

Chapter 1

Frankie stirred the pot. Boxed macaroni—again. It wasn't the only thing he had, but the only thing he had time for. Even taking a second to stir the boiling pot was pushing it, his grandfather already moaning quietly on the couch.

He hurried to him, gazing into his eyes to see what he needed. That's the only way he could tell, especially since he couldn't speak very well.

"What is it, grandpa?"

He straightened his buttoned shirt and adjusted the pillow his arm leaned on.

"You want to listen to something else?"

That's usually what it was. Eventually the radio station would start to play the same songs over. There wasn't much entertainment since the occupation, but radio blew up again- talk shows, Audiodrama, news. Thank God for it too.

They had a bit more in the city, compared to the countryside. Out there, they still had to walk to markets and ration food. But in the city, the tram was up and running—the best change since the British took over.

There was a surplus of people, so you think that'd mean more work for everyone, but there was less. They got all their food from the countryside, so that left tailors, shoemakers, and the likes, but you only need so many of those. Thousands of people were moved to the countryside, and those who weren't took to the streets. But that looked different to everyone. For some, that was crime, for others that was opening a restaurant or bar, there was even a comedy club, so Frankie heard. Money wasn't worth much, unless it was coin, so everyone got paid with metal- copper, nickel, steel, brass, anything you could turn into something else. Paper money was more like toilet paper or something you used to pick gum off your shoe.

Frankie ran back to the kitchen, the mac and cheese now burning into the pot. Hopefully it wouldn't set off the smoke alarm- then a soldier would have to investigate. He hated that. They always asked about his grandfather, and why he just sat there staring off, then asked if he wanted them to put him down.

He had an accident, years ago, even before the occupation. In fact, Frankie wasn't exactly sure what happened, he only knew his grandpa was lucky to be alive. It was fine when his whole family was around. Even after his grandmother passed, it wasn't so bad. But the British took over, then his father and sister were sent to be farmers then after a few months his mother left. It was too much for her. But life was a bitch, and it was too much for Frankie too.

He scrapped the macaroni into a bowl, sprinkling a bit of garlic on it before sitting next to his grandfather.

"Okay," he set a towel in his lap before scooping a spoonful. "Ready for dinner?"

Grandpa opened his mouth obviously ready, the spoon flying steadily toward him, only losing a noodle or two as it settled in his mouth.

"Nice job, grandpa." He scooped another mouthful.

It wasn't too bad feeding him, not like it was the worst part of his day—changing his diaper probably was. But this was the most peaceful time of the day, besides sleeping. Changing and bathing him was like war. Even as he's trying to help. Nothing was ever easy.

Even after his accident, Frankie never felt bad him. The old man was such a bully to him. Sure, he was mean with everyone, but he was Frankie's bully. He'd call him names- pussy, faggot- hit him, push him. So, when he got into his accident, it felt pretty good watching him get what was owed. Watching him suffer made him diabolically happy. Yet here he was, wiping his ass, and feeding him.

Every now and then grandpa would grumble or huff-, and he liked to imagine he was saying 'sorry,' or 'good job.' But he probably just called him a fag. It surely pained even him, since his pussy grandchild cleaned him and put him to bed every night.

But Frankie was just a bit happier today- because it was Thursday. That meant Maria was coming tonight to take care of his grandfather, and even though he had to work, it'd be a nice break. He wiped his face carefully, making sure he was comfortable as she knocked at the door. Perfect timing.

"Hey, Maria," he smiled when he answered the door.

She was in college, studying to be a nurse. So, she saw watching after his grandfather as an honor and learning experience. He also cut her some change every week, because what's life without it?

"How is he today?"

“Kind of grumpy.”

“When is he not?”

They laughed awkwardly with each other. Before the occupation, when they were in high school, everyone always imagined they would date. But he never asked her out, and she never asked why. So even as things fell apart, they kept it as such.

“Well, I’ll be back,” he said, walking out the door.

“Have a good evening at work,” she smiled.

He smiled, feigning thanks. He knew he wouldn’t. When does he ever? As soon as he walked out the door, it was out of the frying pan and into the fire.

Chapter 2

Noah stared out the tinted windows of his mustang. It's supposed to be an American classic, Ford Mustang, but he couldn't help but feel lackluster. Maybe it was all the Cockney in him, that, or the Irish. The building was underwhelming, a towering structure, with dark grey walls, and clothes hanging off the balcony. Maybe he'd have more fun there at least, he thought with a sigh. There were quite a few shady characters, and he already watched two drug deals.

It was his next spot to be stationed. He had to check the place out beforehand, to calm his anxiety, otherwise panic ensued. Now, he didn't have to worry. He pushed open the door, leaning against the car as he lit a cigarette. Impending clouds loomed overhead, threatening rain—no. With all the recent industry, the city streets were covered with smog, especially at this hour. Everyone's lungs were messed already, right? That's how he justified his cigarettes anyway.

"Hey," said a sweet voice.

Noah glanced over his shoulder, holding in a sigh when he saw a prostitute leaning on his car. She was old, obviously used up and her arm was dotted with needle scars. At least she tried though.

His eyes glazed over the building again, drawing on his cigarette. His voice was flat, "you really think I'd be interested?"

"I know what you Brits like," she said seductively.

He frowned at her, though he couldn't help but think about it. Just for a second, the thought fluttered through his head, on her knees. In fact, now that he thought about it, it's been a while since he's been with anyone. How long had it been? A few weeks- no, Months. Shit. He tossed his cigarette on the ground, stepping on it carefully and spitting out the smoky aftertaste. Maybe he should take her up on the offer. Ha—come one. He couldn't help but chuckle at the idea and how stupid it was. There's was no way he'd waste his time on something like that.

"Get lost," he said.

"Come on, honey," a slight desperateness grew in her voice.

He glared at her, finally making eye contact. All it took was the menacing gaze of his dark brown eyes and she scampered off, finding another John. It was just like the other places he's been stationed.

Exactly what he was used to, prostitutes, druggies, and the like. This place would pose no new challenges.

Chapter

Frankie locked the door to his apartment behind him with a deep breath. You'd think it came with overwhelming relief, leaving the old man behind. But it was only bad to worse. The hallways were some of the most dangerous parts of the city. They were lined with soldiers, two on each floor. Their presence was meant to protect and dissuade rebellion. But it was much more intense than that.

"There he is," said Lieutenant Rogers.

"Been waiting on you, Muppet," said Lieutenant Berkley.

He was quiet, edging quickly down the hall. He tried the same defense every day, ignoring them and walking by quietly. It never worked.

"What've you brought for us today?"

Berkley stood in front of him, blocking the way out.

"I asked you a question, Muppet." He pulled a curly tuft with his pinkie. "And you know the rules."

Civilian Code 27, Section 323, part 4: If British personnel directs a question at you, you are obligated to answer it.

"I have to get to work." He droned, not making eye contact.

"And I asked, what you got for us?"

"Nothing."

"Come on, Frankie." He groaned, "you really expect us to believe that?"

"You didn't even pack a snack?"

Talk about school bullies, taking his change and sandwich was a bit pitiful, but it seemed they had nothing better to do. Rodgers pushed him into the wall, pinning him by his shoulder while Berkley huffed in his face.

"Do we have to beat it out of you like last time?"

"Or would you prefer something a bit more vulgar?"

His face grew hot when his hands grabbed his butt. It was always the same threat every week. A punch or an ass-grab; which would scare it out of him today? But Frankie was telling the truth. He didn't even have change to buy bread for the week.

"I don't have anything," he said quietly.

"Looks like we'll be taking something else then," he said, grabbing him by the collar.

They shook him aggressively, practically tearing his jacket in half. Only to be stopped by a loud voice.

"Hey," someone climbed the last stair.

His voice wasn't deep, but it was commanding. Yet their sudden salute was probably because he had more emboldenments on his jacket.

"Captain," they both acknowledged him.

Meanwhile, Frankie picked himself up from the dusty linoleum floor, fixing the loose threads on his clothes.

"Is there a problem?"

"No, of course not," Rodgers said, smiling at him.

Berkley patted his arm carefully, "not at all captain. Just having a laugh."

"Isn't that right," Rodgers smiled at Frankie.

But it wasn't a nice smile, of course not. It was an agree-or-I'll-murder-you smile.

"Yeah," Frankie nodded, looking down.

After a moment a silence, he spoke, "new posts." He said flatly, "beat it."

"Yes, sir," They practically spoke in unison.

They hurried themselves out, muttering to each other as they tried to figure out where their new station was. Frankie went on his way too, as quickly as he could, tripping over his feet as he did so, his keys tinkling to the ground.

Time slowed as he noticed his keys fall from his side. Damn it. Knowing he had to go back to grab his keys made it worse. They were just a foot or so away, maybe half a second to grab them, maybe two. It was simple, but his hesitancy resulted in something much worse.

The soldier scooped up his key and held it out. Nothing but a polite gesture, he told himself over and over again, staring at the shiny ring. Just take it. All he had to do was just take it. But his dark, stony gaze was impenetrable, and it made Frankie quiver in fear. Another moment passed, awkwardness just settling in when he finally tossed his keys at him, hitting his chest and rolling into his hands. And still, he stared, frozen in his tracks like helpless bunny.

“Get out of here,” he said, “damn freak.”

He shook his head quickly, finally breaking free of his presence to bound down the stairs. You’d think Frankie would be happy to see those idiots go, Rodgers and Berkley. But he couldn’t help but feel dread. He already knew what atrocities to expect from those two, but now there was a new bully to be added to the list, which meant new tricks to learn, and more abuse to suffer.

He shivered as he remembered the sheer emptiness of his glare. It felt like just his eyes would swallow him up if he wasn’t careful. But more than that, he felt a deep glare of mystery. He didn’t know what to expect from this one, but he knew it couldn’t be good.