Fandom: Played (CTV)
Title: Foul Play
Author: tj_teejay (AO3 – Tumblr – Instagram – Reddit – E-Mail)
Summary: A play gone bad, and John Moreland is caught in a rollercoaster of confusion and uncertainty. Takes part after the season 1 finale.
Characters: John, Maria, Rebecca
Rating: PG-13
Genre: Gen
Warning: Contains adult themes, but within PG-13 limits (with the possible exception of the occasional f-word). People who have issues with triggery themes should proceed with caution. Also contains spoilers for season 1, especially episode 1x13.
Author's Note: This may very well be the very first *Played* fanfic ever written. Score 1 for pioneering work, but John and the gang wouldn't leave me alone until I wrote them down. So here we are—I hope I'm doing this fantastic show and its writers and actors an inkling of justice. Many thanks go out to Michael L. and in48frames for the beta! Please do not share or upload this fic anywhere without the author's permission.

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Pain.

That was the first sensation John became aware of. The dull pain in his head was potent, yet hard to attribute.

Disorientation gave way to hazy half-recognition. An upscale hotel bed; he was alone. And naked. Without the slightest clue of how he got there.

He couldn't suppress a groan as he heaved himself out of the king-size bed to scramble for his carelessly discarded boxers and t-shirt on the floor. What the hell had happened here?

Sudden, loud pounding on the door startled him. The muffled voice was familiar.

"John? John, are you in there?"

Maria. Of course.

The attempt to stand up brought on instant regret as he fought against a wave of dizziness.

"John, open the door!" The urgency in Maria's voice went up a notch.

The few steps to the door seemed twice the distance, and the narrow corridor was too dim. He fumbled with the door handle, and blinked violently against the bright fluorescent lights in the hallway as the door swung open.

"Are you alone?" Maria asked. His brow furrowed in confusion. Why would she ask him that?

"Yeah, I... Why?"

She looked past him into the room, trying to steal a glance before she pushed past him. He winced as the door slammed loudly into the lock behind her.

He made his way back towards the bed, bracing himself with one hand against the wall, Maria's vehement voice was too loud. "Where the hell were you?! We were worried. Radio silence all night? You know better than—"

She stopped, then asked. "John, are you okay?"

It was all he could do to find edge of the mattress to sit down, trying to ignore that the room was spinning around a tilted axis. Maria was by his side in three quick steps. "What's wrong?"

"Dizzy. Headache. They… they must have drugged me."

"Drugged you? What the— Why?"

He closed his eyes. There were no answers he could discern. "I don't know."

"What happened here last night?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

"Look, I don't *know*, all right?!" he shot, regretting raising his voice as the pain in his skull intensified in perfect synchronicity.

"What's the last thing you remember?"

He screwed his eyes shut, trying to push past the haze in his brain. The details were sketchy at best—and perhaps less than trustworthy. "We were having drinks at the bar. Spieler's boys were there. I was waiting for the right move. They were," he fought against a sudden onset of nausea, swallowing visibly, "they were playing hard to get at first. Then they made a move. Before I knew it, we were in this room, and… shit—"

He bolted into the bathroom, emptying his stomach contents into the toilet. It was quick and violent, and he kept dry-heaving two, three times when nothing more would come.

The cold from the light grey tiles beneath his bare knees sent a chill through him, and he leaned back, closing his eyes in exhaustion. Maria's touch on his shoulder was gentle when she held out a damp washcloth and said, "Here."

He wordlessly took it and wiped his face. He wasn't quite sure his legs would support him if he tried to get up, and she seemed to have read his mind.

The cold water she handed him in a plastic cup was a balm to his assaulted senses, and her touch on his back an unfamiliar comfort.

"Feeling better?" she softly asked, regarding him with worry.

"A little," he allowed himself to admit.

"We should get you to a hospital. Who knows what they gave you."

"No," he protested. "No hospital. I'm fine."

“Yeah, I can see that. You know what, I should call Rebecca,” she said, going back into the bedroom.

He pushed himself up and wearily followed. “Tell her I’m fine.”

Maria shot him a glance he knew very well to interpret. “Sit down. You need to take it easy.”

He did as he was asked—more out of sheer exhaustion than obedience. The headache had made a vengeful comeback and he pressed the heel of his palm against his forehead, too drained to follow Maria’s phone conversation at the other end of the room.

It could have been seconds, it could have been minutes—he didn’t know how long it was until she lightly touched his arm. “Hey.”

He moved his head just slightly in acknowledgement when she said, “Rebecca said I should take you to the hospital.”

“No hosp—“

“No protests. It’s procedure.”

“I said I’m—“

“I know,” she interjected. “You’re fine. Except you just puked your guts into the toilet not ten minutes ago, and by the looks of it, there’s an army of jackhammers wreaking havoc in your head. Death warmed over is a compliment. This is not a discussion.”

He sighed, knowing he was losing this fight. She handed him his clothes.

“Get dressed. We can talk about the rest on the way to Mount Sinai. I assume you don’t want me to call an ambulance.”

“No ambulance,” he quickly responded.

Her mouth curved into the slightest grin. “You need any help with that?” She gestured at his somewhat rumpled clothes.

“No. Just… give me a minute.”

It took more than a minute. When he came out of the bathroom, only barely feeling less worse for wear, Maria gave him a look. He wasn’t sure if it was approval or concern or relief that he read in her face.

“Come on,” she said, nodding in the direction of the door. “Let’s get outta here.”

She had the presence of mind to hang the “Do not disturb” sign on the outside when they left the room.

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Morning rush hour traffic in Toronto was hellish on the best of days, but it was exponentially worse when you already felt chewed on and spit out. No one could tell better than John Moreland at this very moment.

“So where did we leave off? Spieler’s guys took you to the hotel room,” Maria inquired casually. Perhaps it was a ruse to distract him. Perhaps it was just part of the job.

Folding down the sun visor didn’t do much to alleviate the insult on John’s frayed senses. He swallowed down the impulse to retch.

“Then what?” she pressed on.

“Then…” he tried to concentrate, to remember. There was only shallow nothingness surrounded by fringes of uncertainty. “I don’t know, they must have… done something.”

“Did they get you drunk? Is that what this is?”

“Come on, you realize that I know better than that.”

“Do I?”

He snorted an incredulous breath through his nose. “What—is this a fucking inquisition?”

“No,” she backpedalled, “I’m sorry. This just doesn’t make any sense.”

“Yeah, tell me about it.”

“So the next thing you remember is waking up.” It wasn’t really a question.

“Naked, with a killer headache.”

She was suddenly quiet, and that disconcerted him. He looked over at her, but her expression was unreadable, her brow slightly furrowed.

“What?” he inquired.

“Is it possible they spiked your drink? Roofies, maybe?”

“Yeah, it’s possible.”

“John…” It came out quiet.

He wasn’t sure what she was trying to say. “What? What is it?”

“I think you need to let them do a rape kit.”

His first reaction was denial. That was ridiculous. “Are you serious?” he said with a chuckle.

She wasn’t smiling.

He shook his head slightly. “You *are* serious. Why would they rape me?”

“You know Spieler is a fucking psychopath. He tortures little boys for fun, and smiles while he does it. Maybe in order for you to join his club, he needs leverage on you. You know, like a telling video in a compromising position. Maybe he’s a sicko and gets off on watching grown men’s sex

games with underage boys. Maybe he, I don't know, just likes his lapdogs to have a little fun. Tell me I'm not way off base here."

He hesitated, trying to take in what she was saying. She wasn't way off base. The idea was frightening to the point where a knot started to form in his stomach.

He turned his head and looked out the passenger side window, not sure what to say.

"It's just a possibility," Maria tried to reason. "Doesn't have to mean they did it. But I think we need to find out."

He just nodded. They drove the rest of the way in silence.

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She waited for him outside the exam room. He could tell she was trying to conceal the apprehension, not quite succeeding. He knew her smile was supposed to be encouraging.

"You okay?"

Was he? The hospital staff had been discreet and professional. It had still been humiliating. While he'd been waiting in the sterile room, feeling both physically and mentally exposed, he'd silently cursed the universe. This was surely the other shoe ready to drop that he'd been waiting to happen ever since the Mulcair debacle.

These past two months since the shootout in the safe house hadn't been easy. He knew he drank too much, and no one was stopping him but himself. The apartment felt emptier and more oppressive than ever, which is why he spent as little time there as possible. His first impulse had always been to bury himself in the work—this time was no different.

Of course he'd not been able to dodge the wary looks from Rebecca, accompanied by the "I'm worried about you" frown. He knew there'd be the eventual we-need-to-talk conversation, and quite frankly, he was surprised it hadn't happened yet. This recent hiccup was adding more vinegar to the mix, and he didn't want to think about what that would mean.

And it wasn't just the job. He could count the conversations he'd had with Vanessa since the Mulcair endgame on one hand. None of them had lasted more than two minutes. At least there had been a long phone talk with Emily one evening. He'd been texting with her more or less frequently since then, and they were making progress. Vee wasn't happy about it, he knew, but she was *his* daughter too.

He looked at Maria who had gotten up from the plastic chair and tried to rearrange the mask. "Yeah. I'm good to go."

"Rebecca called. I told her what was going on."

Inwardly, he groaned. It was inevitable that she was informed, but he wished there was a way around the questions he didn't know how to answer.

"I'm sorry," she added.

"Let's get outta here, all right?"

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Back at the Steam House, which had become their nickname for the CIU headquarters, he wasn't sure what to expect. He'd never been the "centre of attention" type, so he felt a certain kind of relief when he found it empty and silent.

Maria walked up with him. "Rebecca wanted to speak with you."

"Yeah," he sighed.

The ambiance light outside Rebecca's glass-walled office dipped the room in a cold, green glow that was slowly changing towards blue. John counted his blessings that the overhead fluorescent lights were off.

She lifted her head when he hesitated in the doorway, beckoning him to come in. He chose the brown leather sofa on the side rather than the chairs opposite her desk.

He could feel her sizing him up, with an almost aggressive curiosity that she usually knew to hide the way a good undercover cop did.

"How are you feeling?"

"Peachy," he grumbled.

"I'd let you get away with that if it had been a pub brawl or some other minor altercation. Try that again."

God, he'd never hated her tenaciousness more than now. "What do you want me to say? That I've got a head the size of Ripley's Aquarium and would puke the rest of my dinner right here into your trashcan if there was anything left to puke out?"

"Something like that, yeah."

"Well, there you have it. Next thing you're gonna say is that I should go home and rest, right?"

"Come on, John. You know you're not going out there again today. Or any time soon."

He was taken aback. "What are you saying—that I'm off the case?"

"Let's just say you're benched. For now," she said carefully.

He let out a quick, sarcastic chuckle. "That's just great."

He'd expected her to raise her voice, but she was calm and composed when she responded. "We have no idea what happened in that hotel room last night. We don't know if you've been made, or if your alias was burned. There's a possibility you've been… assaulted in some way. Tell me that's not reason enough to take you off the case."

He sucked in a long breath and didn't say anything. What was there to say, really? She was the boss.

"Can I go?" he finally asked.

“No.”

That was unexpected, and he watched her warily as she came around the desk and leaned against the short edge so that she could face him.

Her voice lacked the usual decisiveness, and there was an unfamiliar, sad edge to it. “I need to know what the results of the examination were.”

He closed his eyes for a long moment. “The bloodwork needs a few days. No semen. The rest was inconclusive.”

Her expression was unreadable. “What exactly does ‘inconclusive’ mean?”

“It means we’re not one fucking step closer to Spieler, that’s what!”

“I’m gonna get those lab samples expedited,” she said determinedly.

He got up from the sofa and regretted it instantly when his vision started to fade and the swooshing in his ears drowned out the world. She was by his side quickly, supporting his elbow. “Whoa, easy.”

It took him a moment to recover, and he was fighting a sudden sense of embarrassment.

“I’ll have Maria take you home,” she told him with a matter-of-factness he embraced, and he knew that neither was it pertinent to argue with her, nor was it such a bad idea to just crash and try to sleep it off.

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“You know, I don’t need a babysitter,” he told Maria when she made no move to leave after she had accompanied him into his apartment.

“I know,” she just said, taking off her jacket.

“So much for taking a hint.”

“Come on, John, you know me better than that. Besides, you have cold beer.”

“Yeah, I could use one of those. Or something stronger.”

“Oh, no way you’re having alcohol right now,” she told him. “You’re gonna go take a shower, and then you’re gonna crash for a few hours. And I’m gonna be here, babysitting all of it.”

He tiredly rubbed his hand over his forehead. “Shoot me now,” he muttered. “Your time would be better spent working the case.”

“Who says I can’t do both?”

“Working undercover from my apartment?”

“Look,” she said in a no-nonsense tone, “We’ve got it covered. Daniel is helping set up an in for Jesse right now. Khali is working her magic. I’m going through old files that Vice suspects have a connection to Spieler’s operation. The guy’s been elusive, but there’s *gotta* be something on him.

It's not like we're sitting on our hands here. We need a few hours to regroup and change our strategy."

"All right," he acquiesced. "Promise me you wake me if something comes up."

She gave a quick nod. "Yeah."

It was several hours later when he emerged from the bedroom, his t-shirt rumpled, his curly hair decidedly disheveled.

"Look who's awake," Maria greeted him with a smile, looking up from where she was working on the couch with a laptop on her knees.

He was momentarily confused, realizing that outside the daylight was fading. "What time is it?"

She looked at her computer screen. "Just past six."

"I was out for over five hours?"

She shrugged slightly. "Guess so."

"You should have woken me," he said with a look of reproach, walking over to the sink for a glass of water.

"If I recall correctly, you said to wake you if something came up. It hasn't."

He leaned against the counter, taking a sip from his glass. "Five hours, and you've got nothing?"

"Well, no, I wouldn't say that."

"Do I have to drag every little bit of information out of you?"

"Looks like it worked. Jesse's in. Daniel and Rebecca are in the surveillance van. Nothing too enlightening so far. It's gonna be a while until we get anything substantial. Which you know."

He drew a face, and she watched him closely. "How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Better," he volunteered.

"Well, translated from Morelandish, that's actually a surprisingly candid statement."

His face drew into a smile. "Morelandish? Is that like Elvish?"

"No, more like Klingon. Are you hungry?"

"Are you my wife?" he countered.

"What—a friend can't make you breakfast? Or, you know, dinner… Besides, I unpacked half your kitchen. I probably know it better than you do."

"I'm not hungry."

"Well, I am."

“I think my fridge is gaping empty.”

“Not anymore,” she said triumphantly.

“Geez,” he mumbled. “You *are* my wife.”

“Oh, uhm,” she pointed at his jacket that lay on the sideboard, “I think your cell phone rang a few times.”

Just as he went to get it, there was a knock on the door. He and Maria exchanged glances, and he shrugged. The knock repeated, and John went to open the door.

“Emily.”

“Oh, you’re home,” she said. “I called your cell, like, a million times.”

She stepped in when he opened the door wide, then hesitated when she saw Maria. “Oh, uh, I… I didn’t realize—”

John rescued her. “It’s fine. She’s a colleague.”

“Maria, right?” Emily said.

“Yeah,” he said with a hint of surprise to his voice.

Emily looked around, taking in her father’s minimalist attire. “Why are you in your underwear? We’re already, like, super-late.”

He frowned. “For what?”

Emily rolled her eyes. “Of course. You forgot.”

“Forgot what?”

“*Gravity*? IMAX 3D. Thursday night. 6:20. Then dinner. I’ve sent you at least three reminders this week.”

“That was *tonight*?”

“Yeah,” Emily just replied.

Maria was closing the lid of the laptop, gathering her things. “I should go.”

John looked like he was caught between a rock and a hard place. “No, you don’t have t—“

But Maria was already putting on her jacket, her hand reaching for the doorknob. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yeah, no… wait.”

But she was already out the door, and he turned around to see Emily looking at him expectantly. “So, are we going, or not?”

“Em…” he said, and it came out as a sigh.

Her face fell. “Geez, Dad, this is the first time we see each other in, like, forever, and what? You have to work? Seriously?”

“No. I…” He sank down in the leather armchair, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Tonight’s not a good night, okay?”

“No, not okay. This was kind of a big deal, you know?”

He could hear the disappointment in her voice, and it smarted somewhere in the vicinity of his stomach. Finally seeing her again, it wasn’t supposed to happen like this.

“Look, I don’t feel so great.” It wasn’t even a lie.

“What—do you have the flu or something?”

“No, not exactly.”

“Then what?” she pressed on.

“It’s… kind of a long story.”

She took off her coat and carelessly let it drop over the back of one of the chairs by the counter. As if it was the most natural thing in the world, she plopped down on the couch, making herself comfortable.

“Well, now that we’re not going to the movies, I’ve got all night.”

“Emily,” he sighed again, but realized that she wasn’t going anywhere.

She regarded him with a guarded concern. “Are you running a fever? Stomach bug? What?”

“No,” he quickly replied, “No, it’s nothing like that.”

“Like *what*? Can you please stop talking in riddles?”

He looked at her, not sure what to say. He’d always tried to strictly separate work and family, and the Mulcair case had only strengthened his resolve.

Emily let herself sink against the backrest, a defiant look on her face. There was decidedly accusatory undertone in her voice. “It’s your work, right? Your stupid work always ruins everything.”

She had every right to be angry, he knew that. Hell, *he* was still angry. Mulcair had ruined his life. Twice. He drew in a long breath. He’d be damned if he’d let Spieler do the same thing. A phone conversation he’d had with Emily a while ago replayed in his head. “I’m the one you don’t lie to,” she’d said.

He met her gaze. “I was out on a job last night. It went bad. They drugged me with something. I’ve been sleeping it off for the last few hours.”

“Drugged you? With what?”

“We don’t know. Rohypnol, probably.”

“Are you okay?” she asked, worry now swinging in her voice.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine. They checked me out at the hospital.”

“Wait a minute—Rohypnol? Isn’t that, like, the date rape drug?”

“Yeah.”

“So they took you out for a few hours. Why?”

“You know I can’t talk about the case.”

“I don’t care about the damn case,” she shot back. “I wanna know if they did something to you. You said you were at the hospital. What are you not telling me?”

“Honey,” he tried to calm her, “It’s procedure, all right? Anything happens on the job, you need to get cleared medically.”

“And you’re okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Except for, you know, the killer hangover.”

She allowed him a faint, consoling smile. “Well, okay, I guess that excuses you from any 3D movies.”

“Tell you what. Why don’t we do the home movie experience instead. There might even be some microwave popcorn around here somewhere.”

She gave him a mocking look of reproach. “Dad, your movie collection is really lame.”

“Oh yeah?” he said, getting up to crouch down in front of his shelf, pulling out a Blu-ray in a green case. “Justin Timberlake chases time.” He pulled out another. “Leonardo DiCaprio builds dreams. Or here. Orlando Bloom tries to kill himself with an indoor bike. Total chick flick material, that one.”

She drew a face, joining him to look at his movies. The one she pulled out had two faces on the cover. “*Cloud Atlas*. Haven’t seen that one yet.”

“*Cloud Atlas* it is,” he confirmed.

“You know that it’s three hours long, right?”

“Yeah. That a problem?”

“No, just… whatever. Let’s go for it.”

180 minutes later, he startled awake with a jerk when someone was tapping his shoulder. “Dad?”

He slowly realized he must have dozed off halfway through the movie, because he had a vague recollection of Tom Hanks speaking with a strange accent and an Asian woman in a futuristic looking world.

He rubbed a hand across his right eye. “Did I fall asleep?”

“Yeah.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay, I figured you probably needed it.”

“How did it end?”

Emily turned down the volume while the credits were still running. “Real tragedy. Everyone died,” she deadpanned.

He gave her a disbelieving look. “Come on, you’re messing with me.”

Her mouth curved into a grin. “Okay. But someone died. And saved the world in the process. I’m not gonna say who. Oh, and I think you missed, like, the last 45 minutes there. Just in case you ever wanna go back and catch up.”

“Thanks,” he said.

She got up from the sofa and held out the half empty bowl of popcorn to him. “You want any more of this?”

He waved his hand in refusal. “No.”

Emily discarded the popcorn in the trash, putting the bowl in the sink. She turned around to face her father. “So, uh, do you need to be… under observation for the night, or something?”

He frowned. “What?”

“You know, with that drugging thing, and everything.”

He shook his head with a chuckle. “I think you’re thinking of a concussion. Which I don’t have. So no.”

“So… you don’t want me to stay?”

“That’s probably not such a good idea.”

She made an eye-rolling grimace. “Yeah, because you and Mom are on the outs, and because your job keeps screwing up our family. Oh, wait, I forgot. I was almost killed by a criminal psycho who wanted revenge on you, so I’m not supposed to spend time around you. I hear it from Mom often enough, I don’t have to hear it from you too.”

“Is that what she said?”

“Not in so many words, but I can read between the lines. Did you know she’s making me see a shrink?”

“Does it help?”

“What?” She frowned at him.

“With… you know… what happened.”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess. Look, can we talk about something else? I’m so over that whole thing and kinda just wanna forget it ever happened.”

But it *did* happen, is what he thought, although he didn’t say it out loud. Instead, he asked her, “Does your mother even know you’re here?”

“Well, she knows I went to see a movie. With a friend. Technically, that’s not even a lie.”

“Em, you shouldn’t keep this from her. Things are complicated enough.”

“God, ‘complicated’ is such a cliché.”

“Going behind your mother’s back will only make it worse.”

“Make *what* worse?”

“This whole… mess.”

“Well, I know a simple solution to it. Quit your job, or put in a transfer for something less dangerous, and all of ‘this’,” she drew invisible quotation marks in the air, “will disappear.”

He shook his head. He’d had this conversation with Vanessa a million times over. It had always ended in angry shouts and slamming doors. What could he say now that wouldn’t lead to the same result?

“I don’t… I wish there was a way I could make you both understand. This… this isn’t just a job for me. What we do, it matters. If we put just one bad guy away and off the streets, it could save a life, two, ten. I wish there was a way we could do it without the risks, without it bleeding into our private lives. But eventually… it does. What happened that day, it should never have happened. I made a mistake, and I wish… I really wish I could do it over.”

“So you’re saying you’re choosing your job over your family?”

Damn. She had asked the hard question. *The* question. The one that had eventually led to conflict, dispute, separation. And what family did he have left? He had Emily. Could he have Vanessa again if he gave up his job? Would it be enough?

He already knew the answer to that question.

“I’m saying I don’t want to give up either.”

“Yeah, well, I think you’ve seen how great *that* has worked out.”

He sighed, letting his head sink into his hands. “Look. Let’s just take it one step at a time, okay?”

She softened just a little. “Is it likely that you and Mom will ever be on speaking terms again?”

“I think you need to ask your mom that question.”

There was a pause before she said, “She’s just scared, you know?”

“Yeah, I know,” he said in a low voice.

Silence stretched on before John asked, “Do you want me to drive you home?”

“With your druggy hangover? I think I’d be safer taking the streetcar. Besides, Mom doesn’t know I’m with you, remember?”

“Em, you need to tell her,” he urged her again.

“I will,” she said. It didn’t sound genuine, but he let it rest.

As he watched her gather her things, he couldn’t help but wonder how she had grown up so quickly to become the smart, young woman she was.

Vee had been right. He’d always been a workaholic—and a crap father. He’d missed the Christmas pageants and flute recitals. He hadn’t been there for the algebra homework or the art projects. And every time Vee had called him on it, he’d sworn it’d change; he’d be there the next time.

Of course he never was. And somehow he had messed it up again.

When she put on her jacket, he got up from the chair. “At least let me come down and wait with you.”

She gave a little shrug. “Okay.”

He let his hand briefly touch her shoulder as she walked out the apartment door, trying not to flash back to that moment—her wild, terrified eyes, her hands clutching onto Mulcair’s arm. He wanted to tell her he loved her, no matter what. He’d wanted to say that so many times, yet it took a violent criminal holding his daughter hostage to do it.

This was just all so very wrong. And he didn’t have the slightest clue how to fix it.

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His welcome at the Steam House the next morning was unspectacular. A good-natured clap on the shoulder from Daniel. The usual hello from Khali and Jesse. A more personal inquiry from Maria. John had the feeling that it was only Maria and Rebecca who really knew the full extent of the “incident” at the Soho Met.

The relief was short-lasted, and he felt the apprehension in his tense muscles and the dull, persisting headache that was hovering at the edge of his perception. Rebecca beckoned to him through the window of her office as he was settling in at his desk. He’d known it would happen, he just hadn’t expected it to be first thing in the morning.

“Come in,” she said as he entered the room.

He sat in one of the chairs opposite her desk, carefully meeting her gaze.

“I need you to take a paperwork day today.” Straight out, the way she used to. In the short time he’d come to know her, he’d learned to appreciate that quality more than anything.

“Where are we with Spieler?” he asked. Redirection didn’t usually work with her, but it didn’t stop him from trying.

“Jesse’s working the play, with Daniel shadowing, Maria and Khali are digging for dirt on the guy.”

“How did you get Jesse on the inside? What’s our angle?”

“John,” she said, the cautionary undertone in her voice loud and clear. “You need to take a step back and trust us to work the case.”

“What,” he said, incredulous, “You’re shutting me out?”

“No one’s shutting you out. We’ve had this conversation yesterday.”

“Yeah. You said I was benched. You seriously expect me to sit on my hands this whole time?”

“I expect you to cover all our bases on this one. Spieler’s a cunning mastermind. We can’t allow any loopholes to come around and bite us in the tenders if we wanna make sure he’s put away at the end of the day. That means our paperwork needs to be squeaky clean. The crime scene guys already worked the hotel room. I want you and Maria to finalize the incident report, then fine-comb it again.”

He sighed. Paperwork wasn’t his strong suit, and that was an understatement. He could see where she was coming from, but it didn’t mean he hated it any less.

“Are we on the same page here?” She wanted confirmation, and the way she held her gaze on him, never wavering, made him more than slightly uncomfortable.

“Yes,” he grudgingly conceded.

She nodded, her expression becoming softer. “Are you feeling okay?”

“Fine,” he said curtly.

“John, I hope you understand I’m not doing this to—“

“I get it,” he interrupted, holding up his palms. “Doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

“I just want to know you’re doing okay.”

His tone softened, any trace of hostility gone from his voice. “I’m fine.”

“Good,” she just said, and he knew that this conversation was over. He also knew it was going to be a long day.

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By the afternoon, the case was looking a lot more promising. Maria and Khali had worked tirelessly on old cases, and eventually they'd come across an unsolved Vice investigation that connected Spieler to a gay prostitution ring.

Daniel and Jesse checked back in an hour later, and Rebecca called a round table briefing. With the new knowledge they'd gained today, it was much easier to devise a strategy that could use what they already had in play, and up the game at the same time.

John was eerily quiet during the whole thing, which earned him the occasional look from Rebecca—distinctly questioning to his eyes, but subtle enough for the others not to notice. When they were through discussing their next moves, Rebecca looked around the table.

"Good work today. I'm confident we can finally put this guy behind bars if we play our cards right. Jesse and Daniel, I think we may want to put in a few hours this weekend. Khali, I might need you on standby. The rest, enjoy your weekend off for the takedown next week."

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During one of their inevitable fights months ago, his wife had once accused John of having an unhealthy attitude towards leisure time. Of course in the heat of the moment, she hadn't quite phrased it that politely. But he had to acquiesce to the fact that there had been some truth in that statement.

He didn't think of off-duty time as an opportunity to relax and wind down. He'd always been itching to get back into action, to work that next job. He was good at that. Not so with the family outings and neighbourhood barbecues.

He silently cursed Rebecca for those velvet gloves she'd been wearing. Being off the job meant finding things to occupy his mind with. He could only spend so much time in the gym, grabbing a bite at the corner diner, or strumming his guitar. It had taken a day or two, but now the implications of his unaccounted time at the Soho Met were finally sinking in.

The nights were the worst. Sleep wouldn't come easy—it hadn't for the last eight weeks—and he spent way too much time stealing glances at his alarm clock while the rest of Toronto was sleeping soundly.

When it wasn't Mulcair's face, it was the word "inconclusive" that was meandering the paths of his mind. The whole thing just didn't make any sense. He didn't feel any different. He couldn't remember anything, and that drove him crazy. In his line of work, uncertainty was part of the equation, but it was a completely different matter if it stared right into your soul, wearing an ugly, impenetrable mask.

Emily called and asked him to make good on their missed movie appointment on Sunday, which was a welcome distraction he jumped at. They'd gone out to catch up on the missed dinner afterwards as well. He didn't tell her about the possibility of sexual assault, nor did he think he ever would.

Monday couldn't come early enough. He really needed something to focus on. Daniel and Jesse had made good progress. The play was shaping up nicely and everything seemed to be falling into place.

Another one-on-one talk in Rebecca's office, but this time John managed to convince her to let him back into the field. He'd never thought it'd work out this way when he was offered the CIU

job, but they worked well as a team. There was a mutual respect, and an understanding of what was necessary in this job to make a true difference.

During the afternoon debriefing, they went over their plan again. They realized it might not be enough for a takedown, but they knew they were getting ever closer. Surveillance would be tricky, a certain element of improvisation would be required. Jesse would have to go with the flow, and communicate whenever he could.

No one seemed overly worried. They'd done this before, and Jesse was a quick study with the kind of intuition a good undercover cop needed. He still had a lot to learn, but the rookie stamp ink was coming off.

By nightfall, everything was set up. Rebecca and Khali were outside in the van, with Daniel and John in sighting distance. The latter were at the bar, pretending to be a gay couple. This was a first, and their best option to blend in. In between virgin margaritas and nojitos, they kept checking the phone for Jesse's updates, which mostly came by text.

In the cramped space in the back of the van, the minutes ticked by and turned into an hour. Khali kept her eyes on the computer monitor that showed John and Daniel in apparent conversation through the high-walled windows across the street. The longer she watched, the more her brow furrowed.

She looked over at Rebecca. "Is it just my impression, or is John a little fidgety? That's not part of the play, is it?"

Rebecca trained her gaze on the screen, watching intently with her eyes narrowed. "It's not part of the play," she remarked.

"Do you think there's some kind of problem?"

"I'm not sure." It was a half-lie, she knew that, but it didn't seem like the time and place to share John's story with Khali now.

She saw John pick up his cell phone, talking to someone at the other end. She could only guess it was Jesse. Without being able to listen in to the conversation, John's reactions were hard to gauge on the small screen from the distance, but he looked more nervous than she liked. She took out her own cell phone and called Daniel.

"Daniel, what's going on?"

His voice filtered through her speaker. "Not sure, it sounds like something's wrong."

"Find out," she simply said.

She could hear snippets of words through the line, but not enough to make out what was being said. She watched as John got up from his stool and started to jog away with Daniel unable to stop him, quickly going after him.

"Daniel?" Rebecca spoke into her phone.

He sounded rushed, now out of sight from the cameras in the van. "Hold on, John's going in."

“Put him on the phone. Now!” she barked, but there was no answer. Daniel hadn’t hung up, the line was still connected. She said his name a few more times without an answer.

She turned to Khali with a frustrated sound, but Khali could only shrug.

She put the phone on speaker, and after another few minutes of indiscernible sounds, Daniel’s voice came back, rushed and out of breath. “I’m on the fifth floor, but I don’t see him. He must be here somewhere.”

“Find him, Daniel!”

It took almost ten minutes for John and Daniel to reappear, Jesse in tow. Rebecca greeted them halfway, a few meters in front of the hotel’s entrance. Her face was stony as she addressed John.

“What the hell happened?”

John seemed jarred, but met Rebecca’s gaze. “It was getting too risky and we had no ears. I got Jesse out of there.”

“You blew his cover?” She sounded incredulous.

“Not necessarily.”

“And what does that mean?” she shot back, but then reeled herself in. She looked at Jesse. “Does it make sense for you to go back in?”

He shook his head. “Not tonight. But John’s right, I don’t think my alias is burned.”

“Okay. Back to HQ, everyone. I want a full debrief.”

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At the Steam House, everyone grouped round the table and gave their statements. The tone was all-business, and even though the team tried hard to stick to the facts, there was no denying that the atmosphere was highly charged.

When they were done, Rebecca looked at John. “My office. Now.”

He didn’t miss the knowing looks from Khali, Jesse, Daniel and Maria, but no one said anything.

“Close the door,” Rebecca said to him.

He wasn’t sure what strategy to go with, but in the end he chose the offensive approach. “This is where you say ‘we need to talk’, right?”

She didn’t smile. “I believe we do.”

“Look, I get it. I made a wrong call.”

“One that wasn’t yours to make.”

“You know as well as I do that Spieler’s capable of anything. Jesse was in a situation we had no control over. We had no ears in there, no idea what was going on. They could have done anything, and we would never have known.”

“Yes, and that is the risk that we’re taking in this job every day.”

“Come on.” His voice now had a distinctly accusing undertone. “We don’t send officers walking straight into a trap.”

She leaned forward in her chair. “And we don’t run after officers and blow their cover when there’s zero indication that they’re walking into a trap.”

He raised his voice, “Zero indication?! What kind of blinders were you wearing?”

She stayed calm. “I think you’re not seeing this clearly.”

“Oh, that’s hilarious,” he said sarcastically.

She was quiet for a moment, sizing him up. “You and I both know that we’re dancing around the elephant in the room.”

“So this is really the ‘You Need To See A Shrink’ talk,” he said provocatively.

“No, this is the ‘You’re The Best UC I Could Dream To Have And I’m Gonna Do Whatever I Can Not To Lose You’ talk.”

“I fail to see the difference.”

“John, in this job there are lives at stake. Not just yours.” She got up from her chair and walked to the other side of her desk, leaning against it, looking him straight in the eye. “These past two months have been hard enough, and now this. You think you can deal with it, right? It’s no big deal. But the truth is, it *is* a big deal. This stuff, it ruins people. I’ve seen it.”

Shaking his head, he muttered, “Yeah, I’ve heard it all.”

“No,” she said determinedly. “You haven’t. Because this is real, and it happened to you, and ignoring it is not going to help.”

She paused before she continued. “You know what I think? You grab a beer when get home to forget it all, maybe something stronger cause, really, the beer isn’t working anymore. You’re barely sleeping. You lie awake in the small hours, running scenarios in your head, trying to make sense of it all. Sometimes you wake up in cold sweat without being able to figure out why. And you find that it is a whole lot more frightening than a standoff with a mob boss holding a gun to your head.”

He stayed silent, because her scenario hit a lot closer to home that he’d like to admit.

“On the job,” she continued, “I need you focused. I need you at your best, because one moment of hesitation, one wrong reaction could put a play on the line, or worse—a life. And *that* is why we’re having the ‘shrink talk’.”

He shook his head. “So you’re saying if I don’t do it, I’m out?”

“God, John,” she raised her voice in unfamiliar impatience, “Do you *have* to be such a hardhead? Suck it up and take it on the chin.”

Against his better judgment, his mouth curved into a slight grin. “This is you doing whatever you can not to lose me?”

She raised both arms and let them fall at her side. “Well, this is me *trying*.”

“You’re doing a shit job of it.”

Her expression grew serious again. “That night, after the Mulcair takedown, you asked how we deal with this. Do you remember what I answered?”

He was quiet for a moment, then said, “You said I let you help.”

“I think this time you need more than just *my* help.”

He sucked air into his lungs, leaning his head back before he met her gaze. “Can I think about it?”

“I think you know the answer to that question.”

He shook his head imperceptibly, then made a decision. “Okay, I’ll see the damn shrink. Happy?”

The smallest smile played at her lips. “I’d be happy if I had my best UC back at full capacity, but I’ll settle for this.”

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John’s lab results came back two days later. The blood and urine samples they’d taken confirmed Rohypnol, but not much else. There was no evidence of infections or STDs, but also no foreign DNA traces. The big ‘inconclusive’ question mark remained, and probably would because it was unlikely that other evidence would come to light.

The big letdown came the next day. The team had worked tirelessly to reinstate Jesse, and had succeeded, although they could tell everyone was on their guard. It was apparent they’d need to be that much more careful now.

The team was casing what they suspected was Spieler’s headquarters: an upscale club in the Entertainment District that was a popular venue for the local LGBT scene. Progress was slow but spirits were still high.

No one took much notice when a group of people went into the club together. It was too late when the team realized what this was. The Vice raid hadn’t been communicated to the CIU, even though Rebecca had made every effort to keep the other police units apprised of their investigation.

The whole thing was a complete disaster. Vice walked away with a few drug possession charges and an illegal weapon or two. Rebecca yelling at the head of Vice at Police Headquarters afterwards could be heard two offices over, but the damage was done.

Feeble attempts at rescuing what there was to rescue were futile. Jesse was quickly being redlined, Spieler had gone underground. On Friday, the CIU had to admit defeat. Even if by

some small miracle they would find a way to get someone into play now, Spieler had vanished without a trace.

At the close of the day, Rebecca called everyone to the briefing table where she was greeted with a myriad of long faces. Everyone had been on the job long enough to know that you couldn't win every case, but it still stung when it happened. Especially when they'd been this close to one of the big fish.

"Okay," Rebecca finally said, and all eyes were on her. "I think we all agree this wasn't how we imagined the case would end. But that doesn't mean we didn't do our job right. I want you to know you all did great work. It was Vice's screw-up, not ours. And it doesn't mean we can't still get Spieler. Sometimes the only way to catch the bad guy is patience."

Daniel clicked the button of his ballpoint pen once before he asked, "So the Vice raid was just routine?"

"Yeah," Rebecca answered. "They should have known we were looking into Spieler. I'm not sure where exactly communication lines were crossing, but you can be sure I've addressed it so that it won't happen again."

The corners of Maria's mouth curved upwards. "I heard it was hard to miss over at HQ."

Rebecca gave her a knowing smile. "Good. But that's—"

She was interrupted by the phone ringing in her office. She glanced around the table and said, "Don't go anywhere," before she went to answer it.

When she came out again not a minute later, she looked at John. "Can you come help me with something?"

He shrugged at the others and followed her to the exit of the building. When he saw the pizza delivery guy with a tower of pizza cartons, he understood. Rebecca paid the man and gave John a cursory look.

"Oh, you're good," he said to her admiringly.

"Too much?" she asked a little unsurely.

"Are you kidding? This is perfect."

As predicted, it was a big hit with the team. Pizza slices were passed around, and Rebecca joined them with a stack of plastic cups and a bottle of red wine.

Jesse half-jokingly asked, "Alcohol on the job? Seriously?"

"Why don't you submit a complaint to your boss?" Khali nudged him.

"All right," he spoke up, theatrically holding up the cup as if to toast to Rebecca. "Herewith I shall file a formal complaint with my unit supervisor that my boss is letting us drink alcohol in the workplace."

Rebecca chuckled. "Complaint noted and dismissed. Next?"

“Our boss frequently makes us pretend we’re someone we’re not,” Daniel piped in.

Maria added, “Yeah, and she keeps insisting we do all this boring paperwork when we’re not in the field.”

Rebecca laughed. “Okay, enough already.”

John watched it all with the faintest of smiles tugging at his lips, chewing on a slice of a Margherita. His and Rebecca’s eyes met briefly, and there was an immediate mutual understanding and respect. She knew how to look out for her team.

Suddenly he realized that joining CIU had been the best decision he’d made in a long time. It didn’t quite counterbalance the sacrifices he’d had to make, but it gave him hope that if he held on to the good things in his life, there was a chance he could make it right again.

He put down the pizza and excused himself, finding a quiet corner where he took out his cell phone. His thumb hovered over the touchscreen for a moment. He stared at the entry in his phone book, but then made up his mind and pressed the “Call” button.

It rang a few times, and he could imagine her trying to make up her mind whether to answer or not. When he heard her voice at the other end, it sent a small jolt through him. Was it just his imagination, or was the aggressive undertone unexpectedly absent from her voice?

“Vee?” he said, “Before you hang up, please just listen, okay?”

He chose to see it as a good sign that she did.

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THE END.