just for that minute, you looked kind of different." He laughed then, quite suddenly. A sharp, vivacious sound; an echo of how I'd often heard him in the past. "But then I probably never really knew what you looked like to start with, did I?"

And he passed through the door and out of my sight.

## Freeman – Chapter 22

It was looking like another quiet day at the flat: slow to start, and barely productive when it did. It'd been that way for a couple of weeks, now. Awaiting my attention were some increasingly terse emails from a potential client, and a couple of calls from my bank about investment

decisions. Not a lot else to attend to in the world outside.

I hadn't accepted a job since that day. Oh, I still had people interested in my skills - in my experience - but I just hadn't been interested in them in return. Instead, I stayed home and read some books; dipped in and out of some movies. I didn't see many of them through to the end, because I couldn't concentrate on the plot. I met Stella for an occasional lunch, but there weren't any other people whose company I wanted at the moment. I washed clothes and cleaned the flat fitfully. I bought food that looked fresh and inspiring, then I ate the bare minimum and ended up throwing large amounts away. I slept many nights on the couch - that was when I was actually able to sleep for more than a few hours at a time.

The place wasn't just quiet: it had the whispered moan of loneliness.

Being alone had never meant loneliness to me before. Being alone had been a choice; a pleasure; sometimes a preference. And, if I were honest, a sort of security.

If I were honest. That phrase had been haunting me.

I lay on the couch in the small hours of most mornings - feeling too much and thinking even more - and wondered how the hell I'd got so many things so very, very wrong.

This morning, I'd been surfing the net for an hour or two since waking, the results of my searches winking at me from the screen. I was sitting at the laptop, my only company its hum and the tap of the keyboard, when the knocking at my door disturbed me. I can tell a lot about a person from their knock. This visitor didn't have the nervous arrogance of a salesperson nor the careless impatience of a delivery. It wasn't the quiet knock of a friend - besides, the only person I expected to call was Stella. I was cautious, walking along the hallway.

I passed the overnight bag lying outside my bedroom door, tilted up against the wall. It was full, and carefully secured by its belt and buckles. It had been there for days. Each time I passed it, I looked at it; thought about why I'd packed it; then left it lying there. This morning I'd planned on breaking that pattern.

I looked through the spy-hole; wondered what would change if I opened the door. What would change if I didn't. I opened it.

"Mr... Freeman?" The man standing there looked startled, as if he hadn't expected me to answer: or maybe he hadn't expected me. He was a couple of inches taller than I was, dark-haired and with a pale, classically handsome face. He was a man who'd grown better-looking with age, and probably always would. He looked only a year or so younger than I.

I'd only seen him at a distance before.

"Just Freeman," I said, and he nodded as if he already knew that. There was a slight flush along the line of his cheekbones. "Come in," I added, and stepped back to let him through.

He glanced around the flat as I showed him through to the lounge, noting things as he went. Guess you can't take the job out of the man, even off duty. He refused coffee or tea, and I didn't press it. He settled cautiously on to my couch - I sat down on the chair opposite. We looked at each other for a couple of seconds.

"Arran Nevelson," he said, though he knew he needed no formal introduction. "Detective Sergeant Nevelson, though I'm not on duty at the moment." He started to hold out his hand, but before I could respond, he let it drop back by his side.

I nodded, instead. "What do you need to know?" I asked.

He frowned, but a small smile teased the corners of his mouth. "That was going to be my first question," he said, his voice pleasantly low. He didn't sound confrontational, though I was wary of him. I wasn't disturbed by any questioning he might have: I was fascinated by his face, seeing how the familiar features might look, at a different time of life.

"How is he?" I asked, quietly. I knew he'd understand who I meant.

He looked at me carefully, assessing me. Others had tried that in the past, with varying degrees of success. "He's fine," he said, slowly. Then he seemed to relax a little. "He's been at home, did you know -?" He paused, and restarted. "Well, he called me up and he wanted to talk, and so that's where we both went. For a while; for a chance to recuperate."

"To build some bridges?"

Arran nodded. His eyes were very bright, very sharp, and blue-grey, like his brother's. "My mother has been very glad to have Kit home. It's not an easy time, because they're not entirely comfortable together, nowadays. But it's a start."

"You called him Kit." I frowned. "Not Christopher?"

Arran shrugged. "He asked me to. It's just a name, right?"

"Right," I said. The sudden jolt of pleasure had been like a kick in the gut. I thought I'd been coping well with the strength of such feelings – or without them – but that was obviously another thing I'd got wrong.

"I came here to... thank you," he said, slowly.

I shook my head. "No need."

It was his turn to frown. "No, I must. For many things, and separate from my mother's gratitude. Personally, you saved Kit and me from serious trouble and public humiliation, and probably saved my job as well." When I started to protest again, he rushed on, his skin flushing heavily. "I was weak, Freeman. I let myself be blackmailed – and then my weakness let it continue. I should have taken better care of Kit; it was partly my fault he ran away from home in the first place, because I let my temper get the better of me. And then I should have had the courage to face up to the professional conflict when I was approached by G, and taken the whole situation to my superiors. Faced the consequences."

"Kit wouldn't have wanted that," I said. "He was shocked when he realised how you'd been compromised. He's proud of you."

Arran raised his eyebrows. "Kit? Yes, I suppose he is." He smiled, gently, as if at something outside of our conversation. "We've always been close. It's just been difficult... with me working away from home. And him being so wild."

"I don't think he is," I said, though I tried to keep my voice calm.

Arran stared back at me. His eyes darkened, then cleared again. "Maybe. Anyway, the crisis has passed, but I've disclosed everything to the force, and they're considering what to do about it. Maybe they'll take disciplinary action against me, maybe not. But it won't affect Kit. They've promised me he'll be protected from it all."

I let out a breath I hadn't know I was holding. "That's good. He shouldn't be involved any more." It hadn't been his battle. "Do you know what's happened with G's business?"

Arran nodded. "The investigation's been reopened. It's been passed to another team, though."

For a moment, his breath caught uneasily in his throat. "But I have friends there who keep me posted. It's being actively pursued: we'll get him in the end. At the moment, he's left the city and no-one knows where he's gone, but that won't last for ever." His eyes narrowed. "The evidence you passed us about the shipments – and the samples – it's all good. Helps us make the case."

I nodded. "Kit helped me get that all together."

"Thanks – and not just for the evidence, Freeman." Arran swallowed carefully. He didn't meet my eyes now. "You looked after Kit, too."

"He's not a pet," I said, softly. "He looked after himself." I just shared some of it with him.

Arran flushed again. "OK. Whatever. I just wanted to say thanks. And to see..."

"To see me?" My tone was wry, and he glanced up. Then we both smiled.

"Yes," he grinned. The sudden humour lit up his eyes, his whole body relaxing. "To see you."

To check me out, I thought, but I wasn't offended. I hoped that he kept his job: I deduced enough from this meeting to know that he was good at it. Meanwhile, he'd got up from the couch, straightening his jacket, ready to leave. His body moved with the same grace that Kit's had, though his movements were slower and more measured.

I found myself on my feet, abruptly, alongside him. "So... will Kit stay at home?"

Arran turned back to me with a look of surprise. "No, of course not. I mean, he's moving away soon, isn't he?" When I stared at him, he gave a rueful grimace. "I thought you might know that."

"No," I said. No, I don't know.

Arran was looking at me with something uncomfortably near pity, though it seemed to include us both. "Freeman, I can't say he hasn't made some bad mistakes, you know? I mean, he was difficult at school, and at home, all through his teenage years - he's always gone his own way. He questioned things: wouldn't conform. People liked him – they still do – but, I mean... his choice of lifestyle has put him in such danger." He bit back a sigh of impatience; frustration, maybe. It didn't seem an easy thing for him, talking to me about his brother. "I'm no fool, I've been in this job long enough to know what must have gone on when he was part of G's organisation, and I'm damned glad he's out of there. I'm not saying he actively invited all that -" He must have caught sight of my expression, because he paused, biting his lip in a gesture that was shockingly reminiscent of his brother's. "OK, I know, of course it wasn't his fault. But then, he told me a little about being with you... Don't get me wrong – I barely know you, and of course I can't deny what you've done to get us out of our mess. But I don't entirely understand where you fit in the whole story, you know?"

"Yes," I replied. "I know." I wondered exactly what Kit had told his brother. How he'd described being with me. Suddenly, it seemed very important to me to know. I probably never would.

"But despite all the mess he's been in - or perhaps because of it - I know him better than anyone. I know him for what he is, what he likes – what he cares about." Arran looked both bemused and pleased at the thought. "Sometimes I think he's another side of me. Despite the differences – all through the fights - he's still my brother, and I'm his. I certainly cope with him better than my mother does. He's not an idiot, and he's not deliberately cruel: and she knows she has to come around to the man he is now, rather than the boy she might have wanted. She was devastated when he left home, you know?"

"I know," I said, and he nodded, impatient with himself. Of course I did.

"She wants to understand him better – learn to respect him for what he is. It might take some time. But, like I said, I hope I already do." He was looking at me, looking for response.

"I don't know how well I knew him," I said, suddenly. "How well I understood him." I was rarely this frank with a stranger, and it was uncertain ground. "But it didn't matter. I wanted to know him. I wanted him to know me. To know..."

He watched as my words dried up. He nodded slightly; a spark flickered in his eyes.

"That's what he says," he replied. "Kit. He says that he doesn't understand you, but that it doesn't matter."

"It didn't," I agreed. Doesn't?

Arran had paused at the door of my lounge and I didn't know why. There was no need to delay his departure. He'd done what he came to do.

"I owe you, Freeman."

I frowned. "I said it, before. You don't. No-one does."

"Whatever," he shrugged. "But because of that, when he asked to come with me, I agreed."

I listened to his words. I heard what they told me. My heart clenched tightly in my chest.

There was the sound of another knock at the door. I knew the sound of this one. Arran raised an eyebrow. "Impatient," he grimaced. He looked down the hallway towards the door, then back at me. "I'm back on duty in an hour," he said. "I have to leave now. If he doesn't want to talk to you anymore – if there's any problem –"

"I'll make sure he gets back," I said. I sounded hoarse. "Wherever he wants to go. Whatever he wants. He's safe. Trust me on that."

Arran nodded and left the room. He took the liberty of going to open my front door for me. I was glad he did, as my legs seemed strangely leaden. I heard it close again, as he left. Then the steps that came almost hesitantly up the hallway, back to the lounge.

Kit paused as soon as he saw me, standing there in the doorway. He looked... different. The same features, but the way he stood and moved was subtly different - stronger; fitter; more confident. I was momentarily confused, though I realised what it was. He'd been home again for the last couple of weeks – he had better, cleaner clothes, though he still wore the same tight, low-slung jeans. His hair had been trimmed; he'd had better food and more regular sleep. He'd had the company of his family again.

"You look good," I said, quickly. I thought he might turn around and leave before I'd said it.

He smiled, slowly. I saw it lighten up his whole face: I followed every crease of the skin around his mouth. "Yeah, right." He shrugged; he looked a little self-conscious. "Things are OK, I guess. What about you?" His gaze darted over my shoulder, flickering around the lounge. "You working?"

"No," I said. "That's no to not working, and no to things being OK." My breath was too shallow to control: I felt too warm. "Will you have a tea or something...?"

He stared at me as I reached in vain for other words. He was searching my face, as if memorising – as if recalling; remembering. "Freeman," he said softly, neither reply nor question.

I felt something catch in my chest and a breath that was more like a gasp escaped through my lips. I felt as if something inside me started to unravel. The bindings slipped swiftly away, freeing me: sharp, silvered threads whipping away on the breeze, allowing me to breathe again, to feel again.

"It's so good -"

"- to see you!" He was saying the same thing, at the same time. I smiled; his eyes widened. We both started to laugh. It sounded rather ragged, but grew in comfort and familiarity.

My voice seemed to come from a long way away, but I was pleased it sounded so clear.

"Will you stay?" I said.

### Freeman – Chapter 23

Kit stared back: his laughter had trickled away, though the smile still lingered on his lips. "Will I stay?"

I nodded. "Like..." Like you used to. "For a while."

He bit his lip, watching me flounder. "Might as well," he said quietly. There was a flush on his cheeks. I didn't know whether it was from pleasure or embarrassment, though I'd never thought him the kind of person who was easily embarrassed. He shifted his weight on to his other foot, kicking casually against his bag. He'd dropped it on the floor of the hallway when he arrived. It was loosely packed. That could mean a lot of things.

"Of course," he continued, his eyes flickering over my shoulder again, "it depends what you've got in the kitchen." When I raised my eyebrows, he shrugged, grinning back at me. There was mischief in his eyes, now. "What? I can't help being hungry, and Arran wouldn't stop for a decent breakfast. You worried I'm only here for the food?"

"No," I smiled. Yes. No, not really. God knows. Before now, I'd kept many of my thoughts to myself. Maybe the time had come to speak some of them aloud. "Perhaps a little worried as to why you're here at all."

He peered at me, as if trying to see something underneath the plain words. "Chill, Freeman. I was just joking. I wasn't sure... you know." When I stared at him, obviously not knowing, he sighed. "Wasn't sure, if I came round here... didn't know how you'd be."

I frowned. Every fractured word of his stirred up the volatile emotions inside me. "You were worried how I'd be? I was the one who made a mess of it all."

His eyes widened. "But we both did that. Well, that's what I've been thinking. And I've been thinking about it... a lot." I just stared at him. He sighed again. "We both came out with a load of shit that day. It was just a shock, that's all. A room full of shock and drama. G being poisonous; Miki being a jerk."

"And my half-truths about it all. About me."

He was frowning now. "Yeah. I thought about that, too. But I reckoned it started as just a job for you, then you got wrapped up in it. It got difficult to talk about it - hey, not that you're any kind of chatterer. And I reckon I confused it all the more, coming on to you like that."

"That's not how it was!" I sounded very sharp. His tolerance was too easy on me.

He gazed back at me. His expression was blank, as if his emotions had suddenly closed up. "No, you're right," he said, more slowly than before. "That's not how it was."

We were silent for another couple of moments.

"How it was..." I began, softly. He started to say something, but I frowned at him to be quiet. "Let me have my say. It began as a job for me, that's true. I knew what the rules were. I knew where to draw the line. But then I couldn't stay out of it."

He was watching me, carefully. He looked more heavily flushed than before. "You had history with G, you told me all that. You knew what a fucking mess it'd turn into if you just walked away. Someone had to stop him, Freeman."

I shook my head. "No, it wasn't just that." I was determined to be relentless with myself. "I couldn't stay out of it because of you."

Kit just stared at me. He stood in my hallway and I stood just inside the lounge and we stared at each other.

"You didn't come on to me, as you put it," I said. Each word felt like a small, smooth stone in my mouth, ready to be spat out individually; carefully; almost painfully. "I was drawn to you, from the very first. I wanted you, even when I knew I shouldn't. It was all because of you – and that was my choice."

He sucked in a breath. His eyes glanced away. "Why shouldn't you have wanted me?"

"Because I was looking for you, but on behalf of someone else. Because I didn't tell you that I had a professional interest in you. Because..."

"Because you thought I wasn't good enough for you? Smart enough – old enough?"

My reply was like a growl. "Never that! Dammit, Kit, you really are -"

"What?" he snapped back. His eyes were on me; bright; challenging; damp with something I didn't want to see.

"Too smart!" I protested.

"So I didn't get in the way? I helped you with bringing G down, like you said?" His words were tumbling out. The tone was still aggressive but now the expression on his face was nervous. "You know, with the pills, and then the bank statement stuff."

"It wouldn't have happened without your help," I said, simply.

A look of delight suffused his face: it took him some effort to dampen it down. "I wasn't sure." He grinned, then, but it was mixed with an angry kind of grimace. "Fuck you, Freeman, I'm never sure with you! About anything. About..." He swallowed, awkwardly. His body was tense; his slender arms rigid at his sides. "Like I said, whether you'd want me to come around again... whether you'd have - forgotten. Moved on. Whatever."

I sighed. I frowned. I felt all kinds of fool, and some new versions, too. "Come in," I said. And then when he looked puzzled, I smiled at him. "Properly, I mean, unless you want to stay standing in the hallway."



He grinned again, more confidently. It was a good look on him. "For breakfast? Yeah, OK. What have you got?"

His eyes were very wide. There was a drop of moisture at the edge of his mouth that glimmered when he smiled. I felt a slight nausea, as if my balance had physically shifted. "Eggs?"

He tilted his head to one side and ran a hand back through his hair, mussing it up a little. It had looked groomed before, as if he'd combed it especially before arriving at my door. His movements were artless; graceful. My heart missed another beat.

"Maybe I fancy something different, Freeman." His tone was teasing, although he wasn't as calm as he wanted me to believe.

I shrugged. I wanted to smile even more, though neither of us had cracked a joke. "I'll see what I can do."

He nodded and walked past me into the lounge. The doorway was wide enough, and neither of us was very broad, but his hip still brushed against mine as he passed. I felt the breeze from his hair against my cheek.

It was a couple of seconds before I remembered to breathe.

We pottered about in the kitchen: I made the tea and he fried some bacon. He used extra fat in the pan, and piled the slices high on the bread, with extra sauce. Sandwiches had never looked and smelled so appetising. He put them on plates, but we stayed in the kitchen, eating and drinking at the counter.

"Your brother said you were moving away."

"Yeah." He'd finished all of his breakfast while I was still trying to get my mouth around the thick crusts. He cupped his hands around his mug of tea, lifting it to drink the last mouthful, and watching me over the rim. There was a stray bread crumb at the corner of his mouth: his tongue darted out to clear it away, then slipped back between his lips. "Just to the city – to here."

"Here?"

He grimaced. "Shit, Freeman, don't look like that."

"Like what?"

"Like you're shocked – like I might bring down the property values." But it wasn't a serious protest – he grinned at me and his cheeks were pink.

I smiled back. "I don't think that."

He shrugged. "Whatever. I'm going to share a flat with Danny: a couple of rooms, down by the industrial estate. You know Danny? He's the boy that was hanging around with G when I was..."

"I remember," I said.

"OK, so he's got no family, not any he can live with, anyway. He needs to stay out of trouble, though, so I said I'd go in with him. We can afford it, together. And I got us some regular jobs, in the restaurant." He was watching my expression: he was defensive. "Hey, it's a proper job for me, right? They're going to teach me to cook. I mean, Danny'll have to stick with washing up, he's no good with cooking or anything like that -" He broke off, frowning. "Freeman, what's your problem?"

"Nothing," I said, quickly. "I'm just pleased, that's all. For you. And... Danny."

His eyes narrowed. "Look at your face, Freeman, like you bit on a lemon. Sometimes you're like a fucking pane of glass. Do you think we're together like that? Like boyfriends? Like we're..." He broke off again. He sighed, quietly. "We're not. We're just friends. He's a bit slow, but he was company for me at G's. He'll be OK with me around - for a while, anyway."

I nodded. I knew I was smiling, and quite broadly, and I didn't want to pursue the subject of Danny. I was still ruefully surprised at being described as a pane of glass, even if it was only sometimes. Maybe I was learning, after all.

"You want some fruit?" Kit was peering back into the fridge, obviously still hungry.

"How are things with your mother?" I asked.

He paused: turned around slowly. He rolled his eyes. "You had to ask, right?"

"Right."

He tutted. "Things are OK, I guess. I mean, better than before. She was in a real state after I'd gone, Arran told me. I never really knew..." His eyes glazed over, maybe thinking of her. There was a gentle, but startled expression on his face. Perhaps he'd never realised how much she cared; how much trouble she'd gone to, to find him again.

He glanced up at me. His eyes narrowed, as if he caught something new in my expression. "But I won't be living at home again. She knows that, too."

I nodded. I thought she'd cope with that, now.

He held his empty mug loosely, maybe looking to refill it. He didn't move, though. "You have no idea what she said to me, Freeman. How bad it was."

"Yes, I do," I said. The air felt too warm; the kitchen too cramped. "But she regrets it."

He shrugged, but he smiled, too. "She thinks you're great, you know. Better than God and his fucking angels, all rolled in together. I'm the prodigal son, returned again, and you're the guy who found me. She wants to see you again - thank you again. Probably wants to introduce you to all her friends."

"That won't happen." I shook my head. The job was over. "Did you tell her about it all?"

He frowned. "You mean about G, and the drugs, and the bust, and - everything?" He saw the look on my face, and grimaced. "No. 'Course not. Did you?"

"No." I had refused my fee for the job; I hadn't offered any explanation, either. I'd kept my communication with the family to a minimum, ever since the last time I saw Kit. Partly because I didn't think my client needed to know anything except that her son was safe; partly because I had many things I didn't want to have to explain. And partly because I'd thought it might be the last time I saw Kit.

That had been a shocking thought.

He continued, nodding. "She knows there was trouble, because she knows Arran was involved. She's asked me about it, a couple of times." He shivered, slightly, his eyes on the counter. I think he thought he could hide his reactions. "Then she shut up. That suits us both for a while." He glanced back up at me, and grinned. "Keeping secrets together... does that make us partners in crime, Freeman?"

I smiled back. I saw the way one of his hands was fisted up, showing he was still tense. I saw how his thin tee shirt creased across his back; how his hair curled into the nape of his neck. "You helped me pull the whole thing together, Kit," I said. I put down my own cup because I was suddenly afraid it might snap apart in my tightening grip. "It was good to have you with me. To have you work with me. If that's being partners in crime, that's fine."

He made a small gasping sound. "I didn't tell her about... you know. About you. About you and me."

I nodded. I couldn't find anything else to say that wouldn't sound trite and inadequate.

He turned away from the counter to face me fully. The kitchen wasn't a big space: he was barely a foot from my chest. It was way too close for issues of personal space, yet not close enough for my liking. He looked into my eyes and I couldn't see any nervousness there any more.

I didn't move. He reached behind him and dropped the cup back on to the counter. It rattled awkwardly, then settled. The noise had been startling but neither of us paid it attention. His fingers were cool on my chin, pulling me towards him, closing the mere inches between us. His lips, in contrast, were warm, moving tentatively on mine. I opened my mouth, taking in his tongue and feeling it move inside me; flickering; seeking; tasting. There was salt from the bacon; warmth from the tea; sweetness that was pure Kit. My heartbeat increased rapidly and I could feel the sweat springing up on my neck.

As I pressed my head forward against his, he pulled back slightly. The shock jolted through me and I stopped at once. "Kit, I'm sorry..."

"No," he gasped. "Don't. It's me. I just didn't know... hoped... shit." He let out a ragged breath. "It's still good, right?"

My body ached for him; my hands fisted at my sides as I held back from touching him. "Yeah," I said, softly. "You won't hear me argue with that."

He smiled, though crookedly. His face was so close to mine that I could feel his breath on my cheek. "I was never sure what I was good for. Not like Arran. I just say what I think; act that way, too."

I lifted a hand and brushed my fingers along his jaw. My nerves shivered at the touch. "I can't answer for you, but to me, it's not a question of being judged good for something. The best – and the only – thing to do, is to be yourself. You're not Arran: you're you. That works for me."

"You said that before," he whispered. He nuzzled gently up against my hand. "To be myself, say what I want. It's not that easy, Freeman."

"No," I agreed. It had got us both in plenty of trouble. But it had got us plenty of pleasure, too. Life's a balance, right?

"I wanted to tell you to fuck off." His voice was low and his eyes half closed. "That day – and plenty of days since. I wanted to get away from you; hurt you back. Fuck knows what other secrets you'd been keeping –"

"Nothing," I interrupted, quickly. "There's nothing, not any more, not about us." He shrugged gently. I wanted him to believe me, but maybe it wasn't that easy. "I've made plenty of mistakes, Kit. We're so very different."

He didn't seem upset by my excuses: instead, his smile returned. "Yeah, you won't hear me argue with that. But it works, right?"

"It does." My hands moved of their own accord. One slid around his waist and the other slipped around his neck and tugged his head back to mine. "It does," I murmured, repeating myself, not caring. I pressed up against him again, guiding him back to the counter. I kissed him, slowly and deeply, and then with increasing passion. I slid my hands over his shoulder, running down his arms, reaching to grip his wrists. He whimpered softly into my mouth and my nerves thrummed.

I wanted to go slow; I wanted to be gentle with him, but the desire flooding through me was so strong, it was almost terrifying. I pressed his hands against the counter edge and he gripped it, my arms holding him there, my body straining so tightly against him that he was bent back over the surface. My tongue thrust into him, and I heard again that gasping noise he makes when he's excited. When he's aroused.

Then he nipped at my lower lip and I growled in reply. He laughed, breathlessly. "I want you, Freeman. I think about it all the time. Gave up wanting to tell you to fuck off – just wanted to tell you to fuck me, instead."

I groaned, the blood rushing straight to my cock. "I think about you like that, too."

He laughed, his hand sliding between us, reaching for the front of my jeans. "Yeah, right. I can tell. You're hard as the proverbial rock."

"No," I interrupted. "Look at me." When he stared into my eyes, his laughter quietening, I looked back with everything I thought and felt. "I think about sex with you a lot. But I think about you even more."

He kept staring at me, temporarily speechless. I kissed him again – fiercely – and then I let go of his arms and slipped my hands behind his thighs. I gripped hard and lifted his slim body, hitching him up to sit on the counter. I stood between his outstretched knees, his legs hanging down either side of me. I kissed him again.

He moaned softly into my mouth. "Do it, Freeman. Do it."

I reached for the button of his jeans, flipping it open. My hunger made me clumsy at first. I pushed the zip down and tugged on the belt loops, pulling the denim down over his hips. He leant his weight on his hands and lifted himself one cheek at a time, so that I could wriggle the jeans from under his arse and down his thighs. His briefs caught up in the jeans and were tugged down along with them. His cock bobbed up and out of his clothing: I could feel its naked warmth against my belly, through the material of my shirt.

He was panting. He reached for the hem of his tee shirt and peeled it up over his torso. I helped him pull it off his head, one of the armholes getting twisted. His foot kicked at my thigh as he toed off his boots, wriggling to get the socks off as well. The jeans slid to his ankles, and he kicked them off and on to the floor. He was naked, sitting on my kitchen counter and tangling his fingers in my hair to bring me in for another kiss.

I was panting now, too.

I pulled my mouth reluctantly away from the kiss, but there were other things for it to enjoy. I put my hands either side of him, resting on the counter, and I bent at the waist until my lips brushed the top of his arousal. He cried out. Then he leant back on his own arms, arching his back, letting his head drop backwards. "Fuck, that's so good," he moaned.

I smiled. I ached. I needed him. I let some of my saliva dribble gently over his cock, lubricating it, then I slid my mouth down over him. He leant back further, his shoulders pressed against the white tiles of the kitchen wall, thrusting his hips out towards me. We moved in instinctive rhythm – my sucking, my slow licking, and his shaky thrusts. We moved without words – his erection

filled my mouth so that I couldn't speak, not that I wanted to, and he seemed stricken into his own, shuddering silence. When he came, the only sound from him was a thin, almost plaintive wail. His come spat gently on to my tongue, his cock throbbing against my teeth. I relaxed my lips around him, still holding him there, as the climax wracked through him. He tasted... like Kit.

"Fuck," he gasped again. I let his cock slip out of my mouth and I straightened up: I could feel a thin dribble of his seed at the corner of my mouth. Before I could wipe it away, his hand curled around my neck and he pulled my head back to him. "Let me," he hissed. He licked at the thread – once, twice - swallowing it carefully. His eyes sparkled.

I felt heat in every pore of my body.

I took one step back, to allow us space to breathe normally again, but he wriggled forward, following me and lowering his feet back down on to the floor. He didn't stop there: he slid down on to his knees in front of me, lifting eager hands to my own fly. "My turn," he whispered.

"Kit..." I groaned, and he laughed. I reached a hand back to find some support and leant against the fridge door. He peeled open my jeans, pushing the fabric down over my hips, reaching inside my boxers to release my own, swollen cock. He laughed again, but with a catch in his throat this time. His fingers curled around me, his thumb rubbing the leaking come over its tip. I could hear my own panting and the slick sucking noises his hand made as it pumped me.

He never got to the return blowjob. I was too excited. A soft, embarrassed protest gurgled in the back of my throat and my hips thrust towards him, my cock jerking in his cool fist. He lifted his head to look up at me, startled, and then I came, the white come spurting out over him, the first spray over his nose and cheek, then the remainder hitting his chin and dripping down over his hand.

I shuddered, my fingernails scraping on the smooth fridge door, my body pressed back helplessly against its coolness. My head was spinning and my vision was blurred. When it gradually cleared, I looked down at Kit, still kneeling naked in front of me.

"Wow," he grinned. "Never seen you flushed like that, Freeman." He lifted a finger up to his cheek and wiped off a strand of seed. "You finished fast."

My breath was too short for any published health guidelines; definitely too short for any sensible reply. I frowned, put a hand under his arm and lifted him to his feet. "Fast," I hissed. "But that's only the first time." I trailed my finger through the stickiness on his chin, and I saw the expression in his eyes flicker hungrily. I snagged a kitchen cloth out of the drawer by the fridge, and helped him wipe the residue off his face.

"Bed?" I murmured.

He tensed up, suddenly. His skin was warm, bare against my crumpled clothes, and his arm was entwined with mine. His cock hung heavily below his belly, and when I took hold of him, it brushed against my leg. But he'd tensed up.

I was vividly aware of being exposed; my own, softening cock lying cool and sticky against my groin; the fly of my jeans still wide open. "Sorry," I said. I slowly let go of his arm. His discarded tee shirt and jeans lay at my feet: I hesitated, wondering whether to bend and pick them up for him. "I shouldn't have presumed..."

He put his fingers on my lips, stopping my apology. He didn't move away from me, but his eyes slid sideways, back towards the lounge and the hallway.

I found my voice. It was oddly hoarse. "You've got your bag with you. Are you going straight to your new place? I can take you there: I told Arran I'd take you on to wherever you wanted."

He didn't answer my question directly. His own voice was low, and unusually quiet. "So what's your excuse?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You've got your bag packed, as well." He tilted his head back towards the hallway. "I saw it there. You moving out, too?"

"Kit..."

"Shit." He grimaced. He shook his head, then ran his hand across his mouth as if to wipe the exclamation away. "Sure. I mean, it's your life, Freeman. You can do what you like with it. You said you'd move on, one day."

"I'm not moving on," I said. "Or out. Or anything. I was going to go and find you."

His eyes widened. The light shone in them, and it was more than a reflection. "Me?"

My throat was very tight. I wanted to draw his naked body back to me; to feel its warmth; to feed off its strength. The room around us didn't exist – my own body didn't exist, not fully. Only him.

"What's with the bag?"

I shrugged. "I thought it might take a while. I wasn't sure of the reception I'd get at your home, and I wasn't sure if you were there, anyway. I had some other places I thought I'd start."

"Find me?" He looked totally bemused. "Again?"

I grimaced. The irony didn't escape me. "Yes. But on my own behalf, this time."

"Right." He still sounded puzzled, but his mouth was twisting into a smile. "And you were going to keep looking, right?"

"Yes," I said, quietly. "Until I found you."

Silence for a moment. Then, "Why?" he asked, softly.

"To apologise."

"That's shit." He frowned at me, but his hand reached out and stroked at my shirt. It was a possessive touch: it didn't push me away. "What the fuck for? I know all about it now, don't I?" He looked angry; distressed. "You're an asshole sometimes, Freeman. I don't want apologies."

My voice sounded very calm; very deep. "Then just to tell you I need you. Want you. Missed you." It was liberating to say it aloud, whatever he said in reply. I caught at his hand and held it to me, pressed against my chest. "Whatever you want."

He leant forward quickly, startling me, and his kiss was a capture rather than a gift. "You took your time," he hissed. His eyes were wet. "That's exactly what I want."

I gripped him tightly, my fingers digging into his bare flesh, but he didn't complain. I kissed him hard, and then his head went back and I slid my mouth down to his neck and sucked at the throb of his pulse. He was moaning; his eyes rolled and his gently swelling cock trailed its wetness along the front of my jeans. I would have taken him, there and then, and he knew it. Instead, he twisted away from me, laughing, grabbing my arm and pulling me after him out of the kitchen and through the lounge.

I nearly fell over his bag in the hallway, but dodged around it, and we both stumbled into the bedroom. I left my shoes somewhere behind me in an open doorway; I left my balled-up socks on the bedroom floor, just like Kit himself had once done. I reached for him and he laughed and my fingers closed on empty air. He fell backwards on to the bed, then scrambled his way up to the headboard, his feet tangling in the sheets and his hands pushing the pillows to the side. He sat there, breathing heavily, a grin on his face. Then he beckoned to me.

I kicked off my jeans and boxers and followed him up on to the bed. I'd have described the tempo as indecent haste. He plucked at the sleeve of my shirt and my fingers fumbled to unbutton it. I shrugged it off my shoulders, then I took his face in my hands and I kissed him again... and again. The taste was different every time, and yet deliciously familiar, as well. When he wriggled underneath my equally naked body, turning his back to me and pulling up on to his hands and knees, I sucked in air that seemed dangerously thin.

"Freeman..." he whispered. "Take me." I couldn't find breath to answer. I knelt up behind him and ran my hands over his buttocks, stroking the pale skin, trailing a single finger down between them until I brushed over his entrance and made him gasp aloud. "Now," he hissed. His head hung down between his shoulders, his eyes half-hidden by his loose hair. "Tease me later, right?"

Right, I thought, finding the promise of that almost unbearably sweet. I reached to my bedside cabinet and dragged out what we needed. I wanted to spend time on him, caressing the skin around his puckered hole; slicking the gel around the entrance; playing a fingertip into him, then out again, until he thrust back on to my hand, seeking more.

He wouldn't let me: not this time.

"Get on with it!" he growled, low in his throat. I saw the muscles of his arms tighten as he braced himself. I slipped one wet finger into him, lubricating him as quickly as I could, my other hand rolling the condom on to my reawakened erection and slicking it with more lube. My cock felt heavy in my palm, hot and blood-red with eagerness. I pressed into him, and we gasped together. He pushed on his hands and arched his back up, adjusting the angle of my cock inside him. I pulled out a little way but plunged almost immediately back into him – I couldn't bear to lose the contact. With my hands on his hips, we rocked together.

"Ahh..." He made noises that stimulated me beyond belief. Soft moans; grunts of pleasure. I knew I might never have had this joy again – I knew I might have lost him. It made it all the more poignant.

He jerked, suddenly, his taut skin slipping in my grasp. "Can't..." he hissed. "Going to..." He'd lifted a hand from the mattress and was pumping his cock. His eyes were half closed. I slid one of my hands around his waist, supporting him, and tugged him back so that he was braced against my thighs as I thrust into him. His head went back and his hand twisted around himself in a figure of eight movement, and I felt the muscles of his arse clench around me as he climaxed. He cursed loudly, laughing as he did, then hiccupping as the spasms shuddered through him.

I held him all the while, his shock coursing through my own body. I pulled his upper body up off the mattress, hugging his back against my chest. I rested back on my own calves, and he collapsed down on to my lap.

"Freeman." It was like a sob. He was shaking.

"Hush," I said, my mouth at his ear. "It's good."

"Good?" He laughed again, his voice uneven. I could still feel his heart racing, his skin shuddering against mine. "Fucking brilliant. Said so, didn't I? Said so -" He broke off with a sigh, his body relaxing.

I murmured something into his ear that wasn't even a word. I could feel a trickle of his sweat running down my legs. My cock flexed impatiently inside him and he shivered. He turned his head to the side, looking at me over his shoulder: his look was mischievous again, his pupils still dilated. "You close, Freeman? How's your second time?"

I grimaced at him, amusement in conflict with agony. "Like I said – not so fast. But I need..."

He nodded. "Lie back," he whispered. "Can you do that, still inside me? Lie back."

We wriggled a bit, mainly to get my legs out from under us both so that I could stretch them out into a sitting position and lie back. He was still nestled on my lap, his back to me. He braced his feet either side of me and lifted up slightly. I groaned. Then he pressed back down, swallowing me inside his arse, up to the hilt – and he tightened his anal muscles.

"Kit!" My turn to sob.

He laughed, very softly – I could feel the vibration from his body. He lifted again, and plunged down – several times. I could see the skin straining over his spine; the muscles clenching in his buttocks as he moved up and down on me. His hand was on my thigh, supporting him as he rode me. His fingers dug in to my flesh and a trapped muscle twitched up by my groin.

It took only a couple more clenches and I came, too, crying out and thrusting my hips up off the bed, my hands grasping for his hips, seeking to sink all the more deeply into him. He held himself still until I stopped shaking, and then he lifted himself off me, slowly and carefully. He lay down beside me, and touched his lips to my shoulder. I lay there, panting, wondering why my own muscles felt like liquid. I left it to him to peel the condom off me – he could see my motor skills had temporarily deserted me. At least, that's what his broad grin implied.

"Freeman?" He whispered against my skin. "I said it was different... said it was something I never felt before. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah," I gasped. I stretched out an arm and folded it around him, pulling him in tight. "Perfect sense." He smiled – I could feel the movement of his lips against my chest – and I smiled too.

"Wow," I said, hoarsely, and Kit started to laugh again.

## Freeman – Chapter 24 - Epilogue

The soft midday light filtered across my bed through the blinds I still hadn't opened. Kit and I lay in the pale gold shadows and talked and caressed.

"Why did you come back?" I asked. I didn't know if I feared or welcomed the answer. "You were worried about my reaction..."

"Didn't you want me to?"

"Yes, I did," I said. I kissed him, to put emphasis on that. It made him grin, so then I had to kiss him again because his mouth had changed position. "But it's your life. I tried never to tell you what to do. I never wanted to make you do anything that you didn't want to."



"I know that," he said, sharply. "Fuck, Freeman. That's why it's so good being with you. You just take me as I am; let me get on with being me. But you still care."

I felt the breath catch in my chest. "I've been accused of keeping that too well hidden."

He laughed. "Sure. You do. But not when it comes to others. I came back because you were more worried about my mum than you were about yourself. Because you kicked ass with G. Because you looked like shit when I left you in the club." He shifted himself up on to an elbow, staring down at me. His voice slipped into a low, sly tone. "Because Stella told me you were still looking like shit."

I protested. "You've spoken to her?"

He grinned again. I watched it happen; watched the movement of his mouth; watched the genuine pleasure light up his eyes. "Yeah. She was cool with me, she gave me her mobile number. Just in case, you know?"

"In case of what?"

He grimaced. "I... well, if I was in trouble, or something. And then when Arran was talking about coming to see you... I needed to check you'd still be here, right?"

"Right," I agreed. "Very sensible."

"Bastard," he growled. He nudged me in the ribs and bit playfully at my shoulder. I tangled my fingers into his hair and pulled him in for a kiss. It stopped the verbal abuse.

When we parted again, he rolled on to his back, sighing. "Will she be OK?"

It was my turn to roll over and look down on him. There was a dappled pattern on his chest from the light, stretching finger-slim strands down over his outermost hip and thigh. I reached out and traced them with my own fingers. The touch of his skin was still on my fingertips; the taste of it still on my tongue.

"She's fine. She's got a flat not far from here. It'll do, until she gets the money situation sorted out, in G's absence."

"Good to be friends again?"

"We always were," I smiled. "But it's good to be near her again. And I can help her out, if she lets me."

"When the baby comes?" Kit frowned, and I laughed.

"Maybe. Whatever she needs." Stella knew I was there for her. She was quiet these days, still shocked from the way that things had turned sour in her life, but she'd survive. I was intrigued to know that she'd kept in touch with Kit. "Perhaps I'll be good with a baby."

Kit wrinkled his nose in disbelief. "Sure. We'll see. And what about the others? You still in danger from G, or anyone?" He was suddenly serious. He pushed a loose lock of dark hair off his forehead and stared at me. "He knows you're the one who ruined it all for him."

I shook my head. "He's gone for the time being – he can't afford to come back here. There are still plenty of people wondering where their money is. I'm OK. No-one else will cause trouble without him."

Kit shifted awkwardly on the bed. His head turned away from me. "What about Miki?" He cleared

his throat. "You seen him around since?"

I bit back the first response that came to mind. "No. He's moved on, too, and I don't know where." Maybe Stella did, but I wasn't asking, and she never told. "The police weren't after him in particular, but I expect he knew he'd be picked up for questioning if he stayed around."

"Freeman..."

"No," I said, quite sharply. "He won't cause trouble, either. I'm not looking for him, Kit. I'm not interested in Miki, or G, or any of that. Don't you believe me?"

"You say that..."

"And I mean it." I dipped my head and nuzzled at his navel. It was shallow and pale, and shivered deliciously when I licked around it.

He pushed at my head, but only half-heartedly. "Fuck off, that tickles. That's another reason for me coming back, Freeman. You care about stuff -"

"Stuff?" I queried. I began to lick, running my tongue slowly out from his navel and down to the base of his belly.

He gasped, but he was determined to continue talking. "You care, but you can't say it yourself."

I paused. His truth was always worth listening to. "I want to."

He nodded. "Whatever." He reached between my legs and cupped my balls, teasingly. "And don't stop the licking thing," he protested, softly. "I can cope with the ticklish part... with some practice, you know?"

I smiled, but I was watching the glint in his eye. Maybe he knew better than I did, what I meant. Maybe the words I didn't speak were as eloquent as those I did.

But that didn't mean I should be silent.

"You said once it seemed that I didn't need anything. I know that I do – but I need to say so."

"Sure, sometimes would be good," he said, nodding, but looking wary of me. Did he think I was angry with him? "Look, Freeman, I can be a bit of a brat. Arran told me so."

"Did he?" I resumed my licking, letting my tongue slide down to his groin, my breath blowing gently through the hairs. I nudged at his cock, watching it quiver; watching the sheath start to tighten again around it.

"What did you think of him?" Kit asked. He was careful to keep his voice even.

"Arran?" I hesitated. "He's good. Intelligent. Understanding."

Kit nodded. His hand was still on my balls, the middle finger stroking gently at the skin behind it. It made me arch gently against him, keening for the touch. He learned quickly. "I don't think he's sure about you."

I shrugged. "Sometimes I'm not sure myself."

Kit laughed aloud. "Shit, Freeman, don't go all philosophical on me now!"

I laughed, too. There was something about having him beside me - something about the vibrant

way he spoke; moved; thought. I'd never spent much time on the concept of happiness. Things in life were either good... or they weren't. Kit had made me rethink many things.

"Look..." he started, then paused. He bit his lower lip: his eyes dropped from my face. His hand stopped moving on me.

"Don't stop the stroking thing," I murmured.

He growled at me. "I've got to say it. I was unfair to you. Out of line."

"What?" I kissed at his belly, but absentmindedly.

"At the club," he sighed. "Shit, probably other times, too. I pushed you too hard, blamed everything on you."

"No," I said, gently.

He rolled over again, his body facing mine. "I got myself into that situation, Freeman. All that shit with G. I went my own way, and then I gave you hassle for doing exactly the same."

"The same?"

"You said it. You have to be yourself, too. You need to do things your way. The way you live here – the thing with Miki – the way you went after G. You didn't have to explain it to me, of course you didn't." He glanced across at me, his face flushed. "You're OK as you are, Freeman. Works for me."

I brushed a stray thread of hair off his face. I felt a warmth that had nothing to do with temperature. "Except sometimes I don't say enough." Like, I want you – need you – missed you.

He shook his head. The sheets rustled underneath him. "No, you say plenty. I just don't know the language."

"Not yet," I whispered.

He smiled. "So we're quits?"

I nodded.

"Then teach me," he whispered back. "There's so much locked up inside you, Freeman, you know?"

I know. "Yes," I replied. I put my mouth to his throat and began to kiss down to top of his ribcage. His skin was salty with sweat.

"So much more than me..." he hissed.

"No," I said. I chewed gently at his nipple, making him shiver. "Just different."

He ignored me, laughing again. "But it's hidden. Hidden deep..." His hand slid down my torso, the palm cool and damp. The muscles of my belly tightened up, enjoying the sensation. "I like to find things, you know. Things that are hidden... I could help you some more with your work. Be your partner in crime for real, how does that sound?"

"It sounds good," I said, gently.

"Yeah." He knew I was teasing - but maybe I wouldn't always be. He tugged suddenly at the hairs

around my cock and I gasped. "Let me find you first, Freeman. All that stuff locked up."

"You're not scared of what you might find?" It was only a joke, but for a second, I frightened myself.

"So scare me," he hissed, unfazed. He pulled his hand away and knelt up, swinging a leg over to straddle my hips. His legs bent gracefully; the muscles tightened to hold him there. He pushed his hair back off his face, and for that moment, the light glanced off his cheekbones and made mocking shadows of his eyes. "Maybe that's what I want. Let it go, Freeman. All of it. So, so much... burn me, bury me, scare me..."

I stretched out, my heart thudding in my chest. He laughed while he tore open the condom packet with his teeth; he gazed at me, licking his lips as he rolled it on to my cock, now painfully erect; he sighed as he slid his lubed fingers underneath his arse, opening himself for me.

"There's not that much to me," I gasped.

"Anger," he murmured, as if reciting a litany. "Compassion. Violence. Righteousness. Stubbornness. Loyalty. Passion..."

"Passion?" I reached up and gripped his hips. "We'll see about that." I pulled him down, pushing my own hips up towards his arse. "There's too much talking..."

" – and not enough fucking," he gasped in reply. He winced as I breached him – it was maybe too fast. But he pushed on down, and began making the soft, sensual noises that excited me so much.

And we spent the rest of the morning discussing things in that purely physical – and totally satisfying – way.

\*

In the afternoon, we touched and napped and then touched again. We weren't ready for more sex yet, though we'd talked about it, and kissed, and caressed as if it were one long foreplay. Kit lay curled against me: he yawned.

"You think I want to do it all on my own," I murmured, softly. "Be on my own. Keep it all inside. That's not entirely true."

He smiled, drowsily. "Sure, I know that. It's cool."

I smiled, too. At last, he was getting too tired for talk. "Stay longer, Kit."

He was silent for a second, then spoke slowly, not meeting my eyes. "I want to be in my own place for a while, you know?"

"Yes, I know." And I did.

"But..." He yawned again. "Doesn't mean I won't stay over now and then. Doesn't mean I don't need somewhere to live while Danny gets our place ready."

I stirred. "Huh?"

Kit laughed, sluggish in my arms. "It's going to be a couple of weeks before we can move in. And

they don't need me at the restaurant until the end of the month. Didn't I mention all that?"

I didn't bother replying – he knew the answer to that as well as I did. I kissed his neck, gently, savouring the taut skin and the hairs that brushed my nose.

"I'm glad you found me, Freeman," he sighed, sleepily. "But I just want to rest for a bit now. Wake me when it's time for supper, OK?"

He turned into me, resting his head on my shoulder. After a few seconds, his breathing started to slow, and I knew he'd fallen asleep.

I'd tell him later that I was glad, too.

End