

*For story purposes. The default/canon Roe is used..*

“Great game, Chris.”

“That home run was beautiful.” He hums at the compliments from his teammates, waving each kind thing away with a humble hand.

“Heads up, champ,” Chris jerks around just in time to catch the ball that sails into his awaiting hand. His coach winking with a proud smile, “game ball. You earned it.” His posture straightens as he gazes down at it, not knowing why when he had about three more at home.

“Practice inside on Monday,” the coach announces to the retreating figures, “and for the love of God, bring the money in for the fundraiser. You want those bags. Bring your money in.” His attention then shifts to Chris, who seems to linger, “you need a ride home?”

“No sir. I got a ride.” With one last nod, the coach moves on, and Chris watches as his team departs, the onlookers doing the same until the area was devoid of all but the volunteers and referees. His smile vanishes as he retreats to the nearby batting cage. With an absentmindedness to his actions, he starts the machine and grabs the nearest bat, hitting one after the other with no regard for time or his aching muscles.

“Hey, dumbass,” he hears someone chuckle, jerking his head up to see his friend, Nigel, leaning on the netting. “Why the hell are you still here?”

“Come on, man,” he groans, flexing his fingers before shifting his grip on the bat, “you know why.” Every moment spent here was less time he had to spend at his own house. On any other day, it wouldn’t be so bad. In fact, it was probably blissful. He could imagine his mother making some hearty meal, the house smelling like some gourmet restaurant as she experiments with baking. All too eager for Chris to come and taste whatever she came up with. Harmonious, truly. But not that day. Too many factors were at play, and too many boxes checked off for him to even consider the possibility of heading home.

His dad was off work and wouldn't have to go back for at least two to three days. He just got paid, which means he went to the store and restocked his liquor. And Chris had a game today.

Yea. That was one too many boxes for his taste.

He swings, watching as the ball pounds against the white circle on the backboard, the thump echoing and filling a silence Chris wishes wasn't there.

"Old man at home?"

"Yep."

"Just do what I do," Nigel shrugs, setting down his tennis bag and nearing, "you sneak in through a window and just act like you were in the bathroom the entire time. They just didn't realize."

"How the hell do you pull that off?"

"Man," he draws out with a smirk, "my parents don't give a fuck, honestly. As long as I'm not smoking or getting some bitch pregnant, they don't care. Plus, tennis makes me seem like some kind of saint. Like, can you imagine someone playing tennis getting into real trouble?"

Dropping his guard and moving out the way of the flying balls, Chris chuckles, "yes. But that's because I know you so well."

"I'm telling you. Come play tennis, and you become the one kid no one suspects. Ms. Daniels even lets me off with just a warning now."

"I get let off easily," he corrects, cutting the machine off and retrieving the balls, giving Nigel a slight nod when he joins in, "but I guess being a star baseball player helps."

"And being so fucking smart and courteous," he jokes, tossing a ball Chris's way and being less than surprised when he catches it without a second thought. "I won't lie, I always thought you were lying up a storm. Pulling some 'oh, pity me' bullshit until I met your folks."

“You mean when you met my dad,” Chris jokes, retrieving both his keys, phone, and bag. One glance at the time tells him that he had done a pitiful job of wasting time. It was only ten o’clock. His dad was probably still up and about.

“Hell yea. I never felt so damn offended, and he didn’t even say anything racist. He just exudes that shit.”

“Bro,” Chris throws his head back in laughter, “do you mean exudes?”

“What the fuck ever. You know what I mean.”

“I’m surprised you even know a word that big.”

“Man it’s like ... I don’t even know how to spell it. Look, my teacher said it, so I stole it. Give me my Scrabble points.”

“Nice to know you’re learning something, at least.” He laughs in shock when Nigel rams into his back, tripping him and causing both guys to tumble into the dirt. Nigel is the first to get to his feet as he stretches out his hand and helps Chris to his feet with a lazy grin.

“My b. But you had that coming, asshole.” Chris simply grins, basking in the moment before he faced what would come later. His mind hardly had time to delve into the possibilities and escape routes when Nigel rests his hand on his shoulder, squeezing.

“Stop worrying about it, man. It’ll be fine.” He was right. It would be. It always was. A few harsh words that Chris never wanted to hear wasn’t about to kill him. His dad just needed to vent, and he liked hearing himself speak. It wasn’t like his father hit him or anything like that. With a nod of agreement, Chris follows behind him as they walk to the near-empty parking lot. Two days. A simple weekend before Chris would once again be able to escape it all with school. He could make it.

He always did.

Maybe it would be okay? Maybe he was asleep, and the conversation wouldn't happen until tomorrow. Chris grips the winning ball in his hand, noting that it felt much heavier than it should and didn't bring him nearly as much joy as it should. Hopefully, he wouldn't need it. It was just in case.

He enters the house, taking a deep breath in as he passes through the foyer and enters into the expansive living room. Besides the two table lamps, no other light was on, and all seemed quiet. Up the stairs, into the room, and straight into the shower. He would eat tomorrow. The sandwich from earlier would be enough for him; it wasn't like he'd starve.

"Chris?" he hears a profound voice question, and his heart skips a beat. So, this was happening. He peers at the time, and so late in the day too, this would definitely bleed into his morning and ruin his entire mood. Every step towards his father's study causes his stomach to descend further into turmoil, attempting to predict how the conversation would go. He grips the ball tighter, wondering if this would stave off any arguments. He opens the door, letting optimism push him forward.

"Chris," his father greets, not even looking up from whatever he was writing.

"Late night paperwork?"

"Yes, some financial concerns and business agreements that need to be looked over." He glances up and nods to the ball in his hands, "what's that?"

"Oh, game ball. I scored the most points."

He hums approvingly, "stats good enough to get the attention of college scouts?"

"I ..." he was at a loss for what to say, "agreeing would only be saving him for the moment. His dad was known to look these things up, and once he saw that Chris's stats were still too low for a reputable school to blink in his direction, he'd hear no end to it. To be honest, though, that was simply begging for a lecture.

"I don't know. Coach was in a rush, so he didn't tell me what the stats were."

“Well, that’s because you played like shit then,” he informs, picking his pen back up to write, “you got that ball because you’re better than that meager-ass team. That’s it, I told your mother you’d do better at a private school. You need people who’ll actually push you. People who think the same as you.”

“Or maybe, simply baseball isn’t my sport.” His thoughts went straight to Nigel and tennis. His father didn’t know it, but he had tried his hand a few times at the sport and had found himself surprisingly good at it. Of course, there was still a learning curve, the coach countlessly pointing out that he gripped the racket much like a bat. Or that his swings, though powerful, would do him no favors on the court.

“You didn’t want to do football,” his father points out.

“There’s other sports.”

“Yea, sports for fags and pussies that don’t know what being an athlete really means. Unless you’re talking about basketball, but we both know you’re not black enough for that,” he growls, baring his teeth in disgust at the thought. “I remember when -”

Chris bit his tongue, keeping the words he truly wished to say to himself, “dad, I’m tired. You’re right, my stats weren’t that good, and so I stayed after to practice more. So, yea, I’m exhausted now.”

“That’s my boy, self-improvement. Wouldn’t need that if you just listen to me, though. Your dad knows what he’s talking about. Listen to me, and I’ll get you where you’re trying to go.”

“I’m trying to go to bed.”

“You being smart with me?”

“No, sir.” Thankfully, his father seemed through with the conversation. He waves his hand and places his attention back on the paperwork in front of him, grumbling about kids and respect. Chris left, walking past the trashcan and dropping the ball inside before heading to his room. A quick jump in the shower, and he was in bed, wondering if he should text Nigel about what happened but choosing against it. He just wanted to sleep.

The following day, Chris spent no time. Quickly preparing himself and before breakfast could even truly be over, he hopped in his car to drive to his grandfather's house. Part of him felt guilty, leaving his mother to fend off the man who would definitely bring up Chris's performance and last night's conversation. It wasn't a guess anymore. His father's behavior was like clockwork.

It was probably also horrible that he treated his father like a villain when he genuinely had his good moments. He was his father, after all. It was only normal for them to butt heads and disagree. At the end of the day, his father wanted what was best for him. Despite that thought, Chris still felt uncomfortable. If all this was true, then why run? Why did he make it a point to avoid his father whenever he could and keep the conversation short and sweet, if nonexistent.

The thought follows him until he parks his car, catching sight of his grandfather and letting the anxiety seep away until he was filled with only contentment.

"There he goes! Wanted to see me put the final touch on this baby?" his grandpa asks, standing up straighter to greet his grandson. He cracks his back with a child-like grin, barely thwarting off a cough that threatens to rack his body.

His words light up Chris's face, his eyes wide as he hears, "you're almost done?"

"No. Not even close. You just looked like you needed something to smile about. Even if for a moment."

He rolls his eyes, but the smile doesn't waver, "Mom told you?"

"No. I just recall you having a game yesterday, and your dad ain't exactly a -," he stops himself and presses a hand over his heart, "I swore I'd stop callin' that man names. So let's say I know because I'm an intellectual man." He over enunciates the latter part of his sentence, winking before cackling at the absurdity to it.

"Humor me. What'd he say this time? Anything original?"

"Nope. Same shit as always. Do better, do better, I didn't raise a failure and do better."

"Well at -"

“He managed to squeeze in two gay insults. Though, I guess the one where he brought up pussies not being able to do certain sports could be counted more as sexist.”

There was silence. “We can run him over.”

“PawPaw!”

“That ain’t the first time I suggested that. This ol’ girl can’t do shit, but she can accidentally roll into someone.”

“I don’t think it’ll be counted as an accident if you intentionally do it.”

He waves his hands sarcastically, “oh, what? Now you some kind of lawyer? I thought you were a baseball player.”

“I wonder if being a lawyer would actually make him happy.”

“Son, ain’t nothin’ gonna make that man happy. If he had his way, he’d be living your life for you, don’t let him do that.”

“It’s fine.”

“No, it’s not,” his grandpa immediately fired back, waving the wench in his face, “you your own man. You got a good head on your shoulders. You make some questionable decisions, but sometimes I wonder if that’s you or him.” He sighs, “I just wanna see you do good things, Chris. Good things that make you proud.”

“Thanks PawPaw, I needed to hear that from someone.”

“Yea, you’re welcome. The day your ma leaves that pathetic excuse of a man is the day I can die happy.” As if his body wished to combat his own words, he begins to cough vehemently, leaning onto the car for support.

“PawPaw?”

“I’m fine. The body just reminding me by sayin’ you’ve been through a lot, you ol’ geezer.” He sighs, his smile vanishing as he takes a seat on the nearest stool. “Chris, I won’t be around forever.”

“Stop,” Chris argues, but his grandfather wouldn’t hear of it, silencing the young man and giving him a smile that doesn’t reach his eyes.

“I’m serious. I watched you grow and become a man that’s not proud of his own reflection. I get it. You want to make your father proud. But that’ll kill you faster than it’ll ever kill him. I watched men younger than you die, heard some of their stories too. Wanting to make they family proud or do somethin’ with themselves. You can’t do much for your life when there’s a bullet lodged in ya brain or your limbs blown to hell cos you stepped on a mine.” He takes a deep breath in.

“What I’m trying to say is you gotta do things for you. I know I’m your drinkin’ buddy,” he laughs, basking in Chris’s relaxed appearance as he nodded his head in agreement, “but as your PawPaw and someone who loves ya. Live your life, son. Love who you love and don’t regret what you do with yourself, even if it pisses off some people. Take it from an old man who married for convenience and regrets it every day. Life surely is too short.”

“Alright, old man,” Chris snorts, standing and moving him to the side, “if you wanted me to help you out, all you had to do was ask.”

“You tellin’ me I talk too much, boy?” he shouts, “now hand me that tool over there and turn the music up. Let me teach you a thing or two.” Chris did what was asked of him and attempted to listen, but it was a known fact that he was never much interested in cars. Frankly, he’d much rather be behind a bar somewhere, concocting drinks and experimenting with a bunch of flavors. But he found little things ever compared to a good Tennessee afternoon spent in his grandpa’s presence.

He was right though. Unless he wanted to look back on this and complain, he needed to start living his life. The way he wanted to live his life ...

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*Sometime in the far future ...*

“Fuck, Damon! Pick up the damn phone,” Chris groans, tossing his phone into the seat, aggressively resting his head on the steering wheel. One minute all is normal,



and the next, Damon's missing, and his uncle's house is on fire. He runs through everything the man had said, everything that had happened, and if any were clues to what was going on. The gas line went off near their job, and then Damon ended up finding that girl along the path. In the library, he said that the hospital called him and after that, he came to work, and the police were there.

That's it. That was the last he heard of him. Besides the whole interrogation thing, nothing seemed off, but he didn't seem *that* bothered by the ordeal.

Fuck! What was he supposed to do? All of this felt surreal, and minding his business like everyone's been suggesting didn't sit right with him. He needed to at least know if Damon was alright, the man was an idiot, and it wouldn't surprise him to learn that he had gotten himself into trouble. Mafia, yea, definitely mafia.

He cuts his engine off, prepared to head into the apartment he shared with the man when the glass to his car shatters. Instinctually he tosses his arms up to guard his face when he's grabbed, pulled out through the window, and thrown to the ground. Chris groans, pushing himself up and telling himself to become aware. Whatever just happened wasn't over, and he needed to be ready for it.

"Stay down, human," a voice growls in his ear, pressing their foot on his back, "it'll be over for you real quick." At least that part wasn't a lie. Something hard makes contact with his neck, and just like that, his world, and life, shifts.