

CHIARO SCURO



PÆAN TO PRIAPUS VI

an anthology of multi-media fiction



PÆAN TO PRIAPUS VI: CHIAROSCURO

an anthology of multi-media slash fiction

117,400 words

editing and design by Caroline K. Carbis

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WARNING:

THIS ANTHOLOGY CONTAINS SAME-SEX, ADULT-ORIENTED MATERIAL. IT WILL NOT BE SOLD TO ANYONE UNDER THE AGE OF EIGHTEEN.

Journey West

A *Professionals* slash novel

By Maiden Wyoming

the **OBLAQUE** series (*Blake's 7* slash)

Oblaque

Oblaquer

Oblaquest

Oblaque IV: to be taken intravenously

Oblaque V: in venery veritas

Oblaque Sextus

the **BENT COPPERS** series (*Professionals* slash)

...As a £3 Note

...As Two £3 Notes

...As Three £3 Notes

the **PÆAN TO PRIAPUS** series (multi-media and literary slash)

Pæan to Priapus, volumes I, II, III, IV, V

the **BENE DICTUM** series (well put, well said, well dicked)

Bene Dictum I: A Dickensian Christmas

by M. FAE GLASGOW (Christmas themed *Professionals* stories)

Bene Dictum II: Half 'n' Half

(Half *Professionals*/Half *Blake's 7*)

Bene Dictum III: Naughts & Crosses

(Three *Professionals* novellas by Sebastian, Helen Raven, & M. Fae Glasgow)

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roadmap

CHIARO

Five stories that are *relatively* light in tone and reflect a clarity of purpose and desire.

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m. fae glasgow
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m. fae glasgow

a few words

Arranging the contents for a zine has always been something of a game with me. Sometimes story order is obvious and I have no problem determining groups or categories or contrasts in tone, length, fandom, and theme. More likely, though, is the case where I sit and pull my hair out. Such was true with *Chiaroscuro*. I knew I had some very, very dark pieces and also a number of lighter ones. But the lighter ones were almost exclusively *Due South* stories (Does this say something about this fandom so far?), while the *Pros* works could only be described as angsty dark to pitch black (what you'd expect in an *Oblique* zine). I didn't want to just put all the *DS* stories together and then do the same with the *Pros*. (And, no, I'm not fooling myself into believing that people really read a zine in the order the editor has chosen.) So, I've compromised. Stories are listed by group, but they're scattered throughout the zine. Read 'em any way you wish.

Other details. I'm bowing to pressure and listing the fandom of each story. And, as usual, you'll find a full range of punctuation and spelling throughout. The UKish authors have their own set of rules (On what planet *did* they go to school?), the Americans range from sensible to experimental, while the perverted Scot has experienced the thrill of having her spelling changed to more American norms for her *DS* pieces. Speaking of *DS*, you'll see both 'Raymondo' and 'Raimondo'; 'Benny' and 'Bennie'; 'Mountie' and 'mountie.' The Glaswegian stands ready to bash your kneecaps if you question *her* choices. As for the typos, howlers, and idiotic mistakes you find—blame them all on me; I was the last one handling the stories, so I must have done it.

—Caroline K. Carbis

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Oh, God, if he showed up wearing Fraser's clothes, it'd be his fifteenth birthday all over again, and no way was he going to subject himself to that. And maybe, no way he *could* subject himself to that now: one thing to let Ma say those things to him then (and even now, he shut the hurt away deep inside where he could pretend it was dead and buried), another to let her say them to him now. If she would. After all, so he dated women, he'd been married, but there were other things he did, too, and Ma had eyes in the back of her head. Had Ma noticed the occasional phone-calls from guys? Or the way he dressed some nights when he went out?

Or the way he looked at Fraser when Benny's back was turned?

He stood up, all movement and attitude, turning his back on that line of thought: no point depressing himself, not when it was getting late, he was hungry, and he still had to get home. Early start tomorrow, big important meeting with the review panel, might get himself moved up a notch or two on the pay scale. Or demoted. Nah. With the way his cases—including the ones that became official cases only after they'd been solved—were going these days, they'd be making him commissioner in a week or two.

"Ray—"

Ray did not, absolutely did not, gasp or sigh or jump Fraser's bones. The man was still damp from his bath, hair curling slightly, skin sheened, feet bare, and all he was wearing were those uniform pants of his, suspenders dropped loosely down to drape around his hips. No, Ray didn't gasp or sigh, but he did gulp, and harden, and sit down abruptly so that the table would hide his wayward reaction from view. "Uh, yeah?" he asked, realizing that Fraser was just standing there, discarded clothing and damp towels tucked under one arm, staring at him.

"Are you hungry?"

You could say that. "Already called for pizza. The usual."

"Oh. Thank you kindly, Ray."

"Hey, I didn't know bath night was such a special event."

One of those blank, uncomprehending looks that should have made Fraser look like a stupid dweeb, but instead made the rest of the world look dumb for not making sense.

"You know, it's bath night *and* you're saying 'thank you kindly' to me."

Oh-ho, a frown this time. Deep emotional stirrings, Ray thought to himself, sarcasm his last line of defense against the way the soft glow of the lamplight was highlighting Fraser's naked chest, showing off the

muscles, the layer of protective softness that the mildness of Chicago weather still hadn't gotten rid of, the slight rise of those little brown nipples. Ray had expected them to be flat, untouched, but they weren't, quite thick, only slightly prominent, but Ray was willing to bet a month's pay check that if you sucked them, bit them a bit maybe, if Fraser liked that, those nipples would get real prominent, sticking out hungrily, begging for more mouth action, his fingers twisting them, pulling on them—

And just how long had Fraser been talking to him—or worse, how long had Fraser been standing there staring at Ray staring at him?

"Uh, sorry, I was thinking about the case..."

Hmm. That was one of the mountie's expressions Ray hadn't figured out yet. There was the obvious, "I'm too polite to even consider that you might just possibly be lying," but there was something else as well, something he nearly recognized.

But he let the speculation go, entered into conversation with some gusto, keeping up the endless friendly bickering right through paying for the pizza and putting up with Fraser's disapproval for ordering Dief his own personal deep-dish meat-lover's special.

"C'mon, Benny, Dief's a wolf, he's a meat lover, and you never heard the homily about bein' hungry like a wolf and havin' an appetite like a wolf or wolfin' food down?"

"Well, Ray, I think that the first two are similes and the last one is an adage—"

"D'you get special mountie points for good grammar? Or's this just the lingering, painful aftereffects of one long winter too many with only your grandma's books to read?"

"Good grammar—"

"Oh, no, we're not gettin' into a discussion on grammar. Lexicography on a Friday night? Jeez, bad enough I don't have a date..."

Bingo! Never failed: bring up anything that hinted at personal life and sex, and Fraser would shut up like a clam. Best trick Ray had ever learned.

They sat quietly and ate pizza, Fraser not even remonstrating when Ray gave Dief an extra slice.

Which of course, had Ray looking at him in concern.

Looking at him for the first time since his lapse earlier, when his mind had raced off on that tangent about nipples. The nipples were still bare, Fraser still half-naked, but maybe that was just because the spartan apartment was, by arctic standards, warm as June. Or maybe it was one of those Canadian manner things: your guest is not fully clad, therefore do not embarrass him by

“And you’ve sure had some different approaches, huh, Benny?”

Two miracles in one day: Fraser getting dirty, and Fraser not pretending to misunderstand a sexual comment. “Some of them have been very different indeed.”

Fraser straightened up then, pausing for a second to breathe deeply, Ray half expecting him to start tasting things again. Fraser did nothing of the sort, just went back to carefully trimming Ray’s hair, Ray only now realizing just exactly what Benny was doing, Benny’s hands touching Ray, and just how close Benny was standing. If Ray were to lean back, just an inch and a half—probably some precise measurement in Canadian—he’d be leaning against—

No. Nope, he was *not* going there, he was not, not, not when he was sitting here near-as-spit naked and all Fraser would have to do is lean over and look and—

Lean over and look, the way Benny already had. Oh. With the scissors skimming over his skull, Ray didn’t dare look up, and that was a good enough excuse for him. “So, uh,” attack being the best form of defense, this would get Fraser all closed off and distant, “what’s the most different approach you’ve had?”

Pity—maybe—that Benny didn’t know that. “Well, actually, the most different approach wasn’t here, it was up in a summer hunting settlement near Tuktoyuktuk, when a young man arranged to have me delayed so that I would have to accept his family’s hospitality, and since he knew that his sister had a crush on me and I was therefore honor-bound not to toy with her affections—”

There was a pause that could, very well, have been called pregnant. Ray cleared his throat again, and tried not to sigh out loud as Fraser’s hands took hold of him and tipped his head forward. “So you were offered this guy as hospitality?”

“Yes, Ray.”

“And...uh...did you, you know?”

“Did I know what?”

Oh, so the mountie was teasing now, was he? Well, this was Frannie’s big brother he was talking to. “Did you know him Biblically?”

He very nearly lost an ear tip for his boldness.

“That depends on whether you mean Leviticus or I Samuel.”

Ray’s head was tipped backwards this time, the top of his head touching Fraser’s bare stomach, Fraser bending over him, bending way down low over him, curving over him warmly, welcomingly, and those nipples were more pronounced than before, peaking, and puckering all round the aureole, and if Ray could tear his eyes away from them for just a moment, he could see Fraser’s face

leaning down over him, those blue eyes saying something Ray couldn’t quite make out.

And then Ray’s heart stopped, the beat skipping, as Fraser ran the backs of his fingers along Ray’s jaw. “You need a shave,” and Fraser’s voice was very quiet, almost a whisper, but not quiet enough to silence the faint tremor running through it.

There wasn’t a single suitable comeback in Ray’s head: there was no room for anything but Fraser leaning over him like this, Fraser all but giving him the come on—

—Or was this Fraser giving him the go-ahead? Was this what Fraser was like with Victoria? Letting her know that he wouldn’t say no? And was that what Ray had been almost seeing in Fraser, was that what he almost recognized? What he would surely have recognized, if it had been coming at him from a woman.

If Fraser were a woman...

If Fraser were a woman, they’d have been lovers a long, long time ago.

But while Ray had been thinking, he’d given Fraser more than enough time and Fraser was pulling back now, blatantly confused, hurt and chaos darkening his eyes.

“Hey,” Ray said, daring to reach up, his hand catching Fraser’s bare forearm, the most intimate touch they’d shared thus far. “Hurry up with that shaving gear, okay?”

And there it was. Clear as day now that Ray’d taken his blinkers off: Fraser all warmth and delight, but so quiet, though, hidden away, and there, along with the warmth, a definite heat, the sort of thing that if Ray saw it in his sister’s eyes, he’d lock Frannie up in the nearest convent for a year. Or two.

Fraser was coming back now, taking Ray’s upper towel off, setting it on the table, right beside all the other arcane things that seemed to be needed for a straight-razor shave. “It’ll be just a minute until the kettle’s ready,” Fraser said, fussing around, folding the towel, rearranging the accouterments, finally stopping, doing nothing but leaning his bum on the edge of the table, crossing his arms and looking at Ray.

They broke apart for a few moments, while Fraser dealt with getting hot water, and sudsing up the old-fashioned brush. He came round behind Ray again, holding Ray’s face with one hand while he lathered Ray up. The straight razor glinted like a weapon, and Ray swallowed, hard.

“It will be all right,” Fraser whispered, and began stroking Ray’s face with the sharpened steel.

This, Ray thought, this was trust, and he swallowed hard, again.

thing approaching normal, and then he was sliding down off Ray, taking him by the hands, and kissing him, with such tenderness, it was enough to break Ray's heart.

Breaking off the kiss, he led Ray to the bed, one broad hand rubbing Ray through the thinness of the towel, Ray's erection tenting the fabric, Ray's need burgeoning as Fraser tugged the towel off and out of the way.

"Later," Fraser said, licking his lips, "I'm going to do for you what you just did for me. But right now," another kiss, devouring, possessive, "I want more than that."

Lust kicked Ray in the stomach, a lurching, heated hunger, and Ray could scarcely control himself as Fraser turned to display his back, his ass, as Fraser knelt on the bed, shoulders down as he braced himself on folded arms, asshole visible as he spread his legs. Ray hadn't actually consciously decided to get on the bed, or move, or anything, but there he was, kneeling behind Fraser, positioning himself, his hard cock stroked by the rough woolen blanket, and his tongue just as rough as he stroked it across Benny's exposed pink asshole. There was just the faintest brushing of fine, delicate hair surrounding the clean skin, and the muscle was tight, thrillingly tight, as Ray pushed his tongue inside. He withdrew, sucking on the bud for a while, kissing and licking and even biting, just a bit, just enough to make Fraser groan. Too soon for another erection, but obviously not too soon for Fraser to love the stimulation.

Ray loved doing this, had had far too few opportunities, no one, in fact, since Angela, and it was tempting, just a bit, to keep on doing this while his hands squeezed and pumped himself to satisfaction. But how could he not take what was being offered? With a last, sucking kiss, he stopped, and got back up onto his knees. Fraser was wet and loose now, opened up and ready, his back long and strong, his buttocks white and round, very firm, with dimples, there, and there, just right for a man to fit his thumbs in as he gripped on to give Fraser a good, hard ride.

Next time. He'd do that next time. But even as he mocked himself for his mile-wide romantic streak, he turned Benny over, was met by that unexpected blinding, happy grin—and had the stray, absurd thought that he'd never think of 'sunny side up' quite the same way ever again.

He took Fraser's penis in his hand, began stroking—and had his hands shifted, down, lower, to the opening of Benny's body, as Fraser lifted his legs up, knees hooking over Ray's shoulder's, that sweet pink hole open and waiting and exposed. Ray didn't bother asking if Benny was ready, such conceits plastic and out of place

amidst such obvious intent and willingness. Steadying himself, Ray pushed forward, and nearly lost it when Fraser reached down and took hold of Ray, guiding Ray's body within his own.

No resistance, only a perfect pressure as Ray's cock passed through the tight ring of muscle, as Ray's cock sank deeper, ever deeper into Fraser's body. He held still for a long, long moment, not to give Fraser time to adjust, no need for that, but simply to rejoice in the sensations of his body. Then and only then, did he begin thrusting, fucking Benny deep and hard, loving every second of it, staring down to meet Benny's eyes, seeing the pleasure there, seeing the happiness there, his own cock happy in its temporary home. Even while his body threatened to OD on pleasure, his mind was busy going crazy with the sheer joy of knowing that he was fucking Fraser, that Benny was loving this, that even without an erection, Benny's cock small and vulnerable on his belly, Benny was getting so much pleasure out of this. He could see it, in Benny's eyes, in the sweet tension of Benny's body, in the way Benny thrust up to meet him, to take him deeper. No, there was no hard-on to signal Fraser's pleasure, but everything about him sang his enjoyment.

Fraser was clenching down on him now, deepening the pleasure, postponing orgasm, but even so, Ray could feel himself getting close, and closer, rising up from deep within, hurtling through his body and exploding, streaming from him and deep, deep into Benny. A few more ragged thrusts, his body swept away on the tide, and then he was slowing, and stopping, slipping free and collapsing down into the welcome of Fraser's embrace.

He lay there, probably for a while, before a noise disturbed him and he realized he'd fallen asleep. Starting to apologize, he realized that Fraser wasn't complaining about his weight on him, or anything else. Fraser was sound asleep, and still smiling. Sweet dreams, Ray thought, looking at him. Something Fraser deserved, sweet dreams. A glance at the clock confirmed it was late at night, just after midnight, and with Fraser right here in bed with him, he had no fear of sleeping in late for his review board. Fraser would be awake at some unholy hour, bright-eyed and bushytailed, even without the benefit of caffeine.

No fear of sleeping late, then. But a guarantee that they would both be awake way early, in plenty of time: time enough, in fact, to cement this new aspect of their relationship. Ray crossed his arms on Fraser's chest, leaned his chin on his forearms and gazed at the sleeping face so serene and calm before him.

It had taken a while, but at least Fraser had had the

ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDEST

m. fae glasgow

HE'D HAD

enough. He had, honest. He took the corner far too fast, without signaling, got the expected sigh, and look, and lips pressed tightly together in lieu of a comment. Honest, if he got just one more long, lingering look, if he got just one more heavy sigh, if he got just one more morose, introverted pondering, if he had just one more day of *him* going around like a menopausal woman, he was going to, well, he was just going to have to do something about it. For fuck's sake, the man was a mountie—a grown-man mountie, not a pathetic, whining Ophelia dressed up as her favourite Canadian cop for Hallowe'en. Anyone would think the stupid mountie didn't realize he (Fraser) wasn't even Francesca or Maria, brooding over everything all of the time.

Christ, anyone would think the moron had cause to be upset. And for what? Okay, so Ray hadn't actually gotten round to mentioning Angela, but so what? Since when did guys go around telling other guys about their ex-wives?

Yeah, well, Gardino always was the exception.

Okay, so guys did go around telling their buddies about their ex-wives and failed marriages. Didn't mean a guy was *obliged* to do it, right? 'Course he wasn't. A guy could tell his buddies whatever he wanted to. As long as it wasn't about feelings.

Ray gave Fraser another speaking look, and thought back, uneasily, to the none-too-distant past when Fraser had been much more verbal than he was tonight. Maybe the long, lingering looks and heavy sighs weren't so bad. Ray was busy remembering that night in the warehouse, Fraser going on and on and on about Gerard and how much lo—

No way, no how was he gonna say that. He was a guy, for fuck's sake.

An Italian-American guy, his conscience reminded him: he used the 'L' word all the time. For family and girlfriends and buddies, but—

Okay, okay, so *everything* was different with Fraser. Everything. Shit.

Ray heard it then, quite distinctly: another one of those aren't-you-going-to-ask-me-what's-wrong? sighs.

No, he fucking wasn't going to fucking ask what the fuck was fucking wrong.

No need. He already knew. Half Chicago probably already knew.

Fuck.

Question was if Fraser was in the half of Chicago that already knew.

Fucking shit.

Going up the stairs now to Fraser's rat-trap of an apartment, Fraser politely stood aside to allow Ray the lead. Bastard, doing that now, after what they'd been through, after the way they'd gotten past all that polite-Canadian crap.

Okay, so that had been before Fraser found out about Angela. And Irene. And about his Pop gambling, and drinking, and beating him. Definitely before Fraser found out about Louise and then Angela. Again.

Two time loser. Three times, you're out. Just as well failed relationships didn't count under the three-time-loser law: he'd never see daylight again.

Okay, okay, so maybe he should've told Fraser he was going out with Angela. Maybe he shoulda kinda mentioned that he and his ex-wife were half-thinking about patching it up, seeing if maybe now they'd gotten rid of the anger, if maybe the old feelings were still there. Maybe.

A cup of coffee thumped down in front of him.

Thumped? Ray looked at the drops of coffee still dripping down the side of the RCMP mug, at the small puddle lying, cooling, on the clean-scrubbed vinyl tablecloth.

He looked up, caught sight of those blue eyes boring into him, looked away as fast as he could. Grabbed the coffee, took a drink, too hot, damn near burned his mouth, but it was better than having to take the heat of Fraser looking at him.

He heard it again: another one of those sighs.

One more, just one more of them, one more of those brooding silences and he was going to have to do something about it. Just one more—

"Oh, for goodness' sake!"

That startled him into looking up. Not a good idea, as it turned out. Fraser was glaring at him—

Fraser, actually, genuinely, honestly, *glaring* at him. "Benny?"

"If I have to hear just one more sigh from you—" Fraser broke off, tongue darting at lower lip. Voice modulated to close to its usual tone, continuing, "Obviously, you're upset. However, there's no need to behave like a baby. You're a grown man and—"

Ray just looked at him, and heaved a weary sigh. Oh, great, just his luck. He'd spent ages wanting to see Benton Fraser loosen up, let rip a bit, and what did he get? He got Benny letting rip, at him, and for what? Nothing, that's what—

"Will you stop that? This has been going on for days, getting us nowhere and now—"

Oh, better and better. Now he had an angry, stuck-for-words Benny. Cue the Inuit tale.

"Well, Ray," Fraser said and Ray looked at him again for that: there had been an odd edge of decisiveness to that, and it was getting stronger, like a man resolving to jump off a bridge, as Fraser continued talking, "you've always said men weren't any good at talking about subjects pertaining to emotions or needs or—"

And now Ray's eyes were widening, alarm bells going off as Fraser looked at him so resolutely, as Fraser licked his inner lip, nodded, and finally said that last word.

"Desires."

Without any farther warning, nor so much as a by-your-leave, let alone Fraser's usually endless 'would you mind, thank you kindly, if it's not too much of an intrusion,' Ray felt Fraser's hands grab him under the arms, and he was hauled, unceremoniously, to his feet, Fraser muttering all the while about Ray being a grown man and a cop, not a brooding poet or Frannie with pms.

He hadn't even known Fraser could say something like 'Frannie with pms' without blushing. Too busy listening to the weird litany coming from the no-longer sighing mountie, he wasn't paying too much attention to what else was going on. Until the backs of his legs hit against Fraser's bed and he was shoved, a bit more forcefully than he'd ever expected from his mild-mannered SuperCanadian friend, to sit down there on the military-neat bed. He bounced once, twice, trying to capture both balance and a train of thought—any thought—that would make sense of this. While Fraser stood in front of him and—

Stripped. Yep. Stripped. Didn't matter how much his brain gibbered other things, there was no denying it or ignoring it. Fraser was stripping. Naked. In front of him. Lanyard, that strap-thing, belt, red tunic, suspenders shrugged off, long-sleeved undershirt lifted up and off, hair tousling in its wake, and then Fraser was sitting

have been subjected to you being broodier than my grandfather's Long Island Reds, and given that you had talked—at length. At great length, I have to add albeit reluctantly—about everything save those things that actually mattered, those things that were causing the sighs and the pouting—”

Not even the shimmer of movement of Benny's butt against his cock was enough to distract him from *that*. “I was not pouting. And *you* were the one sighing and being broody and moody and—”

Damn it if the bastard didn't do that one, slow blink that meant he thought you'd been at the medicinal mushrooms again.

“But talking didn't make any difference, and as you've frequently said men aren't any good talking about it, and so I thought I should follow your tacit suggestion, and that we should bypass the talking and simply do ‘it’ instead. Which I must point out, Ray, we would be doing, if you would only stop talking for just a minute—”

“Me stop talking? Me? You're the one who's been doin' the big-eyed mountie routine, you're the one who's been—”

He shut up then, finding it real hard to talk with his mouth full of someone else's tongue. Other things were real hard too, mainly Fraser's cock which was hard up against Ray's belly, and Fraser's tongue that was thrusting hard and needy into Ray's mouth, and Fraser's hands that were hard and probably bruising on Ray's butt.

Okay, so maybe talking wasn't something they needed to do this very second. So maybe Benny was right, and Benny hadn't been the only one behaving like a romance-starved soap-opera diva. So maybe there were better things to do with his mouth right now than talk.

Not maybe, definitely—and they all seemed to involve the smooth perfection of Benton Fraser's skin.

For half a second, Ray considered stopping this right here, right now, and making them both talk about this, and think about this—but then Benny made his opinion very clear, and his opinion very felt, thrusting his hard cock up against Ray's belly, the movement pushing Ray's cock against the small opening of Benny's body.

Okay.

Okay, he could do this, he could like this.

Okay, okay, so he could love this, he could end up addicted to this.

Fraser wasn't kissing him any more, head pushed back into the small mesa of pillows, mouth agape, gasping for breath, and Ray knew just how he felt: couldn't miss it, not with Benny thrusting up against his belly like that.

They say that in sex, a person does what they want done to themselves.

Thrusting. Thrusting up against his belly. Thrusting up into Benny's belly, inside him, entering him, burying himself in Benny's heat...

Not yet, couldn't think about that. Let Benny, instead, run hands all over him, back and shoulders and butt, fingers grazing him down there in the darkness. Grazing him the way his own cock was grazing against Benny.

Thrusting. Thrusting into him, belly to belly, Benny's cock so hard, thrusting up into his hand as he thrust up into Benny.

Fuck.

Shit, he was going to fuck Benny.

He was going to fuck Benton Fraser RCMP.

He looked at the man under him, at the pale skin flushing red, at the mouth open with hunger, at the widened blue eyes staring at him with—

He was a real man, he could use the L word.

Just not right now.

He leaned down, his own mouth open and wet, sliding across a jaw that should be rough with stubble, but this was Fraser's jaw, so of course it was smooth and perfect and flawless, so soft against his tongue, and then his tongue found Fraser's ear and did to him what Fraser had done at the beginning: tongue tip dipping into Benny's ear, Benny shivering and shuddering under him, groaning again, hands clutching even tighter.

Hell, if that was what the ear did, what the hell would happen if he was to suck on Benny right here, where his nipple was already hard and erect against his tongue, or if he sucked here, where the hip angled out, and here, where the skin dipped in, or here—

There were no words for this. He was sucking Benny, he was sucking Benny's cock, he had Benny's cock in his mouth, oh fucking hell, it was perfect, and he was moaning, or Benny was moaning or they both were and it was gorgeous and glorious and he could suck Benny forever, what the hell had he been thinking to want to talk instead of this, to postpone this feeling, Benny so desperate in his mouth, needing him so perfectly, so powerfully. What could be better than this?

Well, trust Benny to know the answer to *that*.

He was being moved, turned, until he was the wrong way round on the bed, and Benny's cock was back where it belonged, in Ray's mouth again, and his own cock—

Oh.

His own cock was in Benny's mouth, and Benny's hands were stroking his ass again, playing with his hole, with his balls, touching him so delicately, then firmly,



just hard enough, then delicately again, until every inch of his skin was alight with sensation. He sucked harder, taking more of Benny inside himself, felt the reciprocity, felt the fingers touching him intimately, retreating, coming back to tease him again.

Do unto others, right? So he did to Benny what Benny was doing to him, and was blessed by Benny groaning, throat thrumming around Ray's cock, and Benny's legs spreading, Benny's hips arching up, just a bit, burying the cock deeper in Ray's mouth. And putting Ray's fingers—

Putting Ray's fingers against Benny, the fingertip slipping in—mind boggling for a second that Benny was loose enough for that, then abandoning the thought, not even caring if it meant Benny had male lovers or a dildo or just some secret Inuit technique he'd learned to while away the long Arctic nights—and then his whole finger was sliding in incredibly easily, Ray pulling out again just long enough to push his finger into his own mouth alongside Benny's cock, his mouth stretching too wide, but he couldn't bear to abandon Benny now. So he made his finger as wet as he could, and slid it home, burying it nice and deep, feeling what he'd read about, surprised that the gland was so small, and all of Benny so smooth inside, moist, tender, like the head of Benny's cock where it stroked along his tongue.

He felt Benny's hand in his hair, felt the first tiny spasm in the gland under his finger, felt the familiar, last swell of a cock, so weird to feel that in his mouth, but so perfect too. Knew Benny was trying to be polite and pull out of his mouth in time.

Fuck Canadian politeness.

He shoved his finger in hard, sucked the cock harder still: fuck Canadians. Fuck this particular Canadian. And he was, and he would, and the Canadian would fuck him.

Oh yes.

He pushed his own cock deeper into Fraser's throat, nearly wept when his cock was set free, nearly came as Benny's hands tightened convulsively on his ass, as Benny's cock went deep, deep into his throat, as Benny's hips convulsed, helpless with need, pushing Benny deeper still, and then there it was, the first pulse too far back for him to taste it, but he felt it, and pulled back before it became too much, just his mouth around Benny's cock now, his mouth around the cock, tasting Benny as he came, his hand stroking Benny's balls, his finger inside Benny, stroking him there, in time to the pulses thrusting Benny's come into his mouth.

It could have lasted forever, and it still wouldn't have lasted anywhere near long enough. It was over, Benny

dwindling in his mouth, the taste of him still there, but not as strong, the hands caressing him lethargic now.

His own cock was still hard though, and needing, and he wanted—oh, God, he needed Benny to do something, anything, and he started to turn round again, but was stopped, and his cock was offered haven again, tongue swirling round the head of his cock, dipping into the slit, mouth sucking him in, sucking him deep and hard, and hot moistness all around him, taking every inch, throat swallowing, massaging him, fingers stroking his balls, tugging lightly, perfectly at him, and Benny was sucking him and it was wonderful, and he was going to—

Wetness, pressing against him, his sphincter opening, and the wetness, a wet finger, oh, fuck, Benny was going inside him, putting a finger inside him, his body so tight he could feel the first joint as it entered him, could feel the second joint, could feel the other fingers splayed against his ass as the finger sank in all the way home. Just what he'd done to Benny—what he'd done for Benny.

Doing unto Benny...

Doing things he hadn't even known he wanted, until now, this instant, with Benny inside him, and himself inside Benny, joined, Benny's come still tart on his tongue, his throat still remembering the shape of Benny's cock, just as Benny's throat was molding itself around his cock, oh God, he was in so deep. Not deep enough, never gonna be deep enough, and he thrust, felt Benny's chin against his pubic hair, Benny's hand against his ass, Benny's finger in his ass, inside him, Benny was inside him—

And he was coming, coming so hard, harder than he'd come since he was a teenager.

Benny's mouth was still around him, and he pulled away, cock always too sensitive afterwards for anything, especially Benny's contented nuzzling. He twisted round, kissed Benny, let Benny nuzzle contentedly on his tongue instead, tasting himself in Benny's mouth, knowing Benny would be tasting himself, the two of them mingling, joining, becoming one.

He loved kissing, and being kissed, and Benny kissed like a dream. It occurred to him that happy though he was to lie here and kiss Benny until the Last Trump, he was heavier than he looked, and poor Benny—

"Benny, am I—"

"No talking," Fraser said dreamily, wrapping his arms around Ray, hugging him tightly, even bringing one leg up to hook round the backs of Ray's leg.

Guess he wasn't too heavy after all.

Guess he didn't need to talk either. Hadn't he always



said men were no good at that kind of thing? Hadn't even Benny agreed with him? And look where it had got them. Man oh man. Yeah. Action, not talk, that's what men were good at. And he and Benny were fucking incredible at it.

Talking could come tomorrow, or next week, when or if he needed to sort out what the hell he was doing making love to his best friend.

But for now, he didn't need to say a word, or even think. All he needed was right here, kissing him, loving him, needing him.

Oh, yeah, action was what he was extra-specially *really* good at.

And judging by the stirrings in the body cradling his, he was going to get plenty of action tonight.

Sparing half a second for a brief smile, and another second to gaze, lovingly, down at Benny, taking in the half-closed blue eyes, the lazy, contented smile, and the sheer love exuding from him, Ray Vecchio sighed for the last time, and kissed those big mountie eyes closed, and set about proving that actions do indeed speak louder than words.

▶▶▶▶▶



Yeah. And Frank Zuko could never outdo them, no matter how much money ole Frankie boy spent, no matter how many stylists he leaned on.

Yeah. Ray gave his reflection a smug smile—yeah, still got what it takes.

Someone thumping on the door. One of his nephews, indistinguishable through the door, but something to do with needing to go right *now*. Which meant Frannie had taken over the other bathroom again.

One last moment to look at his reflection, then it was out of the quiet and back into the bedlam.

A small whirlwind tore past him and slammed the door on Ray's heels; Maria ran past with Teresa under one arm and a flouncy, frilly monstrosity under the other, wails of misery following behind mother and recalcitrant child; his own mother was carrying on at least three separate conversations, thankfully all with living people; Tony was wandering around wondering if anyone had seen his coat; and there was an ominous silence from the den where there was the unholy combination of unsupervised children and a Christmas tree.

Years of experience, patience, negotiating skill, and practice paid off, and tree, gifts, and children were all rescued before any real disasters could occur, although one present was a bit...bedraggled. But hey, who would notice once the feeding frenzy hit tomorrow morning?

More yelling, more footsteps running up and down stairs, more Maria chasing Teresa, mother picking up daughter's discarded ribbons and hair clips as quickly as they were tossed aside, Tony looking now for his tie, Ma insisting that spit-wet fingers were the most effective tool for taming a boy's hair, the owner of said hair threatening to lose his dinner on the hall floor, and what sounded like every single cousin on both sides of the family talking all at once. Aunt Sylvia was quizzing Frannie on who was sleeping where—with Aunt Sylvia and husband, Cousin Helena and brood, and dear old Uncle Luigi too, Ray was kind of wondering who was going to be sleeping where himself.

Ray left them all to it. He stuck the tape of "Frosty the Snowman" into the VCR, settled back to relax on the center seat of the couch; waited for the chaos to reduce to manageable levels, the children slowly lured into the den by the sound of the snowman with the magic hat.

Glanced at his watch. Another five minutes, that's all it should take.

Okay, so five more minutes, and with the kids in here, the chaos out there should stop in a minute. He'd just relax, take it easy for five more minutes and wait for the chaos out there to stop.

Frosty turned—he winced at the inevitable pun—to

snow, that stupid VCR acting up again, another bill he'd have to take care of after Christmas. Lost two kids as he tried to fix the tracking, lost the rest of them when the picture came back but the sound stayed out.

From the sounds bellowing from the rest of the house, chaos was still abounding out there. And this was just the dress rehearsal for Christmas Day itself. There was a particularly loud crash and thud, followed by shrieking that took Ray right back to Ma's discovery of Franny's first home perm. Probably for the best, Ray decided as he glanced out the window at a sky promising snow, that Benny'd decided to pass on coming with them tonight. This place was bad enough without Franny vying for the mountie's affections.

The noise outside had barely begun to abate. Five minutes. He'd give them all five more minutes. Five minutes, that was his absolute limit.

Fifteen minutes later, he gave up. Went out into the hall and announced that they were leaving *now* and anyone who was late wouldn't get any presents tomorrow.

Another Christmas miracle. The entire family, cousins included, was assembled, polished, perfect and preened, in less than ten minutes. Yelling at him, asking who had died and made him God—although Ma frowned at Franny for that—and all of them annoyed with him. But they were there, and they were ready, which meant that they could still decide who was going in which car, give directions to the out-of-town aunt and uncle, and *still* get to church early enough for Ma to gossip with her friends.

As always, Ray took as many kids as he could fit into his car—who needed crappy canned Christmas marathons on the radio when you had a carful of excited, happy kids singing carols and festive songs as only kids can?

Although he supposed he should mention that yeah, multi-culturalism was a great thing, but still, you just don't sing The Dreidl Song to Uncle Lorenzo on Christmas Eve.

▼ Midnight Mass over, and kids who were too sleepy to stay awake during Mass were now deafening him with an endless and innovative list of reindeer names, sung to a tune that might, once, have been Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer. Or it could once have been Frosty the Snowman, cos those were the words now, and the tune hadn't changed one bit. A particularly choice variation on the words got Teresa a severe uncle-ly frown and it really was as well the mountie was home safe and sound and protected from the language of kids today.

Out of the cold, into the warmth of the house, the kids tearing upstairs to get out of their church clothes, Ma disappearing immediately into the kitchen and Ray

going quietly into the den, closing the door gently behind himself. He gave himself just a minute, maybe two, to look around the dimly-lit living room, almost unchanged from his own childhood, although he'd bought the biggest tree ever this year, and there were more ornaments on it, from the old hand-carved ones from his great-grandfather to this year's crop of popcorn, glue and green paper made by his sister's youngest. The Nativity was in its usual spot and even though he knew exactly where the flaw lay, he could barely see the crack in the stable roof from that Christmas when he'd...ducked, and run right into the table and knocked the Nativity flying.

Evil of him, he supposed, especially since it was Christmas. But still, the pleasure wasn't dimmed one iota, and he found himself grinning as he took his father's place, and turned on the Christmas tree lights, setting the entire room alight and bright, and he was grinning still as he gathered up the after-Mass present for each child.

Who came galloping in en masse, a sea of bright eyes and grabbing hands, voices high-pitched with excitement.

"Okay, let's see... Who here's been good?" he asked, grinning at the piping chorus of "me, me!," grinning even wider as eager kids started ripping open tonight's present.

Oh yeah, Pop, see how much we miss you.

▼ Ma had outdone herself this year. Okay, so it was Aunt Sylvia, but Ray was a good son and a smart man, and he knew better than to give the credit to anyone but his ma. That had been some "little something" to eat after Mass. Rich, heavy, all the foods he remembered from... Hell, since he was old enough to stay awake for Mass.

And now, there were dishes clattering in the kitchen, and Maria and Franny tidying up the bomb-site downstairs, and Ray was roped into the tradition that he himself had added to the family.

Unlike some people he could name, *he* would never ever be too drunk to read the kids a story on Christmas Eve.

He was just about tripping over small bodies here, some half asleep, Maria's boy sucking his thumb surreptitiously again, since Tony wasn't here to yell at him for it. Teresa was big-eyed, that serious, studious look of children—and certain mounties—busy announcing that they were Not Tired, as they fell asleep mid-protest and little Beatrice was already fast asleep, mouth open, looking cherubic enough for any Christmas card.

"Okay, so you all got a blanket over you? Everybody got their pillow—hey, Teresa, give that doll back to Joseph, he can have it if he wants."

"Boys don't play with dolls, Uncle Ray," she informed him, snootily.

"Yeah, and little girls don't get to climb trees and they don't get taught to play pool *and* they wear frilly dresses with flowers all over them and ribbons in their hair. Right?"

Mouthing something that Maria would probably scream over, Teresa handed the doll back to Joseph. And Ray figured that since that little pinch she'd given him hadn't made Joseph cry, who was he to interfere?

"Okay, you guys, settle down, nice and quiet..."

"What if we don't?"

"Then Santa won't come—" Ray began, and as Teresa opened her mouth, quickly finished, "—and even if he does, I'll take all your presents away. So be quiet, get all warm, and I'll read you a story."

Eyes were already drooping shut, and there was almost no noise from downstairs, so quiet now, so very early in the morning or so very late at night, Ray could hear the wind blowing through the streets outside.

"Okay, if you guys are all set, I'll start." Of course, they weren't all set, one more bathroom break, and *then* everyone was all set, children strewn across the floor like snow. Ray leaned back, let Joseph climb into his lap, and picked up his favourite Christmas Eve book. "'Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house, not a creature was stirring..."

And as the last of his nieces and nephews dropped off to sleep, as he looked up and saw his sisters leaning shoulder to shoulder in the doorway, Ray smiled again.

Yeah, Pop, I hope you're watching this and I hope you see just how much we miss you.

▼ No visions of sugar-plums dancing in Ray's head; just bemusement at what the hell all that noise was, and why the kids were up when it was still dark, and then why were the kids up when it was—shit!—barely 7 AM when there was no school or work today and why the fuck could he smell *turkey* before breakfast—

Oh. Yeah. Christmas Day. Kids. Presents. Ma's cooking. Better—Aunt Sylvia's baking. Oh, boy oh boy oh boy!

Blankets thrown back—as Teresa ran screaming into his room, leapt on the bed and nearly had Ray screaming high-falsetto right alongside her. Fortunately, nearly three years risking his life beside Benton Fraser had taught Ray a trick or two, and all he got was a bruised thigh and perforated eardrums as Teresa screamed with

joy over the Lego Technics Deluxe Set he'd given her.

An hour later, he and his favourite niece were still sitting on his bed, the first engine half-built, when Franny came and dragged them downstairs for breakfast.

▼ At some point, he was going to burst. Midnight feast, a banquet for breakfast, and then there was going to be lunch, and then he was taking dessert over to Fraser's.

Just as well he'd worn his new suit last night—after today, he'd never fit in it again. Still, he looked down his nose at his brother-in-law who wouldn't even notice: no grubby, saggy sweats for Ray, not even on Christmas Day. Loose, comfortable mock-turtleneck sweater, his old favourite butter-yellow pants that had worn soft but still looked good, an old pair of soft, suede shoes. Yeah. He'd do a lot for comfort, but being a twin for Tony wasn't one of them.

He looked at the pot Tony had just washed; handed it back again, handed Tony an Ajax pad just to make sure Tony got the message, and went back to drying the silverware that he couldn't squeeze—no matter how hard he'd tried—into the dishwasher.

Maria was chasing Teresa again—something to do with decapitating Joseph's brand-new GI Joe, by the sounds of it. Ma and Aunt Sylvia were arguing over Gramma's original Christmas cake recipe.

And that sounded woefully like Franny on the phone inviting her friend Stephanie over for Christmas lunch. No way. No way was he going to put up with Stephanie making eyes at him, lifting her skirt right up on her thigh as she sat down—hell, trying to play footsie under the table with him, right in front of his ma and his entire family.

Tony handed him the pot again. Ray looked at it. Handed it back again. Started putting away the plastic glasses reserved for the children.

Beatrice and Joseph this time, running like fiends, Sarah screeching behind them. According to the blood-curdling screams, all of that had something to do with them getting more presents than her.

As if they didn't have enough! There had been mountains of gifts, a fortune spent on the kids, and the adults, and now these kids were screaming about what they *hadn't* got? Shit, when he was a kid—

When he was a kid, he'd thought men in their mid-thirties were old. Ancient.

Okay. Let the kids scream about the Holiday Barbie they hadn't got, or that they only got a Sega Saturn system when they'd had their heart set on a Nintendo 64 system. Let 'em. He wasn't going to say a word, he wasn't going to sound like an old man, telling them 'when I was your age...'

At least the pot was clean this time.

God knew how long it was going to take to get the frittata pan up to Ma's standards.

Ray looked at his watch; it was only 10 AM and he could feel a headache starting already.

▼ At least it was quiet in here. Outside, various nieces, nephews and cousins were playing with the new bike—and right on cue, there came a crash, a thud, a moment of shocked silence and then the scream, nearly drowned out by Ma's condolences and reassurances. Someone had been cruel and given Joseph a sword that made loud noises if you swung it just right, and that, combined with the 'laser' pistol Teresa had liberated from the brats down the block, was making World War II sound like a minor skirmish.

Someone—Aunt Sylvia's latest husband?—was carrying on a conversation with both Frannie and Luigi who were, unfortunately, at opposite ends of the driveway.

And he was stuck in the kitchen with a rattling dishwasher that was making a noise that sounded unhealthy and expensive, and a brother-in-law who couldn't wash dishes and was even worse at dissecting a basketball game.

Where was a piddle-sniffing, mud-tasting, garbage-dump-raking, do-gooder mountie when you needed him?

▼ He'd finally given in and kicked Tony out of the kitchen, sent the poor slob out to deal with the insanity of a houseful of kids on Christmas morning. So now the kitchen was cleaned to Ma's specifications, the dishwasher was reduced to an angry hissing sound, and there seemed to be several platoons of marauding relatives running amok through his house. But if he sneaked into the den, closed all the curtains, and turned up the TV just a bit, he was as good as alone in here. And it was quiet. Comparatively speaking. Feeling just a bit guilty, Ray turned on the local PBS station, the one that always carried that English choir thing, all those kids in long dresses and ruffled collars, every one of them looking like a doofus, every one of them singing like an angel.

Yeah, there it was, the church that was old even by Chicago standards, all that rich old wood, and the candles gleaming, as those voices soared, and the screen filled with the placid, ageless beauty of a stained-glass window and—

Someone at the door. Teresa. Wanting him to do more Technics with her.



"Maybe after lunch," he yelled, feeling guilty, but he'd already spent an hour on it this morning, and he was tired after being up for Mass and being woken early—and he'd been working like a dog all week to make sure he could take today off and not be dragged in for nothing more urgent than missing paperwork some poor schlub needed since it was Ray's rare Christmas off and someone else would have to deal with the vicissitudes and viciousness for the next couple of days.

He heard something through the door, Teresa whining. Guess he wasn't the only tired one round here. Well, he guessed it wouldn't do any harm to bring her in, let her watch a little TV with him...

Wrong. Teresa, and on her heels, Joseph. And the two of them whining about the boring stuff on the TV, and why couldn't they watch cartoons, and didn't Uncle Ray have "Charlie Brown's Christmas" and why hadn't he fixed the VCR yet...

The doorbell; Frannie squealing excitedly, Stephanie joining in, Maria adding a dose of sarcasm, the fight traveling down the hall towards Ma in the kitchen.

Beatrice and Sarah hurtling into the den, arguing loudly over which one of them had lost the Polly from her Polly Pocket and which one had stolen the un-lost Polly from the other sister's Polly Pocket and Teresa voicing her opinion on all the Polly Pockets in the world.

And then the smoke alarm went off.

If Tony had been smoking in the downstairs bathroom again, Ray was gonna—

Do nothing but scrape up the remains, if Maria's shouted threats were anything to go by.

Great. Just what he wanted: perfect family harmony. All he needed to make his day perfect and complete would be for Ma and Aunt Sylvia to start in comparing children...

But you know, now that he thought about Ma and Aunt Sylvia, that gave him an idea...

He nearly walked right into the dreaded Steph, scuttled back into the den barely in time, hid there until Steph and Franny's voices disappeared up into Franny's bedroom. Close call. Too close. Lunch was going to be a real joy.

The kitchen smelled wonderful and felt like a sauna.

"Hey, Ma, Aunt Sylvia, how are my two favourite ladies?"

"Fine, fine. Raymondo, who is this Benton friend of yours and why have you not invited him over for Christmas?"

There was a rapid thump-thump-thump as Tony ran up the stairs, followed by a vengeful Maria.

"He has other stuff he has to do today, Aunt Sylvia—"

"But your mother says he has no family here, his mother and father," quick sign of the cross, Ma joining in, "both dead, and poor Benton all alone."

"Nah, he's fine, Aunt Sylvia. He has other friends he was spending the morning with—"

Well. Dief was the best friend Fraser had, right?

"But he should be with family—" his aunt was saying.

Only way back, way, way back, right at the start, just about, Benny had said Ray was his best friend. Best friend Benny'd ever had.

"—not alone or with some casual friends. He should be here—"

As Franny and Stephanie came down the stairs, high heels clacking loudly as they laughed their way along the hall, and as Maria and Tony started throwing things upstairs, as Beatrice and Sarah decided it was all Joseph's fault for eating the lost Polly and as it occurred to Ray that his bed was littered with a 500-piece set of Technics, and that the noise and the pandemonium and the press of people was only going to get much worse here in his own house before it got better, Ray admitted that just about the last thing he wanted to do was bring Benny over here. Even Benny, here, would be reduced to a rôle: Ray got to be brother, son, uncle, brother-in-law, bill-payer, resident cop-cum-arbiter. Benny would be Ray's friend, the charity stray brought in to show some warmth, Franny's would-be boyfriend, The Foreigner. Contemplating giving up the peace and honesty of Benny's place for bringing Benny here, Ray decided that his idea wasn't just good, it was lifesavingly brilliant.

Especially now his ma was fussing too.

"I don't know why you didn't bring Benton over, Ray, we would have squeezed him in somewhere."

"Ma—"

"Of course we would," his Aunt Sylvia put in. "He could have shared with you. Plenty of room in that big bed of yours."

Not much room in Fraser's bed. Or on his bedroll, if Dief had taken the bed.

Aunt Sylvia was looking at him with the same speculative gleam that had preceded her guessing about his marriage going wrong.

"So why have you not brought this Benton friend over here—" a brief pause as Ma refused Tony a snack and shooed him right back out of the kitchen and as Aunt Sylvia handed out cookies to two youngsters who'd been subsisting on sugar since at least lunch yesterday, "—to your home and your family?"

Good question, and one he didn't much want to answer 'you and Ma are too sharp for my own good.' An acceptable answer, luckily, was provided as Franny



and Maria could be heard from the garden, having a spirited discussion on the marital talents of Tony and Franny's ex.

"He's Canadian, Aunt Sylvia, I don't think he's ready for all this."

"And if we don't get on with the baking and the cooking, we will never be ready to feed everyone, Sylvia, leave my boy alone and look at what we still need to do."

Ray stole a cookie from the baking sheet being lifted out of the oven, nearly burning his fingers, taking a second to kiss his ma before making good his escape, completely forgetting the reason he'd come to the kitchen in the first place.

Benny, here, in this zoo? God, the poor man barely coped with a regular family dinner. Benny, in the middle of all this? Definitely cruel and unusual punishment.

The VCR still wasn't working, and it wasn't going to be working, not if Tony didn't stop jamming his meaty fingers into the slot like that. Of course, if there was a short inside, then Tony wouldn't be working too well. Not that Tony worked at all ever—

And it occurred to Ray to wonder why the hell he was spending Christmas morning watching his brother-in-law attack the VCR, Tony looking more and more like a plumber every second as his pants slid lower and his butt crack showed more.

Disgusting. What a disgusting sight any time, but Christmas morning?

Man, this place was really starting to get to him.

And the kids weren't helping.

Just how many were here anyway? He didn't even recognize the one pointing at Tony and laughing—looked kinda like Mario Ciccione, maybe it was one of his. So now he had his nieces, his nephews, his neighbor's kids, his aunt, uncle, cousins and Franny's nightmare friend, Stephanie.

He also had a headache.

He'd actually started to push open the kitchen door when he realized what Ma and Aunt Sylvia were talking about. Looked like Aunt Sylvia's latest husband was heading to be her latest ex-husband.

Ma was keeping her voice quiet, by Vecchio standards anyway. "—believe me when I tell you, being without a man in the house is not a bad thing."

"But you were married to him for so long, it was arranged even before you left home to come to America, you never, *you know* with a man other than him—of course you think it's better to be without a man."

"Sylvia—"

And Ray had to strain to hear his mother's whisper,

didn't know whether to laugh, cry, or run away when he heard what she was saying.

"—he has been gone nearly eight years. I'm a handsome woman, with wonderful children, I do well in the Church—you think I've been without distractions? And still, I tell you, take the distractions when you want them, but you will be happier and better without a man than—"

Teresa coming up the hall, calling his name, forcing Ray to go into the kitchen or be caught eavesdropping. "—so it was dates Gramma used."

"No, no, no, Mamma always swore it was figs—"

"Dates. Oh, Raimondo, you're here again. Looking for coffee, caro?"

If he hadn't heard otherwise himself, he'd be convinced his ma and Aunt Sylvia had been doing nothing racier than discussing dried fruit.

But Ma, his ma, had said... Had said she...

Distractions.

Fuck, if anyone deserved "distractions", it was his ma.

He grabbed her for a hug, held her close, heard her laughter, felt her love, and couldn't help it: he thought again, as his ma plied him with coffee and his aunt fed him cookies, and Ma's grandchildren filled the warm kitchen with their voices: yeah, Pop, see how much we miss you.

There was an argument going on about who should sit where; which kids could be put together at the coffee table without risking a food fight, where to put the turkey so Tony wouldn't think the entire thing was for him. There was another argument about who had made the mess in the bathroom and who had to mop up the spilled shampoo and the smeared toothpaste. Another one, back on what Gramma had used in whichever recipe it had been that his ma and Aunt Sylvia were using to cover up their real discussions. And from that shriek, it sounded like Joseph had finally got his revenge on Teresa. Who was now wreaking revenge for the revenge, while Beatrice blamed Sarah for the mess and Sarah blamed Tony Jr.

And he'd forgotten to get the Advil when he was in the kitchen earlier.

His ma. And "distractions." He had a sinking feeling that the only reason he was so calm about this was because it hadn't sunk in yet.

Now there was an argument about which side was the fork side, and the kids were back on that damned Polly Pocket, Tony couldn't find the shirt he wanted to wear at lunch, and one of the kids wanted to know why the VCR wouldn't play tapes and what kinda house had



a VCR that didn't play tapes, and Maria was telling Tony what she thought of a man who couldn't find his own shirt and oh God, Stephanie was coming downstairs.

Damn it all to hell and back: it wasn't just the Advil he'd forgotten when he'd gone in the kitchen earlier.

"Hey, Ma!" Ray called, heading for the kitchen again, "I've been thinking..."

He'd stayed long enough to carve the turkey—you see who's missing you now, Pop?—and eat lunch and watch the kids succumb to overtiredness and overstimulation. And then he made good his escape, eluding Stephanie's pout and Teresa's loud laments, leaving the rest of his family to their noise and their arguments, the usual rituals of love that they went through every year.

By the time he'd driven to Benny's place, it was already dark, and the gaudy symbols of Christmas had become few and far between: not enough money for big displays here, although there was a sprig of mistletoe hanging over the chipped-paint door leading to the street.

Nothing hanging over Fraser's door, of course. No noise coming from inside either. Ray knocked on the door, waited a few moments until Benny opened the unlocked door and nearly blinded Ray with the happiness beaming from his smile.

"Ray! Merry Christmas."

Ray allowed himself to wallow, just a bit, in the warmth of that greeting, in the delight of Benny's pleasure at having Ray here. "Yeah, Merry Christmas to you too, Benny. You eaten?"

"Yes."

"Recently?"

Faint shrug. "A couple of hours ago."

Ray offered them both the excuse for his absence from his family and his presence here. "So you're ready for dessert, right?"

Fraser looked at him, blinked. "You brought something?"

Ray gave him an old-fashioned look for that. "Benny, I show up carrying more bags than a porter, we planned this days ago, and you're pretending you've no idea, none at all that I might have brought something?"

"I wouldn't say I'm pretending I have no idea at all—"

"But you like the element of surprise, right?"

More shyness in that small smile, and Ray knew that Benny was thinking about other...stuff.

Distractions.

Yeah, you could say Benton Fraser was a distraction.

"So Benny, you want dessert now, or you wanna leave for the game now, so I have time to do all those turn signals you love so much?"

Benny still hadn't lost that smile, was following Ray around, just watching and smiling, looking like—looking like a kid at Christmas.

"If you don't mind, I'd prefer if we left for the game."

"So get your coat, Benny, and let's get moving."

Benny, disappearing into the closet, Ray grateful that Benny wasn't wearing that damned red suit of his—Benny probably thought it was rude to compete with the other red-suited saint on Christmas—and Ray was half disappointed that Benny wasn't going to be stepping out, resplendent.

But then: who needed that red suit? Man oh man, how did Benny *do* that? He wasn't wearing anything special, layers of blue-toned shirts over basic white undershirt and faded blue jeans, and over it, that old, worn leather jacket that smelled, a bit, of wolf. And the man looked like a vision from on High. If Heaven had been painted by Michelangelo.

"Come on, if we're gonna skip dessert, I wanna be there early enough for a beer."

Hid his grin, neatly, at the faintest, politest frown that appeared between Benny's blue eyes.

"Are you sure that's wise, Ray?"

"Sure I'm sure. Because," timing it just right, tossing his keys backwards over his shoulder, hearing Benny catch them, "you're driving."

And maybe this was Ray's Christmas present to himself. He'd done the family thing, and gotten out of there before they drove him nuts and spoiled the day. He'd bought the gifts, and done the chores, and carved the turkey, and all the million other things the man of the house did at Christmas. But this was for him. Sitting in his own car as a passenger, his turn to watch, to look at the driver, to gaze at strong hands on the steering wheel controlling this huge, powerful testosterone statement.

His turn to be passive, to let someone do the driving, to let someone else be in charge. Someone else making the decisions, being responsible.

His turn to sit here, warmed by the heater, watching Fraser in charge, watching the quiet contentment—and the quiet worry—on Fraser's face, Benny obviously aware of just how much a statement of trust this was.

Ray didn't let just anyone drive his car and Benny was the only one who didn't get the running commentary while he was doing it.

They didn't even have the radio on, didn't need it, comfortably quiet, together, just the two of them.

Ray didn't even demand to know where the hell Benny was taking him when they turned off their



route. Oh, yeah, Dief, needed to be dropped off at Maggie's house to spend the rest of the day with his 'family.'

No two ways about it, Benny was weird. Seriously weird. But for once, Ray wasn't complaining and he was damned near sweet as he gently hastened Benny away from Dief's "children" and on to the game.

There was more noise again, kids here too, but mainly it was guys, guys escaping the family, or families getting rid of the guys for a few hours. Leaning back in his seat, sipping on a rare beer, looking through the crowd, Ray wondered how many of the guys here, though, were like him and Benny.

He turned to the man with him, wasn't surprised that Benny was already looking at him. Ray grinned, punched Benny lightly on the thigh, and they sat back, side by side, to enjoy the Bulls pregame, Ray's gift to both of them.

And Ray didn't stop smiling until Benny shifted in his seat, making himself more comfortable, which meant that one of Benny's widespread legs was pressed closely, warmly, all down Ray's left leg. Right there, in public, heat and muscle and strength.

Ray took another drink of his beer, Dutch courage from a German import, and returned the pressure against Benny's leg.

Oh yeah.

This was good, this was great and this was just a taste of what was coming later. What he hoped was coming later. What he thought they'd been building up to for months. Okay, so they were slow: what they'd been building up to for years.

It was...comforting, to know that they were finally on the right path. A quick glance round, and Ray reached over, squeezed Fraser's thigh, just for a second, and then leaned forward in his seat to enjoy the game on the court and the pleasure of his companion.

Back in the car, the temperature outside heading rapidly below freezing, the threat and promise of snow in the air. Talking now, loud and animated, who played what, who screwed up, who did good.

And Benny driving. Benny relaxing into it, all that easy, competent strength only hinted at, tantalizing, as Benny steered the car through the light traffic.

Benny turning to him at red lights, just to look at him, just to smile at him.

Oh yeah, Ray thought, as Benny turned away to concentrate on driving Ray's other favourite baby and

Benny actually nearly giggled over one of Ray's comments, you just see how much I miss you now, Pop.

Back in Benny's apartment, very little decoration here, no dead trees, no fat jolly old St. Nicks. Just peace, and quiet, and promise, and Benny.

They had dessert, still talking about the game, moving on to the exploits of the kids at Ray's house, Tony getting his hand stuck in the VCR, Ma and his favourite aunt.

Sitting over coffee, Ray feeling the tension seeping from his bones into the serenity of Benny's place, not even surprised that he'd started talking about his ma, starting off slow and easy, knowing that he was going to tell Benny all about Ma.

"So I said, you know Ma, I been thinking, about you and Aunt Sylvia feelin' so sorry for your Benton and all, maybe instead of just taking him over a slice of cake and taking him to the game, maybe I should take over enough food for dinner, and maybe some fritto musto for breakfast and spend the night, you know, keep him company, so you two won't be wasting away worrying about your poor Benton being all alone."

Hadn't expected the reaction: Benny, dropping his fork, grabbing at it, flustered, cheeks reddening, and not from embarrassment, that sudden flush of heat very distinctive.

"You're staying the night?"

Ray's turn to redden, and he was none too sure quite all what made him blush. "If you don't mind."

That killer smile, the shy one, the...loving one. "I'd like that, Ray. I'd like that very much."

"You sure 'bout that?"

"Oh, very sure. I want you to spend the night here. As often as you choose."

Feeling absurdly happy, and even more absurdly a bit shy himself. "Yeah?"

Deep voiced, drawn out, the sound of utter satisfaction, Benny's expression dark and hot. "Oh, yeah."

"That's good, because otherwise you'd be sick of me in a week."

And short of having sex on the table amidst a litter of dessert, what was there to do but back off an inch, catch his breath here, even if Benny didn't seem to have any such hesitations. Probably knew exactly what they could use the cream frosting for, too. "So, uh, when I go into the kitchen to tell my ma this, you know what I hear her and Aunt Sylvia talking about?"

"Sex?" Benny said, bluntly, provocatively, nearly distracting Ray again.

"Yeah. Sex. My ma and what she was calling "distractions," but I knew what she was talking about, right there



in the kitchen with my Aunt Sylvia. It's not that she's old or Catholic or anything, but this is my ma we're talking about, you know, and other women have affairs or boyfriends or whatever, but she's my *mother*."

"And you think you should feel outraged or disgusted that she's had these...distractions?"

Smiling at his friend for that. Trust Benny to notice. "Yeah. I think I *should* feel all this negative crap, and shock and stuff like that, and I keep on waiting for that to hit, but you know something, Benny? All I am is happy for her. After my father... Hey, I wouldn't wish a man like my father on the Dragon Lady, and after him... Ma deserves a bit of happiness, you know? A bit of fun?"

"So the only problem then, is that you're not upset by this."

"Put like that..."

And Benny's eyes laughing at him, and Benny's hand—so warm!—touching his cheek briefly before Benny went off to the kitchen to brew some more of that disgusting herbal crap he drank.

"So, uh, Benny?"

"Yes, Ray?"

"You ever think about... You ever wonder about... With it being Christmas and all..." Ray close behind Benny in the kitchen, following his friend back to the well-scrubbed table with its bowl of tangerines, their fragrance clean and sharp in the air. "D'you ever think about your...mum?"

The unfamiliar word sounded odd to Ray's ears, felt weird in his mouth, but hey, this was Fraser's family he was talking about here, what else did he expect?

Benny was cradling his mug between both hands, and it was one of those rare times when Benny's sheer size was apparent, those broad, broad shoulders, the strong sweep of his back, the muscular forearms, big hands. "She died such a long time ago, most people expect me to have put her behind me."

"Have you?"

Benny leaning back in his seat as Ray walked round into his line of sight. "No. Not even close. I still find myself thinking about her, wondering what she was like, if she was happy, if she was glad she had a son or if she wanted a little girl. If she'd be proud of me."

Ray took a tangerine, mouth watering involuntarily as he broke the peel, even though he wasn't even close to hungry. He focused, fiercely, on peeling the thin veins of pith from the sweet juicy flesh. "How did she die?"

"There was an accident, out on the ice. She went through, by the time they could pull her out... It was too late."

"No Dief for her, huh?"

"No. No Dief for her." A pause, Fraser taking one of the tangerine segments from Ray. "I thought about that, when I was in the water that time, and afterwards, of course. The symmetry, the irony of it—and how little it took to make the difference between one of us living and one of us dying." Fraser's turn to ask the unasked, quietly. "Your father?"

Shrug. "Drunk. Driving. Telephone pole. That about covers it."

"But you don't miss him?"

Anger brightening Ray's smile. "You know Benny, this year—I don't miss him at all and for the first time, God, Benny, it's terrible but it's true and it's wonderful too, but for the first time I don't even feel guilty that I'm happy he's gone. I keep looking round my life and my family, and thinking how damn good it is that the old bastard isn't here to ruin everything again. And you know something else? This is the first Christmas I've had a beer or a wine or something just for the pleasure of it, not drinking the way I learned from him, but just because—I can do it, and he couldn't." A large draught drunk, the line of his throat elegant as he swallowed. "That, and it tastes good."

For that, he got one of Fraser's patented looks.

"Okay, okay, so maybe because a beer loosens me up a little."

Brightness in those blue eyes, and wicked, lovely humor, all housed in perfect, absolute innocence that didn't fool Ray one bit. Not any more, anyway. "And you think you're going to need to be loosened up, Ray?"

"Well, Benny, I think one of us is going to need to be, and you don't drink, so hey, why not me?"

And blushed, at what he'd said, and at the audible sound of him swallowing hard, and at the sudden flare of heat in Benny's eyes.

Too much, too soon, even though they'd been literally years working to this. So even while he was kicking himself for being so damned nervous, he heard himself still talking. "Uh, yeah, so, uh, what did you think of Jordan's game tonight?"

Benny letting it go, Benny banking the heat back down, and Ray was nearly embarrassed all over again that he needed this extra time. Very nearly embarrassed, until he looked at Benny, and saw understanding, and more than a little embarrassment and nervousness of Benny's own.

And so he sat in the sparse apartment, feeling as if he were finally on his way home, and he looked at this man who was his friend, who would always be his friend, and who would soon be his lover too.

Oh, yeah, Pop, he thought as Benny managed to



make a comparison between slam-dunking basketballs and blocking a tackle in ice hockey, you just see how much I miss you, you miserable unloved bastard.

They'd eaten again, a very late supper, even though Ray swore blind he was going to burst, and Benny being Benny, now they were in the kitchen washing dishes. Real dishes, with real silverware, and matching glasses: Benny's Christmas present to Ray.

"Dishes," Ray muttered, more pleased than he was willing to say: no need to be mushy, after all. "He gives me dishes—dishes we're gonna keep in *his* apartment, in *his* kitchen, and then expects me to believe it's all for my sake."

"Well, I must confess," Benny slung him a slow smile and went back to fishing spoons out of the soapy water, "that there was an element of self-gratification involved."

"Oh, so you're kinky for flatware, huh, Benny?"

More of that lovely wickedness shining in those even lovelier blue eyes, Benny deliberately playing the innocent for Ray's delight. "I really don't know what you mean, Ray. I simply meant that perhaps there was an element of self-gratification in stopping your somewhat...repetitive complaints regarding my kitchen equipment."

"Hey, perfect as you are, a man has to find some of your equipment to complain about."

And perhaps it would have happened then, perhaps their relationship would have changed right then and there, but as Fraser turned to Ray, the soapy water splashed, and Ray's hands were full and there was clumsiness and awkwardness and the two of them grinning at each other like loons.

"Back to the dishes," Ray said, supposedly stern but sounding unnervingly indulgent. Benny did as he was told, but not without another one of those wickedness-wrapped-in-innocence looks of his.

"You really got me dishes to stop me complaining about those damned camping utensils of yours?"

Benny, concentrating quite intently on making sure that every single tine of the fork was spotlessly clean. "Things aren't important to me, but you like your creature comforts and I hoped that the more comfortable you were here, the more time you'd spend here, with me and—"

"And?"

"Buying a double bed seemed...presumptuous."

There wasn't a thing Ray could think to say to that that wasn't seriously mushy. Not a thing. So he stepped closer to his friend, put his arm around Fraser's shoulder. Took a deep breath, let his arm slip lower, until his arm

was around Benny's waist, and they were standing there, side by side, Ray leaning on Benny, neither of them looking at each other, just...standing there.

They were quiet for all of a minute and a half, and of course, it was Ray who started talking again, stepping.

"Remember when you had amnesia, Benny?"

"Well, of course I remember, Ray, I had amnesia *then* about the past, and now I have my memory fully intact so I can remember not remembering."

"So d'you remember in the car, when you were askin' what I meant when I said that we'd bonded?"

Soft, low, a remnant of hurt. "I remember that."

"And I said we'd bonded as friends, kinda like blood-brothers?"

"And I wondered why you said that, since it seemed to me—"

"That we spent a hell of a lot of time together for just buddies—"

"And my reactions to you were a long way from brotherly—"

"And I ran away."

"Not literally. And who can blame you, Ray? It must have come as quite a shock to you—"

"Who are you trying to kid, Benny? We've been dancing round this from the second you looked at me in that holding cell, and you know it, we both know it."

"Well..." Clear-eyed, meeting Ray's gaze boldly. "Yes. We have."

"And back then," Ray said, not looking away, having to stop and take a drink because his mouth was so dry, and knowing that Benny would notice that and know what it meant, "and back then, I told you it was because we were friends."

Benny turning to face him now, taking the dishtowel from where it was slung across Ray's shoulder, drying the soap from himself. "And I asked why we were just friends. You told me it was because that's what we were. Friends. Just friends."

"Only, there's no just about it. And... Okay, so the reason we're just friends is because neither one of us has the balls to make the first move, which is really dumb cuz it's not like we think the other guy's gonna say no or run screaming in horror—"

"Or perhaps that's why neither of us had the courage to make that move, Ray." Taking a half-step nearer, so close now Ray could feel Benny's body heat, smell the soap he used. Could feel the power of that gaze like a caress. "Perhaps because we were both so very certain that if we took that step, if we made that move—it would be..."

Deep breath. Look into those eyes. Lean forward just



an inch, into strong hands that came up to hold him, strong body moving forward to support him. “Forever.”

“Are you ready for that?” Fraser looked steadily into his eyes.

“No. You?”

Lines crinkling at the corner of Benny’s eyes, that silly dimple deepening in his left cheek, those blue eyes twinkling, “Me? Petrified.”

And Raymond Vecchio wondered why he’d ever been scared of this.

But Benny was laughing again, face nearly impassive, but those eyes were brimming with laughter and happiness.

I did that, Ray thought, looking at all that vibrancy and unbridled happiness, remembering the Benton Fraser RCMP he’d met all that time ago. Hey, not bad for a screw-up, huh, Pop?

“So Benny, are we gonna... you know.”

“No, Ray, I don’t know.”

Standing there toe to toe, touching at chest and belly, Benny’s hands so warm and restless on Ray’s waist, and of course, let’s not discount the pulse of arousal pressing against Ray’s groin. And Benny was still pulling the innocent routine. Worse—was still pulling it off.

“If I didn’t know better...” Ray muttered, his own hands coming to rest lightly on Benny’s hips.

“If you didn’t know better what?”

“Before Victoria—”

And even now, after all this time, after all the depth between them, there was still a flicker of pain in Benny’s eyes.

“Before Victoria, I honestly thought you were the world’s oldest boy scout. I couldn’t imagine you actually, you know, having sex with anyone, and then along comes Victoria—”

“And you could say challenges your conceptions of me.”

“Yeah, you could say that. Okay, so I know it’s stupid, I kept telling myself it was stupid, but once she was gone again, and you were running away from women again—”

And Benny very nearly changed the subject, by beginning the slow lifting of Ray’s sweater, those hands even warmer when they touched bare skin.

But Ray refused to be easily distracted. “The Dragon Lady...”

Sudden sharp glance, Benny looking away. “She... I was trying to find a distraction, a conventional outlet for my feelings. Since it seemed... It seemed that you didn’t want my feelings.”

And Ray could hear Benny all over again: sometimes it’s easier to believe yourself in love than to admit you’re alone.

“You got me, Benny.”

Full, genuine smile, lighting up Benny’s face, the heat from it dazzling. “Yes, I have.”

For an innocent, Benny could sure put a lot of meaning into three little words, and Ray heard every single one of those meanings loud and clear. He gulped, and wanted to kick himself for his own nervousness. His erection faded, and he was edgy, uncomfortable in Benny’s arms. “Sorry, behaving like a stupid virgin—”

“Not stupid, Ray, but—the other?”

Okay, he could do this. He could say this. “Yeah. Definitely the other. When it comes to guys.”

“Then perhaps it should be me...having that beer?”

“So you’re not— Ah, you’re not, ah, that, when it comes to guys?”

“Nor when it comes to women either.”

Only one thing he could say to all of that: “Wow.”

And Benny smiled at him, and kissed him, all tenderness and heat, passion and control, not pushing, not at all, but making it clear that he knew what he was doing and all Ray had to do was relax into it, let Benny take the lead...

“Do you want to go to bed now, Ray, or do you want another beer first?”

“You’re the one who knows what this is all about, Benny,” Ray murmured, letting go of all the weight of carrying his family, of being the stereotype of the Italian Male, letting all of that go without so much as a sigh for its passing, and allowing himself the luxury of trusting another person’s strength. “You think I’m going to need that beer?”

Benny’s hands darted down, quick, firm, fingertips pressing into the seam of Ray’s pants, pressing in right there, Benny’s instincts perfect as always.

Ray gasped, and tensed, and Benny soothed his palms over the lean muscles of Ray’s ass, and then held him close. “I think we can skip the beer, and I think we can also skip the anal intercourse.”

“But that’s what guys do—”

“That’s one of the things men do, Ray. There are plenty of other things we can do, until we’re both ready for anal intercourse—”

“But you’re ready.”

The slightest of pauses. “Yes, I am, and believe me, I will be very happy to give you that tonight.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

A slightly longer pause. “I’m sorry, I’m not following you.”

“No, you’re not and that’s what I want, Benny. I want...”

What did he want, and how to say it?

“Benny, if I’m gonna do this—and I am, God, I *am*, I want to do it...big. I want it to mean something, you know, something I can look back and say, right then, right at that second, it all changed. *I* changed. If I’m gonna do this with a guy, with you—then I want it to be something. Something major. I don’t want to just kinda ease into it, you know, build up over time, but something big, one big moment. I’m changing my whole life here, Benny, I want it to be an *event*. I want it to mean something.”

Then Benny kissed him again, both hands cupping Ray’s cheeks, then sliding down to cup his nether cheeks, those blunt-tipped fingers probing again.

“Beer,” he said, “one more beer, and a bath, and a shave.”

“Then bed. With you, and me, and what we’re going to do.”

And bless him: Benny didn’t ask him if he were sure, if he really wanted this. Benny trusted him, respected him, would let Ray call his own shots. Yeah. This was going to work. The sex and everything, this was gonna work.

“Why don’t you make yourself comfortable, Ray,” Benny said to him, taking him by the hand—and how the hell did Benny make that sexy and not stupid?—and leading him not to the bed, but to the table. “I’m going for my bath, and while I’m doing that, if you want to get ready, you can wear this bathrobe.”

“Uh, about getting ready, Benny...”

Embarrassed beyond belief about this—how did you ask about *that*?

Gentle smile, not in the least mocking, Benny crouching down beside him. “All you need to do is shave so that I don’t have any untoward rashes to explain tomorrow, and wash. You don’t need to do anything else, Ray, I promise.”

Okay, so he’d survived asking that, and he’d survived the answer. Might as well go for broke while he was already dying of embarrassment. “Uh, so, uh, are we gonna use... you know... condoms?”

Christ, when the fuck was he going to stop sounding like a nervous virgin? In ten minutes, judging by the intense desire on Benny’s face.

“I have no communicable or infectious diseases or conditions, but—” and sweet, to see Benny sharing Ray’s discomfiture. “If you want them, I do have a supply.”

“For the Dragon Lady?”

“No! After the Bolt incident and after I regained my memory... Well, I had hopes, Ray.”

“I, uh, I don’t have any diseases or anything either, but if you want to, because you’ll be putting your dick in, uh, there, that’s okay.”

“Thank you kindly, Ray. I’ll just be a few minutes. Okay?”

And Ray was really quite proud of himself that he was recovering his aplomb already, enough to call to Benny’s retreating back, “Hey, I expect you to last better’n a few minutes, mister!”

But then he was alone, in Benny’s little apartment, his irritating nervousness returning because he was getting naked and he was going to be fucked up the ass.

He was going to be a woman for a man, be a fairy, a nancy boy—

“A fucking queer.”

Oh, man he shoulda known Pop would show up.

“No, Pop, I’m gonna be the catcher, so I guess that’s gonna make me a fucked queer. You got a problem with that?”

“Yeah, I got a problem with that. I didn’t raise a faggot—”

“You didn’t raise *nobody*, Pop, you didn’t raise one of us, you just gave a donation and walked away when you’d had what *you* wanted and you never, ever raised one of us.”

“Hey, don’t you speak like that to your father. Your mother would—”

“Yeah, let’s talk about my mother. You know what my mother’s been doin’, Pop, since you finally did something good and died? Ma’s been having other men. Did you know that, Pop? Did you know that she doesn’t miss you at all, not even for sex? Cos she’s got sex, Pop, and it’s better’n anything she ever had with you and—”

And he broke off, stiffening his back to meet the blow from his father’s raised hand. “Yeah, go on, Pop, hit me, just like always. Because that hand is the only thing you ever raised.”

His father—the ghost, the afterimage, the figment of his imagination, his conscience, whatever the hell it was—lowered his hand, stuffed both hands in the ridiculously tight gigolo-wannabe white trousers. “I wouldn’t dirty my hands on a piece of shit like you. A fag, a fucking queer—”

“We already covered that, Pop,” and even as he said it and heard the weariness in his own voice, he started to realize just how much of his fear tonight was the sour aftertaste of his father’s brand of ‘manhood.’

“You’re no son of mine—”

“Oh, you’ve no idea how much I wish that was true.”

“Ray? Should I come in or do you want to finish your phone call first?”

Ray scowled at his father, the last of the ties unraveling. “Come on in, Benny, we’re finished here.” And he



took the greatest satisfaction watching his father fade away to nothing.

It wasn't until he turned round, and saw Benny's face, that he remembered he was naked.

Benny, for his part, seemed to be having some trouble finding words, his hunger visible, in his eyes, in the erection that was firming as Ray watched.

Right now. It could be right now.

But if he'd felt the event deserved a bath before, after that little encounter with his father, Ray wanted to be sandblasted inside and out. Maybe then he'd feel clean. Maybe then he'd feel worthy, again, of this man staring at him with such need. "I won't be too long."

"I'd appreciate haste."

"Yeah, I can see that!"

Then Ray was wrapped in the discreet bathrobe he'd given Benny last birthday, and heading off down to the bath.

Oh, yeah, Pop, he thought, as he scrubbed away the lingering aftereffects of his father and his father's words, his skin now glowingly clean, and thought of Benny's mouth on him, tasting him, Benny's hands touching him, Benny's cock actually inside him—yeah, Pop, you just see how much I'm gonna miss you now.

▼ The electric lights were all out, oil lamps casting soft—dare he say, romantic?—glows over the bed, but Ray barely glanced in that direction, hurrying on past the bed and the man in it to the sink to shave, the toilet door shut firmly behind him. Self-conscious as he felt, he did *not* want Mr. Gorgeous watching him shave and brush his teeth, the sort of things mere mortals—but not Mr. Gorgeous—looked dumb doing.

Stupid, stupid, stupid, but he felt as awkward as his first time. More awkward: that first time, he'd been young, inexperienced and he hadn't even entertained any hopes of Irene coming across—definitely not going all the way. But here he was, a grown man, married and divorced, lover to his fair share of women, but his hand was shaking as he lathered his face. He had to take his time, go slow and easy, because otherwise, he was going to end up one giant shaving cut, and wouldn't Benny find that just incredibly attractive. By the time he was suitably smooth—he did *not* want to be standing there when Benny decided to be good and honest and explain his beard burn to Thatcher—and had emerged from the protective shell of the toilet, Benny was propped up in bed, barechested, his face nakedly showing his worries.

Benny looking at him, nervousness and insecurity personified, Benny unsure enough to be fidgeting with the blankets. "I was afraid you'd changed your mind."

"Even if I did, Benny," and it was easier than he expected, with Benny needing him, Benny being nervous and scared, to breeze in there, drop that robe and climb into that narrow bed with this man, "it'd only be a delay, till I got my nerve back."

Again, Benny didn't ask Ray if he was sure, he didn't double-check, he just lay back and trusted Ray, had faith in Ray, let Ray be the one to initiate this first time.

Ray lay there for a moment, the awkwardness returning, part of him waiting for Benny to take the initiative, part of him appreciating being allowed to make the first move in his own good time. He looked at Benny, looking at Ray: took a deep breath, sloughing off as much of the past as he could, and gave himself the luxury of doing not what Raymond Vecchio, cop, son, brother et al. *ought* to do, but what he, Ray Vecchio, truly *wanted* to do.

And Benny tasted good. Clean skin, soft, smooth, firm muscles underneath, the skin shivering slightly as Ray laved along the side of Benny's neck, from chest to ear, his tongue making all of Benny shiver as he darted it inside Benny's ear. I'm in you, he thought, and moved round to kiss Benny, pushing his tongue into Benny's mouth. I'm in you, I'm right inside you, and you're going to be inside me.

Lips still touching Benny's, Ray's tongue touching Benny's lips occasionally as he spoke: "You like being fucked, Benny?"

Benny's breath catching, Benny's cock pulsing, harder, as Ray said that. "Love it. But if you don't, Ray, that doesn't mean you can't have intercourse with me."

Daring, greatly daring, thrilling to it, his fingers finagling their way under Benny to touch him, intimately, a sound escaping Ray as Benny returned the caress, with interest.

Ray squirmed a little as Benny's fingertip pressed against him, found the sensation was a lot pleasanter than he'd expected; found himself relaxing easily, found himself wanting more than just that gentle skimming touch. "So you don't think we're gonna need score cards to see whose turn it is every night?"

Benny was sounding husky. "I think we're not even going to need that beer tonight."

Ray heard the question under the affection and the relief. Maybe some day, he'd tell Benny, tell Benny the mix-up of emotions, insecurities, needs, whatever the hell it was that had him see-sawing him tonight. Maybe one day, he'd even tell Benny what it was like being visited by your dead father. Nah. Not even Benny would believe something like that. He arched his back, raising his butt a bit higher, inviting Benny's touch in deeper.



“But we will need something—”

“Hey, no pain, no gain.”

“It won’t hurt. Well, not at the time, not if I use enough lubricant and dilate you thoroughly. And as long as I...do ‘it’ right—although afterwards, there can be chafing, and muscle aches just as after any stretching or vigorous exercise to which your body is not accustomed so—”

“So in other words, you’re gonna fuck me till I come, and tomorrow, you’re gonna feel so guilty every time you see me try to sit on my butt, you’ll wait on me hand and foot. Am I right or am I right?”

“You—” and looking at Benny at that moment, Ray knew this was it, point of no return, this was the precise second he would look back and say, that’s when it really, really started. “You are wonderful.”

Christ on a crutch! The way Benny was looking at him. “You gonna say it?”

“Only when you’re too distracted to feel it’s silly. Let me kiss you...”

Ray let him. Let Benny hold him, and kiss him, deeply. Let Benny set the pace, let Benny touch him and hold him, let Benny be the one who shifted position until—there, oh, God, there, his cock touching Benny’s cock, and he had to thrust, had to, couldn’t stop, needed this, needed it so bad, never knew how much he needed this until he had Benny under him, hard and aching, their cocks slick against each other. Benny was still kissing him, Benny making that sexy, needy, little noise in the back of his throat, Benny pushing up to meet Ray’s hungry push downwards. It felt better than he’d expected, and as natural as being with a woman, which should have shocked him, but he was beyond shock, he was too wrapped up in sensation and emotion to think about too much else. Too wrapped up in Benny to spare a thought for anyone or anything else.

It was wonderful, and it was the biggest turn-on in the world to see Benny sweating and flushed, to see Benny’s eyes so dark with passion, to feel Benny thrusting up against him, cock so hard, so demanding—

And incredible, to be turned, put flat on his back as if he weighed no more than a feather, and to feel Benny kissing and licking and nibbling his way down the entire length of Ray’s body, that mouth so hot and wet and so fucking good.

Teasing him, though, probably not meaning to, probably trying to be perfect at this too. “Benny, suck me, come on, Benny, take my cock in your mouth, swallow me down, Benny oh, God, please, yes—”

And then there was a mouth on his cock, tongue pressing the underside, his glans hitting the back of

Benny’s throat, and so he pulled back, wanting to cry because he had to pull back when all he wanted to do was thrust and fuck and find completion in that wet mouth—and sobbing, once, his voice catching on the pleasure of Benny taking him in deeper, throat opening around his cock, Benny’s throat rippling around his cock as Benny swallowed. Benny was fondling him, Benny’s fingers on his balls, stroking, stroking, more fingers, other hand, touching him *there*.

Ray scrambled to stop him, but Benny was abandoning his cock for a second, two, three seconds, an eternity, but then it was almost all right: Benny kissing him on the mouth again, that taste, incredible, knowing that was his cock he was tasting in Benny’s mouth. Wonderful, being kissed like this, but he needed more, reaching down to stroke his own cock, soothing the pre-ejaculate slick and smooth over himself. Another kiss, Benny pulling back long enough to look at him, those blue eyes so bright with emotion, with a passion that matched—outstripped—Ray’s own.

Now Benny was kneeling between his legs, and Benny was sucking him, and Benny was probing him, *there*, with a slick, slippery finger that was just gonna slide right in, oh, God, what a feeling, weird, really weird—and distracting him, Benny sucking him harder, and Benny’s finger in him deeper, touching him inside, and that was the most incredible feeling. Ray decided he loved that, really loved it and wanted more of that, wanted Benny doing that to him. He gloried in that sensation inside, internal caress that made him soar, the firm touch that made his cock pulse. Benny’s tongue was doing incredible things to him, dancing over him, the tongue tip pointing, darting to probe the slit at the head of his cock, and then that mouth opening and swallowing him all the way down, his cock so hot and wet and close to coming, deep inside Benny’s throat.

Every time Benny sank his mouth down on Ray, that finger sank deep inside Ray’s ass too, pressing him, stroking him, driving him to distraction. And pleasure. Two fingers in him, and the mouth sucking him, and Ray couldn’t take any more. His back arched, his flailing hands clutched Benny’s hair, holding him tight in place, as Ray fucked forward once, twice, three times, his semen flooding from him, as he pushed forward into Benny’s face and pushed backwards onto Benny’s stiff fingers.

Collapsing back onto the bed, quivering, muscles going limp, cock going lax, as he lay there, asprawl, sweat beading him, as Benny licked him clean and still, those two fingers inside him, not moving, simply being there: Benny inside him.



And he was, faintly, shocked by just how much he liked that.

"Sorry," Ray managed after a minute or so, "didn't mean to come, couldn't help myself."

A wicked smile for that, and a soft kiss to the sensitive head of his penis. "You weren't supposed to stop yourself. It's easier, you see," and Benny was raising himself up to cover Ray, a bit awkwardly, because those two fingers were still inside Ray, while Benny's legs were urging Ray's farther apart, and Benny's thighs and free hand were urging Ray to lift his legs, lift those knees, expose himself, expose that place where Benny's fingers were inside him.

Ray looked down and his gaze caught, ensnared, on the hungry upward thrust of Benny's erection, that cock so dark compared to the milk-white skin of Benny's belly. The cock that was going to be inside Ray, fucking him, and his heart beat faster, panic tingeing him, as he looked at that huge cock, monstrous, big as a baseball bat—average, he reminded himself, looking at it, thinking about it, calming himself as Benny recommenced the slow, sweet stroke of his fingers inside. Average, maybe a bit bigger, not as big as himself, Ray thought, maybe a tad thicker, okay, a lot thicker, but quite a bit shorter. His own reaction took him by surprise: he wanted that cock, thought it was gorgeous, the veins a tracery on the surface, not like some of those varicose monsters he'd seen in the videos he'd rented. He looked at it: Benny's cock, wet at the tip, so hard, so needy, needing him so much. Ray looked up, met Benny's eyes, recognized the tightly coiled patience and control that was giving Ray time to get used to all this. Then he looked down again, at himself. At himself, and Benny, and Ray swore, fervently, at the sight of Benny's fingers inside him. Swore again, as those fingers moved again, disappearing inside him, and if he didn't know better, he'd swear his cock was going to get hard again.

"I said," Benny told him, getting his attention by nipping Ray's left nipple, "that it's easier to engage in anal intercourse when the recipient is fully relaxed and one of the best ways of ensuring that—"

"Is to give him the best blow job he's had in years. Who taught you that, Benny?"

"Ray, Ray, Ray, Ray..."

"Yeah, I know, you're not going to tell me."

"Of course," Benny said, and Ray was pleased to note that Benny's voice was husky, and trembling, just a fraction, "there is a world of information in your local library."

And as Ray laughed at that, at the thought of Fraser going into the library in his dress reds and formally

asking for information on how best to perform fellatio, Benny slipped a third finger into him, and the laughter died, Ray sighing, squirming a little this time, but liking it too. Liking the way he could accommodate so much, loving the way Fraser was kissing and stroking him, loving hearing Benny's voice damn near break as he whispered Ray's name.

"Come on," Ray told him, reaching down until his fingers were touching Benny's, touching his own skin where his body had stretched and opened for Benny, "you need this, you must be hurtin', Benny, come on, I wanna do this, gonna take you inside..."

Then Benny was fumbling, pressing his cock against Ray, withdrawing his fingers, a sudden hunger filling Ray as he felt their absence, words tumbling from him in his hunger— "Get inside me, get your fucking cock inside me now, Benny, come on, I want it, give it to me" —wincing as Benny tried, failed, tried again, slick cock head sliding past the opening, Ray grabbing Benny's cock, trying to guide it, hold it steady, press it home, there, right there, at his opening, guide it and press it inside—

Oh.

Oh dear God in Heaven.

Too much, too, too much, and Benny wasn't stopping, pushing and pushing and pushing, how fucking long did it take to shove a cock in? Hurting, hurting, and then Benny was kissing him, needing him so much, the kiss breaking off as Benny groaned, and groaned again, and at last, Ray had Benny all the way inside.

Benny's arms were trembling, the muscles on his back knotting under Ray's hands as Benny struggled to hold still. "Okay?"

More or less.

"Yeah," Ray said, only lying a tiny bit, "this is good, Benny, this is fine, real fine."

And then Benny was moving inside him, deeper than his fingers had gone, and Ray could feel the bulk of him inside, and the heat of him, the way the head was wider as it stroked him, inside, God, so far inside, so deep, right up inside him, and he was going to go even deeper inside Benny. Oh, yeah, he was going to do this to Benny because it felt so good, and to fuck Benny, that would be heaven, because this felt good, this felt real good.

Oh, yeah, he was gonna fuck Benny just like Benny was fucking him, so strong, so sure, deep, deep strokes, inside.

Making him hard again. Shit, he hadn't done this in years. Not that he was complaining, no not one bit.

Especially not when Benny giggled, yeah, that giggle,



who could resist the sheer happiness in that? Not Ray Vecchio who knew love when it slapped him upside the head. Ray sighed, as Benny took Ray's cock in his hand, and squeezed him, Benny's hand still slick from putting lubricant on his own cock. Still, the grasp wasn't quite right, the rhythm off, but then, Benny had one or two other things on his mind, so Ray took over, masturbating himself the way he liked it best, as Benny thrust into him—as Benny finally started to let loose, fucking for pleasure, fucking for passion, pushing into Ray, pushing him higher on the bed.

It was a joy to see, an almost greater joy to feel. Benny's mouth was open on Ray, sucking his nipples, biting his shoulder, nipping an earlobe, kissing him open-mouthed, before Ray watched Benny pull away, watched Benny's face as his expression changed, watched as Benny abandoned all restraints and let Ray see *him*, no masks, no barriers, no nothing, just Benny needing this, Benny abandoning himself to this. Benny taking his pleasure, filling his needs, and filling Ray, too.

Strange moment, incredibly strange, incredibly sexy, feeling it, inside, each individual spurt of semen splashing him, as Benny thrust into him, hard, hard, hard, as Benny came, inside him.

Oh, yeah, that was something, Benny coming inside him, Benny's semen inside him, part of him now, seeping into him, and Benny still hard inside him, and Benny kissing him again, whispering Ray's name into Ray's mouth, whispering other things too, things they'd never dare say face to face in passionless daylight. Benny's hand, still shaking after that climax, cupping Ray's balls, rolling them lightly in his fingers, Benny's cock only now beginning to soften, and shift inside Ray.

Nearly there again, Benny inside him, Benny touching him, Benny kissing, Ray stroking himself, faster, harder, until, yes, he was there, nothing much to show for the wave of pleasure that beached him, but it was wonderful nonetheless.

Calming down, heartbeat returning to normal, reality creeping in. Realizing his back hurt, and his asshole felt weird, but only a tiny bit grateful as Benny moved off

him, rolled him over, those wonderful, warm hands stroking his back gently to ease his muscles, touching him softly, intimately.

"Don't think I didn't notice," Ray mumbled into the pillow.

"Didn't notice what?"

How could someone still sound innocent after what they'd just done?

"Don't you go thinking I didn't notice you checking out my ass to see if you'd hurt me."

"Actually, Ray," and there wasn't even a trace of innocence now as Benny slid down him to kiss his tender ass, "I knew I hadn't hurt you, because you would have said so. No, Ray, I was just..."

"Marking your territory?"

"Revisiting a site of much happiness."

He had to laugh at that. "Hey, well whaddaya know? My butt is the happiest place on earth. Don't you go telling Disney that."

The closest he got to a reply to that was another kiss, and then more kisses as Benny slowly came back up level with him. He was turned again, and petted, and pampered, and was ridiculously pleased when Benny settled down to sleep. Benny, flat on his back as always, Ray in his usual half on his stomach, half on his side, and they fit together like hand in glove. Or cock in ass, he thought, wishing he had enough energy left to explore Benny. Hardly touched him, Ray realized, too busy being swept away by his own experiences. Next time, he promised himself. And the time after that, the surety a comfort and a happiness that went beyond words as he hugged Benny close. Tomorrow, maybe, he'd be embarrassed by how sappy he felt right now, might even have a hard time dealing with the way Benny gazed at him. But then again, maybe he'd just enjoy it, the way he was enjoying the feeling of another kiss pressed to his forehead, the way he was enjoying Benny hugging him tightly—the way he loved how it felt when Benny's hand came to rest possessively on his tender butt.

Oh, you were right, Pop, he thought with deepest satisfaction, hoarding his happiness, I'm no son of yours.



Concern now, real worry creasing between Fraser's eyes. "Is what we do so very—unsatisfying for you? I'm aware of my lack of expertise—"

"Which you've very diligently tried to correct by borrowing every gay sex book in the library system but you know something, Benny, it's not gonna help if you can't get past the table of contents."

"The list of topics was rather graphic and—"

"And you're too uptight to let yourself go enough to enjoy it. Look at you!"

And exactly the way Ray expected him to, Fraser did precisely that: looked at himself, and found nothing wrong. "I'm perfectly neat and tidy, Ray."

"And that's the point I'm making. We've been here since, what, three this afternoon, we've made love once already, and you still look like you're on duty outside the Consulate."

"Well, no, Ray, if I were on duty—"

"We wouldn't be having this conversation you'd be in full dress reds complete with hat and lanyard and you'd have to arrest us for having sex in public and anyway, it was hyperbole, Benny," and Ray continued while Fraser was busy widening his eyes over Ray dropping his ignorant-American ploy, "but what I'm saying is, you never relax, you never let yourself go, you never give yourself permission to just drop all the masks and be *you*, Benny Frasier."

There was a terribly soft expression in Fraser's eyes as he came round to Ray's side of the table, and crouched there, hands on Ray's long, lean thighs. "Which is where the problem lies, Ray. I'm not 'Benny Frasier'. I'm Benton Fraser, or occasionally, I'm Ben Fraser. You're the only one who sees Benny Frasier, you're the only one who knows him."

"Now, don't you go gettin' schizophrenic on me, Benny. C'mon, Benton, Ben, Benny, what the hell difference does it make? It's all you, it's not about who people see you as being, it's about who *you* are."

"Am I human?" Fraser repeated a not yet distant conversation, softly, eyes searching Ray's. "Do I feel anger and love and lust and fear? Do I sometimes cry, Ray?"

Ray's arms came round him, enveloping him, Fraser allowing himself to lean into the embrace, the two of them tangling together. "You do, with me. Any time you need it, Benny, you just stand still long enough, and I'll be there, and you can cry with me, Benny, you know that, don't you? I'll be there, no matter what you need—"

A small smile against the side of Ray's neck, down low, beneath the line of five o'clock shadow, where the skin was soft enough to tempt a saint. "I thought you didn't want 'mushy'."

A shrug, Ray's embrace tightening, his mouth brushing a kiss on Fraser's temple. "Hey, I do mushy, you let yourself go a little. Deal?"

Fraser didn't say anything, and Ray rode that out as well. Finally: "Okay. Deal."

"So you'll do it?"

"I'll try."

Ray's face alight, his eyes very bright. "When?"

Fraser shook his head, gave in and smiled. "Now?"

"No time like the present, huh, Benny?" Ray said, breaking the hug and getting to his feet in one liquid movement, heading for the bed, his clothes tumbling in his wake. "Isn't that in one of your Inuit stories? No, forget I said that, I don't want you starting in on those Inuit stories, the words I want to hear from your talented lips aren't blubber and mukluks and harpoons." A very rude glance down to where his trousers were peeling down off his hips, "Okay, so maybe harpoon I could live with."

"Purely in the interests of accuracy, of course."

"Of course! Gotta be accurate, Benny, especially about something as fine as—"

And that was half the problem, of course. Even *he* couldn't say half the words, not in front of Fraser, finding himself, absurdly, feeling embarrassed. And he was expecting Fraser to talk dirty for him? Look at the poor bastard, Ray thought guiltily, looking over to where Fraser was undressing slowly but only down to his shorts, folding his clothes across the back of the chair, picking up Ray's own things, until finally, he was turning his back to Ray, taking those frighteningly starched shorts off, and slipping under the blankets, discreet every inch of the way.

Before Fraser could turn round, Ray was kissing his back, small, affectionate kisses, reassurances, his hands patting Fraser reassuringly too. "Hey, Benny," he murmured, mouth open moistly on the point of Fraser's left shoulder, "you don't have to do it, you know? I'm being selfish—"

"Yes, you are," Fraser said in a very normal tone of voice, and he rolled over onto his back, Ray automatically sliding on top of Benny, just the way Benny always seemed to want it. "But you're also being honest, and if my inability to use certain words troubles you—"

"Because it's more than the talking, Benny, it's the attitude. Sometimes—" Breaking off, ready to bury it all in kissing, Fraser stopping him, silent demand for Ray to keep right on being honest. "Sometimes," heavy sigh, look away, "it scares the hell out of me that all this, you know, all the *stuff* we do—it's gonna drive you away. If you can't enjoy it—"

Fraser's face went very still, very bland, the perfect mask. "You think I don't enjoy it? What—that you *force* me into this?"

"No, not like that, like, I don't know, like you do this because you know how much I need the sex thing, but you know, like *you* don't need it."

For a moment, Fraser seemed at a loss for words, his mouth shaping a word, discarding it, his expression growing as troubled as a northern sea. "You think—you honestly think—I've given you the impression—you feel that I participate in the carnal aspects of our situation solely because you need a sexual outlet? Not because I want it as much as you do?"

Conciliatory now, trying to soothe away some of the distress, trying to set the facts straight. "Look, Frazee, I know I'm not forcing you and you like it okay when we do it, but," shrug, one hand absently toying with some of Fraser's wonderful, thick hair, "but it's not something you go after, you know, not like when we go for walks with Dief or we go for Chinese or something."

"You think—You really believe that I prefer going for a Chinese meal to...to having sex with you?"

"I'm not saying that, I'm saying—"

"You're saying that I seem so unenthusiastic to you, you think I'd rather take my wolf for a walk."

And what a wealth of hurt there was under the usual circumspect exterior. "I'm saying this wrong, I knew I'd say it wrong, I wish I'd never started this. Why do I do this, Fraser, huh? I'm no good at the talking about it stuff, so why do I keep on talking about it?" No answer, but at least Fraser wasn't backing off. "When we actually do it, I got no complaints, so you can wipe that look off your face. But even though it's really wonderful when we do it, you never suggest it, you never start it and—"

"And I never relax and I never allow myself to be 'me'."

"Yeah. And it scares me, Benny, because I don't know if I'm enough for you, and it hurts me, because you can't trust me enough to just let go."

"So this thing you want—it's not simply a fetish, it's an issue of trust."

"Like me doing the mushy stuff." Pleased: now they were getting somewhere!

Flat, calm, but if you knew him, oh, if you knew him you could hear the unhappiness in Benny's voice.

"Which you don't do."

"Oh, so telling you I'm gonna always be there for you isn't mushy?"

"Friends say those things to each other. In fact, you first said words to that effect within three months of our initial acquaintance."

"Oh."

"Exactly."

They lay there, while it grew dark outside, clouds rolling in, rain before morning. "I should call Ma."

"To tell her what? That you'll be home late or that you'll be out all night and not to worry?"

"Which is your nice polite Canadian way of pointing out that I'm asking you to trust me with who you are, but I haven't even told my own ma that her son's settled down."

Ray had expected the pause; he hadn't expected that note of strangled hope in Fraser's voice. "Has he?"

Deep breath. Ignore the panic. Reach out again, remember that this was Benny, and all bets were off and all the rules were up in the air when it came to Benny. "Yeah," he said, keeping it simple, keeping it plain. "Her son has settled down. Even if you never change, even if not one single thing about you or us or what we do ever changes, this is it, for me."

"No matter what?"

"No matter what."

"Why?"

"Why? *Why?* What d'you mean, 'why?' You can't figure it out?" Ray raised himself up on one elbow, trying to make out Fraser's expression in the near darkness, feeling like a complete heel when he did. "Okay, okay, you want mush. You want major mush, serious mush, you want the kind of mush even Hallmark would reject? Okay. I can do mush." Deep breath again, let it out, turn Fraser's face so they were at least more or less looking in each other's eyes: if he was going to do this mushy stuff, he was going to do it right. "Okay. I love you. There. I said it, I actually said it. I love you, I need you more than I can ever find a way of saying that won't sound really dumb, and to prove it, I'll call Ma and tell her I'm spending the night here."

"Well, I'd call that mushy, Ray."

"Why, thank you very kindly. So was it mushy enough, or I should have roses delivered?"

"Oh, I'd say that was mushy enough. And you really don't have to tell your mother you're spending the night with me."

Ray wasn't going to argue about *that*.

"Because if you call your mother and tell her that, it will precipitate a lengthy, emotional discussion, which would interfere with my plans for you."

"You have plans for me?"

Fraser's turn to take a deep breath. "I have plans for you and your—butt."

Just as well it was night-time: in sunlight, that grin of Ray's would have blinded. "I give you mush, you give

me what I want. Sneaky, Benny, pushing me like that. You set me up, you set the whole thing up, you manipulative little mountie, the whole thing was you faking it."

"No, not all of it. Some of it—" A hard kiss, deep, letting Ray sense Fraser's needs, and his insecurities. Trusting him.

"So," Ray said, when Fraser eventually freed his mouth, lying down, Fraser kissing his chest, Ray's hands busy on Fraser's back, chest, arms, anywhere he could reach, "you got plans for my *butt*?"

"Yes. I believe I even have plans for...your ass."

"My butt and my ass. You got plans for any other of my assets?"

A quick hand snaking down to display which assets Fraser was contemplating. "I have plans for your penis. Sorry, my mistake. Your...dick. I have plans for...your dick."

Dick? That was Fraser's idea of talking dirty? Oh, they were going to have them some fun teaching his polite Canadian an entire vocabulary of dirty words. Ray covered Fraser's hand with his own, squeezing them both tightly round his hardened flesh. "You got plans for my cock?" And felt Fraser's penis pulse at that, felt the surge of hardness against his thigh. So Fraser might have trouble saying it, but fears—or manipulation—to the contrary, he wasn't going to have any problems hearing it. "What are you going to do with my cock, Benny?"

"I'm going to perform fellatio on you."

"Perform fellatio huh? You gonna suck me, Benny? You gonna suck my cock?"

Fraser took a deep breath, steadied himself—lost it. Ducked his head and said, towards the general region of Ray's right shoulder, "Yes."

"Oh, Benny," Ray said, helpless in the face of this, tugging Fraser in close to him, hugging him tight. "You don't have to. You don't have to do it all at once, okay?" A long kiss, thorough and loving and exhilarating, because it occurred to Ray that he'd said it, he'd done the mushy part, he'd told his Benny that he loved him, that he considered himself settled down—so how come he wasn't scared and nervous like he'd been when he'd proposed to Angela, huh?

"What are you thinking, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Benny, look at us."

Of course, Fraser did precisely that.

"We are naked in bed together, right, Benny?"

A nod.

"We're plannin' on having sex, you even said you were plannin' on fellatio, right?"

An embarrassed nod.

"So here we are, lying here together bare-assed naked, all wrapped up in each other, and I've just told you I love you and you're it for me, and you're asking if I *mind* you askin' me what I'm thinking? Benny—relax, okay? You don't have to keep on being polite to me. In fact—"

"I wasn't being polite," Fraser said—interrupting!

"You weren't being polite?"

"No. I was being considerate."

Ray just looked at him for that.

"You looked somewhat troubled, and I wanted to let you know that you could talk to me about it if you wanted to, but I wasn't demanding that you tell me as proof that you trust me, so that you knew that if you didn't actually choose to tell me what you were thinking, I wasn't going to...persuade you to tell me."

"Persuade, huh, that what you call it? It's no big secret, Benny. I was thinking about when I proposed to Angela. It was all set, you know? We both knew she was going to say yes—we'd talked about moving in together, if it was better to get married in June or September, how we were gonna accommodate her family and my family both wanting their share of the wedding, we'd done all that stuff, so we both knew it was a done deal. But still, when I asked her, and she said yes, and I knew that was it... I was shaking, Benny, literally shaking. She had to hold my hand steady to put my ring on."

Odd, whimsical tone of voice. "You wore an engagement ring?"

"And a wedding ring. Still have them both."

"Ray..."

"Yeah?"

"Ray..."

A heavy sigh, the sort usually reserved for when Fraser was planning on risking both their lives again and Ray didn't need to make Benny actually ask the questions. "The reason it didn't work out was because she wanted some things I just wasn't ready for, and I didn't even know why I wasn't ready for them. Like babies, and a house with a yard, and college funds and staying home Saturday night to play CandyLand with the kiddies. I mean, I wanted those things, but I wasn't ready, and the whole idea scared me. Ange was the one who figured it out."

Fraser, just looked at him the same way he had in the car the day Ray had told him about Angela the first time, gaze heavy and soft, saying nothing.

"We'd gone out to Luigi's for dinner, and there was a new waiter, and she caught me eyeing his butt. And she told me what my problem was, what was wrong with me, why I didn't want to commit to babies and all that



stuff. We had the worst fights, Benny, really ugly and nasty, because I wouldn't admit it. I kept on denying it, Benny, calling her a liar but it was me lying to her, lying to myself. So she left. Came home from work one day, all set to celebrate making detective, and she was gone."

And it still hurt, and he could see that it hurt Fraser too. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah, me too, sometimes. It woulda been nice, you know, to have little me's running around, but she was right, I loved her, but that was never gonna be enough to keep me from wanting something else."

"Men."

"Yeah. Don't get me wrong, I love women, I do, but it never seems to last, you know? But with you..."

"We've hardly been together long enough for you to know whether or not this will last either."

"Oh, this one will, Benny, this one will."

"How can you be certain of that?" Clear, honest eyes, knowing this was going to hurt, but doing it anyway, because it had to be done, and because Ray was brave enough to do it. "How can you be certain that I'm not another Angela or Irene or Suzanne Chapin or Ms. St. Laurent?"

"Your dick is bigger? Okay, okay, don't look at me like that, I was only— Yeah, well, you know what I was trying to do. It's just different this time, Benny. Different than all the others, just real...different. No lies, this time, I'm not hiding half of who I am, I'm not lying to you about liking women or wanting women, the way I did with Angela about men and trying to be something I'm not. And I'm not running away from you, the way I was with Susan. And I'm not trying to recapture being young or gettin' one over on Zuko or running away from you the way I was with Irene."

"And Ms. St. Laurent?"

"She's a gorgeous woman, Fraser, you can't blame a man for trying."

"But it's not a serious emotional entanglement?"

"No. You're the only serious emotional entanglement in my life. This mushy enough for you, Benny?"

"Oh yes."

"Yeah," hands moving again, stroking down from collar bone to groin, lingering at the interesting points along the way, "you're the only serious emotional entanglement I got room for in my life. Serious. Too serious. Wanna lighten up here, Frazee? Instead of all this yakkin', you wanna get back to where we were before."

"Ah, yes." A very deep breath, a frown of concentration between the arched brows, a distinct bloom on the usually pale cheeks. "Big dicks, tight bums."

"Bum? You callin' me a bum?"

"You'd rather I called you an ass?"

"Oh, you're wicked, Benny, you're very wicked. Big dicks and tight bums, is that what you got in mind?"

"Is that what you were thinking of, in terms of 'talking dirty'?" Fraser asked, looking anxious and innocent as only he could, lying naked in bed with a naked man, talking dirty to him. "Or were you leaning more towards 'Come here',' and this time, despite his blushes and his awkwardness, he didn't have to take a deep breath or steel himself, was able to simply pull so that Ray came here, and then put his hand on Ray's nascent erection, "'big boy, and fuck my ass with your big, hot, fucking dick'?"

Ray swallowed hard at that, his cock pulsing up against his belly, Fraser's hand curved around it. "Uh... that's good, Benny, that's real good. Uhm, not trying to be picky here or anythin', but can we make it, uh, 'your big, hot, wet, fucking cock,' Benny?"

"Big, hot wet fucking cock," Fraser repeated, with the air of a schoolboy learning his catechism. And blushed.

Ray took pity on him, opening his mouth and kissing him, tongue tracing soft and wet along the smoothness of Benny's teeth, rubbing against Benny's tongue, hardening and fucking his mouth like a small cock, until Fraser took over, kissing back, hard, and then soft, and then deep and hungry, exploring Ray's mouth as if he had never known it before.

Oh, this was going to be good, Fraser kissing him so intently, holding him so tight, their erections rubbing hard and sweetly against each other and—

Like the worst of clichés, Ray's cell phone rang.

What Ray said would have made a marine blush; Fraser, to his credit, simply raised his eyebrows. "You could always ignore it."

"You'd let me do that?"

The phone was still ringing.

"No."

"Didn't think so," Ray said, resigned and unhappy, extricating himself from the bed and Benny's arms, his skin a mass of goosebumps as he padded, naked and hard, to the phone.

He perched on the edge of the kitchen table, his left hand dropping down to toy with his cock, his eyes very dark as he stared at Fraser, his cock pulsing again as Benny kicked back the covers and reached down to touch his own erection, his hands matching Ray's every stroke. He was going to owe Benny a bucketful of mushiness for this.

The phone was still ringing.

Staring at Benny, hand on his cock as Benny's hand was on his own, Ray took a deep breath before he

attempted answering the phone in a nearly normal tone of voice. "Vecchio."

A matter of two seconds, no more, and Ray wasn't looking at Fraser any more. Another second, and he'd let go of himself, five more and his erection was fading fast, Fraser coming up off the bed to approach him.

"Okay, okay, don't panic, I'll be right there. Yeah, I know, okay, okay, let me get dre— Let me get driving, okay, Frannie? Yeah, 'bye."

"What is it?" Fraser asked, handing Ray the pile of his clothes.

"Ma. There's been an accident, she fell down the stairs, Frannie says the noise was awful, and she's bleeding, the ambulance is on its way but—"

"Of course you have to go. We need to get you ready, you need to hurry." Fraser had his own underwear on, decently covering anything untoward, was kneeling down, tying Ray's shoe laces while Ray buttoned his shirt.

"I'll call you, okay?"

"When you can."

"Okay—"

Time snatched for one brief kiss, and then Ray was leaving. Door slamming behind him, sudden silence, and Fraser left standing in his barren apartment, alone.

Ray's feet hurt. And he was tired, and hungry, and cranky, but no way was he going to go home and get the sleep he needed. No way. Not until he'd seen Benny, held him, just spent some time in the same room as him. Oh, man, he had it bad, pathetically, embarrassingly bad. Benny wouldn't complain though, Benny would lap it all up and make Ray feel good about it. Which is why he'd called Fraser, and why he was trudging up the stairs to Fraser's apartment at this unholy hour of the night.

Ma was fine, happily driving Franny crazy, making his sister fetch and carry and fuss, every inch the traditional daughter. According to Ma, it was only fair: if Frannie had put away the laundry like she'd been asked, then Ma wouldn't have been on the stairs anyway, and Ma wouldn't have dropped a washcloth, and Ma wouldn't have slipped on it and fallen, and Ma wouldn't have broken her leg and hit her face hard enough to give her two black eyes and a bloody nose. Oh, yeah, Ma was having a whale of a time.

And right after that, still in the hospital, Ma just settling in to her hospital room for an overnight observation—thank God for the health insurance he'd taken out to supplement her Medicare—when there'd been the phone call from Lt. Welsh, and the investigation, and the godawful hours. And the phone calls with Benny.

Weird phone calls. Telling Benny he was sorry to run

out like that; and later, sitting there in the car, waiting for Welsh, telling Benny how much he'd appreciated Benny lying there in bed, touching himself, for Ray.

He felt like a fool for not saying 'jacking off' or any one of a hundred phrases. "Touching yourself," Ray muttered under his breath. Even Benny had managed better—'fuck me with your big, hot, wet, fucking cock'—even if the poor bastard had sounded like he was rehearsing his lines. Which made Ray think of Benny that time with the pizza kid who'd gotten his junk-heap car stolen, and there had been his Benny, planning on going undercover, practicing his undercover lines: 'Have you seen any stolen cars? Please raise your hand,' yeah, right, could see it—could, really, which was scary, and why he'd put his own money up to go undercover with him—Benny getting Ray to help out, getting them both where Benny wanted them to be. Side by side, working together.

And that was the first time he'd thought Benny might be willing to take it beyond the buddy stage. Half-drowned, Benny's hands freezing cold, but firm, gripping him, stroking him, that single, tell-tale thrust of Benny's hips, and Benny looking like all he wanted to do was hold on tight and kiss it all better.

Ray grinned to himself over that. Oh, yeah, he could see it now: him and Benny, kissing up a storm on the hood of the Riv, and Frannie right there to see it all.

He'd never have lived it down.

Still, it was a nice memory, a fond one, the beginning of it all.

And look where they were now. He'd told Benny he loved him, told him that was it, all settled down now, forever and ever. The mushy stuff. Jeez, was it only last month he'd been shutting Benny up for trying to get mushy? At this rate, they'd be serenading each other over flower-draped balconies.

He grinned again, thinking of 'California Dreaming' and glue in the saddle. And Ode to Joy.

Oh, God, he was getting seriously mushy again, and he hadn't even seen Benny yet.

He raised his hand to knock on the door—and nearly fell as the door was pulled open in front of him, Fraser's hands grabbing his coat, pulling him in, the door slamming shut, and Ray—Ray was shoved up against the wall, Benny stunningly naked, and Benny kissing him hard, tongue deep in his mouth, pushing, tasting, controlling, Benny's hands hauling at him, pulling his clothes off, ripping things and not a word of apology.

It was the most exciting thing Ray Vecchio had ever done. Or had done to him. Benny was all over him, tugging at him, moving him this way, and that, and then Ray realised: Benny was talking to him.

"—these clothes off you, I want to see you naked, in the light. I want to see your chest, and your hair, and I want to see your nipples peak, and your skin shiver when I suck on your nipples."

Pause, Fraser stopping to look Ray in the eyes. "Tits?" he said, puzzled, obviously this part of his script under-rehearsed. "Or are you one of the men the book says doesn't like 'tits,' but prefers nipples or chest?"

Nearly laughing, filling his hands with the soft heat of Benny's skin. "What the fuck have you been reading?"

"Many things, Ray, oh, I've been reading many things and all of them well past the table of contents. Now, where was I? Oh, yes. I'm going to suck your tits, and bite them, and leave them red and swollen, and then I'm going to remove the rest of your garments, and get down on my knees and suck your...suck your..."

Ray took pity on him and kissed him then. Pulled him in close, thrilled to bits that Fraser had done this, that Benny had rehearsed his dirty speech, that Benny had stripped naked and stood here with all the lights on, waiting for Ray to come through that door to give Ray what Ray wanted.

"I am going," Fraser said, low and breathless, "to suck your cock, and then I'm going to shove *my* cock up your tight ass, and I'm going to fuck you." A groan, a wrenching sound, something breaking, something breaking free, and Benny was thrusting against Ray, hard, needy, cock weeping pre-cum. "I'm going to fuck you, Ray, I'm going to fuck you till you come, and then you're going to fuck me. Oh please, Ray, I want you to—"

"I'll do it, just wait, Benny. I'll fuck you," mouth wet and wild, covering Benny's chest, sucking and laving the nipples, hands tightly stroking Benny's cock. "But we better get to the bed before we both fall down here, loverboy, okay?"

Fraser didn't reply, stumbling them both towards the bed while he kissed Ray, compelling, commanding, greedy, snatching at Ray and pleasure in a way he'd never done before. At least, not with Ray. And Ray had never dared ask about what it had been like between Benny and Victoria.

On the bed, Fraser on his back, Ray atop him, Benny's legs spread wide, an open invitation. Ray was working his way down Benny's body, heading for his cock, when he heard it, the sound thrumming through Fraser's chest. "Are you going to hurt me?"

"Only if you want it, that your secret kink, huh, my wicked mountie? Is that—" Dawning on him, clambering up Fraser's stocky frame, cradling Benny's face in his hands. "I'm not Victoria, I'm one of the good guys, remember? I'm not going anywhere, and I love you, I'm real clear on that, Benny, no love/hate crap for me. You

got that? It's easy, it's real easy and it's real simple. You can be *you*, and I still won't leave you. You got that?"

And Fraser didn't smile, or cry, or anything mushy, eyes bright and intense as he talked dirty. "I want to rim you. I want to fuck you with my tongue, and suck your balls, and I want to eat your cock, you can fuck my face, and I'll eat you out—"

Not all at the same time, Ray thought, but there was no way he was going to say anything that might make Benny feel self-conscious—or make Benny think Ray didn't appreciate what they were doing here. "You wanna eat my ass?" he asked, finger teasing Fraser's hole.

"Yes," said simply, and truthfully. This, something they'd done, twice, very briefly, without talking about it, as if it were something best kept discreetly hidden.

Ray started to move, to kneel so Fraser would have access, and found himself grabbed instead, urged upwards, so he was crouched astride Benny's head, his hands pressed hard into the wall to steady him, as he lowered himself, feeling wicked and wanton and naughty, to Benny's waiting mouth.

"Oh, fuck, Benny, that feels good, oh, yeah, put your tongue in me. Stick it up me, Benny, stick your tongue all the way up inside me. Fuck me, go on, fuck me with your tongue, oh, yeah, that's it, fuck me just like that..."

And it felt as if a floodgate had been opened, sluicing the dammed words out and through him, a rush of words filling the air around them, everything he said inspiring Fraser to new delights.

"Yeah, that's it, now lick my balls, oh, just there, harder, the other one, suck them inside, go on, you can do it, take it one at a time, suck me, Benny, yeah, do that with your tongue, oh, God, yes..."

And then Benny was rimming him again, tongue thrusting inside, wet and hot. Not content with that, Benny was craning his neck, and sucking Ray's cock inside. Loving this, Ray lowered himself, kneeling now, turning round, doing something he'd never dared try in case it put Benny off, facing down the length of Benny's body, as if they were going to 69, but instead, he made no attempt to gently ease his cock into Benny's mouth while taking his friend's in his own.

He put his hands, gently at first, on Benny's face, feeling the hollow of Benny's cheeks as he sucked, and then, Ray's hands slid lower, and lower, to Benny's throat, feeling himself fill Benny's throat, as he plunged his cock in deep, deeper than he'd ever allowed himself before, feeling himself as he fucked Benny's throat.

"Try again, you've taken me nearly this deep before, you can take me all the way," he whispered, as Benny pushed him out a bit, nearly gagging. "Go on, try again,"

Ray had found the body of that missing girl, had been like this after Ray had had to kill his car. Hardly surprising it should be like this after today's funeral. His own arms tight around Ray, Fraser lay his head on Ray's shoulder and closed his eyes as Ray had told Irene to do, Ray's hand on the nape of his neck, stroking, comforting, soothing. Giving, always giving. They stayed like that for a long time, uncomfortable, awkward, Ray taking comfort only through giving it, Fraser giving comfort through taking what Ray needed to give him.

Until finally, although neither made mention of it, the fraught hug changed, a subtle shifting, first of bodies to relieve aching muscles, then of attitude, and of need, and finally, of intent.

Ray, frowning intently, slid Fraser's braces down off his shoulders, his fingers unbuttoning the top of uniform trousers, his hands cool and smooth as they stroked Fraser's stomach.

Again, Fraser stood there, still, unmoving, and watched; watched as Ray watched his own hands under the white cotton of Fraser's undershirt; watched, as Ray lifted that shirt up, tugging it over Fraser's head, pulling it down to pin those strong arms, rendering Fraser's strength immobile, vulnerable. Trousers next, Fraser stumbling backwards, fetching up against the wall with his shoulders, hands scrabbling for purchase as Ray stole his balance, lifting his feet out from under him, right foot, left foot, until the trousers were gone and his feet were bare.

Ray stopped now, and stood back, and took his time just to stare.

So that's how it was going to be tonight.

Fraser waited, his gaze never leaving Ray, his breath coming faster, aware of his heart rate increasing. Aware, more, of the blood heating his penis, aware of the precise moment erection began, aware of the first minute lengthening of his own penis, and there could never be words to describe how that felt, his sex growing, and hardening, and rising, a miracle of liquid engineering that brought the head of his penis against the starched cotton of his underwear, trapping his flesh uncomfortably.

Ray was, as always, still looking at him. Looking at his erection, looking at the damp spot seeping through the pristine cotton. Stepping forward, blessedly, to reach in, to take Fraser's cock in his hand, and adjust him, such a casual, intense intimacy.

Ray stepping back again, his eyes so very dark, a lure, and alluring, to Fraser.

Fraser didn't move: he stayed where Ray had put him, and waited until Ray chose to move again. Ray coming

towards him, unsmiling, brow furrowed, mouth so tense, so tight, but his hand gentle enough as he reached for Fraser, only a touch, and then Ray becoming distant once more.

The coolness of air on his penis, and Fraser didn't have to look down to know how Ray had left him: erect, darkened flesh sticking out through the slit in his white underwear. He should feel ridiculous, arms constrained, sex exposed, facing this man still fully draped in his somber, formal Armani, but there was nothing in Ray's eyes that could ever humiliate him, nothing in those eyes that made Fraser feel anything but aroused, hungry, wanton. He wanted to thrust, to fuck, to mate, his hips canting forwards, his throat allowing a sound to escape, his legs automatically spreading.

And Ray was just standing there, watching this. Watching Fraser, arms pinned by his undershirt, strength made helpless; watching Fraser, hard cock thrusting through the shorts, virility rendered impotent.

Ray, watching Fraser, the pale skin flushing red, small brown nipples hard, surprisingly thick, unless a man knew what Fraser liked to have done to those excessively sensitive nipples.

Ray, watching still, as desire gave way to passion, as passion gave way to need, as need, ultimately, gave way to surrender, and Fraser's eyes pleaded.

Then, and only then, did Ray step forward again.

He filled his hands with Fraser, rough as he kneaded Fraser's chest, rougher still as he flicked and twisted those nipples that knew his touch so well.

Giving, still, for this roughness was Fraser's secret need, the darkness within him that had resonated so to the darkness in Victoria, this harshness another of Ray's gifts to Fraser: sex as punishment and pleasure, penance and reward. Oh, Ray understood, and Ray gave, and Fraser took, greedily, and took, needing this.

Ray leaned forward, teeth gleaming in the light, just for a second, before his lips and teeth closed over one hard nipple, and Fraser's breath hissed inwards, while his chest heaved upwards, and his cock thrust upwards just as Ray's hand pushed downwards. The soft skin of Ray's hand met the softer skin of Fraser's cock, skin whispering on skin, too dry, and so Ray straightened, and brought his hand up between them.

They both looked at it, as Ray turned it, this way, that, the tendons moving under the skin, the skin olive over the whiteness of bones. They both looked at that hand, until it was too close and Fraser looked at Ray's face instead, at the intent expression, at the parted lips, the hooded eyes. Fraser kept on looking, at the way Ray ran his tongue over his own lips, a fore-shadow of what they

both knew Fraser would do. Ray's fingers touched Fraser's mouth and Fraser ran his tongue over Ray's fingertips, echoing Ray's desire. He watched Ray's face, addicted, as Ray slid one finger inside Fraser's mouth, watched Ray's face even while sucking on Ray's finger, watched the shift in Ray's expression as Ray slid another finger into him, and another. Fraser knew what was going on in Ray's mind, for he'd told Ray: Ray knew he'd done this for Victoria. Ray knew that, and knew, too, that Fraser had sucked other things, on other people. Knew, first-hand, what it was to have Fraser suck Ray's own body, down low, at the hard heat of him.

Ray's fingers were wet now, and he withdrew them, slowly, his touch lingering, and then that wet touch was lingering on Fraser's erection, fingers teasing the foreskin, palm pressed hard along the length of his shaft. That hand tightening, loosening, sliding up and down, doing everything exactly, precisely, the way Fraser liked it best, the hand tightening into a fist, hard and rough, the way Fraser needed it most.

Ray, giving, and giving, and Fraser stared into Ray's eyes as Ray's hand blessed him with pleasure, giving it to him, Fraser's own hands useless, Fraser's body helpless.

Ray was staring back at Fraser, staring at his own hands giving, his eyes finally beginning, gently, to take: taking in the sight of Fraser standing there, unsteady, arms pinned behind his back, chest flushed red, nipples hard. But that wasn't enough for Ray, obviously, for he actually, at last, took a little more for himself: Ray grabbed the front of Fraser's underwear, lowering it ungently, Fraser groaning in pleasure as the cloth scraped down over his penis, Ray's hand hard and tight around Fraser again almost instantly. Ray's hand lingered as he adjusted the fabric just so, the waistband pulled taut across rounded buttocks as Ray lowered the front to exactly where he wanted it to be.

Ray's hand so tanned compared to Fraser's paleness. White underwear cupping balls drawn up at the base of the rigid cock, black pubic hair a shock against the white of Fraser's belly, and now Ray was satisfied with the vista before him, or seemed to be, because he stepped back once more.

His need too great, Fraser stumbled forward, following Ray, stopping only when Ray turned a dark, heated glare on him.

It was Fraser's turn to stare, to gaze and watch and devour with his eyes as, basking in the heat of Fraser's gaze, Ray Vecchio finally began to undress. The coat first, folded over the back of the chair, then the jacket, seating himself to take off shoes, and socks, Fraser barely daring to blink at even this small nakedness, Ray's feet

narrow and bare on the brown floor. The belt-buckle opened, the button undone, zipper rasping like a tongue on stubble, shirt pulled out over the gaping trousers, denying Fraser even a glimpse as Ray bent forward and peeled off trousers and underwear. The tie, finally, top two shirt buttons opened, cuffs flicked open, and Ray walking towards Fraser, naked under that shirt, long, gorgeous thighs with the muscles flexing, and brief moments when perhaps, perhaps, Fraser was gifted with a glimpse of hardening cock as Ray stepped forward.

Not until Ray's hand—so warm, so strong—pressed against his chest and pushed him did Fraser back up against the wall, and then Ray was taking that last step, until they were plastered together, chest to knees, Fraser's cock so hard and aching, trapped between them, nudging, blindly seeking Ray's cock, seeking relief, frustrated by the creased cloth of Ray's shirt.

At long last, Ray was shedding that shirt, and there was nothing between them but skin, and hunger, and need. Fraser thrust forward, the head of his cock rubbing through the soft hair at Ray's groin, and touching, temptingly, tantalizingly, the soft skin of Ray's own cock, hips thrusting forward again, trying to find Ray again—denied, wrenching a horrible, lonely sound from his throat.

But this was Ray, who always gave, and who always knew. Fraser was guided, hurriedly, need dictating the pace, to the table. Within moments of that one wordless, need-filled sound, Ray was bending Fraser over the table, Fraser's cock trapped between his belly and the tablecloth, the coarseness a piquant pain. Fraser's back was covered by the warmth of Ray's body, Ray's cock nudging at him between his legs, Ray's cock rising up between Fraser's thighs to dandle Fraser's balls, to slide, once, the head so slick and moist, up the underside of Fraser's cock. Ray's fingers were in Fraser's mouth, and Fraser sucked, hard, but they were taken from him anyway, if only for a moment, because Ray knew where Fraser wanted them: now those wet fingers were probing him, seeking out his darkness, spreading him and wetting him and opening him up.

A thicker hardness probing at Fraser now, the skin so very different, the heat so very much more intense, and the thrust slow, and sure, and familiar, sliding into him, taking over the darkness within, beginning the deep, slow thrusting. Ray was bent over him, giving Fraser no room to move, no way to ease the sweetly painful friction on his cock. Ray, giving to him again, Ray giving him what Benton Fraser never, ever, dared ask for. What he never dared hope anyone, but Victoria, would ever love him enough to offer.

Ray's body hair was so soft and caressing on Fraser's back, and on Fraser's buttocks, Ray's thighs pressing against the backs of Fraser's legs. A moment to adjust their position, Ray controlling even that, and then Ray was thrusting in so hard, so deep, Ray standing straighter, his hands tangling in Fraser's undershirt, grabbing hold of the fabric, holding Fraser immobile and helpless as Ray thrust his cock deep within Fraser's body.

Ray thrust harder, deeper, staying there, shoving his hips forward for that last fraction of penetration, possessing Fraser utterly. Withdrawing, then going inside Fraser again, holding steady, deep within Fraser, and moving, just enough, his hips tilting, his cock twisting inside, touching, touching and stabbing and stroking.

Stillness, and stillness, until Fraser feared he would cry out, and then Ray moving again, the table creaking dangerously, Ray's thrusting in his strong, steady rhythm, plunging in, pulling almost completely out, again and again and again. It was the way it always was, on these nights that were so different from their usual way. But this was one of the rare nights, when Ray needed, and he gave, gave Fraser the fulfillment of the deepest of their desires.

They were as they always were, the pattern of these nights unchanged, giving and taking, the two of them moving as one, sweat sheening on Ray's back, sweat sheening on Fraser's face, as Ray pushed so deeply inside, Ray's mouth open in soundless completion, his movements arrhythmic, jarring, fucking Fraser so hard.

And Fraser lay pinned under Ray, splayed helplessly across the table as Ray came inside him, Ray's seed spilling into him, as Ray's hardness slowly softened, and dwindled, and left Fraser, alone.

A few moments, the sound of their breathing so very loud. Then Ray was helping Fraser to his feet, was turning him round, Fraser's arms still bound, his underwear still tight up under his balls, his cock dark with need. Ray looked at him, looked him straight in the eye, and wrapped one hand round Fraser's cock as he leaned forward and for the first time that night, kissed him. His groan of final pleasure swallowed by Ray's kiss, Fraser came, semen hot against Ray's hand, Fraser's mouth hot and open against Ray's.

Too quickly, at the end, as always, for the kiss ended, shame creeping in on cloven hooves, until Ray looked away, then kept his eyes on the neutrality of Fraser's

shoulder as the undershirt was finally removed by Ray's tender hands, as the underwear was finally pulled off, used, in the end, to swab spilled semen from hands and inner thighs.

And now that Fraser was fully naked at last, Ray turned back towards his own clothes, his hands unsteady as he made a move towards getting dressed, and leaving.

No.

Not this time.

This time, there would be as much comfort for Ray as there had been balm for Fraser; if there was to be shame for what they did on these nights, then it was Fraser's, not Ray's. And Ray had taken all that shame away, the very first time he had filled Fraser's darker needs and loved him still, in spite of it all. Even after Victoria. Perhaps especially after Victoria.

Fraser was reaching out, now, taking the clothing away from Ray, turning his friend towards the bed, holding Ray in his arms as he lay down on the bed, pulling Ray to lie down on top of him.

Now, now at last, perhaps, it would be Fraser's turn to give. He nestled Ray in closer, draping Ray over his own stolid form, encircling Ray with his arms. And Ray allowed it. Allowed himself to be cradled close and caring the way Ray had held Fraser such a short time before; allowed himself to lay his head on Fraser's shoulder, and to close his eyes, as Fraser stroked his hair, and his back.

They lay like that for a long time. Fraser's hands never still as they soothed, and comforted, as they did what Ray so rarely permitted. Fraser gave Ray small kisses, and caresses, and Ray took them, settling into the embrace, relaxing into the warmth of Fraser's body. They didn't talk, neither one asked the other a single question, they just lay there together as the last echo of sex left their bodies, and sleep whispered in. In the quiet, Dief's breathing was loud, and the noise from the outside world intruded upon their own small pocket of silence.

But for tonight, the world was out there, and the hollow ache had left Ray's eyes, and Fraser didn't need to hear Ray say anything; he already knew and didn't need to hear any of the pain of the funeral and of saying good-bye; they didn't need words to know that this was different from the usual, that this time, this tight, hard hug was Ray Vecchio taking what Fraser had always so desperately wanted to give him.

And with that, Benton Fraser was content.





“Reckon you’d been reading me right all along.” Bodie hadn’t needed to look at Doyle. They knew each other very, very well.

“Knew it. Best yet, if you ask me.” Doyle ambled towards the bound man.

A doubtful sound from Bodie, who had stayed back. “Can’t tell yet. Not that simple, is it?”

The smile that Doyle turned on his partner was warm, affectionate. “You know you haven’t got my experience. I can tell.”

“Yeah, hard man. Your little friend’s this close to wearing me down by pure boredom.”

Poor Wilson: prepared for anything except their uncomplicated laughter. “That’s good, Terry.” Doyle always took the lead in these sessions—it was natural and right. “I like you. We both like you. And that’s important, isn’t it?”

“Oh, yeah.” Bodie’s tone was too fervent, his gleaming gaze too intent. You could see the flicker of Wilson’s thoughts, the scramble to second-guess this pair. Failure, presumably, as the old defiant stare reappeared.

“Yeah, can’t be just anyone. I had a feeling about you right from the start. So I came prepared.” The knife was out. Doyle loved his own speed. Always had. And he didn’t have to look to know that Bodie’s erection would be visible by now. For himself, the pleasure was still (just) at the intellectual stage.

“Oh, y’re one of those.” A very creditable boredom. This lad would go far.

“Wrong, sunshine.” Bodie had come close, was standing by Doyle’s knife-hand. “Two of those.”

“Yeah. Different kinds of ‘those’, maybe, but not in any way that’ll matter to you, Terry.” To Bodie: “Ready?”

“Ready.” Relaxed, smiling, and in unison, they came to within a foot of the chair.

“You know your knives, don’t you, Terry? But you’ve never been this close to one this sharp. Look.” On Doyle’s last word, Bodie stretched his left arm out in front of Doyle’s body, the palm turned to face Wilson. Doyle switched the knife to his left hand—loving his equal skill with both even more than his speed—supported Bodie’s wrist with his right, and laid a cut quickly and precisely through the meat of Bodie’s thumb and right to the thumb-tip. Bodie’s only reaction was a flutter of eyelashes, and the other men were not watching his eyes. Even before he lowered his hand, the blood was dripping onto the floor.

Wilson was already lost, though he didn’t yet know it. Nothing in his planning had prepared him for this. They smiled at him, their smiles now thoroughly complicated.

“You’re thinking, aren’t you?” Doyle. The one who

controlled. “We can see exactly what you’re thinking. And you don’t even know the whole of it yet.” He sheathed the knife, then turned to Bodie, and lifted the hand. Slowly, he explored the wound, displaying it to Wilson while—this time—Bodie made small flinching movements.

“Fucking maniacs.” A helpless, involuntary mutter. Poor, poor Wilson. A fair guess that a good proportion of his brain was screaming at him that he was English! In England! This wasn’t... really... happening.

Doyle’s policy was to ignore everything until the confession. He stroked the wound closed, but kept Bodie’s hand in his as he raised his eyes to his partner’s face. “Think about this, Terry. I’ve known this man for seven years, and I love him more than my life. But you... An hour at most, and you’re not making me laugh like you did at first. “ Now he turned his head to Wilson, expression all bright curiosity. “Are you thinking?”

“Ray. Ray, he’s thinking. Let’s get started.” Bodie’s voice was hoarse with longing.

“Self-control, my friend. Do you remember me explaining about self-control?” Unfair of him to put his hand to Bodie’s groin then. Most unfair. From Bodie’s groan, you’d think he was the one under interrogation. These moments aroused Doyle more than anything else these days—eventually, no doubt, all his appreciation of sex would have to be channelled through Bodie first.

“Shit. Fucking shit.” A whisper under Bodie’s groan. Oh, don’t say they’d overestimated Wilson. He couldn’t be that close, could he?

Doyle stepped back from his partner then gave a light touch to his arm. “Where do we start then? I’ll let you name.”

“Thigh.”

A pursing of the lips, then a slow, thoughtful nod. “You weren’t kidding about going easy on him. I wonder about you sometimes. Up to doing the belt?”

“Yeah. No problem.” Bodie wiped his left hand on his cords—black, not to show the stains—and was quick and efficient about removing the belt from Wilson’s jeans and turning it into a gag. Doyle, kneeling before the bound and parted legs, watched throughout, his appreciation obvious.

“You want to talk to us, Terry, just nod. OK? Any time. But right now you’d be best to keep still.” Doyle had a second knife—the ripper. He started the cut in the fold of denim at Wilson’s left knee, then brought it along the length of the inner thigh, just above the seam, in one smooth, continuous movement. He’d had a lot of practice at this, and had never cut Bodie, not even a scratch. Wilson was rigid, staring down with wide, disbelieving eyes.



“Oh, very nice.” Bodie slid the fingers of his right hand into the slit. Wilson jerked and protested, and the two agents exchanged slow smiles. “You keep fit. Stuck behind a steering wheel most of the day, but you still keep fit.” He stroked and kneaded, and Wilson showed no signs of getting used to this, of summoning a workable frame of mind. “Still got the tan, too, from that fortnight in Tenerife. Yeah, you’re the best we’ve seen in a long time.”

“Thought you wanted to get started.” Doyle was teasing. He had the first knife again, now, and was rubbing the handle between his palms as if warming it. “Stop feeling him up, and give me room to work. Eh?” He moved around to the right side of the chair, opposite Bodie, and knelt up with the knife in his left hand, ready for the sweep from knee to groin. Bodie took a grip on the denim, held the slit open.

Wilson was giving small, hoarse near-screams. Bodie glanced up. “Hey, he’s really shaking his head. Looking forward to it, I’d say.”

“s what I like to hear.” The knife went in just above the knee, came out after three inches. Then a thorough inspection, Doyle opening it to the full depth—about a quarter of an inch—while Bodie gazed down, breath now fast and loud. “Ah, *now* he feels it. Takes a few seconds, doesn’t it, Terry?”

“God, Ray, you’re good.” On a breath, with a note of awe close to pain.

Doyle withdrew his hands, pressed the bloody fingertips briefly to Bodie’s lips. Bodie groaned and his eyes sank closed for several seconds. “Next one’ll be even better. Your favourite. Look. I can take it along this vein right up to here.” A fingertip traced a curving path to within an inch of the groin. Wilson yelped, then when the knife was raised again, he started shaking his head frantically, pushing out a strangled shout with each shake. This time both agents looked at him: Doyle with curiosity, Bodie with growing impatience. “Huh.” Doyle. “You’d think he was trying to tell us something.”

“Just wants attention if you ask me.”

“Must be. ’cos I told him what to do, didn’t I?”

“Well, I heard you. And you weren’t even speaking to me.”

Doyle nodded, and they bent again to the thigh. Knife raised... But now Wilson’s body was rocking backwards and forwards against the restraints.

Bodie looked up, then gave a sharp sigh. “Ray. He’s nodding.”

“No!” Doyle turned to check, then slumped. “Bastard. Terry...” A slow, disappointed shake of the head. “I thought you were one of us. Bodie?” Bodie stood and

went behind Wilson’s head to unfasten the belt. At his signal, Doyle reached under the chair to start the tape recorder, and in the next second Wilson was giving them everything they’d asked for, and more. He talked for a good five minutes with pauses only to draw breath, looking straight up at the ceiling, not at them, not at his leg. When he stopped it was sudden, and he slumped forward, eyes closed. Doyle switched off the tape recorder, picked it up, and they left the room without speaking.

Still without speaking, they entered a room two doors along the corridor—another cell, this one with a hard, narrow bed. Doyle dealt with the door—shutting and securing the observation window, and turning the locks—and by the time he was finished Bodie was already in his position at the end of the bed: on his back, legs folded up to his chest, clothing hobbling his knees. Far from comfortable, but this never took long. Doyle lubricated himself with saliva and blood, and pushed in very slowly, holding his breath as he waited to discover how Bodie would be this time. Quiet? Or frantic? Or something altogether new?

Quiet. His most quiet. Not a sound throughout the steady, relentless penetration. Once it was complete, Doyle finally raised his head and sought Bodie’s face, and found it turned to the wall, with eyes tight closed. It looked like pain, like desperate denial, and it was only from experience that Doyle knew otherwise. For some time Doyle had suspected that if Bodie was ever going to come from the fucking, then it would be during one of the quiet times. But it was not today, and maybe that meant that Doyle should accept that it would be never. Possibly just as well—he’d miss the ache in his jaws, the taste in his mouth, he knew he would.

They didn’t linger afterwards. They never did. Crazy they might be, but not stupid. But there was always time for a kiss by the door. When they drew apart, Bodie turned and reached for the first lock, but Doyle pulled him back, not yet willing to relinquish control.

“Each time, I find I’ve forgotten how good you are.” Bodie looked self-conscious, a sign that they were heading up to the surface, back to the ordinary world. “You make yourself so tight, as if it really had been months. Do your other men appreciate it, what you do to make them think they’re the only one?” Now Bodie was blushing, head turned again towards the wall. Doyle wouldn’t accept that as an answer, and the whisper in Bodie’s ear was fierce. “Do they, Bodie?”

Two rapid blinks, a swallow, and Bodie was recovered, and his smile all wicked charm. “Why’re you so sure you’re not, eh? Reckon I could do better?”

“Reckon you’ve never known when you’re well off. Hmm.” A long, considering look—and Bodie was still grinning at him. “Of course, it’s not your place to make an approach outright—”

“No, Ray. Of course.” Mock-serious, now. Doyle wanted to take him back to the bed immediately.

“—but we both know you could have done more to tell me that you were available.”

“But everyone on the squad knows semaphore. A secret handshake?”

“When we’ve finished with this—” Doyle pointed to the tape-recorder, which was on the floor to the left of

the door. “—you’re coming home with me. I don’t care how late it is. If you’re claiming I’m the only one, it’s time you learned what that means.” He saw Bodie’s body jerk, heard the roughened breathing—more reaction than he’d got during the fucking.

“Hope it means you’ve got some plasters. I know I’m out.”

“Enough for what you’ll need. Now you can unlock the door.” Bodie looked at him, eyes intense, mouth opening—then nodded sharply and turned to deal with the locks. Doyle bent down to pick up the tape recorder, and within a minute they were back to work.



“You were meant to,” Cowley told him. “Actually, he failed the security checks.”

“Deliberately?” asked Bodie, and Cowley leaned back and steepled his fingers.

“Conveniently.”

Doyle grinned, appreciating it. Cowley raised an eyebrow at him.

“What’s he been doing these two years, then?” asked Bodie.

“In fact, 3.7, we don’t know. He hasn’t been able to keep in touch; contact might have jeopardized his cover. He did pass on warning of a couple of bombs last March; we notified the police and got them removed without fuss. But early this morning he called for an emergency pull-out. Presumably he’ll explain why when he’s safe behind these walls again.”

“Reckon they’re onto him, sir?”

“Possibly. Or he may have word of another bombing campaign, an assassination, something big enough to make it worth his while to come in. He was sent out to use his best judgment, and if he feels he’s got to run for cover now, then we give it to him, and we pump him for everything he can tell us.”

“Right, sir.” Doyle thumped his partner on the shoulder and turned toward the door, stuffing the paper in his jacket pocket. “Let’s go.”

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They had made love that morning, hard and fast and good. They both liked doing it in the morning. For one thing, even as partners they couldn’t be spending three or four nights a week together; CI5 didn’t routinely surveil its own agents, but a pattern like that couldn’t help but be noticed eventually. And neither of them much liked the idea of climbing out of a shared bed and going home to sleep alone. But who would think twice about an agent—Bodie, usually—showing up at his partner’s an hour or so early in the morning? Cadge breakfast, plan the day, come to work in one car instead of two; it made perfect sense. And if breakfast was a mouthful of coffee and toast gulped on their way out the door, and they planned whatever needed planning in the car—well, who was to know?

Besides, Doyle liked sex in the morning, always had. Woke up randy, edgy, itching for Bodie to come over and tackle him onto the mattress. He’d actually tackled Bodie there, the first time, Bodie half-laughing, gasping for breath, and then kissing him back so hard and wet. Doyle loved to have Bodie fuck him in the morning, and to carry the secret pulse and burn inside his arse throughout the day.

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Bodie scanned the printout in the car as Doyle wound them through the London streets, heading for the disused factory complex it directed them to. “Doesn’t say much.”

“I know.” Name, brief description, address and time for pick-up. “Wish we knew if they were after him, at least—why he yelled for help.”

“Two years.” Bodie shook his head. “Makes an Operation Susie look like a doddle.” They had done plenty of undercover work, both of them, but never for more than a few days at a time. “Oi, remember that night when Macklin showed up in the pub with a bunch of the new lads, couple of years ago? Wasn’t Brady there?”

“Was he? I don’t remember.”

“Sure. They’d all just come off the assault course, and Macklin introduced them around when we met up with him, you and me and Jax and Murphy and some others. Brady was so pleased with himself for living through the week with Macklin, he bought the whole squad a round.” Bodie chuckled, remembering. “And then he realized he only had three pounds, and borrowed the rest off me and Murphy. Christ, he still owes me almost nine quid!”

Doyle grinned over at him. “Cheer up—now’s your chance to collect.”

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The sister had cranked the head of his bed up a little, before she left, so he wasn’t flat on his back. He would almost have preferred to be. Now he had to look at Cowley, glaring at him, and on the edge of his vision was Bodie. He couldn’t tell where Bodie was looking. With a dull, throbbing ache that echoed from his leg to his chest, he’d rather have been staring at the ceiling, himself. Hospital ceilings were good for that. Lot of cracks and flecks.

“Well, 4.5?” Cowley snapped.

Doyle didn’t say anything. Cowley took a step toward the bed. He probably meant it to be intimidating, but Doyle only saw the old man’s halting gait, his limp, and wondered if he’d have one like that.

Probably not. Just a bad break, they’d said. Messy, but in a few months you’ll never know.

Yeah. Right.

The Old Man was standing over him now, mouth tight with anger. “I send the two of you out on a simple pick-up, and what happens? I want to know how you could foul the job so badly. I want your report, 4.5, and I’ll have it now!”

Then Bodie took a step forward, coming into focus



next to their boss. He wasn't looking at Doyle; at least, Doyle didn't think so. It was hard to tell, when Doyle himself wasn't looking at either of the other men. It was a good ceiling; it didn't demand anything from him. Not like them.

"He's doped, sir. Because of his ankle."

Well, that was true, but it wasn't much, really, and Bodie knew it. Just some codeine for the pain, nothing that would string him out. But if Bodie wanted to volunteer to report first, Doyle was not going to stop him. He wondered, with an abstract numbness, what his partner was going to say.



They were to meet Brady in the shadow of a deserted warehouse, its massive doors chained shut for years, standing among its fellows in an abandoned industrial park. Untended grass that had once been lawn-smooth lapped the buildings, and was divided by the winding access road that hadn't seen a delivery lorry in years. They left the car in the road and climbed up the embankment, across the grounds to the building's north side; windowless, paint peeling, the wall stretched a good ten yards in either direction from where they took position near its midpoint, waiting silently. Brady might show up from inside, if some smaller access door had been pried or picked since the owners had abandoned the place; or he might come around one of the corners where the wall ended, off to their left and right. Hell, for all they knew he might rappel down from the roof forty feet above their heads; when Doyle gave Bodie a wry glance acknowledging their total ignorance of what to expect, his partner grinned, then slid a speculative glance upward.

Doyle poked him. "You're just thinkin' how much you'd like to do it," he accused in a low whisper. Bodie nodded cheekily. Then a flock of pigeons erupted from across the road, and hard on their startled twittering came the sound of running feet, and a gunshot.

"Shit!" Doyle spat, and bolted for the far corner.

Bodie was right behind him, and as Doyle skidded into shelter he threw himself down and around in the same motion, coming up on his knees to give Bodie cover as his partner whipped around the corner in turn. And ten yards behind him was Brady, desperate terror on his face as he raced for their protection, and another shot sounding from across the road. Doyle fired back on general principles; he couldn't see the gunman but it was obvious what was happening. Brady's IRA mates were on to him.

And worst of all, they couldn't get to the car. The direction of the shots indicated that they'd be in a clear

line of fire if they went out into the road again; and if the shooter was following Brady, as seemed likely, the corner of the building wouldn't hide them for long, either.

Of course, that went both ways. Brady careened into cover, head-on into Bodie from the sound of it. "How many?" demanded Doyle, without looking back.

Whatever Brady had been doing for two years, he hadn't been running assault courses. He was gasping, tearing sounds of air being hauled forcibly into his lungs, and Doyle couldn't make out what he said. Bodie repeated it. "Three at least, maybe more, coming after him. Rifles and handguns. Brady's not armed. Or hit." He'd apparently been frisking the man while Doyle scoured the blank facades of other buildings, watching for movement.

"Any chance they'll back off, now they see you've got friends?"

"No—no." Brady's voice was hoarse and harsh. Doyle glanced around at him momentarily. The other man's straight black hair was longish and disheveled, and his face was splotchy red, but he had managed to gain enough breath to speak. "They want me dead; they're not—" he coughed thickly, and spat—"not going to give up."

"Want you that bad?" Bodie asked.

"Yeah. They've got—I know—"

"Never mind what he knows," Doyle snapped.

"There's three of them that I can see, coming in, and unless you fancy us as Butch and Sundance, we're getting out of here *now*." He fired once more, hoping to at least wing the man peering from the broken window of the factory across the road. The man ducked back, and an answering shot from the building's shadow sprayed dirt into Doyle's face. Doyle spat it out and came to his feet. "Have to run for it. You know this area?"

"No—"

"Do they?" Bodie interrupted.

"No. I picked it be—"

"Never mind. If we're all running blind, we run the opposite way from them. Find some shelter, call for help... move!"



They'd talked about it once, when they'd started. Getting caught would mean the end of their jobs, maybe of their careers. But there was no question of stopping, of pretending that that sweaty, laughing tumble into bed hadn't happened, or hadn't mattered. They both knew that, when they rolled over and looked at each other, the next morning, and moved together for a long, open-mouthed kiss before they even spoke.



“Christ, Ray.”

“Yeah.” Doyle turned onto his back and pulled Bodie close with an arm around his shoulders. Bodie threw his own arm across Doyle’s chest, and began playing, idly, with his left nipple.

“Your breath’s foul, first thing,” Doyle told him conversationally.

Bodie stretched, flexing skin against Doyle’s skin. “You’ll get used to it.”

“Reckon so.”

The first time Bodie had shown up at Doyle’s door at quarter past six, he’d stood in the doorway and grinned at his bleary-eyed, scowling partner, who was holding his pajama trousers up with one hand while he rubbed at his face with the other. “Brushed me teeth, Mum,” Bodie had said sunnily, and slipped past, into Doyle’s flat, while Doyle was still gaping at him.

It was that day, an hour later, when Doyle’s bed was a wreck and the pajamas wadded up in a corner of the floor where he had gleefully kicked them, that they’d talked it out. If they got caught, they were out of a job. “So,” said Bodie complacently, “we don’t get caught.”

Doyle was lying on top of him, looking down into the blue eyes and wry black eyebrows; Bodie’s hands were square and warm on his back. “You think we can pull that off?”

“I know I’m not giving this up.” The tone was light, but Bodie’s hands tightened on him, hard, and they were both silent, listening to what Bodie had said.

Then Bodie kissed him, lightly, and the moment passed. “Besides,” he added, “I figure it’ll give us an edge, on the job. The better we know each other, the better we’ll work together, right?”

Doyle snorted softly. “Planning to propose that to Macklin, are you? And before every major op, the whole of CI5 can get together for an enormous cluster-fuck...”

“Christ, you’re disgusting,” Bodie told him, laughing. “No, I mean it. Just another reason to watch your arse, sunshine.”

“Oh, well,” answered Doyle, deadpan. “I’m all in favor of that.”

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“We were coming down the road, you know, between the buildings. I was leading, with Brady behind me; 4.5 was flanking us on the left, up on the grass.” Bodie’s voice was tight, but steady. “We reckoned we’d outdistanced them for the moment, and we were trying to angle back toward the car.”

“You hadn’t thought to call for backup?”

“RTs couldn’t raise anyone, sir. Out of range.” Cowley scowled at that, but he couldn’t dispute it. He gestured, sharply, for Bodie to go on.

“There was a loading dock on the left, big wide driveway cut into the hillside up to the side of the building. He was in there, keeping low; we didn’t see him until it was too late. He’d already fired when 4.5 shot him.”

“And what in God’s name were you doing, strolling along in plain view like that, 3.7? You’re supposed to be one of my top teams, and you damned near painted a target on Brady’s forehead for them! I ought to suspend the pair of you for sheer idiocy—”

“Look, sir—” Bodie was almost yelling back—“we were in the middle of a running fight, we did the best we could, if you don’t like it then bloody fire us but at least we’re still alive!” His fists were clenched, and he didn’t look at Doyle once.

Doyle wanted to shift in the bed, ease his leg a little; but still more he didn’t want to do anything that would remind either of them that he was there. He didn’t want to remember it himself. He lay there, breathing shallowly, trying not to see anything but the cracked and grainy ceiling, and listened to Bodie lie.

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He’d been surprised, a little, by how much he loved making love with Bodie. Not just that he loved it; he’d known he would, months before he actually did it. But by how much he liked being fucked. Being sucked was always wonderful, Bodie’s mouth bigger than a woman’s, able to take more of him; and jerking each other off had a companionable, matey feel that sometimes almost made him smile, and sometimes it was the best way to watch each other’s faces, slowly, making it last. Fucking Bodie was okay, but—not that he didn’t love Bodie, but for that he’d rather have a woman. But when Bodie fucked him...

It wasn’t just the prostate, or whatever. Curious, he’d done a little surreptitious research in the gay sex rags, and gathered that there was something up there, where he’d never particularly wanted to go exploring, that helped make it good for the bloke on the bottom. Sometimes he was pretty sure he could feel Bodie hitting it, sliding over it as he slid into him. That was nice, but it wasn’t what sent him so far over the moon.

Bodie, whispering to him, urging him to his knees and fitting warm and hard against his thighs and his backside, pressing in and filling him, full and hot. Caught suspended between his own palms flat on the bed and Bodie’s hands guiding his hips, able to feel nothing but the slow, agonizingly erotic movement of Bodie’s cock into him, he would start to tremble, panting harshly, his cock arching, aching, trying to fuck the empty air. Head hanging, arse raised, he could feel every



one of Bodie's fingers pressing him open, every inch of Bodie's cock as it filled him, and withdrew, and gave itself to him again; and untouched anywhere else, anchored only by the strong strokes in his arse and the strong fingers holding him steady, arousal would spiral wildly, crazily up, until he was dizzy with it, until he scarcely knew where he was, except that he was with Bodie. Bodie was fucking him, and he was begging for release, for anchorage, shaking violently as he was fucked, harder, harder still, and then Bodie's hand was there, grabbing his cock, slick and hard and stripping him from tip to root until he screamed, and Bodie's other arm clamped around his chest and Bodie's weight was against his back and Doyle bucked and spasmed in the strong hot grasp of his lover's arms, coming and coming, Bodie grappling him tight and safe as he writhed, racked by the terror and the glory of it all.



They were pressed against the side of yet another warehouse, peeling paint catching at their jackets, inching leftward toward its front end. Doyle was in the lead, with Brady between him and Bodie; inadequate cover, but the best they could give him. They seemed to have shaken pursuit for the moment, and the front of this building faced the road; by Doyle's mental calculation they had managed to work their way back to fairly close to where they'd begun, and if they could get to their car, they had a hope of getting out of this. The tires might have been shot out, but it wasn't likely that the IRA had taken the time to destroy the radio, and it was far more powerful than their RTs. A yell for backup, and another twenty minutes of luck, and Cowley might just be able to save the cost of their wreaths. Doyle grimaced; that kind of joke was more to Bodie's taste than his. He wished for a moment he could tell it to his partner. Maybe later. Then there was a small sound, just enough to register on his adrenaline-hyped senses, from in front of the building. Gun in his left hand, grateful for his skill there, he waved Bodie and Brady to stillness with his right, and very carefully, barely breathing, crept forward, crouched to minimize the chance of being seen and squinted around the corner.

The road was there, some twenty or so feet from the square front end of the warehouse. The ground was higher here against the building than at the road, and a driveway leading to the building's loading dock cut into the artificial hillside perhaps fifteen feet from where Doyle crouched. It was wide enough for two lorries to be parked side by side, its retaining walls rising from only a few inches high where the driveway met the road

to ten feet or so against the side of the building, where wide steel gates were rusted shut.

And on the grassy near side of the driveway's cut, just by its edge, stood a young man in a gray cotton jacket and black trousers, face pale and slightly freckled, a 9mm semi-auto ready in his hand as he scanned the road in both directions. Looking for them. Doyle ducked back behind the building's corner as the IRA agent turned toward him, and met Bodie's watchful inquiry. Silently, Doyle held up one finger, then mimed with his hands the sunken loading dock and the gunman's position beside it.

Bodie pursed his lips for a moment. Doyle knew what he was thinking. They had to surprise the man, take him out before he saw them. The shot would certainly alert his mates, but at least the odds would be better with one of them down. And the loading dock would give them a little shelter, a little cover. They could catch their breath for a moment, figure out which way the car was, where to go next.

He'd shoot; he was the better shot, and he was in front already. He crouched down a little again, and switched the Browning to his right hand. Behind him he could hear Brady breathing rapidly, and beyond sound or sense he could feel Bodie, waiting, ready. A deep, calming breath, and he leaned around and shot the man dead in one smooth motion, the corpse jerking and toppling into the driveway, and Bodie was already running for its temporary shelter, dragging Brady by one arm, as Doyle leapt up and followed.

There was a heap of rubble against the near wall of the cut, stones and broken bricks and rubbish dumped and left, rising nearly as high as the retaining wall itself. He saw it just as Bodie, ahead of him, jumped down onto it and skidded downward toward the pavement. One arm outflung for balance, Doyle followed him, a small avalanche of scree under his feet. Bodie hit bottom and shoved Brady forward, turning himself to reach back and grab for Doyle's arm, and as Doyle reached for his partner's hand something turned the wrong way under his left foot and he choked on a sickening wet snap as agony vomited up from his ankle and he felt his knees collapse as he screamed.

When he came to himself he was sitting on the ground, back against the retaining wall. It took him a moment to realize that he was facing the pile of rubbish he had come down; somehow he had gotten across the width of the driveway without realizing it. His legs were straight out in front of him, both hands clamped tight around his left thigh, just above the knee. He didn't know where his gun was.



He didn't want to move his hands. He didn't want to move at all. There was a tearing, slavering beast crouched inside his ankle, eyes glinting up at him, and if he didn't move and didn't breathe and didn't disturb it in any way maybe it wouldn't rip at his bones again the way it had before.

Bodie crouched down in front of him, eyes stony. "Broken?"

Doyle tried to nod without moving his head. "Yeah." Quick, shallow breaths. "Shattered, feels like." More breaths. He felt sick. "Can't walk, no way."

Bodie straightened up, then, and glanced around. Doyle could see Brady, white-faced, and the corpse of the IRA agent face-up on the asphalt, arms awkwardly outflung. The driveway walls rose up on either side of them; not a moment of shelter, now, but a deathtrap.

If Bodie could drag him toward the road, where the walls were lower, he might be able to give them some cover, until they were out of sight. If he could find his gun, and if he didn't pass out when he tried to move. They didn't have long; Brady's ex-comrades would be homing in on the sound of the shot. And the scream. "Bodie—"

But Bodie wasn't looking at him. Bodie looked at Brady, and then out at the road. He went over to the corpse and holstered his gun, bent and picked up the dead man's 9mm. He turned to Brady, advancing on him, so that Brady, still not understanding, began backing away toward the road, and as Doyle shouted "Bodie!" Bodie shot him, once, in the stomach, so that he was thrown backward, staggering out of cover, and as Bodie took a step forward, lining up the gun again, a rifle shot cracked from somewhere not far at all and Brady spun and collapsed with the side of his head blown away.

Very slowly, still looking out into the road, Bodie lowered the gun. After a moment, he came back to where Doyle sat, and lowered himself to the ground beside his partner.

Doyle didn't say anything.

After perhaps five minutes, a car engine growled awake, and drove away.

Doyle didn't say anything. He didn't look at Bodie. He didn't want to know if Bodie was looking at him.

Half an hour later, Bodie pushed himself upright again. He shifted the borrowed gun to his left hand, drew his own, and walked out into the road.

Nothing happened. He glanced down at Brady's corpse, blood splattered and pooled around the head and stomach wounds. Then he turned and walked away, out of sight.

Twenty minutes later, the ambulance arrived. Doyle rode to hospital with two blanket-covered bodies on one side of him, and Bodie on the other. Nobody said anything.

Cowley glared at Bodie, waving him to silence. "Damned near incompetent, the pair of you. Do you realize you got Brady killed? *Before* he could report? Do you realize what you've done?"

"It wasn't our fault," Bodie said stubbornly. "We did the best we could. Not our fault if his own mates topped him."

"Under your noses, 3.7! Because you had the bloody nerve to take him walking in plain view down the street. A vital informant dead, and another agent sidelined for months—your partner!" Cowley glanced down at Doyle. "And you, 4.5? Can you do a better job of explaining this?"

"No, sir," said Doyle woodenly. Well, he couldn't.

"I hope you realize what you've done," Cowley said again, low and furious, to both of them. The door slammed hard behind him.

Doyle looked at the ceiling.

"I know what I did," said Bodie, harshly. "I'd do it again."

Doyle knew that. That was the problem.



A FAIR HEARING

lainie stone

WELSH ARRIVED

at Fraser's hospital room and, as he expected, Vecchio was there, sitting in a chair and dozing in the cat-way of on-call public servants.

"What happened?" Welsh whispered when Vecchio started awake.

Fraser was pale, lying unconscious and still in the bed.

"The usual. He got thrown off the car he tackled. I got the plate number—Elaine's running it," Vecchio replied, calm and resigned.

"Will he be all right?" Welsh drew up another chair. He worried about Big Red. He felt paternal toward the man and it had been a rough couple of years for him and Vecchio both.

"This time," Vecchio shrugged.

Welsh looked at his detective. He wasn't going to say anything. He'd promised himself that he wouldn't, but the need to voice his fears was becoming irresistible.

"Oh, I'd just say what was on your mind, sir," Vecchio's smile was wry. "It'll save you an ulcer."

And looking into Vecchio's eyes, he knew he didn't need to voice it—Vecchio knew the truth. But being human meant only saying the words would make them real. "He's, ah, not altogether with us, is he?" Welsh said in a whisper, half defying the gods to hear and make it so.

"He's nuts," Vecchio said flatly, "Almost always. Psycho. But he doesn't think so."

Welsh felt cold. "That's a little harsh, don't you think?"

"Or he's a cartoon. Take your pick." Vecchio shook his head. "The active refusal to admit to reality, the continual disregard for his own life—and mine—the obsessive-compulsive actions in the face of the demands of reality—how do you spell crazy?"

"You've been reading," Welsh said after a minute, filling the new, heavy silence.

"It's what the family does when a member is terminal. You read, you hope for something new, something different. You become the expert on your version of Hell."

"He's not dead."

"He will be." Vecchio leaned back in his chair and shut his eyes. "Better if he goes first. Without me he wouldn't live a week and God knows what he'd do with a full blown psychotic episode—probably decide to let the polar bears loose from Lincoln Park or take on a gang war single-handed."

Welsh swallowed. "You think so?"

"You don't?"

Welsh couldn't answer with a negative.

"I'm...I'm his partner," Vecchio murmured, almost to himself. "I'm his anchor. I yell at him and rag him and joke with him to remind what little bit of him is still sane that this fantasy he's living isn't real. But the sanity is getting smaller." His eyes opened and met Welsh's. "He was sane when he had amnesia. Completely, absolutely, everyday sane. I didn't like him much then."

There was a chill in the air, or in Welsh's guts. "You want to keep him as he is." Condemnation, he could hear it in his own voice.

Vecchio nodded. "Oh yeah. Say, just hypothetically, we convinced him he was nuts and we got him to a shrink. Say he worked until he lost the fantasy, until Reality slapped him upside the head—do you think he'd be all better?" He made a motion with one hand, a sharp, bitter gesture. "He'd kill himself. At least this way he'll be happy when he goes. And, yeah, I like his fantasy too. Everybody is basically good, the world is clean, he makes a difference—I'd like to feel like I make a difference for once. I'd like to believe people aren't shits and the world isn't a cesspool. I'd like that. I can't have it but I sure don't mind him having it."

Welsh considered this. It really made a kind of terrifying sense. He looked critically at Vecchio and noticed the other man, with two years of an inordinate amount of personal pain etched into his face, the two years of knowing his best friend was insane, had developed under the habitual griping a curiously resigned

calmness, a still waiting, and there was dumb sorrow in the expressive hazel eyes.

It was the look of the accepting dying, the peace that came with lack of hope. It was an ascetic face. Even his clothing had changed over the years, darkening into severity.

Welsh wished he hadn't seen it. He wished he'd never thought about Fraser and work or, now, Fraser and Vecchio. He neither needed nor wanted the truths found in this hospital room. "What will you do?"

Vecchio shrugged, "I'll go on. Suicide's a sin and I'm still Catholic. I dunno. When Ma goes... when she goes maybe I'll do something else. Whatever, it'll be anticlimactic, you know what I mean?"

Yes, life would be dull without Fraser. And Welsh could easily see Vecchio living the life of a widower, sad and moving brokenhearted through the motions until God took pity.

All that love lavished on someone whose internal visions kept recognition away. Fraser would never feel, at the gut level, the depths of his partner's love. That emotion would only be a concept to fit into the ideal of the perfect Mountie and his perfect partner. And Vecchio's deep feeling would be forever unrequited because the perfect Mountie and his perfect partner could only have the perfect, platonic friendship—manly and pure in the fashion of old legends.

Welsh wasn't in the habit of wishing homosexual affairs on anyone but he found himself wishing—praying—for Fraser to awaken to reality, just a little while, to know what he was offered. Welsh blushed at his own thoughts. He stood with deep discomfort. "Vecchio," he said quietly, "You're a good cop. Don't let yourself get killed. You do make a difference in this cesspool. Come to me if you need anything."

Vecchio's shadowed gaze met Welsh's. "Thanks," he said, simply.

Welsh moved to the door and his last glance back showed him Vecchio dozing again, his long, olive-skinned fingers laced through Fraser's pale ones.

"What can you do against the lunatic who is more intelligent than yourself, who gives your arguments a fair hearing and then simply persists in his lunacy?"

—George Orwell, 1984.

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

an infant schoolchild in brandnew uniform, room for growth which was not now going to be needed: horribly affecting, haunting.

Doyle, who had been first to the bodies, winced as he ran and made a silent promise: gonna get you, scum. Four men down. Cowley was going to be mad. He and Bodie on overtime for weeks. Your number's up, mate. Beg for mercy: be my guest. The thought lifted him and he fairly flew up the last flight of stairs.

The last room. No sign of Bodie, checking out the other route. Doyle hesitated for no more than a second: drew up his gun in both hands, and drove a huge kick into the door. It flew open with a bang.

Instantly Doyle was diving to one side, dropping to one knee, gun high and steady—

Only to let it fall slackly, with a sigh. Bodie, a familiar sight in brown leather jacket, was rising to his feet, giving him a clap, surveying this performance with a glint of humour. "Took your time, didn't you?"

Adrenalin flooding through him, fear and effort and arousal. His heart was kicking violently as he rose to his feet, grumbling, "Broke a record getting up those stairs, mate. I suppose you took the lift?"

"Damn right," Bodie agreed. "Trouble with you, Doyle, you like to do things the hard way. Get a kick out of it, do you?"

"I get a kick out of a lot of things," Doyle said shortly. "Running up the bloody stairs is not one of them." Cream shirt fresh, black trousers with knife-edge creases, Bodie was looking pretty damn pleased with himself, as well he might. Their murderer was sitting right here in the room with them in a chair: possibly not of his own volition, since he seemed to be tied to it at ankle and wrist. A piece of sticky tape affixed across his mouth accounted for his relative silence, though what sounds did emerge were not indicative of serenity.

Doyle made a slow motion gesture of turning. "Don't need me, do you mate? I dunno why you don't work solo, it's a waste, innit?" He spoke sarcastically, shoving his Browning down the front of his white jeans.

Dark brows quirked, Bodie watched him with amusement. "Livin' dangerously, yeah?"

"You know me," Doyle remarked, "No thrill too small." He wandered over to the captive, saw into the angry, violent eyes, no remorse there, only fury at the loss of freedom. "Pleased with yourself?" Doyle asked of him rhetorically, anger building anew in him—etched in his mind was the woman, sprawled on the road, badged here and there with red; christ, how Bodie had had to swerve to avoid the body, his neck still ached with whiplash. Now he looked down into the killer's eyes

with great care and attention: "Caused a lot of trouble, you 'ave, 'aven't you?" and his voice was quite soft, quite tender.

"Oh, come on Doyle, be fair," Bodie objected, eyes heavenward, "Anyone can have an off day."

Doyle counted them off on his fingers: "Three more widows out there now, all wanting their pension—'s a drain on the nation, innit? Four mates of mine stretched out with an extra hole or two more than they had this morning. The orphaned kiddie. Wonder if he's still shriekin' for 'is mum? —was when I left. Oh, and the mother whose eyes I 'ad to cover back there in case she saw the mess you made with her kid's brains: very pretty, if you like that sort of thing."

"All part of the plan, was it?" Bodie asked, moving in on him, suddenly hard, threatening, eyes as chill as morning frost.

"Did you get off on it?" Doyle said to the man in the chair, gentle, uninflected: and then he smiled, just a little movement of his facial muscles, could almost be a tic. Without turning his head he said softly, "And Bodie didn't kill you when he had the chance. Now, I call that real self-control."

Saintly, Bodie shook his head. "I waited for you, Doyle," he said, soft and sweet and low.

"He waited for me because—it's more fun together," Doyle said, still gentle as a lover, without lifting his eyes from the man's face, and there it was, what he had been waiting for: the first sign of fear. Only a quick sharp spark in his eyes, but it was there; and Doyle got a rush from it, the first, a warmth inside him beginning to spread—

Had your fun. Now you pay for it.

"Well, and here we all are," Doyle said, amiably, squatting on his haunches, "And what are we gonna do with you? Got any idea?"

Now their victim twigged it. It was real: he was going to die. There really wasn't going to be a way out. This horrible understanding flashed up starkly in his eyes again, and seeing it, Doyle smiled, quick, feral.

Well. You think death's the worst thing there could be, do you?

He asked, serene, lucid: "You getting off on this too, sunshine? Or isn't it quite so good for you this way around?"

"Shoot to kill, didn't the Cow say?" Bodie murmured, softly, clearly, feet planted squarely apart.

"Yeah, but then Cowley always was too forgiving." Doyle's head was down, he withdrew the gun from his waistband, began to stroke the warm barrel off with his fingertips, obsessive; Doyle liked his weapons clean.

Then he reached out to slip loose the ties on the man's ankles. Bodie watched him indulgently, ankles crossed, gun resting negligently on his folded arms.

Another tie came loose, worked on by Doyle's lean strong fingers. Doyle wasn't in any hurry. The man's eyes darted about this way and that. You could see the confusion, the doubt: what the hell are they up to?

And then he was free: "Gonna run?" Doyle asked him, almost smiling, head cocked to one side.

Well, you would have to try for it. You could see how the choice would look—any chance, you would reason, was better than no chance.

Just an illusion, mind you, that there was any chance at all.

In the blink of an eye he was up from the chair, making a last, desperate bid for his life. And just for a moment it looked as if he might make it: freedom was there, just on the other side of the door, just out of reach of his clawing hand—

Almost casually, Bodie unpropped his gun and raised it to shoot.

In that one split second he glanced at Doyle, read the inclination mirrored there, bright and clear and twisted as his own.

The barrel dropped down. He aimed the shot low.

▼ So there they were, alone together with the creature they had made. Bodie crossed his arms, leaned back against the desk behind him. Doyle turned his head, smiled at him peacefully. He smiled back. There was no need to say anything. It was a curiously intimate moment, private for the two of them, special. Very special indeed: reserved for initiates of a very particular taste.

The writhings of the man on the floor had taken him quite half across the room, an involuntary lashing, like a broken snake on the road. Arms folded, watching with a desultory eye, Doyle withdrew the toe of his leather boot; blood was hard to remove from clothing, though it washed off naked skin easily enough. Together they waited; there was no hurry. And eventually the man's desperate movements ceased, the first driving agony dealt with by the brain so that thought could return and bid again for survival, and you could see, there in the bloodshot eyes, the black spiral of despair; anyone would feel it, alone in a room nursed by two men without limits. Their victim began to moan, a long loud animal noise. Doyle's eyes, lushly closed, flicked wide open.

Bodie kicked something aside and looked down dispassionately. "Put a sock in it sunshine, or you'll get another one." And when the noise did not abate, knelt

down swiftly, savagely. "I said, turn down the volume, cunt, or we'll have to think of something else to do to you."

"Don't tempt us," Doyle said, breathing fast, looking down. And Bodie swooped in to whisper:

"Ever been gutshot, sunshine?"

"Now that always looks to me like it really hurts."

"Takes a while to die."

"Bullet up the back passage—? Keeps it nice and tidy."

"Get an exit hole about—here—" He gently placed his hand on the spot, rubbed it with his palm "—if you get the angle of entry right, of course."

Doyle leaned in, curious, intense, eyes dwelling here and there: "Tell me something. Did it make you come when you watched 'em all die—?"

"Did you know what a charge it was gonna give you? Or did it take you by surprise?"

Doyle was struck by a sudden thought, snapping his fingers: "Hey Bodie, we should've brought the video. Good market for snuff movies these days, int there?"

They loomed in on him where he cringed on the floor, looking at him, interested, delighted, as if he were a new growth in a tube. Nightblue devil's eyes gleaming, narrowed as if looking through a visor, mirth and malevolence. And his accomplice, stone-eyed, alert, breathing fast with the kick of it all, on a roll. This excited them. It was their kind of fun.

With enormous effort, the last and greatest he would ever make, the man's sobs melted into a harrowing wheeze as he found the strength from somewhere to plead for his life and Bodie ripped the tape off his mouth to hear it: "I've got money—"

"Money, eh?" Bodie remarked, unmoved, chucking the wrinkled bit of tape behind him. "Nice... but I'm afraid our boss isn't too keen on undeclared income, int that right, Doyle?"

Doyle was shaking his head and tutting. "Do we look corruptible? Got anything else on offer?" he added, for the hell of it.

"Women... I could fix you up, easy—" One look at the two of them, brutish, solid, unmovable, made him change the angle, to plead instead: "I've got a kid at home—"

"Kid, eh? Don't reckon he's much cop as a dad though, do you, Doyle? Poor little bugger's probably better off without you, mate. Mum'll soon get in a replacement," Bodie comforted, and dug Doyle in the ribs. "Oi. What you snorting about?"

Doyle was chuckling, head shaking from side to side. "For a minute there I got the wrong end of the stick—thought he was offering us a kid instead of the women—!"

Fiends at play. You could see from his eyes that he had begun to understand, just whose hands he had fallen into; abandoning hope and speech together he began to moan again, blood running from the shattered knee through vainly clutching fingers.

Doyle was looking at the window, attention caught by something he had seen there, a small sandy man in a beige raincoat, coming this way fast—

“Cowley.”

Suddenly all business Bodie spun his gun in automatic reflex, knelt down by the man’s side.

“We’ve got to go now. But thank you for having us.” The mouth of the gun, still warm, just touched the clammy skin, then settled in there, ready, rocksteady.

Doyle came to stand nearby looking down, playtime over, absolutely cold: “That’s it, mate: this is where it all ends for you.”

“Unless there’s a hell, anyway,” Bodie said, and let that get home, sick horror twisting blackly in their victim’s eyes, before he shot him in the head.

▼ Cowley took one look, then turned away in distaste. “Made a mess of him, didn’t you?”

“Sorry, sir.” Following their boss cheerfully on light feet down the stairs, Bodie got out a tube of Polos from his pocket, tore back the wrapper and offered them to Doyle, pushing the top one up with his thumbnail. “He moved the wrong way.”

“Made a break for it,” was Doyle’s offering, taking the mint. “Ta.”

“Well, so long as you stopped him: that was quite some spree. Four men down! Extra shifts for you two, and you’ll not be the only ones.”

Doyle took a close look at Bodie’s hand. “Blood all over

you,” he noted *sotto voce* as he tossed the mint into his mouth and stuck the point of his tongue through the hole.

“So long as it’s not mine.” Bodie bowed to him elaborately: “Or yours.” Cowley was moving at quite a lick for an old man or they would have stopped. Hurrying along, Bodie tossed a sideways glance at his partner. And Doyle looked back at him, eyes bright, curious, excited: for a moment they were alone again, back there together in some private place far, far away from the world.

“Wanna come round to my place tonight?” Bodie said, and gulped down the last of his sweet.

“Yeah, okay.”

“I gotta video we can watch.”

“Something educational, I hope, Bodie?” Cowley rapped back at them.

Bodie smiled at Doyle as he answered Cowley: “Only type there is, isn’t it, Sir?”

Cowley turned around to look at them—cheeky, irrepressible pair! Doyle was leaning artistically on the roof of the car while Bodie, clowning around as usual, knelt to him, Doyle a paper king, knighting the top of Bodie’s bowed dark head with one swipe of his sword.

Cowley let the pride swell: they had not let him or the nation down; they had done their duty, just as he had known and trusted that they would. It had been the dirtiest sort of job, the sort of job no-one should have to do. But these two were strong enough. No shadows on their souls to bring them nightmares: they could handle it. Cowley settled back in his seat for the ride back to HQ, making himself comfortable as Bodie took the wheel and swung the car off into the road.

Good men. His best.

—Sebastian June, 1996





the best track record, but I do know the score. Be glad to help. Who is it?"

"I don't know her name."

"A mystery woman? Whoa, Bennie! You want me to help you track her down? How'd you meet?"

"We haven't exactly met. It's rather strange."

"With you around, I'm getting to be an expert on strange."

Fraser ignored that. "She appears to be following me. And, well, exposing herself to me."

"What?"

"Well, she opens her coat, and she's not wearing anything underneath. It's quite embarrassing." Fraser ducked his head, thumb rubbing at his eyebrow.

Ray leaned back in his chair. "How come I never had that problem?"

"Well, if you can't help, Ray, I quite understand..."

"Facetious, Bennie, I was being facetious. So, that was her on the roof across the street?"

"Three nights this week."

"Bennie, it is a crime, you know."

"Illinois Criminal Code, title 3, section 11-9."

"Ah, yeah. So why don't I arrest her and you can meet her when you file a complaint?"

"I don't think that's necessary. She's not hurting anyone. I'm certain she's just misguided. I've tried to catch up to her to explain that I find this embarrassing and that she should seek professional guidance, but I've only been able to track her to her car. She's driven away in a different direction each time."

Munching on another bite, Ray asked, "Description?"

"She wears a dark baggy hat that hides her hair. Her overcoat looks like brown tweed. She's about 165 centimeters..."

"American, Bennie, speak American."

"Sorry. Five foot seven, one hundred twenty pounds, and, ah, well-endowed."

"Not just a flasher, but a stacked flasher," Ray crowed. "Oh, Fraser, what are you doing to the women of Chicago?"

Fraser looked disconcerted. "You think I'm responsible for this poor woman's actions?"

Smiling, Ray reached around the pizza box and patted Fraser's arm. Poor guy really couldn't handle the situation. "No, Bennie, she's just a nut. I expect if you ignore her she'll give it up soon enough. She's just doing it to get a rise outta you."

"But Ray, it really is quite embarrassing. I just wish I could discourage her somehow without having her arrested."

Dief gave a small bark.

Ray said, "No seconds till I've had mine."

Fraser looked up, a hunted expression crossing his face. "She's back."

Ray glanced at the wolf, and sure enough Dief was looking toward the bedroom window, ears perked.

Ray contemplated Bennie, a devious plan presenting itself. "Okay. You want my help?"

"Yes, Ray. I would appreciate any assistance you can give."

"Fine. I got just the thing to discourage her, but you gotta promise me a couple things. You never tell a soul. And you don't hit me. Promise?" He kept his face straight.

"On my word of honour, Ray. You won't arrest her?"

"No arresting." Ray got up from his chair, staying out of the line of sight, and began giving stage directions. "Walk over to the window. Casually, you don't know she's there. Stop right there and turn facing left."

Bennie managed a fake casualness that would have done the lead in a high school play proud. Ray sighed and hoped the unknown woman was not an experienced theater-goer.

Biting back a smile, Ray repeated, "Remember, no hitting,"

walked over, grabbed Bennie in a flamboyant hug, pressed his body tightly against Fraser's, pressed his lips to Fraser's cheek, and, turning so that the watcher couldn't miss it, ran a hand tenderly downward and grabbed Fraser's butt. Which was quite nice, Ray noticed.

Ray felt the man tense in his arms, shudder, then go still. Ray released the kiss, turned his head into Fraser's neck and nuzzled him while he tried to see the woman. Bennie smelled clean, with a faint scent of shampoo, and a stray bit of hair tickled Ray's nose. He blew it away. "Thank God you didn't deck me. Play along with me here, Bennie. Hug me back." Body tense, Fraser complied, his arms slowly and awkwardly embracing Ray. "Give her another couple minutes and she'll be totally convinced you do not ever even think about naked women, much less look at... Got her! I see her. Damn it, her coat's on. Keep playing."

He cuddled Fraser convincingly, keeping one eye on the woman while he ran his hands up and down Bennie's back. "Umm," he murmured when Fraser pressed him closer, and muttered, "sorry" when the man twitched violently as Ray stroked Bennie's butt again. He angled his head for a better view, kissing Fraser's ear to cover the move. She was still there, all right. "Turn a little this way, wanna make sure she sees I'm a guy." He tugged at Bennie.



As he turned, one thing became obvious. Shifting his stance confirmed something he'd not absorbed—that was not Fraser's bunched up leg muscle he was in contact with, that was Fraser's dick he was feeling pressed against his leg. The guy was hard as a rock. At the same time, he saw the dark blur of the woman's figure as she ran away across the roof.

Ray dropped the embrace, stepping back. "What was that?"

"What?"

"That, what was that, Bennie?"

"I'm sorry, Ray," Fraser said, turning away. In the indirect light he looked more upset than Ray could ever remember seeing him.

Then Ray realized what must have happened, the only thing it could have been, and gave himself a mental shake. "Hey, buddy, I'm sorry. She really got you strung out, and then I hadda go and grab you like that." Filled with remorse—what a thing to do to the guy—he offered the only expiation he could think of at the moment. "Hey, come on. I'll make it up to you, okay? Just like in high school." He really just wanted to help Bennie. Really.

"What?" Fraser sounded confused and still upset.

"Oh, come on, you can't tell me Canadians don't do this. Boys will be boys, right? Even in Canada." A little bluster to cover any embarrassment.

And determined to apologize for making the problem worse, Ray pushed Fraser two steps back to the bed, sat him down, undid his jeans, and reached for Bennie's cock. Bennie responded violently to his handling, flailing against him on the bed. Muttering, "Shh, it's okay," Ray avoided the fumbling hands attempting to fend him off and leaned his weight against Bennie's legs to hold him in place. Determinedly concentrating on his justifications he was able to ignore the beginning of his own response as he held Bennie's aroused penis, stroking and rubbing efficiently, not letting himself get into any inappropriate enjoyment. It didn't take long, just like in high school. Fraser stopped struggling, lay still, and then came, without a moan or even a whimper. Feeling the spurts of warm fluid filling his palm, Ray shivered.

Bennie lay back, gasping, and stared at Ray, eyes huge in the dim light.

Ray just looked back, hand still on the warm flesh of Bennie's dick. The room seemed very quiet. Then Ray pulled himself together, reaching left-handed for his handkerchief, and looking away from Bennie while he wiped his hand clean.

When he looked up from his task, Fraser was still

staring at him, shock mixed with some expression Ray couldn't identify.

Ray stood up hurriedly. "Oh cummon. You already promised not to tell, right? And I made it worse for you. Besides," he added flippantly, "if she came back and saw that she'll be absolutely convinced she ain't got a chance with you."

Bennie nodded, then sat up awkwardly because of the loosened jeans. "Thanks."

Still trying to regain his usual casual tone, Ray replied, "Sure. No biggie. If I ever need a favor I know I can ask you." He stepped away to give the guy a chance to pull himself together.

"Of course." Bennie stood up, staying out of the line of sight to the windows, and quickly fastened his jeans. He seemed to have recovered his composure, only his breathing, still fast, giving a clue to what had transpired. That, and the fact he was carefully not looking at Ray.

"And, Bennie?"

"Yes, Ray?"

"Tomorrow we'll put up some curtains, just in case."

When they went into the kitchen, they found Dief finishing the second pizza.

▼ On his way home soon after, Ray quirked an amused grin at the evening. What he had done, jeez, what a laugh. He must have been crazy. It had been a little strange there for a minute and he'd had a qualm or two afterward, but Fraser had seemed to be willing to treat the whole incident and aftermath the way it should be, as if it never happened. No need to worry. No need to think about it at all. Really. It might have been nuts, but, hey, he'd been pretty strung out lately.

Crazy, yeah. "And I didn't even get to see Bennie's flasher!" Ray announced to the quiet streets.

Stopped at a light, he stretched, hearing his shoulder pop. God, he was tired. He'd been staying out way too many nights, but he just couldn't take sitting at home with Franny behaving the way she had been recently. He was just gonna have to do something about his baby sister, either that or move out of his own house. He pulled into the curb. Damn, the lights were still on downstairs.

He walked in and faced the usual chorus. Ma wondering what he'd had for dinner, did he need a little something. Franny glaring, unspoken accusations hovering about brothers who didn't bring Mounties home for their sisters. He fled to take a shower.

What was he gonna do about his home life? He sure as hell wasn't gonna end up spending every evening in the pool hall like his old man, but hiding out at Bennie's



every night wasn't fair to his friend. Mind churning through the usual paths—why weren't arranged marriages still allowed?—he stared out the window at the yellow-tinted night sky until he finally fell asleep. He didn't think about Bennie. Well, not much.

▼ Five weeks later, Ray was having trouble remembering his desperation. He found himself humming as he climbed the steps to the precinct. Damn. Things were going so well, it was scary. The squad-room was cheerful in the wake of the success of their biggest case in years—the capture of the perps that had bombed two university faculty offices. Fraser had given them invaluable help by recognizing the colonial connection.

And things at home were great, just great. Franny was out of his hair for the first time in years. She had met a new guy a month ago, and miracle of miracles, Ray and Mama Vecchio both approved of him. Cam Czerwinski had bought old Mr. Ferraro's neighborhood plumbing business and the sudden demise of the Vecchio washing machine had instigated the fateful meeting. One look at Cam's muscles straining the shoulders of his spotless overalls as he man-handled the new washer into position, his blond hair and bright blue eyes—Ma thought he looked like Robert Redford, Franny thought he looked like heaven—and Franny was lost. Ma invited him to dinner that very night and when Ray had come home, late as usual, he found the whole family so entranced that for the first time in weeks no one berated him for not bringing Bennie home with him. Happily, in light of her new interest Franny had finally let her hopeless pursuit of the hapless Mountie drop completely.

Ray was cautious, waiting her out. Would she find some horrible flaw and dump the plumber? After meeting her family would Cam dump Franny? Weeks went by and Franny was still happy. Friday and Saturday nights were quiet because Franny was out dancing with Cam or going to the movies with Cam. Cautiously, Ray started coming home for dinner again. Then she started helping out in Cam's shop a couple afternoons a week. Ray started getting enough sleep.

Last night Ray had finally taken a chance and invited Bennie over for dinner, telling him Francesca had a new beau and there would be no repeat of the unfortunate incident with the ice cream. Ray would guarantee that Bennie would be perfectly safe because Franny was out with Cam for the evening.

Ma had been thrilled, fluttering around Fraser, glad to see him for the first time in nearly two months and happy to feed him. It was a quiet evening, Maria and Tony and the kids at his parents for the week. After

dinner, Bennie and Ray talked about work while Ma watched television. But when Bennie excused himself, Ma motioned Ray over to her chair.

"Raymondo, is he all right? He's not pining over something?"

"Pining? Ma, what are you talking about?"

"You listen to your mother, I know what I'm talking about. There is something wrong between you?"

"No, Ma, I swear it."

"Well, then, you find out the problem, Mr. Detective. That's what friends are for."

"Okay, Ma."

Later on he and Bennie took Dief out for a walk, and Ray tried to check out Fraser, but he couldn't see any difference in the man's behavior. And within minutes Bennie had asked him what he was looking at. Ma must be imagining things. It had been business as usual lately, as far as he could tell.

When they returned to the house, Franny and Cam were back, and the two men were pounced on and babbled at as soon as they walked in. Ray gave up trying to make sense of the overlapping voices and yelled "Shut up!" Into the brief silence he asked, "Franny, what?"

"Ray, we're engaged!"

Ray looked from his beaming sister to the smiling plumber. "Cam, you sure you know what you're doing?" Franny, predictably, hit him. "See what I mean?"

"As long as I have your permission, Mr. Vecchio, sir." Cam joked back, and then everyone was being hugged and kissed and cried on all over the front hall. When he saw Franny hug Fraser with no more to it than if he was another brother, Ray felt a profound sense of relief. It wasn't just that he was happy for Franny and glad that she'd be out of his hair, it was a feeling that things were really starting to work out all around. This was how things were supposed to be. He hugged Cam, slapped him on the back. Ma cried harder, and hugged Franny. Ray hugged Fraser, feeling him stiffen in his brief grasp. Gotta work harder to turn this boy into an Italian, he thought, then hugged his sister.

"Why are we standing out here? Cummon. Franny, you go call Maria, tell her and Tony and the kids. Ma, you get the glasses, I'll get the wine. We gotta have a toast."

Half an hour later, Ray looked over from where Cam was, totally unnecessarily, telling him all about the plans he had for his business, and how he'd never met anyone as wonderful as Ray's sister, and that Ray would never have to worry about her comfort or happiness, and checked on Bennie.



Fraser was sitting next to Ma, politely holding the wine glass from which he'd taken only one token sip for the toast, listening quietly to Franny and Ma talk about the wedding. Franny wanted to have it as soon as possible, Ma wanted to plan for at least three months. Bennie looked tired. He met Ray's glance, but did not return Ray's grin.

Ray got up, saying, "Ma, you two can do that tomorrow. Let's let the lovebirds have some privacy. I'll run Bennie home." Ma looked at the clock, exclaiming at the hour, and after more hugs all around, she went to bed, and Ray and Bennie left.

They were silent on the drive home. After five minutes, Ray ventured, "You okay, Bennie?"

"Yes, Ray."

"You looked... tired. Or sad, or something." He remembered what Ma had said earlier. Maybe she was right after all. "You'd tell me if I could help, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, Ray."

"Ah."

Silence returned.

"So what's the problem?"

Fraser gave a little twitch of a smile. "I was just envying you your family, Ray."

"Up until tonight, I woulda said you were nuts, but tonight —yeah, okay." God, it was great not to be fretting over Franny. He felt as if the whole situation had been gnawing at him, taking up his life, cutting into his sleep, cutting into what passed for his personal life. "Hey, I know I haven't had you over much lately, it was just after the last time... You think he's okay, Fraser?"

"Mr. Czerwinski seems a fine man, Ray. I'm sure they'll be happy."

"Just gotta be better than the last one, Franny deserves the best. Neither of us had much luck... Aw, Cam's a great guy, she'll be fine."

"You both deserve the best, Ray," Fraser replied with unwonted intensity. "Your whole family does."

A little startled, Ray recovered and said, "Yeah, right."

So here he was, going to work happy. It felt strange, but he thought he could get used to it. He hummed louder, bouncing a little as he went up the steps to the squad room.

Elaine stopped him in the hall. "Franny called me and told me the news. You like this guy, Ray?"

"Yeah, Elaine, I do."

She looked at him, then went on, lowering her voice. "You don't think she just went for him when she couldn't get Fraser?"

"A rebound thing? Nah, I think she'd given up on Fraser before she met Cam."

"Hmm." Elaine looked distant. "Oh, the lieutenant wants you."

"Thanks, Elaine." Ray said with all of Bennie's sincerity, and walked on smiling, so certain of the rightness of the world that he knew it couldn't be bad news.

Welsh told him to collect Fraser at two tomorrow and show up at the Dean's office at the University for a special thank-you from the grateful administration. Ray envisioned an honorary degree, but the following afternoon consisted of a short speech, a matched set of calligraphed parchment commendations emblazoned with the University seal and totally unreadable due to the curlicues, then a surprisingly enjoyable tea with four of the surviving professors from the bombed office building. Two of them were philosophy faculty, and Ray soon decided they could just talk to each other; he couldn't figure out what they were talking about at all. The third wrote mystery novels on the side and she pumped Ray for details of forensics and police procedure. Fraser was of course able to hold his own with an anthropologist on the legends and beliefs of the Inuit.

Still making promises, Ray and Bennie left, walking through a stream of students toward the parking structure. When they reached the Riviera, Ray made a decision.

"They don't expect us back any particular time. Let's play hooky."

"Hooky?"

"Nothin' like hockey, Bennie. Let's blow off work. It's only another hour." Oh, this was stupid. Fraser play hooky? "I know, I know, it wouldn't be right... forget it. I'll take you back."

"Actually, I'm signed out for the day."

"Great!"

They walked slowly back across the quad, enjoying the rare fall sunshine. Winter would be here soon enough.

Ray looked at Fraser, striding along next to him, quiet and a little somber. Ma was right, he decided, something was wrong. Bennie just put so little expression into anything that it was hard to tell what was going on with him. Ray headed for a deserted bench on the sunny side of a clump of trees, branches not yet stripped completely bare.

They sat, side by side, watching the ebb and flow of the campus.

"Bennie, I do want to know what's wrong."

"Wrong, Ray?"



"Even Ma noticed. Tell me, Bennie."

"No."

Ray turned to stare at his companion. "No? Bennie, you're telling me 'no'?"

"Yes."

"Why, I oughta... okay."

▼ So Ray spent the next few days making sure that Bennie noticed he was sulking, and being careful that Ma didn't. It didn't work. Breakfast-time on Wednesday and Ma was onto him.

She poured more coffee for both of them, then sat across from him, hands wrapped around her mug. "Raymondo, I was right, there is something wrong between you and Bennie, isn't there? I see you together and there is trouble."

"Yeah, Ma, I asked him to talk to me and he wouldn't."

"That's how you try to help? Oh, caro."

"Well, Ma, I can't exactly get him drunk and hope he talks, can I? He's a grown man, he can handle his own problems. And if not, he knows where to find me."

Ma buttered more toast, dropping it onto Ray's plate with unnecessary force. "I will just have to talk to him myself."

"No, Ma!" The vision of Bennie embarrassed but polite, trying to deal with God knows what kind of personal questions from a woman whose persistence he had years of experience with came forcefully to his mind. "Let me try some more, okay?"

"All right, you try. He is your friend and he loves you, so he will tell you. You must give him a reason that can not be denied."

"Yes, Ma. Gotta run." Kissing her cheek, Ray left, carrying an extra piece of toast for the drive.

All the way into work, he thought about Bennie. The man was the same, yet he wasn't. He was always quiet, but he was quiet in a different way. He wasn't behaving any differently, yet he was.

Ray ran over the last week in his mind, reviewing their times together. Nothing. He just couldn't put his finger on it.

In the squad room, Walters and Bennett were joking around, describing their successful arrest the day before. Bennett slapped Walters on the shoulder, flailed around and clipped the cup of coffee Ray was drinking with his broad gesture. Tepid liquid lurched over the rim onto his lapel. Shoving Bennett aside with a pithy comment, Ray stomped off to the john to mop off the damp stain.

Dropping another handful of wet paper towels on the floor, Ray checked himself in the mirror. It would do.

Juvenile bastards, why'd they always have to do that locker room slapping and pounding? "Grow up," he growled at the mirror, taking another rub at his jacket. Half the teams in the place were the same way together. Some kinda dumb partner thing that he was...

Wait a fuckin' minute.

"He doesn't touch me anymore," he whispered to the mirror, then panicked, hearing himself. If anybody heard that, it'd be all over the station. People laughing at him. He bent down and scanned under the stall doors. Empty. Thank God.

He went into one stall and sat, it being closer than the supply closet for private thinking. It was too obvious, now that he'd hit it. Fraser didn't touch anyone a lot, but he did touch Ray from time to time, none of Bennett's exuberant hugs or thumps or punches more suited to a sports arena, but just a hand on the shoulder or arm from time to time. Ray couldn't remember a single touch in at least two weeks, maybe more.

That means it's my fault.

And he was afraid he knew exactly what he'd done wrong.

The rest of the day passed quickly only when he was working with somebody, checking out leads, talking to witnesses. Left with paperwork, his mind wandered at once off work and onto the problem of his own crime.

A hand touched his arm, and he started. "Uh, Elaine..."

"Are you all right? I've got the license numbers you wanted."

"Thanks, Elaine."

She lingered, despite his show of leafing through the print-out. "Can I get you something? Aspirin?"

Her face was uncharacteristically soft, sympathetic.

"No, that's okay. Uh, I just got somethin' on my mind."

"Okay. Let me know if I can help." She patted his arm again briefly, and he smiled at her, surprised but grateful.

He forced himself to keep his thoughts on the print-out, and spent the rest of the afternoon checking out the most likely numbers with no luck. By the evening he was restless, annoyed, and frustrated. The knowledge that Fraser hadn't confronted him was tipping him over into anger.

He picked up Bennie and Dief from the Consulate, and drove them home. Bennie was quiet, giving no sign that he noticed Ray's dubious mood any more than he'd noticed the sulking. He did not point out the traffic violation when Ray made an incomplete stop.

Simmering, Ray followed them up the stairs.

Bennie proceeded through his normal routine,



refilling Dief's water bowl, placing his hat on its stretcher, hanging up his tunic. Ray paced, waiting to be asked what was wrong. Nothing. Ray's temper frayed further. Damn it! He'd tried talking about it, he'd tried not talking about it. What the hell else was he supposed to do? Why did Fraser have to always be so annoying? He couldn't stand it. Ray whirled, pushed Fraser one step back against the wall, and demanded, "Bennie, what the hell is wrong?"

Then he heard Dief's growl, and dropped his hands from Fraser's chest. He stood very still.

Fraser didn't move, but he said, past Ray's shoulder, "It's all right, Diefenbaker."

Ray took a shaky breath, then said, "I'm sorry. Think I'd know better than to push a guy with a wolf." He turned slowly and looked Dief in the face, carefully enunciating "I'm sorry."

Then he put out a careful, slow hand and touched Bennie's arm. Backing off from his anger, he said, "I did something, I know. Talk to me."

He stared at Fraser, who looked bothered. "Ray, I'm sorry. It's not your fault. It's me."

"But I did something."

"Yes."

"What?"

"Well, um."

"What? Cummon, Bennie, what? What did I do?"

"Ray..."

Still hoping it wasn't what he feared, he put forward the only other explanation. Maybe, just maybe, this was all it was. "You think I was cutting you out." Ray stepped back, paced. "Look, I explained. I wasn't not inviting you over because of not wanting you. It was because of Franny. When she did that with the ice cream... I just couldn't have you subjected to that kinda thing in my own house. But it's okay now, you been over a couple times a week for dinner. You know it's not me, I wasn't cutting you out."

"No, Ray, that's fine. I understand and I appreciate your motives."

"Then, what?"

Fraser looked at the floor. Rubbed his eyebrow. Took a deep breath. "What you did, six weeks ago..."

Hell. He had really, really hoped it wasn't that. "Oh. Oh... God, Bennie, I'm sorry. I did embarrass you, didn't I? I just wanted to help, but I screwed it up. Big time. God, what an idiot."

For the first time in weeks, Fraser reached out and touched Ray, a tentative touch on the shoulder. "Ray. No. You didn't. It's my problem."

Now how did the guy figure that? "Talk to me, Bennie," Ray demanded.

Fraser sighed. Ray went to the bed, sat, thinking again the guy needs to get a couch. He patted the mattress next to him. After a moment Fraser joined him, staring straight ahead.

Fraser took another breath. Ray thought he might try to drop it, but he looked down at his clasped hands, and said, low and quiet, "You said, even in Canada, boys will be boys. Well, not me, Ray. I'd never done that."

"Oh, jeez, Bennie, I'm sorry." Ray rubbed his hands over his face. "I just assumed, I mean, all the guys I knew in school, well except for Jimmy Zanelli, and hey, the way he turned out..." Once started Fraser seemed determined to have it all out. He didn't even acknowledge Ray's repeated apology, but continued, voice tight, with his confession. "It's a loss of control, you see, and of course that's not good. Lack of control is dangerous."

When the meaning of that filtered through Ray's guilt, he sat up, staring at his friend. "Are you telling me—you don't, I mean you never—What about Victoria?"

"That's my point precisely, Ray. You saw what happened. I did lose control. I stayed off work for four days, I almost deserted my job for her, I almost deserted you, just because... because she touched me, and I couldn't handle that. I lost control."

Ray stared at him. Control was certainly Bennie's middle name. He never really lost it, even when attacked, or wounded, or disappointed by the system Fraser dedicated his life to. Ray, he kicked vending machines, slammed his fist into things, screamed, yelled, broke things—hell, he couldn't even manage control sometimes when it was the only proper response, witness his time in jail. But that was work. Did Fraser mean...?

"Wait a minute. Are you telling me you don't, you know..." Ray clasped his fist over a handful of air, and made a pulling gesture.

Fraser looked away. "No."

"My god."

Ray contemplated a life like that. How could somebody be so wrong, when he was right about so much else? But it made a horrible kind of sense. Fraser didn't yell, didn't scream, didn't cry—hell, Ray could only think of a few times he heard the man even laugh out loud—and he only hit people when they were wanted criminals, and even then usually only if they hit him first.

No wonder women never got anywhere with him. All they really would have to do is pounce on him, make him lose it, and then they'd get somewhere—three or four days in bed, then the world's biggest guilt trip.



The man was nuts. How could any guy not... Ray got up, paced the room, his embarrassment forgotten in light of the enormity of this problem.

Fraser watched him, sitting quietly.

"God." Ray stopped, met Fraser's gaze. "Bennie, will you accept my apology? I didn't mean to embarrass you."

"Of course, Ray."

"Good. Thank you, Bennie." Ray resumed his walking. Okay, it really wasn't his fault—well, what he'd done was, but Bennie had accepted his apology—but Bennie's problem wasn't his fault. But maybe it was something he could help with. Sure. Hey, who was it that taught Debbie Cucchio, the shyest girl ever born, how to kiss? Right. Well, he, Raymond Vecchio, was going to fix this if anyone could. He couldn't let any friend of his go through life with that much of a screwed-up take on such an essentially simple thing.

"Got any food in?" he asked abruptly.

Fraser looked relieved. Thinks he's off the hook. "Yes."

"Pasta?"

"Yes."

"Start some, I'll be back in a couple minutes."

Ray thudded down the stairs, pulling out his cell phone. Told Ma not to worry if he didn't make it home tonight, he was getting Bennie straightened out. Ray didn't want his evening interrupted by phone calls from home, no matter how things worked out here. Shoulders hunched in the evening chill, planning strategies and organizing his thoughts as he walked across to the little market on the corner, Ray quickly picked up some romano and a couple fresh tomatoes for the pasta and a bottle of wine for himself. He was back by the time Fraser, now in jeans and his RCMP sweatshirt, was tipping a cupful of rigatoni into the pot.

He continued to plan while the food cooked, sipping a small glass of the chianti. Fraser responded best to honesty in Ray's experience. So, honesty he was going to get. He took off his jacket, hanging it over a chair before sitting down to eat.

After dinner, he took his glass and went back to sit on the bed. "You really need a couch."

Fraser sat next to him. "I'm comfortable here, Ray."

"Yeah, right. I need you to have a couch, Bennie."

Placing the glass out of the way on the floor, he turned a little to face Fraser.

"Okay, Sorry about this, Bennie, but we're having this out. You'll be embarrassed, I'll be embarrassed, but I gotta do it." He marshaled the arguments he'd been mentally preparing. "You are so wrong about this, man. Everybody needs to lose control sometimes, preferably

in a safe way, 'cause if you don't you tie yourself all up. Sex is about losing control, that's what it's for. It's, ah, physiology. And it's right, it's natural, it's good—you can't argue that it ain't good, Bennie." He risked a glance, but Fraser was still sitting quietly. "That's why God gave us hormones. All this stuff we do, sitting in offices, playing games, worrying about stuff, well we didn't evolve for that. We're animals, Bennie, when it comes to sex. We should all be rolling around on the grass somewhere doing what we want when we want. But we got civilized, so we spend most of our lives worrying instead."

Fraser seemed to be coping with this impromptu world-according-to-Vecchio lecture, as best Ray could tell. He hadn't left, anyway. Or asked Ray to leave.

Ray asked himself once more if he really wanted to do this. Risky. Stupid. He took a steadying breath, and went on. "But when it comes to sex, we are out of control. It's a good out of control, and that's how it's supposed to be. And I'm going convince you of it."

Ray reached over and dropped a hand onto Bennie's crotch.

Bennie jumped up, stepped away, his calm fled.

"Ray!"

"Come back, Bennie. You have to. You owe me. You know how bad I been feeling, thinking I had done something wrong? And this time it's you that's wrong, and I'm gonna show you."

"Please don't."

"Bennie." Ray just looked at Fraser, letting him make up his mind, giving him space.

After a minute Bennie returned to the bed and reluctantly sat down. His friend said, "I promise it'll be okay. Just gimme a chance."

"I have to disagree, Ray."

Still arguing, sure, but he's sitting with me. "I know you disagree, but you are wrong. You owe me the chance to prove it." Come on, Bennie.

Another moment of silence, then Bennie finally nodded.

Ray started to move, then thought about earlier. "Is Dief gonna cause any trouble?"

"No, Ray. He knew you were angry, before. He'll know that you aren't now."

Ray glanced just a little nervously at Diefenbaker, but he seemed obliviously asleep. Where the wolf was concerned, Fraser was the expert, so Ray pulled off his shirt, gesturing to Fraser to follow suit. He let the man carefully fold the blue sweatshirt and put it on the footlocker, then he pushed gently at Bennie's chest until the man lay back across the bed.



Ray was surprised at how easy it was—was a little emotional blackmail all it took? Was that how Victoria got him? He had been almost positive this wasn't going to work, and he wasn't certain for a second what to do next. Start simple. He looked at Bennie, lying where Ray put him. His eyes were squeezed closed, and he twitched when Ray placed a careful palm on the smooth white skin of his chest.

"Anybody ever touch you, Bennie? Skin to skin?"

"In hospital." And Victoria, always unspoken, the single exception. To everything in Fraser's life.

"Oh, great, associate being touched with pain, do you?"

"No. But the pain let me keep control."

"Yeah, all those beautiful nurses, especially when they give you a bath. I been there." And the last time you were there, not much sensation below the waist for weeks. My fault, again. The way Bennie looked now, lying passive and unresponsive, reminded Ray of how he'd looked in the hospital after the shooting. He pushed the uncomfortable memory away. "But control is appropriate there, with nurses it's supposed to be like a business relationship." Ray began to move his hand, just a tiny circle, soothingly against Fraser's ribs. The skin was outrageously soft and fine-textured. "Aw, Bennie. Control is wrong, here. I'll get you to admit it. Everywhere else, but not in bed with someone that wants to be here. Touch me back." When there was no response, Ray took Bennie's hand and put it on his own ribs. Skin on skin, the perfect blessing of it. Ray spared another thought for exactly how stupid this might be, what he was doing. Fraser's hand was cool, callused, slightly damp, and trembling faintly.

After a minute, while Ray made lazy, undemanding circles on Fraser's chest, he felt Bennie's hand twitch, and stroke gently, minutely, once, down and up his side. Ray felt a trail of goosebumps rise, the stroke so light and tentative it was torture. "That's it," he breathed softly. Resisting the urge to add 'That wasn't so bad now, was it?' like a trip to the dentist, he kept up his petting, watching Bennie's closed expression, shadowed and a little ambiguous in the muted light of the kerosene lantern, hoping for something more from the man. The hand moved again, and Bennie scrunched up his face. Ray, checking him over, saw the trouble.

God, the poor guy had no resistance, no wonder he thought out of control was bad. Got to get him used to this, get him to where he can handle it. Good for him. But now...

"Bennie, remember you trust me," he murmured, and moved his hand with care down to where Fraser was

already erect, the trapped dick knotted at the top of his thigh, pushing hard against denim. When Ray gently rested his palm there, Fraser turned his head away, but lay still, clearly a martyr to his promise.

Poor guy. Poor misguided guy. His erection was hot, warming Ray's palm through the jeans. Ray resisted to urge to press, to caress, right there, shaping Bennie through the fabric, and instead gently moved over to the fly, holding his breath as he tugged buttons free, pulled aside the underwear, and eased Bennie's penis out. Muttering all the while a quiet repeat of "It's all right, it's okay, let it go," Ray stroked him gently, softly, with no sudden movements, as if Fraser's erection was some wild animal who might leap out of his hands and run away if not handled with caution. But Bennie's cock bulked up under his gentle strokes, smooth and straight, hard and soft, and then, just like the other time, Bennie got off fast and sudden and in absolute silence. Ray shivered, wanting to moan for him, give him the reaction Bennie was denying himself. Obscurely, he felt a sense of loss. Why? This wasn't what he was here for.

Keeping one hand for warmth, or perhaps comfort, on Fraser's penis, Ray awkwardly tugged the jeans and underwear down, and lay against Fraser's side, pressing as much skin against him as possible.

He pulled at Fraser's hands, making him complete the embrace as much as he could. He let him lie quietly for a few minutes, hoping in vain to feel some relaxation in the tense muscles. When Fraser continued to lie without moving, Ray pulled away to shed the rest of his own clothes, and knelt to pull Fraser's jeans all the way off.

At the first tug, Fraser spoke, low, a tinge of desperation to the words. "Ray. Ray, would you go now?"

Pulling the jeans down Bennie's legs, Ray replied, "Uh-uh, Bennie. I just figured you couldn't hear what I had to say until you got that off your mind."

Fraser's eyes snapped open.

Ray answered the unspoken protest. "Hey. This is not about getting off. Told ya, you're just all tied up in knots. That's what I'm talking about. This is about admitting that there are times—and places—where losing control is okay."

"Ah."

Well, that was about as non-committal a syllable as Ray had ever heard. "Yes, 'ah.' I'm right, you're wrong, and you're gonna learn."

Having disposed of all the clothes, Ray lay down next to Fraser, ignoring the fact Bennie clearly didn't want Ray anywhere within ten blocks of him, and replaced his palm on Bennie's chest. Square one. "Skin is great stuff, Bennie. Tell me about skin."

Fraser began a recitation. Planning on not admitting someone was touching him, was he? Well, that would change. "It's the largest single organ in the body. There are nerves, pores, blood vessels..."

"Nerves," Ray interrupted.

"Yes, Ray. Per square centimeter, there are an average..."

"Why?" Ray began the small circling caress again.

"Why?"

"Yeah. If all skin was for is to keep your insides from getting loose and falling out on the floor, we wouldn't need nerves. But nerves are for feeling, Bennie," Ray ran his fingers up and down the side of Fraser's ribs, watching a tiny flock of goosebumps rise. "More to the point, nerves are for feeling good."

"That's not entirely accurate, Ray. Nerves are also..."

"Bennie, Bennie, Bennie. That is your problem. You are willing to cope with losing control to pain, if you have to, but

not to pleasure. I want you to learn to enjoy losing control to pleasure."

"Why? It's better this way." Fraser's face was cold and hard and he was lying unresponsive and passive. Martyr. If it wasn't for the goosebumps and the conversation, Ray would've thought he was stroking a dead man. There was no connection to the warm, firm, needy cock he'd been stroking a few minutes ago. Not if Fraser could help it.

"It is not. I know." Here he was, trying to fix this guy up and all Fraser was doing was fighting him. "Ah, jeez, Bennie! Try for a little open-mindedness here, willya?"

"You don't consider this, this position you have me in to be open-minded?"

Hah, touched a nerve there. "Nope, I'm talking attitude not position. You are grim, you are suffering, you are so damn intent on not enjoying this. Attitude. Bad attitude."

An hour later, Ray was ready to either shoot the guy, or give this whole thing up. He had talked, he had argued, he had persuaded. What it came down to was Ray thought touching was good and Bennie thought it was bad, and Ray couldn't get past that by logic or discussion or threats. The only progress was negative—the man hadn't actually fled or thrown him out. But Bennie still showed no willingness to consider a change. Ray was pretty well talked out. He was even a little bored with the sensation of stroking Bennie's body—and considering how soft and sensual Ray found the man's skin, that was saying quite a lot. Ray sat up.

"Excuse me, I'll be right back. Do not move." He

tromped off to the toilet, peed, and thought. He needed another strategy.

When he came back, he'd thought of something. "You know muscles, Bennie? Of course you do, you read a book." He plopped face down on the bed. "Give me a back rub, please. For some reason, God knows what reason I could have here, I'm feeling tense."

He kept his face turned away, and waited, giving a good imitation of Bennie's recent posture. Eventually, Fraser put his hands carefully on Ray's shoulders and started to knead the muscles. Ray could feel the clinical detachment of the touch, no hint of caress allowed, just the press of thumbs into bunched-up spots. After five minutes, Ray directed, "Further down."

Reluctantly the touch moved down a couple of vertebrae.

"Keep going."

After a few more minutes of pressure, he turned his head, looking at Fraser where he sat cross-legged, just far enough off to avoid any unnecessary contact. "Bennie."

Bennie promptly removed his hands.

"Nuh-uh. I'm humoring you. More to the point I am no longer touching you, you are safe for a while. But I like being touched and you are going to indulge me. You are going to rub my back, all of my back. Okay?"

He turned away. The hands returned, and restarted at the shoulders. "Done that." Fraser sighed just a little, and began to move over broader areas. After a few minutes, Ray started to actually enjoy himself. "That's great, Bennie. I like that. Further down, too."

He was certain that it wouldn't happen but eventually Ray felt a cautious touch on his butt. God, a miracle. Or at least some progress. He enjoyed it for a moment, then rolled over, smiling. "Thanks, Bennie."

Bennie was looking at him with a less than cold expression for the first time in hours. He chewed his lip, hesitating.

"What? Tell me," Ray prompted patiently.

"How do you—if that were me—"

"That's one of the things I been telling you but you can't hear me. I like being touched. I like it a lot. But it doesn't have to be sexual. I happen to find backrubs relaxing, not arousing." He took Bennie's hand, and placed it on his ribs. "This is nice too. If you'd get outta that idea that all this is good for is sex..."

Bennie voluntarily began stroking Ray's chest. It was getting late, and Ray closed his eyes, pleased not to be talking for a while. "Ummm." Fraser's hands moved up, onto his arms, back down. He paused. A thumb stroked a nipple. When Ray opened an eye, it was to see Bennie looking at his crotch.

"Nope. I know some guys are, but I'm just not that sexually sensitive there."

Fraser started.

Ray propped himself up on one elbow, pleased when Fraser didn't remove his hands. "Bennie, don't go thinking I'm just better than you at keeping control. I just do something about it regularly and you don't. If you— Hmm." Show don't tell, right? Ray reached for Bennie's hand and pressed it to his own penis. Fraser went still but didn't pull away. "If you do what I did to you, I will lose control as fast as the next guy." He kept his hand on Bennie's but did nothing else. Not voluntarily anyway. His dick had other ideas, starting to firm up a little at the feel of a warm hand. "Ummm."

Nothing happened for a few seconds, so Ray took his hand away. He lay back and waited, looking at Fraser, preparing for another round of talking. Bennie seemed almost contemplative, sitting cross-legged, spine very straight, staring blindly at nothing. Then he looked down at his hand. Ray gave a surprised little murmur when Bennie awkwardly stroked at his cock, watching his response. Ray dithered—gotta encourage him, gotta show him this is okay, guys are supposed to be able to let go and enjoy, gotta not scare him off—but after a few moments of Fraser's tentative explorations he just didn't give a damn. Despite his claims to Bennie, he hadn't been getting off much lately—no current girlfriend, and pretty much too tired most nights until recently—and, well, having another hand on him had always been more fun than doing himself. Way more fun.

Lying there on his back, his dick was filling, jutting up now, Fraser carefully gripping him with one warm hand. It was great, it was wonderful, it was frustrating as hell lying still. Finally, he couldn't stand it, he just couldn't go further in that position. "Bennie, Bennie, that's great, but I gotta move, change position. You mind?"

Bennie still looked calm and rather distant but no longer martyred. He was studying Ray. The intent gaze made Ray uncomfortable; it was kinda embarrassing to be some sort of exhibit when he was all hot like this. It made him think stupid things, about what he looked like to Bennie, lying here in front of him, naked and aroused. Ray looked away.

"No, I don't mind. Ray, how do you—"

"Not now, Bennie, later, okay?" Ray was just not willing to go back to talking at this stage. "You have done a wonderful job of making me feel good, and I wanna feel better. Like I told you, at this point it tends to interfere with my thinking a little, you know? Then we'll talk more. Lie down."

Bennie dutifully lay down, and for the first time in an hour, Ray touched him, stroking up and down his chest lightly. "You mind if I touch you, Bennie? It's what makes this better than my own hand, the body contact, okay? Can I?" He waited, feeling sweat prickling his skin.

"All right."

Ray wasn't certain if the calm tone was a continuation of the martyrdom of earlier. He really didn't care, he just wanted to think about himself for a bit, and forget about Fraser's stupid hangups. Forget about what Fraser might think about him. Bennie's body looked inviting, smooth and pale, and his hands remembered the soft feel of his skin with exquisite clarity. He wanted...

No, no, he just needed, right? He just needed to get off. Maybe he was using the guy, but, hey, that's what guys did. Just a helpful, convenient assist here. Like he'd helped Bennie. He swung a leg over Bennie, kneeling, pressing his legs together around Fraser's thighs. He reached for Fraser's hands, wrapping them back around his erection, and began to push into the grasp.

"Ah, that's good, yeah." He began pumping, pushing for completion, hands braced on Bennie's ribs.

Fraser gripped his dick, hands tunneled around it, not doing much but being there. Ray thrust, seeking the inevitability. The feel of Bennie's body beneath him, between his thighs, under his hands was right, was exciting. He arched up and back, wrapped his hands tight around Fraser's and shot, groaning aloud.

"Whooo." He kept the grip, riding out the pulsing, all the sensation to the dregs, draining though and out of his body.

"Damn, that's good," he muttered, falling back onto the bed at Fraser's side. When he could think again, he rolled over, shaking sweat out of his eyes, almost afraid to look Bennie in the face.

Shit. So much for his agenda, that had probably scared Bennie off totally. And so much for his point about touch not meaning sex. Idiot. Screw up. He looked, prepared for disgust, dislike, neutrality.

But Fraser smiled at him.

What?

Sticky hands curled, the man was smiling.

"I believe you, Ray."

"Wha.."

"The way you looked, how you acted, you are right. For you, it clearly is good, as you said. And I'll try to learn. If you'll show me?"

Goggling, Ray could do nothing but laugh. "Jeez, Bennie. But my point wasn't... ah hell, of course I'll help. That's why I started this, wasn't it?"



Bennie rolled onto his side, scrunched closer, and placed himself within touching distance of Ray. "Um," he said, gesturing with a curled hand, "I should wash."

"Nah, rub it in, it's okay. Need a shower anyway."

"Rub it in? Isn't that... it's sticky."

"Bennie, Bennie, Bennie. It's not evil. And I'm already sticky." Ray grabbed Fraser's hands and swiped them on his skin. Fraser left them where he placed them for a moment, then rubbed lightly, looking at the white residue.

"Not evil. Ray, given your cultural background, shouldn't it be evil? Doesn't your church..."

"I don't go anymore." Ray sighed, reaching past the effects of afterglow and tiredness for more philosophy. "Bennie, I believe in God. But I just can't believe God gave us the capacity to enjoy things, not just sex, but touching, or eating, or singing, or whatever, so the Church can say sometimes it's wrong, or it's only right certain times. Did I hurt you?"

"Of course not, Ray."

"Did you hurt me?"

"I don't think so."

Ray laughed. "Jeez. Know it, Bennie. And did we both wanna be here... bad question. Forget before. Now, are you okay with being here?"

"Yes." Fraser began to run his hands up and down Ray's chest.

"Then it's okay. I believe God gave me a brain to make my own judgments. Evil is child abuse, and murder, and hooking people on crack, and blowing up buildings full of innocents, and hating people causa their skin or their name. It sure as hell ain't this." He reached over, mirroring Bennie's gesture, hands stroking gently. "And it isn't even losing control, if it's in the right circumstances."

"It's that simple?"

"Yeah, I guess it is. To me, anyway."

Fraser was quiet for a few minutes. Then he sat up, excused himself, and went to the john. Ray sat up and began fishing around for his shirt, figuring they'd had it out, and he should be getting home. He looked at the wind-up alarm on Fraser's battered footlocker. God, it'd be close to two by the time he got to bed.

"Don't go."

Ray looked up and saw Bennie watching him from across the room. "Fraser, it's kinda late..."

"But, Ray, I want... You said..."

How could the man look so abandoned? "Aw, hell, Bennie. Okay, sure."

He hung the shirt over the chair and sat down again.

Fraser came back to bed, lying down, and tugging at Ray. Ray gave in to the wordless demand, telling himself this was exactly what he had told himself Fraser should be like, and now that he gotten it, who was he to bitch? He began gently stroking Bennie's body, systematically working the guy from broad shoulders down, studying him in the lamplight, looking as well as touching.

"You're sure pale. Shouldn't you be all sunburned, skin like leather, all that snow reflecting?"

Bennie looked down to where Ray's hands were stroking now near his waist. "I tended to keep that bit covered up in the snow, Ray."

"Ah." He continued, moving to arms for a bit, then legs.

Fraser gave a little hiss of indrawn breath, then said, "Sorry, Ray."

"Hmm?" Ray was definitely feeling sleepy. "Oh." He realized Fraser was apologizing because he was responding to the touching, becoming aroused again. "It's okay. Told you it was okay before. Roll over." Fraser did as he was told, cocking a leg a little for comfort. Ray began a deep kneading massage into his shoulders, hard enough to probably hurt a little. "That better? More distracting?"

"Yes. Ow!"

Ray gentled down a bit, but kept kneading. After ten minutes he could feel Fraser relaxing, and he moved down the spine, avoiding the scar, staying out to the sides there and being gentle, using palms instead of thumbs. Further down, onto the lower back, working carefully, knowing what felt good to him after a day mostly desk bound. Thumbs into the dimples at the top of the butt, pressing at the sides of the tailbone. Brief token work on the cheeks. His wrists were starting to ache.

"That's all you get. Roll over."

Fraser lay still, then after a second, rolled. He was fully erect, damp with it. He didn't say anything, just lay there, not meeting Ray's eyes.

"Jeez, Bennie."

Bennie opened his mouth. Ray slapped a hand across it.

"Don't say a thing, just don't."

Fraser's eyes had that lost look again, peering over his hand at him. Ray removed the hand.

"Sorry. You're perfectly normal—for a frustrated fifteen year old. It'll wear off." In response to the look, the incipient apology just waiting to leap off the man's tongue, Ray reaffirmed, "No, really."

Bennie reached over and stroked Ray's thigh, calluses catching a little on the hair, but he didn't say anything.



"And stop being sorry."

Bennie took Ray's hand and pulled it lightly toward himself. "Will you—"

"Yeah, yeah." And once again, Ray found himself doing the friend in need trip, but this time Fraser was trying to enjoy himself, stroking at Ray, watching him, and when his orgasm struck, looking not at all like a martyr. Fraser was still silent, but his hands grabbed at Ray. Watching Bennie's eyes close, his head fall back, Ray felt the sting of unnamed emotions. Hand covered with come, he rubbed it gently onto Bennie's stomach, feeling the muscles flutter beneath.

Striving for a little lightness, he said, "Now we both need a shower."

"Ray..."

"What?"

"There isn't one."

"What? Oh, hell. I'm too tired to care. It can wait."

Ray had let himself be talked into staying over, perfectly happy to take Fraser's horrible bed rather than drive home. Bennie had insisted on the floor, and when Ray woke at three-thirty with Dief's cold nose pressed to the back of his knee, he understood why. The damned wolf wouldn't be moved, and kept taking over more of the bed. Ray gave up, and moved down with Fraser. He woke again soon after dawn, the light filling the room as though the sheet he'd tacked up over the window all those weeks ago wasn't even there. Groaning, he sat up, rubbing at his back. Nothing like sleeping on the floor to make a guy feel about eighty.

Fraser was bright and cheerful and Ray wanted to kill him. After chamomile tea he still wanted to kill him. After swabbing himself off with a dishtowel at the sink rather than stand in line in the hall for the use of the elderly bathtub he really, really wanted to kill him. He settled for going out for a big breakfast at the diner two blocks over. After lots and lots of coffee he only felt strung out, not actually exhausted.

Walking into the squad room half an hour early, he met Elaine heading for the file room with a stack of manila folders. She stopped, looked him up and down, and opened her mouth.

"Don't. Say. It."

"I was only going to ask 'how many aspirin?'"

"Four."

She stared at his lapel for a minute, then smiled, a strangely feral smile, before turning away down the hall.

Ray looked down. The faint mark of yesterday's coffee

stain smote his eyes like a neon sign. Oh, god.

"Elaine, hey, Elaine..."

He'd survived the day. Somehow. At home, a long, hot shower, clean clothes, and the prospect of food almost strengthened him enough to face his mother.

"Caro, you look so tired. You should go to bed."

"I will, Ma, I will. Right after dinner."

"It's just for you again, Franny's with Cam."

"Oh, good, I can stand for it to be quiet."

"You don't take good care of yourself, Raymondo. I worry when you're so tired."

He sat down at the kitchen table and let her voice wash over him in chiding waves. When she stopped, he looked up. She was looking at him like he was one of her grandchildren. He could almost see the intended pat on the cheek.

"Ma..."

"I know, caro. You are a grown man and you don't want to be fussed over."

"No, Ma, I love it."

"So. How is Bennie?"

One screwed up sexually deprived lonely guy. "Better, I think, Ma. I talked to him, I think I got him feeling better." After getting jacked off twice in one night, he better be feeling better.

"Good. Next time, bring him over here to talk. I worry when you're out all night."

Ray couldn't help a shudder at the thought of last night taking place here. "That's why I called, so you wouldn't worry."

Close to eleven hours of sleep made Ray actually willing to face Friday. Elaine checked him over thoroughly when he came in.

He was wearing a different suit—a different color suit, just to make sure she didn't miss his virtue. A rash of car-jackings had him out on the streets till two, then he was back, typing up reports. At three-thirty there was a familiar chorus of over-friendly voices, and Ray looked up to see Fraser striding down the room, Dief at his heels. Well, at his heels until the first offer of a doughnut.

Ray felt a moment of total blankness. What the hell had he done? How had he gotten himself into that whole situation? What in God's name had he been thinking? He had a vivid vision of someone, sometime asking Fraser about their relationship and Fraser telling them honestly and sincerely about Wednesday night. His job, his family, his house, gone, swept away because he stupidly wanted to help a friend with his problems. A



picture of himself, dirty, unshaven, with fleas—or worse—living out of the Riviera until one morning, there he'd be, frozen to death...

"What?"

"I said, did you remember that we have to go talk to the neighborhood watch group. This is the second Friday of the month."

Fraser looked normal. Completely normal.

"Oh, yeah, right."

And the afternoon progressed as it had last month, and the month before. They left with Fraser burdened down, as usual, with little plates of baked treats from his cadre of admirers, which they dropped off, as usual, at the mission soup kitchen. Better than Diefenbaker eating the whole collection. Ray figured the wolf would explode if he did, since he'd gotten more than Fraser from his own admirers, also as usual.

They had a usual Friday night at Ray's, playing with the kids while Ma and Maria and Franny got dinner. After the kids were off to bed, they watched TV and talked, though Ma and Franny were still arguing over the timing for the wedding, so the men tended to stick to sports topics, which were not so likely to lead to domestic violence.

By the time Ray drove Bennie home he had almost forgotten his panic of the afternoon. He was going to have to get used to the idea that there were some things Bennie was willing, it appeared, to keep his mouth shut about. Thank God. He went up to the apartment at Bennie's invitation.

But once inside he lost his confidence when Bennie said, "Ray? About Wednesday night, would you—"

Oh, no. "You wanna talk some more? Sure, Bennie."

"No, I want— Would you— Um, could we do that again?"

"Bennie, Bennie, Bennie, nobody needs a teacher with their own body, just do what feels good, and remember it's okay to feel good."

"I'd appreciate it if you would help me, Ray."

Soon enough and with the same confusion, Ray found himself in a repeat of Wednesday, with variations. Well, part of Wednesday night. Ray's fears were enough to keep him from finding Bennie's body, Bennie's responses, and Bennie's trust arousing. Without Ray's invitation Bennie didn't try to touch Ray again. Bennie still wanted to follow his lead, wanted Ray to show him what was good. Essentially, Ray soon realized, Bennie wanted Ray to touch him rather than to touch himself.

A bit grimly, Ray lectured again about how it was all right

to do this for yourself, it was normal, it was healthy, it

was good for you. Bennie agreed with everything, but didn't want to be left alone. There were comments about Ray's greater experience in these matters that made Ray wince. He stopped what he was doing and sat back.

Bennie just looked at him, a faint confusion washing his features." Did I do something wrong, Ray?"

"No, no, no. It's just... well, Bennie, I told you that this was no big deal, but you make it sound like I do this all the time. And I don't, I definitely don't. Not in years and years. It was high school, we were all horny as hell, and none of the girls would let us... you know? It was just a temporary thing, okay?"

"And I appreciate your willingness to help, Ray."

"Yeah, yeah. Look, the sooner we get you comfortable with taking care of yourself in these matters the better." And Ray resumed his role as instructor, working to get himself out at a reasonable hour, no matter how much stamina Bennie had.

By Sunday afternoon Ray had long since realized just how big a mistake he'd made. Parked by his house, he sat in the Riviera, head in hands and moaned, "I have created the world's only Mountie sex addict. Me! Single-handedly. You are such a screw-up, Vecchio. God, what a mess." If Bennie had had his way, Ray would have been cooped up the whole weekend providing aid and comfort in repeated doses. Though he had come back Sunday at Bennie's urging, Ray had finally walked out early with an excuse of something he had to do for his mother.

Damn. Be careful what you wish for, right. Bennie was certainly losing some of his repressions, which Ray still thought would be a good thing in the long run, but... jeez, he was like a horny teenager, can't leave it alone, and Ray was his chosen partner, because he'd made the stupid, idiotic mistake of preaching hedonism to him.

"How the hell am I gonna get out of this? I mean, he's my friend, but I'm sure as hell not gonna give up all my evenings to go over there and do... that!"

Maybe he could shoot himself in the foot. Taking a bullet would be easier in some ways—it would be over faster. But then he'd heal up and be right back here. And with a cast he wouldn't be able to run away. Maybe he should sprain his wrist? Bennie'd probably just ask him to use his left hand. He leaned forward and rested his head on the steering wheel. "Ohh. I just can't handle this. What a mess."

There was a polite tapping on the driver's window, and he slowly turned his head. It was Mrs. Ruggerio from next door, with a bag of groceries cradled in her arms.

“Ray? Are you all right, honey? Should I get your mother?” She sounded just like she had when she’d found him crying behind the hedge with a skinned knee when he was seven.

He pulled himself together. “No, thanks, I’m fine, I was just...” Panicking? Wallowing in guilt? Afraid? Contemplating shooting myself in the foot? “...thinking.” He managed a smile. Got out and locked the car. Gave her a hand with the bag, chatting about the weather, hoping she wouldn’t have it all over the neighborhood by supertime that little Ray was crazy, sitting talking to himself. There were many disadvantages to still living in the old neighborhood.

Inspiration hit in the shower. Balanced on one foot, scrubbing at his left sole, there it was, the obvious answer. Get Fraser a girlfriend. It wasn’t as if there weren’t candidates everywhere. Couple of double dates, then yank off the old training wheels and let nature take her course. Simple. Better make it next Friday, though, give the guy a chance to wear himself out a bit more. He toweled off, flipping through a mental list of candidates. Better not be somebody from work...

“Ciao, Andrea. It’s Ray.”

“Ray Vecchio.”

“Yes, it has been a while.”

“Oh, really? How old is he? Walking already? Hey, that’s great.”

“No, just called to say hello. Look, I gotta go.”

Whew.

“Barbara? Hi there, it’s Ray.”

“Now wait a minute, that wasn’t my fault!”

“Yeah, well, let me tell...”

Hmmm.

“Hello. May I speak to Colette, please?”

“Not since when? Oops.”

“Yeah, I’ll do that.”

Right.

“Shellie? Ray.”

“Would you shut up a minute? I have a deal.”

“I can get you a date with the Mountie.”

“Yeah, Fraser. Yeah, the one that sings. How many Mounties ya think I know, anyway?”

“No catch.”

“Hey, that was years ago!”

“All right, all right, there is one thing. It’s a double date and you have to bring someone for me.”

“Yes, a girl.”

“Ha!”

“You just better make sure she’s nice, or I’ll tell the Mountie about the time you...”

“All right, all right, I won’t unless you do. Deal?”
Okay.

Somehow, Ray survived the week. By Wednesday he could see a hunted look in his eyes when he shaved in the morning. By Thursday, Ma was starting to hover and bake him favorite treats. By Friday he didn’t care who or what he’d be out to dinner with, as long as Shellie took Fraser off his hands. Somehow he’d managed not to scare Fraser off the date, but he thought that Bennie was placing undue emphasis on Ray’s presence for a guy that should be chomping at the bit to get to know a great woman like Shellie.

By Saturday morning he wished he were dead.

What a disaster. He had never, ever, in a life full of bad choices, gotten himself into something as bad as that. Shellie was every bit as wonderful as she always was, dressed to make Ray feel pangs of regret for setting her up with Fraser, and every bit as oblivious to Ray’s admiration as she ever had been. Her friend Marianne was a little short, but pretty, pleasant, polite, and with no obvious defects that would relegate her to blind-date purgatory.

Until she met the Mountie, of course.

Oh, she’d been polite to Ray up through the time they’d ordered dinner. Then Ray became aware, even while himself keeping a worried eye on his protégé, that he did not have her full attention with his stories of exciting true-life crime and personal heroism. Even his best smile didn’t stop her eyes, not worried but more... predatory, from drifting to Fraser.

Fraser gave a nervous start about the time the salads arrived. By the time the main course was served, the whites of his eyes were showing. By dessert, Ray couldn’t take any more. Had these women no shame? Ignoring Fraser’s desperate glances, he left the table to make a quick call. Bennie’s relief when he returned was obvious to Ray, but not to the women, who had passed though vying for attention and were reaching perilously close to the personally vituperative stage.

Ray counted off the moments, worried he’d cut it too close and violence would be done. His cell phone buzzed, and he almost ripped his coat pulling it out of his pocket. Bennie’s grateful expression would have been comical if Ray had been in a mood to appreciate it as he left cab fare and gave the women the story about being called in on an emergency, dragging Bennie away in mid polite farewell before Shellie or Marianne could figure out that Mounties weren’t, as a rule, called in on Chicago PD cases. He didn’t look back, but he could guess what might be happening. He was glad he’d paid

the check while he made his call when he heard the first crash behind them as they fled out the door.

Disaster. Before he met the Mountie he wouldn't have thought women as a whole so lost to manners, or at least to playing by the rules of the game. Before he met the Mountie he still had a social life. The Riv rocketed away from the curb as he headed, again, to Bennie's apartment.

"I'm sorry, Ray."

"Yeah, yeah. Not your fault, I shoulda known better."

Tonight, he'd be firm. Tonight, he'd tell his friend he just had to handle things on his own.

Disaster.

Plagued by his own sense of guilt, he cooperated with Fraser's usual evening choice of activities, visions of Shellie in that dress, or almost out of that dress, annoyingly persistent.

Interrupting Bennie in mid-question, Ray exploded. "We coulda been with two beautiful women. But no. Here we are alone. And it's your fault."

"The date was your idea, Ray."

"Yeah, because I want you to have a girlfriend."

"But they were fighting."

Why did the guy have to sound so helpless? "Yeah, yeah. I know."

"I never know what I'm supposed to do, Ray."

With a laugh, Ray gave that the answer it deserved. "Welcome to America, Bennie. Women, they want to keep you off-balance. Keep you guessing."

"I understand that, Ray. But it wasn't like that..."

Ray turned, interrupted Bennie with some bitterness. "With Victoria? She was using you. She had everything figured out ahead of time, she just did what she had to put you where she wanted." The guy was just gonna have to get over Victoria, stop thinking of everything in relation to her.

Fraser didn't wince at the reference. He looked directly into Ray's eyes with a steady gaze. "No. It wasn't like that with you, Ray."

Thrown off balance, Ray could only say, "Huh?"

Still looking at him with that wide, blue gaze, Bennie went on, "I don't want to be with them, Ray. I'd rather be with you."

Ray floundered. He must just mean that he wasn't ready to move on yet, right? "Yeah, I know, but I keep telling you, this is temporary, just to help you out. We'll get you squared away, find you a girlfriend. They aren't all like that, really, okay?"

Bennie's answer to that was to tug at Ray's hand, urging him back to interrupted attentions. He reached over to his footlocker and picked up a tube of lotion, wordlessly glopping some into Ray's hand.

"And where the hell did you get this?"

"The corner pharmacy, Ray."

"Oh, great. Walked in and said, 'Excuse me, sir, but my friend, Ray, that's Ray Vecchio, the cop, is teaching me how to jerk off and what would be the best lotion to buy for that?' in a clear, carrying tone?"

"No, of course not, Ray. I asked him, quietly, about something soothing for chafing."

Bennie carefully capped the tube, and reached for Ray's hand again. But Ray was still afraid, and frustrated and ticked off over the failure of his plan, not to mention the vision of spending the rest of the year getting a sex-crazed Mountie rooted out of the ruins of his social life. And what exactly had Bennie meant by what he said? Ray avoided Fraser's hand, grasped his wrist, and swiped the lotion off his palm onto Bennie's.

Adamantly, Ray shook his head. "Nuh-uh. You gotta do it yourself."

"Ray..."

"No." Get this over, and get out, that's the plan. He can take care of himself, just gotta prove it to him.

Fraser looked faintly hurt and began reluctantly to work on his own dick. His gaze, still calm, stayed on Ray, quickly losing the hurt expression, gaining warmth as his hand slipped juicily up and down. Looking at Bennie, forgetting for the moment his own continual internal litany of self-abuse, Ray became aware of the difference between Fraser's usual reserve and this calm but more open expression. And there was something...

"Bennie?" Ray said quietly, hoping he was wrong.

Fraser looked up, met his eyes.

Oh, God, no.

Ray broke eye contact, patted Bennie on the arm, and got up,

gathering his clothes and dressing efficiently.

"Bennie, I know the date didn't work out, but believe me, we'll get you somebody. I know you've got the hang of it, and frankly, I can't keep dropping everything to help you out with every little thing. I'm glad to have been able to help, but I gotta go, okay?"

And, not stopping for what he was certain would be the wrong answer, Ray Vecchio fled the scene.

That night, lying sleepless in bed, he stared at the familiar view of his bedroom ceiling and counted over his mistakes. And the compounding errors he had made trying to fix the initial mistakes.

And there was no one there to point out to him the fact that not once in this journey did he question why he would have made the mistakes in the first place. His

own motives could be no more complex than the desire to help a friend.

Could they?

▼ The weekend seemed quiet and a bit surreal. He did things around the house for his mother. He went to the park with Tony and the kids and played catch.

Above all, he did no thinking about Bennie that he could avoid.

Sunday night, facing the Monday morning drive, he had trouble sleeping. But at least he wasn't young enough to believe that embarrassment was fatal—at surviving that particular malady he'd had plenty of practice. He bulled through, telling Fraser up front he was busy tonight and wouldn't be able to take him home. Tuesday he actually looked at Bennie, and was reassured to see nothing untoward showing through the familiar calm demeanor. By Tuesday afternoon, up to his neck in a possible mob related murder, he forgot any personal problems for a while. The case was a bear, taking up all his thoughts as he worked through the weekend before there was a break.

By the next week he could tell himself he had just imagined what he'd seen in Fraser's face. He took Bennie home for dinner again, afterwards dropping him in front of his building. Fraser did not ask him up.

All through the fall, while Ray was occupied on cases with and without the Mountie's assistance, he still kept worrying about his friend. Pretending what had happened between them was only the casual, not worth talking about event he had thought he intended it to be was easy for weeks on end, then something would happen and he'd have a glimpse of Bennie's loneliness intrude on his work-a-day view of the man as a friend, a partner, an annoyingly perfect crime-fighting paragon.

He did not again make the mistake of trying to fix Fraser up

with a date, though he was worried about Franny's upcoming wedding, picturing poor Bennie under siege from hordes of Franny's girlfriends and all the Vecchio female relatives.

All in all, Ray found the week before the wedding trying beyond belief. For some reason he found himself feeling a sense of dread completely unrelated to Franny and Cam. Waking up from dreaming about Angie, he lay thinking it out. Of course he was worried. Francesca's first marriage had been a disaster. He and Angela had had troubles of epic proportions. Maria and Tony were hardly a shining example of marital bliss. And his parents... Vecchios were not a good value when it came to marriage.

He found himself able to remember, even after all these years, every word of the hard truths Angie had thrown at him. Truths he had denied to her, but which were the same things he used to beat himself with over his failures. He had loved her, he had wanted to change, but intentions stood no chance against the breadth and depth and height of his failures and his stupidities. There was proof of it everywhere, in the lack of lovers, in the lack of friends.

Franny would be okay. Franny was better than he was. And Cam was certainly better than Ray, miles better—he didn't need to see Franny as another Angie saddled with someone like him. Hurt by someone like him.

Turning over, kicking at the twisted bedclothes, he told himself to go back to sleep and not worry about her. Fraser—Fraser was another matter. There he was right to worry. Knowing some of Franny's friends, he might really get pounced on after the reception. Then who knew what might happen. He'd just have to look out for the guy.

He needn't have worried. The event had gone off well, partly because Franny had stuck to her guns and demanded that it be a small wedding. Well, small by Italian-wedding standards, at least. Ray teared up a bit leading her down the aisle, but Franny was oblivious and didn't embarrass him. Fraser was in high demand for the dancing, and Ray noticed he seemed to be handling the female attention pretty well, compared to last year. The man stayed for the whole party, not jumping out of windows or hiding in closets. Wandering around after many of the guests had left, Ray was momentarily heartened to see Bennie in an animated conversation with a woman until he realized it was his third cousin Theresa. He couldn't hope to fix the two of them up, because she lived in Philadelphia and she was already married. So the attraction had to be her profession. Sure enough, when he was close enough to hear snatches of conversation they seemed to be trading stories about urban versus wilderness librarianship.

Ray was glad that the wedding had been a success considering what the next few weeks brought. Louis' death, Fraser's behavior about Zuko, and then the loss of Irene left Ray feeling wounded and hurt. He retreated, not noticing Bennie's quietly supportive presence until a week had passed. Gradually some calluses formed, work was more demanding, and he found himself able to handle the routine of daily life again.

Ray's social life that fall and winter had its share of ups and downs, mostly downs when he gave it thought. He tried to check on Bennie's progress with women,

stupid," Probably? As stupid as any of the many stupid things he'd ever done, "but, you want to come up to bed with me?"

"It won't help with your guilt."

Did you learn that from Victoria, too? "No. I know it won't. Will you come anyway?"

"Yes." Fraser didn't hesitate, and there was only the plain simplicity of his affirmation.

As Ray turned and lead the way upstairs, he knew that what he wanted to ask and couldn't was why. He couldn't ask Fraser because the man would tell him. He couldn't ask himself because he wasn't sure of his own answer. He told himself not to think about it, denial being his second unsatisfactory method of dealing with his mistakes when brooding on them didn't help. He closed the bedroom door behind them, not hearing the familiar creak as the old door fit into the slightly warped frame. Based on last fall, Ray expected he'd have to take the lead, so he walked over to the bed, sat down, and patted the mattress next to him. Not looking at Fraser, he removed his shoes, and tucked his feet under to sit cross-legged while Fraser followed suit.

He wasn't sure what he wanted here. Fraser sat, quiet and unreadable. But he had said yes.

"Are you sure you wanna be here?"

Fraser smiled, repeating, "Yes."

"Okay." Ray started to reach out a hand, then asked, "Bennie, can I touch you?"

The man just nodded and unbuttoned his shirt. He lay over on the window side of the bed, propping up his head on one hand, waiting. Ray reached over, began to stroke warm hand against cool skin, and Bennie closed his eyes, breathing out. Fraser's expression was calm, and should have been easier to deal with his eyes shut, but Ray felt suddenly more certain this was a mistake. Before he could decide to stop, Bennie rolled onto his front, face buried in his arms, no expression at all to be seen, just the back of his head and the rucked up crumple of his shirt. The scar still drew him, and Ray traced a finger around it as lightly as he could.

"Ray. Don't."

He pulled his hand away.

"It's over. We both made mistakes."

"Yeah, right."

"Ray."

The tone said more than any fifteen further discussions. Ray replaced his palm on Bennie's spine, circling it over the site.

"You've saved my life as well."

Ray sighed. "You know, I'm still not sure. Bennie, what if I just convinced myself she had a gun, so I could

shoot her, stop her from hurting you? I thought I saw it, but... what if this is the price I have to pay for talking myself into justifying the murder of an unarmed woman? All right, the attempted murder."

"The price you have to pay?" There was no emphasis on one word over another, the question a deceptively simple repetition.

"Knowing it's in there—not the 'I almost killed you' thing; that didn't happen—but just knowing it's in there."

"Ah." Bennie rolled onto his side again, sat up, and wrapped his arms around Ray, just as calmly as before. Ray let him, feeling stupid. It was only after Bennie lay back against the pillows, positioning Ray against his side, almost cuddling him, that Ray realized the man was taking the lead after all.

Ray looked over at Bennie, and raised his eyebrows. "You seem okay with this. What gives?"

"What gives?"

"Yeah, what gives?"

"Well, Ray, you were right."

"Yeah, but my being right made you into a horny kid for weeks! Now you can handle this touching okay? Somebody else give you more lessons?" He poked Bennie lightly in the ribs, then left his hand there.

"Ray, you know full well it wasn't your being right that did that."

Ooof. There he goes, being honest again and at the damndest times. At least five things not to say in this situation rambled through Ray's brain. No things to say followed them.

"Ray?"

"Yeah, Bennie?"

"We don't have to stay." He's gonna let me run again, oh peachy.

Ray sat up, swung his legs over the side. "Yeah, it is kinda stupid, Ma being three doors down, and all..." He dropped his head, feeling the muscles pull down the back of his neck. He rubbed his hands over his head. "Bennie, sometimes I really miss my hair, you know?"

"It was your decision to cut it."

My decision. Why the hell was everything my decision? Whether to shoot Victoria, whether to blow up my car, whether to help Bennie with his problems... whether to stay or run. He sat there, head down in his hands, palms rubbing at his temples, and wished that life could just once in a long, long while, be simple. "Yeah, but it sure as hell wasn't my decision to have it all start falling out. Sometimes things just happen that you can't prevent, and you just have to handle them somehow."

"Yes, Ray, I know."

Ray took his hands away and looked over his shoul-

der at Bennie. Clearly visible behind the habitual reserve was the truth of that for the man. On multiple levels. None of which had anything to do with hair.

"We don't have to stay," Fraser repeated.

Ray dithered. Stay. Run. If you stay, it will get complicated. Okay, more complicated. If you go, he'll still be waiting.

Fraser did nothing. No arguments, no gestures, no words, no actions. He just was.

Ray reached a hand behind him, touched Bennie. Turned, said "No, I want to." Looked at Bennie's face, saw again what he feared, and faced it. Saw Bennie acknowledge the continued glance, Ray's decision not to hide.

And then Bennie stopped waiting.

Fraser reached forward, carefully and slowly—still giving me an out, will he always do that?—and slid a palm to cradle the side of Ray's head. A moment of stillness filled not with waiting but with promise, and Fraser leaned forward, and eyes open, tentatively kissed Ray. He dropped his hand, pulling back.

Ray really looked at Bennie, seeing so clearly what he'd avoided since that last autumn evening.

"Yes," Ray said, and this time he took the lead, reaching for Bennie, initiating a second kiss that started as simply as the inexperienced fumbblings that Ray could barely remember from the long gone days of his own innocence. But new as this was between them it was hardly innocent, for their bodies had had that week's worth of contact last fall, too well remembered. No matter that it had been months ago, had been as intentionally one-sided as Ray could make it, and did not involve kissing, Ray found himself heating up, the familiar scent and texture of Bennie's skin coming to mean something more than helping a friend. More than he'd allowed it to mean then. He closed his eyes, insinuated a delicate tongue tip into Bennie's mouth, felt the man's breath catch, then his own breath held as Fraser followed, his tongue caressing Ray's in return. After a long moment, Ray broke the contact reluctantly, and stared at Bennie. Bennie's eyes were wild and warm, and no longer calm at all. He expected his own eyes had much the same heat in them, along with a major quantity of startled discovery.

He got up, walked to the door, locked it, and returned to the bed, taking off his clothes on the way.

"Uh, Bennie, you with me here?"

"What? Oh. Right." And Fraser got up, the better to do likewise.

Naked, Ray somehow felt committed. This was stupid, right, but he still wanted— Well, what he wanted

he wasn't quite admitting yet. Fraser was smiling, looking at him, and Ray laughed. "What, never seen anything as good as this before? Forget it, Bennie, I know better, remember?"

"Oh, Ray, you're being silly."

"I know, but ya gotta admit, it's kinda ridiculous. Being silly is sometimes the best response." Whether it was the two of them, naked male bodies, sex itself, or all three, Ray wasn't certain precisely what he was referring to. Bennie didn't seem to care about the inexactitude of Ray's phraseology. He reached forward and tugged Ray back toward his bed. Ray allowed it, figuring another quick couple of mutual hand-jobs and maybe reality would return, so he sat down, rolled to his side and reached toward Bennie. Once again the man surprised him by not leaving the lead up to him. Bennie rolled toward him, making contact all up and down his body, and began to kiss him again, warm, and exploratory, and with a smile in it.

After a minute Ray just let it go, not thinking, not bothering, just enjoying how good it was to have someone working on him with such feeling. Fraser was stroking him, hands moving gently, appreciatively over his sides, down onto his butt. Gone was both the reluctantly distant Fraser of their first time, but also apparently the horny, out of control, needy guy of their subsequent evenings. Ray was getting turned on but he could still feel nothing urgent in Fraser's body and actions. Ray gave an experimental little hip thrust, and heard Bennie suck in his breath where his lips were now busy at Ray's throat.

So Ray did it again. Fraser's hand gripped his butt. By now, Ray would have expected pleas to take care of him, urgency.

Breaking the kiss, Ray asked, "So, who have you been taking patience lessons from? Thatcher?" The thought hurt, just a little.

Bennie's hand loosened its grip, and he said, "Ray." "I know, I know. Enough. Chivalry and all that. Sorry."

Bennie rolled onto his back, taking Ray with him. Ray pulled up a bit, straddling him, while Bennie continued his stroking. It was all very soft, very gentle, very cuddly. Ray was still afraid of the expression in Bennie's eyes, and soon lay down on Bennie's body, beginning to thrust against him, pushing his response away from the softness, away from the confusion, toward the familiar heat, the less complex physical drive. Bennie murmured, pushing up a little to meet the thrusts, reaching again to kiss, his tongue exploring with the beginning of hunger, his penis responding happily to the direct stimulation of Ray's.

Ray pulled back again, reached down and took the two of them in his hands, stroking and fondling their two erections. Looking down at what his hands were up to he felt a moment of mental dizziness. What was he doing? He shook it off.

Deliberately pragmatic, he said, "Whatta you want, Bennie? Hand job?"

Fraser's eyes regained some focus. "I'd like to, well, if you'll let me..."

"Hey, you wanna do something, do it. Anything you do I don't like, I'll tell ya, okay?" What the hell was he doing?

"Yes, Ray." Bennie gently rolled Ray over onto his back, crouched over him, and began kissing and exploring and stroking again in the same way Ray found quite scary in its implications. He thought about stopping him, he thought about his own stupidity again, but he let it go on. It felt too good not to. But his mind couldn't help but fight the pleasure. It was too gentle, it gave him too much opportunity to think, and to be afraid. He started losing it, softening up. He opened his eyes, planning on saying something about picking up the pace, but what he saw stopped the words in his throat. Bent over him, flushed and intent, Bennie was looking at him with that warm wildness in his blue eyes, and he was far from being in Ray's diminished state—his penis fully erect, dark red, leaking a little fluid, reaching toward Ray. Ray quickly closed his eyes again, the sight of Bennie's passionate physical response to him blazoned on his brain, shocking through his nerves, re-starting his flagging arousal. His face heated, and he gave a small gasp as his dick twitched. Bennie gave a little grunt, and breathlessly asked "Ray?"

Ray knew he should open his eyes, but he couldn't. He just said, a little roughly, "Anything, I told you." He had no idea what he was agreeing to, this side of Bennie seemed almost alien, it was so new to him. Yet it was hardly something he hadn't known in other situations. And tempered as it was by Bennie's continued concern for his own wishes, how could he fear it? He didn't fear Bennie. What he feared was in himself.

Bennie's hands trailed heat down his sides as the man slid down in the bed. Then he grasped Ray's penis, and Ray felt the hesitant soft kiss of lips on him there. He gasped, then murmured a surprised sound as Bennie took him into his mouth, lightly lapping at him. Then as Ray rolled his head back pushing instinctively for more, Bennie pinned him with a leg across both of his and was sucking hard to the same insistent rhythm with which he was thrusting his cock against Ray's thigh. The rhythm broke, stopped, and Bennie moaned into Ray's groin.

Ray felt the shocking gush of Bennie's ejaculation against his leg. Bennie slithered up and wrapped both arms around Ray, clutching his body tightly, panting with huge gasping breaths. With the loss of immediate sensation on his penis Ray felt his brain kick back into gear, gripping desperately for traction on this unknown new path.

Well, that settled that. He just couldn't believe that Bennie would do what he had done unless he felt what Ray thought he felt.

So what are you gonna do about it?

If I take him up on it...

What kind of thing would it be? There would have to be a lot of lying. Discreet Bennie had proved himself, but Ray wasn't sure he'd be up to lying on a regular basis.

What if I like it? What if I... Because if I do, he's gonna leave. Sooner or later he's gonna get assigned somewhere else. He'd never give up the job, he's gonna end up still stopping knife-wielding killers and runaway trains when he's an old Sergeant with seven stars on his shoulder like that Frobisher guy. And I can't follow him around Canada like some pet moose. Pet caribou. And Ma needs me here. I can't leave. So whatever I do, anything between us is doomed.

Oblivious to Ray's thoughts, Fraser recovered enough to raise his head. He was smiling, a little embarrassed edge to it, a small smile but a smile, dimple quirking. "Sorry, Ray."

"Jeez, Bennie, what for? I told ya," Ray said, more softly than he'd meant to. How did the guy get away with having dimples, too?

"I was going to make you feel as good as you did for me," Bennie said, sounding abashed and still apologetic.

Uh-oh. Admit I'm panicking here? Lie. "Nah, probably the extra wine. My fault. I'll take a rain check, okay?" Why the hell did I say that? What the fucking hell was he doing? How did Bennie make him feel so confused, so scared, but still so good? Simple, he wanted simple. Something he could handle. Simple, please. Just a little bit.

"All right." And Bennie leaned over and moved to kiss him again, then stopped, and asked with charming hesitancy, "Do you mind if I kiss you after...?"

"What, it wasn't in your grandma's etiquette book? It's okay, yeah." You just had to laugh. Ray leaned forward and kissed him, Bennie's response passionate and full of the oral equivalent of thank-you-kindly-Ray and the taste of Bennie with a light additive of Ray.

Calling himself a coward, Ray let it go with a few more minutes of cuddling, then announced they would



be sensible now. He got up to dress. Just keep running away, that's right.

Fraser must have burned out his brief flurry of taking the lead in sexual matters, because he went along with Ray's decision, with no protests. Once dressed, they kept their distance from each other.

That night, the troublesome Mountie safely returned to home and wolf, and Ma settled in for the night, Ray lay in bed. He was getting way too familiar with the geography of his bedroom ceiling. But no matter how much study he gave it, he couldn't find any easy answers in it. He couldn't stop thinking about the evening.

He kissed me. Bennie kissed me. Damn, it had been nice. The whole brief thing. Nice. Maybe it was just having a warm and willing body that really wanted to make him feel good. It had been a while. Quite a while, to be honest. But what his mind kept dwelling on was how Bennie's lips had felt, tentative and sweet, and the feel of the bullet scar against Ray's palm, the rise and fall of Bennie's chest, his friend's response to him, the look in his eyes, those eyes that were so coolly blue, but looked at Ray so warmly—blue wasn't supposed to be hot, was it? He wasn't thinking about his own body, not how he himself had felt, but how Bennie felt to him, under his hands, pressed tightly to him, gushing out come against his thigh, his tongue tasting Ray's mouth. Restlessly, he pushed at the covers. Maybe that was why he couldn't settle down and sleep. He had been all turned on but didn't get off. Maybe if he took care of that he could crash. Sure, it was just a physical problem. Sliding his hand inside his pajamas, he rummaged around in his mind for some suitably hot fantasy to fit onto Fraser's body—perhaps the man on his knees, Ray driving his cock into his mouth... wow, who woulda thought Bennie would suck him like that? Never in a million years. And then the way he hugged me, stroking my body so gentle. His skin's so soft, he's so warm... In disgust Ray realized that his hand had relaxed and his intended hot fantasy had simply circled back to sweetness. He grabbed the spare pillow, curled up on his side hugging it, and gave up. Rubbing his face on the pillow, he spent some time remembering the kisses, and finally fell asleep with a small, embarrassed smile on his face.

He was up at dawn, helping Ma through a coughing spell, getting her some lemon tea and a fresh box of kleenex. At seven Franny showed up to sit with Ma, and Ray headed off to work. Daylight and duty banished the sweet indulgent feelings of midnight, and Ray's doubts returned. He avoided Fraser for a couple days, not exactly running away again, more like avoiding the decision whether to run away for a further while. On the

third day, Fraser showed up at the station with a tall blonde woman.

"Ray, could I trouble you for a few moments?" Polite, businesslike, the Mountie on duty. It never happened. He'll let me keep running. If that's what I want to do.

"Hiya, Fraser. Sure, you know I never got anything to do around here," Ray responded sourly, keeping the thick file folder he was studying open in his hands. A week's work just wouldn't be a week's work without Fraser adding an extra day's worth or so.

"Oh, Constable, now I wouldn't want to cause your friend any trouble. Let's just..." The woman positively twittered. She was clearly upset about something, but then most of the people Fraser brought into the police station were upset about something. Because they were in trouble. And Fraser expected Ray to help them, just because he would. Oh, well. He was used to it by now.

Ray stood, leaned across the desk and put out his hand. "Ray Vecchio. How ya doing?"

Fraser beamed at him. Well, it was the slight smile about the eyes that Ray took for the Far North equivalent of a beam.

"Ray, this is Ms. Paula Nevlin. She's a writer from Toronto."

Shaking hands distractedly, Ms. Nevlin fussed, "Mr. Vecchio, Constable Fraser insisted you would be able to help, but I really don't think I need to be bothering you..."

"Come on." Ray lead them off through the chaos to a quiet interview room.

The woman was in Chicago researching a television script. "It's going to be on next fall, and I just wanted to get a little more local colour before I did the final rewrite. Of course, I have a backup of the script, but not the notes I took down on the back of the pages."

"So you lost your script in the park? Ah. Bennie, could I have a word with you?" Ray grasped Bennie's elbow, and led him outside into the hall.

"Bennie, why me? Just tell me what I did to deserve this? No, don't," as Fraser opened his mouth to do so. "I didn't even know you had television in Canada."

"Well, of course we do, Ray."

"Right. Hockey games."

"Now, Ray, that's not accurate. And you have hockey games on American television as well. Mr. Mustafi mentioned it."

Ray backed up against the wall to avoid a passing clerk. Female. Passing closer than necessary to Fraser. "Yeah, yeah, right. So she got a bag fulla newspaper instead of a bag fulla stirring tales of Canadian life suitable for Toronto..."



With a polite nod to the clerk, Fraser stuck to his agenda. "Ray, I don't believe you were listening. If she is here getting 'local colour' it must be a Chicago story."

"Suitable for Toronto television. Oh, boy, am I sorry I won't get to see that!"

"All of this is beside the point, Ray. I was hoping that you could help me look for her script."

Ray leaned back against the wall. "Bennie, one brown paper bag looks much like any other."

Smiling in triumph, Fraser played his ace. "But I have a lead, Ray."

"A lead?"

"A young man in the park saw a Mr. Nelson, apparently a regular, collecting newspaper from the trash cans. He sells it to

a recycling plant."

"Fine, so you can just go, and... Oh, no. You want me to look through garbage again!"

"Well, it's not garbage, Ray. Newsprint is just paper." Fraser was being rational.

Hands gesturing, expressing his disgust, Ray protested, "Yeah, paper that's been fished outta trash cans, paper that pigeons shit on, paper that's had really disgusting stuff wrapped up in it."

"Ray, the recycler says that the trucks come at seven. If we don't find it before then..."

▼ "I can't believe I'm doing this for you, Bennie. And why can't she help?"

"She is, Ray."

"Pointing out likely bags from a safe distance isn't what I'd call..." Grumbling, Ray continued to systematically unstack, check and restack anything in a brown bag. It seemed that the method of choice to recycle newspapers in Chicago was to collect them in brown paper bags. Bend, open, set aside.

By 6:47, Ray was adorned in black smudges—not all of them ink—and his back was protesting. This was worse than calisthenics at the police academy, and he'd hated them with a passion. Bennie, of course, looked pristine and was handling and sorting the stacked bags as efficiently as a robot. How come the guy's jacket didn't even ride up? Ray's shirt had come untucked after the first five minutes and he'd pulled it all the way out, and rolled up his sleeves. The ink probably wouldn't ever come out, and he'd liked this shirt. Even Dief looked spotless, though he didn't seem to be able to tell scripts from newspapers as far as Ray could tell, so what use he thought he'd be, Ray had no idea.

Bend, open, set aside. At 6:48 Ray looked into a

another bag, long past caring what awful thing might be in with the paper. Hmm.

Wincing, he straightened, and hobbled over to the edge of the huge metal bin. "Hey, lady, is this it?"

"Oh! Oh, thank you, Detective! Oh, this is wonderful," Ms. Nevlin twittered. "I've got to get back to my hotel, type up these notes."

"Glad we could assist, ma'am."

As soon as the writer was returned to her hotel, Ray told Bennie that he demanded to be fed and fed well, as soon as he was clean. They drove to Ray's house, and Ray headed straight for the shower, yelling down over the bannister to tell Ma they wouldn't be staying for dinner. When he finally thought he was ink-free, and had dressed in clean clothes and gone downstairs it was to find little Davie playing catch with Dief in the back, while Fraser and his mother watched from the steps.

"Come on, Fraser,

you owe me. Hi, Ma."

A wail erupted from Davie. The kid must be destined for opera. Ray shielded his ears. "Unca Ray, don't take wolfie. Deef stay with Davie."

"Bennie, he can't come to the restaurant. Might as well leave him."

Fraser checked with Mrs. Vecchio, and extraordinarily detailed plans for Dief's comfort were being worked out between all concerned parties when Ray's patience wore out.

"It's fine. He'll be fine. Davie'll run him ragged, Ma will feed him too much, we'll get him later. Let's go, already."

He hustled Bennie out of the house, took his remonstrations about Ray's lack of manners in silence, and headed for the restaurant he had in mind. But one more comment...

"That's it! Enough. I ruined another shirt, I'm tired, I'm hungry, and my back hurts."

"There's no excuse for bad manners, Ray, and your mother..."

"Yes there is, and you just heard four. Leave it."

"Yes, Ray."

"I gotta buy some coveralls, start keeping 'em in the trunk for the next time you make me dig through dumpsters with you. Actually, the Canadian government oughtta be paying half my dry-cleaning."

"Well, I could submit a requisition for reimbursement..."

"And how much paperwork does that take?"

"Well, there's a form 4017D and..."

"Don't tell me!"

"Understood."



The dinner was very good, and by halfway through an excellent steak Ray had started to feel less cranky. By dessert he was thinking about an apology for his earlier loss of temper. But when the check arrived, Bennie looked at it and said, "Oh, dear." Ray rethought the apology.

Reaching for his wallet, Ray growled, "Never mind. Add it to what you owe me."

"Thank you, Ray."

"Oh, just don't mention it, Fraser. Do not mention it."

Then when he got up from the table, a spasm seized his back as forty-five minutes of sitting on top of the hard labor in the aid of idiot Canadian writers combined to wreak havoc. He could move, at least, but God it hurt. He let Fraser know in no uncertain terms whose fault it was while he gingerly drove him home.

Fraser simply apologized and offered to rub it for him.

Ray gave it some thought. Stupid, maybe. But he figured the guy owed him, owed him big, and he just hurt too much.

"Okay, yeah, you can just do that."

Climbing the stairs, he regretted the decision by the second step. Each leg lift sent a twinge up his back, sharp and hot.

He stopped, waiting out the pain as it ebbed away slowly. Ignoring Fraser's offered arm, he leaned on the wall and grimly made it the rest of the way up to the man's apartment.

It actually was very nice, he thought. He lay face down on the sheet, the scratchy striped blanket shoved aside, and just enjoyed himself. Fraser had some system, all about finding not just the one pulled muscle, but working on all of them, following them in long progressions from shoulders down, thumbs gentling, then pressing, then digging, loosening each section. He had heard the part about the interconnectedness of the muscles of the back, but lost interest when Fraser lapsed into Latin, naming muscles and discussing them like species of exotic wild animals. He was almost asleep when Fraser actually reached his lower back and began to work on the one section of muscle strain and not its neighbors. Thumbs pressing into the injured area woke him with a jolt.

"Ouch!"

"Sorry, Ray."

"Ow. Ow."

"Now, Ray, if you tense against the massage I can't loosen it up. And you are undoing all the work I've done so far."

"Ow, Bennie. That hurts."

"Ah. Wait a moment. I have just the thing." Fraser patted him, then went away to the closet.

He returned with a square brown bottle and a ragged towel. "Take off your pants, Ray. You won't want to get any of this on your clothes."

One look at the bottle told him this didn't come from the Sav-Mor Drug Store. "What is that? It's not some sort of native Eskimo thing made out of dead walruses, is it?"

"Inuit. No. It's a sovereign remedy for sore muscles. The RCMP have been using it for years."

"All right." Ray shed the rest of his clothes and lay down again, staring suspiciously over his shoulder. When Fraser uncorked the bottle, the odor hit his nose like a roundhouse punch. He gasped, sinuses clearing as if they'd been roto-rootered. "My, God, Bennie, what the hell is that stuff?"

The man actually sniffed the bottle with what appeared to be pleasure. "Dr. Dilby's Patent Embrocation."

"What the hell is in it?" He was starting to get used to the smell, presumably in self-defense. It was clearly that or die, and the human body was well known for its ability to choose self-preservation.

Fraser tipped the bottle, watching the liquid slosh. "I have no idea, Ray."

"And you're gonna put that on me? What if I'm allergic? The way it smells I could swell up, turn purple, explode maybe. I think it's killed my nose already."

"Ray, Ray, Ray. I can assure you it will only make you feel better. No one has ever had any trouble with Dr. Dilby's."

"Don't use too much."

"Ray. I know what I'm doing."

Muttering darkly Ray subsided onto the sheet. Bennie poured a scant spoonful of the liquid into his hand, carefully corked the bottle, and began to work Ray's lower back.

It felt wonderful. Tingly, warm, sort of like the Vapo-Rub Ma had rubbed on his chest when he was a kid, but not quite the same. The intensity of the odor eased as it warmed from the contact with Bennie's hands and Ray's back. Within minutes Ray forgot his objections. Bennie's hands worked deep into his back, kneading heavily into his butt and the backs of his thighs. The soreness departed, the muscles feeling loose and sloppy under the attentive inch-by-inch assault. Bennie switched to a brisk circular rubbing that heated his skin, then covered him with the towel and the top sheet.

"Lie quietly. relax, and let it work in for a while."

"Mmmph."

The next that Ray was aware of was waking a couple hours later. He turned his head. Fraser was lying on top of the blanket next to him in bed, head propped against the wall, one of his father's diaries lying face



down on his red long-johned lap. He'd slid down a bit, and his hair was pushed up into a untidy squiff at the back.

Tentatively, Ray moved, waiting for his back to protest. It didn't. He carefully rolled up into a sitting position, trying not to wake Fraser, and padded away to the john. He checked the time, glad he'd called Ma when he accepted Fraser's invitation, so she wouldn't be still up, worrying about him. Coming back he stood, indecisive, one hand on his clothes where Fraser had folded them neatly on the table.

He should go home.

He looked back at the bed. Fraser looked dead to the world, mouth a little open. He looked vulnerable, and silly, and tired. Ray stood there looking him over, thinking about how the man could be so annoying, and yet so much a friend. Thinking about three nights ago. Thinking about handling problems by running away.

Ray sat down heavily on one of Bennie's horrible kitchen chairs, and dropped his head into his hands. What the hell am I doing? Why the hell did this have to happen? Walk away, man. It's not too late. He hasn't said anything. I haven't said anything. All we've done is jacked each other off. I can pretend it didn't happen. I can leave now.

If I don't...

Remember how he touched you, so fine...

I should go.

He'll leave me.

But, I want, I need...

I'm afraid.

"Stupid idiot," said Ray bitterly, and went back to Fraser's bed.

He lifted the diary off Fraser's lap, placing it with a stack of books on the footlocker. "Come on, Bennie." He shook Fraser sharply. "Come on. Get those off and get under the covers before I freeze out here and you get a stiff neck." Fraser opened his eyes, smiled a little muzzily at Ray, then did as he was bidden, sleepily peeling out of the long-johns. Ray got into bed, and held up the covers for Bennie to join him. Without waiting for permission, Ray reached for the guy's cock, wrapping his hand around its softness and squeezing firmly. He ignored Bennie's gasp, and began a fierce, forced rhythm, fueled by Ray's anger at himself.

Why would he stay with me?

I'm afraid.

I need him.

He'll leave me.

Fraser neither threw him out of bed nor made any

shocked comments at Ray's abruptness. His penis filled and rose swiftly in Ray's grasp.

I'm afraid.

I need him.

He won't stay.

Why would he want to?

Ray gave a harsh little laugh. "Do you want sweet, Bennie?"

Like the other night? Kisses? Romance, even? It's not gonna be like that." He threw his leg over Bennie's and began brutally humping himself against the long firm thigh muscles. "I don't think I have sweet any more, Bennie, it's all gone, burned away by guilt and sin and evil and loss. You don't want me. You can't want me."

"Ray..." Bennie's voice was rough.

"No, Bennie, you don't." He continued pulling, rubbing, hard, insistent hands demanding on Bennie's burgeoning erection.

"Ray." Bennie sounded hungry, wild. He reached up, pulled Ray close against him, kissing him hard. "I do want you, Ray, whatever way you are."

"No, you don't. You want what I wanted," cock leaving damp trails on the pale skin of Fraser's thigh, "years ago, when I thought I could have happiness. You don't" pull, "want" thrust, "me."

"Ray!" And Fraser pulled away from Ray's hands, from Ray's cock. He pushed Ray over bodily and straddled him, holding Ray's arms away, imprisoned over his head. "I want you. Not sweetness, not romance, you, Ray."

Ray twisted against the firm grip, anger and fear making him resist what Fraser was telling him. "No, you don't. You can't."

Over him, Bennie was flushed and panting, sweat standing out on his pale skin. His face was transformed, anger mixed with passion, unlike Ray had ever seen him. He released Ray's hands, moved hurriedly off him, then took his ankles, pushing roughly to position Ray where he wanted. He grabbed the tube of lotion off the footlocker, squeezed a glob onto his fingers, then jabbed his oiled forefinger into Ray's asshole.

"Fraser!"

Bennie was staring at him, eyes fierce. "Yes."

Eyes locked on blue eyes, Ray answered, "Yes," and reached down, grabbed for his own dick, pulling, rubbing hard to the same forced beat he had used on Fraser, feeling fingers probing, hurriedly rushing his muscles toward dilation.

Bennie pulled his fingers out, and without a request for permission or a word of excuse, positioned himself over Ray and began pushing inexorably into his body.

Spreading his legs wider, hips lifting, Ray watched Bennie do it, pulling hard on his cock, slicking up and down as the penetration continued. It was kind of dry, and it felt to Ray as if he could measure every inch of Fraser as he humped down onto Fraser's cock, humped up into his own hand. It hurt some. It hurt as he deserved to be hurt. This Fraser maybe he deserved, for a while, before he left. He knew that he couldn't deserve the Fraser that had kissed him so sweet and wild the other night.

With a needy, impatient whimper, Bennie pulled out, leaving a sore emptiness. He rolled Ray over face down, held his wrists behind his back, and got out of bed. Keeping one hand over Ray's wrists, he fumbled around for something. Ray felt the hot weight return as Fraser straddled him again, and moved his hands down to roughly caress Ray's butt. Fraser's weight pushed Ray down against the bed, and he rubbed his erection against the sheet, impatient. Seconds later the cock returned and Ray felt the slipperiness of its bulk pierce him again, hard, oilier, and then suddenly deep. Bennie moaned, and his hands frantically scrabbled at Ray's body, pulling him up. Then he reached under and slicked up and down, greasing Ray's erection, squeezing a little too hard to be pleasurable.

"Ray, I want you, Ray, Ray..." A flurry of hard fast thrusts and Ray felt Bennie's come gush into his body. A second's pause then Bennie was pulling out, renewing the pain, the soreness, the loss. "Ray, I want you..." Bennie rolled over, dragging Ray by main force on top of him, raising his own legs, tugging at Ray by his grip on his cock, pushing at Ray to do it to him. And Ray did, finding the muscle and forcing it to open, watching the pain blossom on Bennie's face, watching him welcome it, urging Ray on. "Want you," Bennie said, low, a statement not a demand, when Ray moved in, the head of his penis slipping, then finding the opening. As Ray forced his dick into Bennie's body, watching it push in deeper and deeper, he could feel where Bennie's cock had been, his ass still stretched from it as he stretched Bennie with his. Bennie was holding his legs up and apart, offering his body wide open for Ray, his cock lying half hard and still wet against his stomach. As Ray pushed in harder, Bennie moaned, pushing up to take it, and Ray could feel Bennie's come oozing out of his butt and down his leg. And Ray let his violence loose, his fear, his hurt, his certainty of loss, and thrust in harder, deeper, more bitterly, watching Bennie's ecstatic welcoming face, until Ray came, hard, deep, and angry, seeing Bennie shiver and twitch as Ray flooded into him.

Fraser kissed him then, letting his legs fall, pulling

him down tight against his chest, tongue echoing what cocks had done, saliva as juicy as come in his mouth. Ray pulled away, rolled over, and put his arm up to cover his eyes. Bennie followed, lying heavy on him, and started talking, breathless. "It's what you fear, Ray. Pain. Loss. No one to accept your damaged soul as it is. I know. But I will find what you want, to have you, Ray. If you want strength I have it. If you want pain, darkness, I have as much as you. I love you, Ray, and I want to give you my warmth and my joy but if you can't accept it, I will give you what you are willing to take. Even my darkness, Ray."

Ray lay still, head turned away from the words.

The intense voice went on. "And I want to take your pain as well as your sweetness. What you need to give me I want to take. Anything."

Ray couldn't move.

"My life, Ray."

Ray found words then, dull with pain. "You'll leave."

Slippery with sex, Fraser's hands roughly turned Ray's face to his. "Maybe. Or you me. Everybody has left me, Ray, why not you too? Or maybe I will leave."

Ray stared at him, anger resurfacing.

"What, you wanted me to deny it? I can't, Ray. And neither can you. I faced it. You do it too." Hot blue eyes did not blink.

Silence.

"I took the risk."

Ray shrugged Bennie off him, pushed him away to sit up, welcoming the wince of pain in his ass. "It's not a risk, it's a sure thing, Bennie. You aren't going to quit your job to stay with me."

Fraser sat up as well, cross-legged, the sexual flush on his chest only just starting to fade, cock still long. "Well, no, Ray. But I could say the same thing about you."

"So?" Ray wrapped his arms around his chest, annoyed to feel himself shaking. "So you gonna give me some seize the day crap? Some pukey platitude about smelling the damned roses?"

"No."

"No?"

"No, Ray. I don't think you respond terribly well to pukey platitudes."

"So?"

"Oh, Ray." Damn the man, the smile was back in his voice. "The truth is, I can no more guarantee my continued presence in your life than I can fly. But you can do no better. I'll let you decide, but I would really prefer it if you'd just agree to the whole thing, shut up, and come here and let me hold you."

"Even if it's not for ever?"

“Yes, Ray.”

But Ray couldn’t pull himself out of the defensive posture, couldn’t bring himself to reach out to Fraser. Afraid. Run. But...

“Ray?”

Slowly, as if the fingers had to be broken to loosen their grip, Ray unwrapped one hand from his ribs and moved it toward Fraser.

Bennie reached out, wrapped him in a strong-armed hug. Whether it meant ‘don’t leave me’ or ‘I won’t leave’ Ray couldn’t tell. Fraser pulled him down onto the bed, lay half-way across him, skin sticking to him, one hand behind Ray’s neck, the other possessively across him.

Ray lay there in the embrace, feeling half his body cooling in the night air, feeling Bennie relax and weigh more heavily on his leg and chest. Hearing his breathing slowing, matching Ray’s own breath for breath.

His hands reached for Fraser, wrapping over his shoulder and around his waist. He turned his head, resting his cheek against thick, springy hair. Ray’s hand just reached the upper edge of the scar. He moved it away, onto the shoulder. Bennie murmured a little, pressed against him.

It would never work.

It could never work.

Arms tight around Fraser, Fraser’s body plastered to his, Ray fell asleep.

▼ Finishing the last of his ironing, Fraser checked the

clock. Early yet, Ray wouldn’t get here for another half-hour at the soonest. He would read until then. He lay on the bed, back propped against the wall and reached for a book. His hand hovered, then settled on one of his father’s journals, the one with a place marked with a slip of paper. Dief came over and settled himself on the rug nearby.

‘I have found that while hunting and trapping are challenging tasks, the most difficult, and also the most rewarding, is taming. You are called on to deal with the animal’s fears, its instinct to run. You will try to handle it, and it will try to fight or escape. Time and again you may think you have won the battle of wills, the fight for trust, but find that you have not. You must use persistence, and guile, and infinite patience. You may have to change your strategy and alter your methods. Eventually you will know in your heart that you have achieved your goal, but there is always a risk that when you put things to the test, and let the animal loose, that you will be wrong, and it will run. Or you are right and it will stay with you but only until some stronger lure than the bond you have forged arises, and it leaves, sometimes after years with you. Then you wait and wait, never knowing if you will see the animal again.

Or you are right and nothing stronger than its attachment to you exists until the end of its days, or yours.’ Diefenbaker rose to his feet, looking toward the door. Fraser replaced the journal on the pile of books by the bed, and got up to meet Ray.

▼▼▼▼

He'd definitely have to bend Alfred's ear about that suit. Nipples, for God's sake, and exaggerating every limber muscle on that young strong frame, and as for the codpiece—

The man's hands curled into the bedclothes and clenched tight. He stared at the ceiling.

He wouldn't think about it any more. He just wouldn't, that was all. He didn't feel what he was feeling, it was just his exhaustion.

Bruce closed his teeth and eyes and willed the images away from his sleepy erection. It worked; his solitary life and training habits took over, sending him into the well of sleep and overriding everything but that most basic need.

It wasn't so easy when he'd drowsed awake in the early evening. His cock had gotten a second wind and was now seriously thinking about what had lulled him to sleep. This, on top of his old memories dredging up again, Chase's attentions stirring in him a deep longing for truth and intimacy—and such minor asides as the megalomaniacal plottings of Two-Face and the Riddler—had been keeping Bruce Wayne in a state of distracted confusion for weeks.

Badly distracted, enough to let himself walk right into Harvey's trap in the abandoned subway station. He'd thought he was dead, buried alive, his last reserves wrenched from him by the fall and the fire. He remembered the weight of the hot sand squeezing the breath from his lungs, sealing his eyes shut, grinding him to dry powder, waiting to spill down his throat when he opened his mouth to breathe...

But a hand had punched through the sand like a striking snake, seized his wrist, and pulled him out and free of the suffocating tomb with the easy strength of one who has spent a lifetime holding people a wire's edge from death. And there he had been, flashing that cocky, daredevil grin, the nimbus of Bruce's anoxia-clouded vision glowing all around him. In that moment...

Bruce Wayne groaned.

Harvey Dent was dead. Edward Nygma was babbling to himself in an Arkham cell. Chase Meridien was far from Wayne Manor. He himself had finally made his peace with the dark creature that had ruled his spirit since his tragic childhood. Now, Bruce Wayne had no choice but face and admit the instant attraction he'd felt for Dick Grayson.

Pedophile! shrieked the winged and halo'ed stone demon squatting in his gut, wrapped in her white shroud. (He knew that demon; for nearly thirty years she had cackled at him from her marble death-grip on his mother and father, mocking him with the pious quotes

about rest and peace engraved beneath her white wings.) The creature tormented him with images of the criminals he despised above all others—the sexual exploiters of children—

No, whispered the bat-cowled angel in his heart and mind, the muscular angel that had taken the grief-hollowed seven-year-old Bruce under his black wings. *No. You know the truth of it. That young man is no boy. It's not a boy's body that makes you hurt. From the moment you saw him on the trapeze, it wasn't his boyishness that attracted you.*

It's exploitation. He's your ward, your charge, snarled the demon with the face of the judges, the child protection services, the legal system ready to pounce on any image of impropriety.

He's your partner, your friend, the bat-angel corrected. *This would be anything but exploitation—that young rogue wouldn't allow himself to be exploited. Be careful that he doesn't exploit you.*

Bruce coiled in a fetal position, hard, refusing to respond to the images in his mind. *He's brave. He's smart. He's—beautiful. And I mustn't touch him—* He was touched.

He bolted upright, every instinct geared for fighting, only now realizing that his preoccupied mind had not responded to rustling or a sense of presence. He'd let his guard down again... When he realized who he was gripping by the upper arms, he let go as if burnt and fell back in the bed, gasping.

"Hey, hey, it's just me, it's okay," Dick said softly. He was wearing only the bottoms of his slate-blue pajamas.

"Don't—" Bruce clenched his teeth. "—ever—do that again. Let me see and hear you coming. My reflexes—"

"Kept you alive all these years," Dick concluded. "Yeah, sorry, that was a dumb move. Never sneak up on an elephant—one of the first things Dad and Mom told Robbie and me." He looked down, then away, then back at Bruce. There was some kind of hungry look on his face, a pleading for something.

"Dick?"

Dick remained silent for a bit longer. Then he said quietly, "When I saw him hanging over the edge of the island... It's like he stopped being someone I had anything to do with. He was just a criminal I had to put in jail. Not the guy who killed my whole family."

Brave. Smart. And carrying the same wounds in his heart.

Bruce Wayne reached out in the darkening room and rested a hand on Dick Grayson's shoulder, hoping that the younger man could feel in that grasp the strength and protection of black bat-wings. Everything physical



he felt was subsumed in the stronger need to save the fragile spirit from becoming a mirror image of his own twisted soul. "When I caught the Joker, I tethered him to a gargoyle just as he grabbed for the escape ladder on his helicopter, and he got caught between them, stretched out as if on a torture rack. It was *wrong*. I wanted him in Arkham; I didn't want to see him tortured. I could not bear to hear his screams of pain. If he'd only let go of the ladder, I'd have pulled him back up to wait for the police. He was just a psychotic, someone who loved killing too much, someone who should have been locked up." His voice was cold. "I'm not sorry he's dead. But I would have saved his life if I could. Is that how you feel now?"

The crown of the close-cropped head sank against clenched fists. "That's exactly how I feel." A deep breath, and Dick's next words were muffled by anger and his fists. "It's *wrong*! We were the Flying Graysons, we worked without nets. I flew to save Robbie's life. We were charmed—nothing could kill us, *nothing*. And he shot them down in two seconds like they were nothing." His body shook. "It's wrong! I should have wanted him dead!"

"It's not wrong, Dick," Bruce said intensely, both hands gripping the anguished youth. "It's right. It's the final test, if you want. You confronted the most personal of villains, and you treated him the same way you'd treat any other law-breaker. Because..." Bruce paused, blinking, and continued, his heart opening to the truth he had not been able to name at the time, "...because you knew that not all the rage you took out on him would stop your pain. If you could kill him, and bring him back to life, and kill him again, a thousand times, it still wouldn't help. It wouldn't make him feel the anguish you feel. It would only hurt you inside, and turn you into someone your family would have despised."

The strong round shoulders quivered. Dick made a strangled noise in his throat.

"And instead," Bruce said strongly despite the dry burning in his eyes, "you became someone they would have been very proud of. Someone as heroic as they all were in their last two minutes of life."

The body went very still. "Robbie and I were twins." Grayson's voice was flat and dead. Quavering. "His name was Robin." And the cool tough facade that had held the young man together since the tragedy shattered. Dick gasped, hard, and sank forward.

Bruce caught and held his ward.

"Sorry," Dick sobbed, "sorry, I'm sorry—"

"Don't be," Bruce snapped, holding him tighter. "Be grateful you can cry. I can't any more."

"It's over. It's over, it's all over..." There was no relief in that voice. Richard Grayson was finally mourning the loss of his life—his life with his family, with the circus—the only life he'd ever known.

Victory has a thousand fathers—defeat is an orphan. But someone should have told the sage that victory could be an orphan, too.

No words would comfort the young man. Bruce simply held him and let the warm summer rains thunder down; the downpour healed something inside the older man as well.

▼ The smudged young tough in work coveralls looking up from the engine looked more like a paroled grease-monkey than the other half of the "Dynamic Duo," as Vicki Vale had floridly christened the Batman-Robin team that had vanquished Two-Face. The only thing the young man lacked to complete the image would have been a cigarette half-drooping from the corner of his mouth. Despite the grime and the evidence of hard manual labor, he looked as if he were in heaven, and his face lit up even more as he saw what was approaching. "Perfect timing, Al. How's the hardware retrieval going?"

"Extremely slowly, Master Dick," Alfred replied as the young man tore into the thick sandwich that had been lying on the salver he bore. "I fear that I neglected to back up the spare hard disks during this entire Two-Face affair. As it is, Master Bruce is forced to re-input a great deal of updated information by hand."

Dick set down the decimated torpedo, leaned against the battered hood of the most distinctive automobile in Gotham City and took up the uncapped bottle of beer accompanying his lunch, upending the glass container with a flourish and setting it down nearly empty with an exhalation of pleasure. "You're a lifesaver, Al."

"And how is your own work progressing, Master Dick?" asked the old valet.

Dick waved his recaptured sandwich with a slight shrug. "I've done a lot of the basic repair work. Most of the fancy fix-ups will have to wait until after the parts come in. We'll work on the body once that's done. And after that we start work on the new Bat-plane." A look of lust gleamed behind his half-lidded eyes. "And *then*, I start on the Vincent Black-knight."

"And before all that, you're going to finish planning your curriculum for Gotham University," Bruce's voice rapped down into the work-pit.

"Up yours, Wayne," Dick called back, taking another swig. "I've been home-taught all my life, we had a tutor in the circus. Why should I start doing time in ivy walls now?"



“Because you need to establish your social persona as my ward, the way Bruce Wayne must be seen as the bored billionaire at all the right parties and fund-raisers.”

“Yeah, but those are—”

“Fun, Dick? In that case, you’re going with me to the Daughters of Gotham Dowager Ball in December. And you’ll dance with every debutante as all the mothers and grandmothers size you up as a prize breeding bull.”

Dick shuddered. “Bruce. You *wouldn’t*.”

“All part of the glamour of fighting crime,” Bruce said wryly. “When you’re done down there I want you to finish your course schedule for this upcoming semester. Dick...you really have to think beyond the idea of being Robin all your life.”

“Crap on that,” Dick retorted.

“Language, Master Dick,” Alfred reproved. “Master Bruce is right. You really must attend college.”

“Not you too, Al,” Dick groaned. “I thought you were on my side.”

“I’m afraid I am, sir.”

“What were you planning, Dick? A return to the circus?”

“Oh, great,” Dick said in disgust, slamming a wrench down on the tray of tools to produce a satisfyingly loud clatter. “So while *you’re* saving the city from a mad bomber or a costumed nutcase all by yourself, *I* get to do something vital like stay awake through a lecture on Chinese pottery, is that it?”

“Master Dick,” Alfred said nearly as sternly as Bruce, “if a criminal were to strike a museum, your knowledge of Chinese pottery could prove more useful than your ability to jump through a skylight.”

“Dick?” For the first time Bruce looked over the edge of the pit that held the half-repaired Batmobile. One corner of the man’s mouth quirked up. “Just remember. You can take college a few classes at a time; no one says you have to get your degree in four years. And it’s a lot easier to cut classes in college than in high school—if, say, you saw the Bat-signal in the middle of an exam.”

“Master Bruce...” Alfred groaned. He’d seen the way Dick’s face had lit up at the suggestion.

“But that works both ways,” Bruce said sternly. “If you see the Bat-signal when you’re on a date, you’ll have to take her home and come here. And if your grades suffer,” and the Batman glower was on Bruce’s face, skewering his charge, “it’s full-time for you, and you only get to fight crime on *weekends*.”

Dick was up and out of the cave in seconds.

“Did you have to say that, Master Bruce?” Alfred said. “The sooner we get the boy on a normal schedule—”

“Alfred,” Bruce laughed. “That circus boy hasn’t had a

‘normal schedule’ from the day he was born.” He quieted at the mutinous look from the man who’d been his closest friend for thirty years. “Alfred. I’ve been aware recently that I’m not getting any younger. I’ve got you here at headquarters—but I need a field partner; I can’t do it all by myself. He’s got everything I need; he’s young, he learns quickly, he’s brave—and he’s already saved my life once because he knows when to *disobey*. He’s a good defense fighter...” Bruce rattled off the list, unaware of how enthusiastic and cheerful he sounded. “The odd hours won’t be a problem for him, he’s got ideas of his own. I’m already figuring him into my plans, as if we’ve always worked together. I can’t explain it, Alfred—I think he was destined to come here and join our work.”

And he makes you laugh and smile—more than you’ve done in your entire life. Since his arrival you’ve stopped sounding older than I. I would never have wished Master Grayson’s orphaned state upon him—but I am grateful for what he is doing for you.

Alfred was a good butler, and said nothing. He left both his young men to their work in the Batcave, and returned to the kitchen.

Bruce pulled the Bentley into its slot and cut the motor. It was nearly noon. The Rolls was gone; no doubt Alfred was out shopping again, a young man’s appetite having caused the household grocery bill to skyrocket.

He should have been feeling hollow, lonely, or at least self-pitying. But all it took was the sound of whistling from where the motorcycles were parked, and all melancholy thoughts were sponged away. He thought of what he was planning for the owner of that cheerful whistle and was cheered himself.

“Hey, Bruce,” Dick’s voice called from behind the supports.

“Dick,” Bruce returned, disembarking from the Bentley. “Getting a start on the bike?” He rounded the corner and stared.

“You might say that,” Dick said without looking up.

The Vincent Black-Knight, one of 101 in the world, looked as if it had been scavenged and left for dead on the streets of Gotham. Most of the body was intact, but the majority of its features lay in parts all over a white sheet on the garage floor. Dick was seated cross-legged on the floor in his coveralls, industriously cleaning a cog with a cloth that had once been white; other cogs lay soaking in a can of clear fluid. Nearby lay several thick library books and one musty book that looked borrowed from a museum, all of them on motorcycle repair.

Judging from the picture on the page the ancient black

groggy with winter, to look into the clear bright eyes of Spring.

"I keep forgetting," Dick said simply. "You're me."

Bruce nodded; any pride or defensiveness he should have been feeling seemed unnecessary. The strong hands made him feel safe, protected—an unusual feeling in one more comfortable in the role of protector.

Dick drew Bruce forward and hugged him hard.

Slowly, awkwardly, Bruce's arms came up around Dick and returned the embrace; it was the expected response. He'd been hugged before, mostly by people whose family members he'd just rescued or by the rescued party themselves. Any memories of being himself hugged or held for comfort lay behind the wall of blood and roses, the implacable black wings; it had been part of his life before. He did not know the etiquette of such embraces; he was embarrassed, and moved beyond words by the young man's gesture.

"Thank you," he said simply when Dick let go of him.

Dick's eyes were very bright. He sat back down abruptly and took up the cog and cloth again, his head bent fiercely over the minor chore of cleaning the sticky gear. Bruce watched the crown of the man's head, and for the thousandth time restrained himself from reaching out to brush his fingers over the cropped fuzz.

"So it never—never gets any better." Dick's voice was very low.

Bruce was silent a moment. Only the truth between them. "Not in the way you mean," he finally said. "You get stronger. You learn to live with the pain—and you deal with it as best you can. But, no—that pain never goes away."

"Damn." The voice was very soft. Dick kept his head bowed. Perhaps it was sweat droplets that hit the white cloth; it was a warm afternoon for November.

It was so strange that a man who'd kept to himself, licking his own wounds his entire life, knew how to give aid and comfort to someone similarly wounded. Or not so strange, to render the service that had just been given.

Bruce squatted beside the still figure of Dick Grayson and wrapped one arm tight around the young man's shoulders. Those were indeed tears running down his nose, and Dick blindly accepted the proffered handkerchief without embarrassment. "Dick," he said quietly. "I cannot tell you how proud, and relieved, I am that you did not kill Harvey. Not for his sake, but for yours. Revenge eats you, until nothing is left when the act is accomplished."

"He died," Dick whispered, catching his breath.

"Yes. And it wasn't enough, was it." It was not a question. "If you had been the one to kill him, it still

wouldn't be enough. Your parents did not raise you to kill, Dick. They raised you to fly."

"I dream..." Dick took a big breath. "I'm flying again, doing the Death-Drop, Dad's waiting to catch me. Then I see that purple face, the bomb goes off, I grab for Dad's hands, I miss, I fall. Now I'm the one falling to the ground."

Bruce simply held him.

"I know what that dream means." Dick's voice was flat. "I'm finishing what Two-Face began. The Flying Graysons are dead."

"Not this flying Grayson." Bruce squeezed his shoulders again, then let his arm drop naturally. He could not have asked for a better time in which to spring his secret. "You need to fly again. And I need you to supervise some alterations in my gym equipment."

Dick's head lifted. The cog still in his hands drifted down to touch the dropcloth. His legs unknotted.

"You'll know better than I what needs to be done to set up the rig you worked on in the circus." And for the first time in what felt like a long day, Bruce smiled. "If you're going to be my partner on the streets, I need you to teach me some of your trapeze tricks."

The look Dick Grayson gave him was one kings have died in battle to receive. It went straight to Bruce Wayne's heart and pierced it through and through, conversely making it beat harder. *How can it be that you can't hear my heart from here?* Bruce reminded himself to smile and say, "It's a plan, then?"

"Yes," Dick whispered, eyes bright. "Yes!" He hauled himself to his knees, seized Bruce's upper arms and drew him down again in another hug, his grin brighter than the chrome on the Harley. Then Dick grimaced in embarrassment and let go; only then did either realize just how grimy Dick's hands were from his messy work and just how much damage they had done to the expensive camel jacket Bruce was wearing.

To cover his embarrassment Dick's voice became businesslike. "You'll, you'll have to be trained as a catcher, of course, not a flyer. Get Shaky Pete, he did our rig, he'll know what I need, I'll tell him it's to keep my hand in..." His voice steadied and grew stronger with his authority on this subject.

Bruce nodded in an idiotic head-bob, listening to the voice lift and soar, even as his heart tumbled in his chest.

He would never lay another hand on the young man again if it meant that Dick would look at him again in that same way. The steady lifeline of Dick's hands on his shoulders, Dick's arms around him, Dick's exuberant grip on his arms were well worth the cost of a soiled Armani jacket.



Not just the instant physical attraction to a beautiful young man that had caught him right away, then; not only the horrifying *deja vu* that had bound him to the tormented spirit inside.

What he had felt for Chase Meridien was the moon in daylight, pallid and bloodless before the blazing glory of the sun that burned inside him now.

I am in love.

Not even the most holy and epiphanous of internal transformations are exempt from intrusion. "...so I'll never be a drag on you again."

Bruce blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me, Bruce, I was worse than useless to you at the end."

Bruce looked at the angry young man, this time trying to focus beyond the event that had poleaxed his brain to see Dick's self-castigation. Ah. "I think...ah, I think what's more important is what happened inside you, rather than, than the case. You met the man who murdered your family face to face, and you took him alive."

"Yeah, and then I got caught by him," Dick muttered, still not looking at Bruce. "My first job, and I blew it. I was a liability to you. Maybe I should change my name to Hostage Boy."

Bruce didn't—quite—release the burst of laughter that wanted out; that angry self-pity was such a trademark of men in their early twenties. If he laughed or made light of this Dick would be hurt—and for Dick to be hurt was unthinkable now. "It was your first field assignment," he said soberly. "You let your guard down. It won't happen again."

It didn't help much—Dick was still angry at himself. "Stupid. Clumsy—"

"Some day," Bruce said, smoothly breaking the tirade, "perhaps, I may tell you about my first time on the street as Batman."

That got Dick's attention. An unholy smile lit up the young man's face. "That bad?"

"Nearly," Bruce said deadpan, his heart pierced by the smile.

"Oh, I've *gotta* hear this," Dick said with an evil grin.

"Some day," Wayne repeated himself smoothly, rising. He looked down at his friend. "Perhaps."

And Bruce left Dick to his dismembered motorcycle, going into the house proper. He was very proud of himself, and grateful that the stylish long cut of the jacket had hidden his full reaction to his inner revelation.

"Good afternoon, sir," Alfred said with his usual warm formality. "Shall I prepare luncheon for you now?"

"Half an hour, Alfred," Bruce replied calmly, walking

past the old retainer and starting up the long spiral staircase. "I'm going to shower first."

But not all the cold water in the Gotham Reservoir would numb that ache in his heart.

hold on, hold on to yourself, for this is gonna hurt like hell

▼
Bruce lay prone on his bed, naked, skin ice-cold from the water, shaking and holding the pillows close to his chest, trying to stop the pain that made him bite his lips to bloodiness, that rumbled in his throat, that wanted to cry out against this intruder. As he had suspected, the shower had not helped.

Pain was nothing new to Bruce Wayne, nor was grief. His heart had been one solid ball of pain since the simultaneous loss of his father, his mother, his sense of security, his belief that the world made sense, and his childhood in the space of seven seconds; that black iron ball had battered and pounded him from the inside, beating him into tempered steel even as his mind picked up everything it could in an effort to fill that void. That hard ball was now a steady hammering at the outer shell he wore even when he was out of the Batman armor.

Grief he could handle; rage, hatred, lust, and loneliness had all consumed him at one time or another. He had even succumbed to them at times; he had slept with Vicki Vale, and Selina's rough tigerlike games still featured in his most erotic fantasies. With Vicki it was simple ordinariness he'd craved. Selina/Catwoman's recognition of his own Bruce/Batman dichotomy had filled his maw with the realization that he wanted to be known, seen, understood by someone—someone who could also be a companion, a mate, a partner. Fond as he was of Alfred...

But Selina was dead saving his life. That had started the dreams that had troubled him into seeking Chase Meridien.

He'd thought Chase was the one. She was beautiful, knowledgeable in her specialty, a cool sense of humor, tougher in a crisis than she looked. He'd sensed a glimmering of that partnership with her, had reached for it and her—

And he'd been blindsided by the real thing under his own roof, by Alfred's surprise. The instant he'd seen Dick in the Robin suit everything had quietly clicked into place, and solitary crimefighting had become unthinkable between one breath and the next.

Dick, angry and irreverent and stricken—Dick, a younger version of Bruce, who could be rescued from the emotional quagmire in which Bruce had waded his entire life. Dick had stolen the Batmobile for a joy ride—



and while he'd been out he had taken on an entire gang, single-handed and unarmed, to rescue a citizen. Dick had attacked Batman in a rage of grief—and not two months later he had saved Batman's life. Dick had seethed with his plans for revenge and murder—and when his enemy was finally helpless he had extended his hand to pull him to safety, sensing his duty lay beyond even his own pain.

It was instinct and synchronicity, parallel lives and the persistence of evil. It was youth and beauty, strength and wildness.

He thought of two scenarios: someone else as Robin fighting beside him, or Dick Grayson at Wayne Manor doing nothing but fixing up motorcycles for the rest of his stay. He'd rather have Dick on any terms than someone else as his Robin.

A friend; a partner.

And now, this pain that ate him from the inside. Grief and loss and aloneness had been his from seven years old, but a new pain beat at him now. His heart was not an iron ball now but a glowing ingot, flooding him with heat and light from within. This pain was the pain of blood returning to a frozen limb, one frozen for twenty-eight years.

He took deep breaths, trying to overcome the pain, to move with it and find its core, and when he did that he uncovered more truth:

During that double plummet on Claw Island, he had saved Chase's life because the Batman was sworn to defend the law-abiding citizens of Gotham from its villainous underbelly, and he was honor-bound to make every effort to rescue the hostage. He had saved Robin's life because he would have been unable to survive the loss of Dick.

Not that he wouldn't have grieved for Chase—but at that moment he saw everything clearly, saw her pallid moon eclipsed by that plummeting sun, and he knew he would never again go to her as a lover. But with Dick—

He rolled with that pain.

What if he *were* to go to Dick and say "I want you, I'm attracted to you, I wish to sleep with you"? Would Dick even respond with anything besides ridicule or silence?

Perhaps. There was a wildness and a lawlessness to the young man that hinted at such a sexuality, or at least the verve to try anything interesting at least once. Dick could very well be gay or bi. Even if Dick's reaction was to decline, they could find a way around the one-sided attraction to keep working together.

But that wasn't the truth; not what Bruce truly felt. And his trepidation at Dick's reaction to a sexual propo-

sition was nothing beside the water-gutted terror of imagining Dick's reaction if he went to the young man and said what he truly wished to say— "I love you, I need you in my life, never leave me."

The young man had lost his entire family and way of life less than six months ago; he had been thrown into a darker, more dangerous world than the circus that had been his home since birth, and had nearly been killed by his family's murderer not two weeks ago. And to die falling, bound and helpless, surely the nightmare of all trapeze artists—

Stresses piled on stresses. Bruce's admission could be the one that broke the camel's back. He had not received any signal from Dick that his feeling was reciprocated—not even that Dick was attracted in any way to Bruce.

Dick Grayson had lived with a traveling circus all his life; he'd never stayed in one place for long. If Dick felt threatened, overwhelmed, unable to handle a one-sided passion in this fixed place, wouldn't he simply take his motorcycle and leave?

Bruce would go to his grave with his love unspoken rather than see that day dawn. But just now his pain threatened to send him there anyway.

"Master Bruce?" Alfred behind the door, discreet as always. He was there to remind Bruce to come down for lunch, down at the dining room table, where Dick would already be sitting. "Are you well, sir?"

He could not, he would not, send Dick away even as he himself teetered on the edge of a disastrous crisis.

He would go away, away from everything, and stay away until he could tame this new pain that had taken up residence inside him. He had saved the city one more time; surely the city would allow Batman time away from his nighttime duties.

Just one more time. Nonchalance and distant affection.

"I'm fine, Alfred," Bruce said, rising from the bed to dress. "I'll be down in ten minutes."

He had fought with broken bones; he found he was able to eat lunch with Dick. He did a good job of it, even finishing most of whatever it was Alfred had prepared.

"Dick, you organize the rig set-up from start to finish," he said casually to his plate. "I'm going to be out of town for some time. At most a month."

"What the *hell*—" Dick started, whipping his head around.

"Start your studies, prepare the rig, but do not go out on the streets until I return," Bruce said coldly. "You'll need to be trained, and your reactions honed."



"Wait a sec, where the hell do you think *you're* going?" Dick snapped.

"Master Bruce?" Alfred echoed, his tone of puzzled disapproval voicing the exact same sentiment.

"I need some time alone. I'll be back." Bruce rose from the table, making an art of not meeting either set of eyes. "Don't worry about my luggage, Alfred, I'll handle it myself." He headed for his rooms. "Remember, Dick—not until I'm back and the rig's in place."

Thank God it was over. He didn't think he could take another minute of Dick's stunned silence beside him at the table.

Two bags would be enough. Bruce could carry the entire expected retinue of a playboy billionaire bachelor anywhere in the world, but knew how to carry everything he needed in a belt around his waist. Two bags were a good compromise, and Bruce Wayne's private jet waited in its private hangar at Gotham Airport.

Where to? Alaska? The Gobi Desert? Borneo?

Bruce realized he was thinking in terms of exile, barrenness; he wanted some place quiet and away from people, somewhere to sit and think, far from the sight and sound and nearness of that beautiful young man who had taken his place beside Bruce as naturally as he had once flown forty feet above the crowds without a net.

He was only going away until he could control this need inside him. Now that he knew what that need was, he had to keep it tamed, locked tightly away. Perhaps, in a few more months, maybe even within a year, he could gradually release the truth and let Dick decide if he could act on it or not. If not...

He leaned over his open suitcase, hollow inside.

Damn it, he *had* to control this. He would control this. Men have died and the worms have eaten them, but not for love. He would live. He would survive. This was *not* the worst thing that had happened in his adult life, it wasn't. It wasn't.

The door thumped loudly. "Bruce, let me in! Now!"

That was the worst thing that had happened.

"Let me in, dammit!" The doorknob rattled loudly.

It was over.

Bruce stared at his bag, at his hands. What he felt, what he needed to say to the young man, was trembling inside him like a snow overhang about to turn into an avalanche. He could control physical pain, he could contain himself in the presence of enemies, but this territory was new and untraveled for him. He would not be able to control what he said.

So. As quickly as this, his time with Dick was over. He had at least gotten a kiss from Selena.

As he was turning toward the door, it opened. Dick smoked in and the door banged shut behind him. He was in the leather jacket and jeans he'd worn in the garage. "You had your chance," he said coldly, and slammed something small and metallic on the inlaid and polished ebony table, probably leaving a permanent mark from the sound of the contact. "Al gave me the key. I didn't want to have to use it. So there is one other locked door in this museum of yours."

Should have taught him how to pick a lock, Bruce thought irrelevantly, mind locked in panic. Alfred had given Dick the key, and at the moment that didn't bear thinking about.

Those angry hazel eyes bored into his own, so intense and beautiful. "Mind telling me where the hell you think *you're* going?" Grayson snapped. "And why you didn't tell Alfred? Not telling me—well, that's bad enough, I'd *hoped* you could start to trust me," and the look of plain blunt hurt on the young man's face was painful beyond words to Bruce, "—but not telling *Al*? He's as baffled as I am."

Bruce threw up an ice wall, trying to stave off the coming avalanche. "I need to be by myself for a while," he said coldly, turning back to his open case and folding a sweater into the interior. He had to keep his back turned now—he was no longer wearing his long jacket, and his reaction to Dick's presence was unavoidably present.

"But why? And why not tell anybody?"

"I need—to recover after my breakup with Chase."

"Bullshit." The word landed like a whipcrack on Bruce's back. "You need to tell Al or me why you're *really* running scared."

"Not...running," he ground out, the ice blocks grating against each other, ready to crack beneath the weight...

"Dick, I haven't had a vacation in years. I'm simply exhausted."

He could hear the faint *shushhing* sound of leather; without looking behind him, he knew that Dick had just folded his arms and was now in a loose straddle, head cocked to one side. "Uh huh. You're so exhausted that you didn't tell Al you're leaving, you won't turn around to look at me, and you're not keeping track of your lies.

"And you *are* lying, because you can't do it right. I can't lie either—not convincingly. That gang knew I wasn't Batman when I took them on.

"Bruce," and now Dick's voice was so gentle it pierced Bruce's heart and his guts and his eyes all at once. He sank his teeth into his lower lip in a desperate attempt to make the pain stave off the trembling snow. But the warm gentle voice bored into him, melting the



ice wall. "You *can't* lie to me. You *are* me, and I'm you. You knew what I felt from the very first, about every-thing. Why won't you trust me now? Why won't you tell me?"

The wall fell, block by block, a thundering sound of ice. Bruce's eyes were tightly shut, his hands buried in the folded clothes in his open suitcase, clenched tight around shirts and sweaters. "I don't want to lose you," he grated. "Dick, the truth does not make you free. It only explains why you are in pain. You've learned that much."

"You're running away from me."

Another bolt to his heart. "No," he gasped. His tight-shut eyes felt on fire.

"I'm not just a friend or partner to you, am I?"

"No." A whimper, a moan—futile denial as the arrows hit closer and closer to the mark...

"You want to sleep with me."

This time, the only sound that escaped was a whine of pain from behind a closed mouth. Bruce's eyes were so tight-shut he saw lightning flashes.

"Geez, Bruce! You mean this is all about you getting turned on around me?" That exasperated, angry tone held more intimacy than a sultry confession of reciprocated passion ever could have held, and it was a red-hot skewer. "You've been ripping your guts out over wanting my ass? Is that *all*?"

"No, it's *not* all!" Bruce Wayne roared, even as something flooded his blazing eyes to stop the terrible burning pain. "It's not all there is, I wish it were!"

Angry, enraged, stricken with a grief that waited in the wings to tattoo his heart, Bruce opened his eyes and coldly swiveled to face Dick Grayson, glaring at the young man in black as best he could with his blurry vision, as if through wavy glass.

"I wish it were just that," he snarled again, his anger the only thing that could get past the paralyzing pain wrapped hard around his throat and that kept him from collapsing. He didn't give a damn any more that Dick could see his erection clearly through his trousers; there were no more humiliations to fear before the greatest one to come.

But Dick's look of stricken disbelief was not aimed at the ridiculousness of the swollen bulge tenting Bruce's expensive camel trousers. He was staring into Bruce's eyes. "You said you couldn't do that any more," he said softly, like a child who catches a parent out in a lie.

And before Bruce Wayne could react (Before he could react? Was this the same man who rescued two plummeting people in mid-fall?), Dick Grayson's hand was up, fingers half-curved, the back of one hand

brushing at one cheek. Dick pulled his hand back and stared at his knuckles. He looked back up at Bruce. "Now I know," he whispered.

"No you don't," Bruce snapped, heedless of his hot wet eyes, heedless of his erection, heedless of the astonished look on Dick's face. The snow was thundering down, and when it ended he would be buried deep, buried for millennia. "And that is *not* all. If I only wanted to fuck you that would be easy to control," he said harshly. "I know how to deal with lust.

"It's worse than that, Dick. I love you. I am in love with you. I need you in my life. I want you at my side and in my arms and against me and inside me, and I want to be beside you and inside you. I want your fists beside mine in a fight; I want your mind to join mine over a puzzle; I want your fearlessness with mine when people are in danger. I want your hands to pull me to safety, and to reach for mine when you need to be saved. I want your eyes looking at mine over a single pillow, and your body joined with mine in one bed. I want your mouth and your ass and your cock and your heart to be a part of me, and I want mine to be a part of you."

The snow that fell so hard was hot and wet, and it fell down his cheeks. He was watching Selena electrocute herself all over again, but this time his own words were providing the electricity. But he hadn't cried when she'd died.

"Stay here. You are welcome here. I will take myself away until I can control myself. I will never bring this up again. I will never approach you in a non-professional capacity, if that is your wish."

Was this the Dark Knight of Gotham, the black-winged terror of the underworld whose mere presence had been enough to scatter a savage gang—this man in tears who was only a heartbeat away from sinking to his knees before a man a decade his junior, whose last words were a near-whispered "Only don't leave. Please, Dick. Don't leave."

Dick stared at Bruce in silence. He took a deep breath.

Don't leave. Oh, please don't leave.

"And here I was hiding everything so I wouldn't scare you off," Dick said. Slowly, the cocky grin appeared and curled broad across the young man's face. And he stepped forward, advancing on Bruce.

Bruce watched this, numb. This was a joke, it was obviously a joke, Dick was teasing him for desiring him. Let him tease, let him taunt, as long as he was not frightened or angry enough to go away.

But when Dick's arms went around Bruce's neck and

What is *Real*? the Velveteen Rabbit had asked.
This is real.

Stupid of him, ridiculous. He'd let his ingrained pessimism cloud his perception of reality. He should have known this would be all right between them.

Strong muscles molded against strong muscles through silk and leather and wool. Strong muscles, and thick hard cocks. It only made their kisses wider and deeper. Nothing their cocks did with each other's bodies would be any wilder, deeper or more intimate than the depth and intensity their mouths shared now. No more intense or intimate, perhaps, but surely pleasure beyond belief, only joy and lust appeased, a deep hard hunger sated. Dark wild thoughts coiled up into his brain, slithered into his cock.

"Bruce, you're—"

"You're mine," he said. His doubled fists gathered Dick's leather jacket together and pushed together hard, forward.

Dick stumbled backward, the back of his knees caught the bed and he went sprawling on the bed, making a small noise of pain as one outflung wrist banged against the edge of the open suitcase.

Bruce simply yanked both bags off the bed, clothes flying in disarray from the open case as it hit the floor. His fists recaptured the jacket and his thighs straddled Dick's, and his eyes bore into the stunned, transfixed hazel eyes over the swollen red mouth. He continued his conversation. "Your ass is mine, and I'm going to fuck it until you can't walk. Is that all right with you? Because I'm going to do it whether it is or not." His thighs gripped hard, felt hard muscles shift beneath. The power of his lust swam through him; it was relief as much as arousal to state his mastery over Dick's startled body, to tell the truth of what he wanted and felt.

Dick's hands gripped his upper arms. His eyes never left Bruce's face, and his eyes were hot. Dick's heart pounded hard beneath his bunched fists, painful against his knuckles. Dick's parted mouth was panting hard. His cock jerked, visibly, even through the heavy denim of his jeans. He was going to punch a hole through the fabric unless—

Bruce let go and sat back on his heels, buttocks resting on Dick's knees. "Undo yourself. And me." His own hands rested upon his thighs, unmoving even when the same strong hands that had pulled Bruce from a collapsed subway tunnel trembled at unbuttoning his fly.

His own hands swooped in instantly, capturing both of Dick's hands. He pressed them to his freed groin, at the bulge in his silk underwear; he wrapped the hands around the cock and held them there as he pumped a

little, stroking in ecstasy. "Feel it," he said, squeezing the hands around the cock again. He was hard and exultant with his power over this strong young Turk—and here and now, with this man, he was allowed and encouraged to have such dark unheroic thoughts. "Feel how big and hard you've made me. You're going to make me small and soft again, too. You'll do it with your mouth, and with your ass." He jerked his cock through the young man's gripping hands again, and then released Dick's hands so that he could wrap his own hands hard around Dick's head, stroking the velveteen fuzz at the top fiercely. "Strip me to the thigh and suck me." He knelt up a little bit, to allow the man to open and peel him.

One lovely advantage to being a billionaire was not having to worry about one's clothes in the middle of an emotional scene. Motorcycle grease on his jacket, rips and tears in his trousers, cum spattering fine Armani, they were all to be ignored.

Those strong, hot acrobat's hands gripped at his buttocks, sank deep in the iron muscle. Bruce shuffled forward on his knees, still straddling Dick's body, his balls brushing close to the denim's zip, the coarse cotton of the T-shirt, his bare thighs slithering past the black leather and rough buckles of the jacket. Dick was still dressed. And he was trembling beneath Bruce's body. His mouth parted wide even before Bruce reared up, aiming, and Bruce's hands brought the young man's head forward. Bruce wetted Dick's lips with seed, parted them, stretched them wide and plundered.

Dick sucked.

Oh. Oh, bliss. Sweet as wild honey, wild as a tiger, loud and coarse and utterly wonderful. He was as transfixed as the young man sucking him so sweetly; his hands gripped Dick's head, but Dick was the one who moved over and over Bruce.

Soon a moaning Bruce was fucking that wanton mouth. Wanton it was—Dick worked his throat against the immense cock inside him, wetted and slicked it with saliva, swirled his tongue round the head, nibbled in just the right places.

How many villains had longed to hear the cowed crusader whimper? If only they had known how very easy it was to inspire that sound...

"Oh fuck...oh fuck...oh fuck..." he moaned, trapped between strong hands and that delicious mouth. Orgasm was rising in him, beckoning to him, promising—

"No...no..." and he pushed at Dick's shoulders, hard, pushing strongly until his cock was free, chilling in the air. Dick gasped for air, his lips red and wet and swollen, looking up into Bruce's eyes—the same heart-stopping look of worship and love that had flattened Bruce only



that afternoon. He was so young, so beautiful, and Bruce wanted so much more from him than a fully-clothed blow job.

Bruce dismounted the younger man and stood beside the bed, still hard as a rock. Dick sat up, still looking dazed, staring at him.

Without a word Bruce heeled off his shoes and stripped off his trousers and silk boxer shorts. He reached up to unbutton his shirt only to find both wrists held in a light but unbreakable grip. Dick pulled his hands away and his head came in. This open-mouthed kiss was wider, deeper, stronger, hotter. Bruce pulled half-heartedly against the implacable grip even as his mouth was taken, filling him with a musky taste that was different from the last time Dick had kissed him—the taste of his own cock, he suddenly realized with a thrill of lust that jolted through his body and tightened his balls even more.

His wrists were released as Dick's hands moved to the top button of Bruce's shirt, slipping the fine silk off his shoulders as it was carefully freed of each mooring; as the shirt was pulled down further and further, Bruce's arms were pinned at his side by the silk material.

Dick's mouth released Bruce's from its second fucking and Dick's head moved in, all velveteen bristle over a beautifully-shaped skull against Bruce's neck and shoulder. Bruce gasped, convulsed as that wicked mouth seized his flesh again, as Dick's thighs clasped his cock. Dick's arms went around him, leather warming against his bare back, strong fingers digging into his ribs; Bruce was naked against him, chewed and chafed, his body held fast by leather, his arms pinned by silk and his cock grasped by brutal denim. The noises he made were loud, guttural sounds.

Bruce wanted it. He wanted more. He wanted to be held down, held fast, fucked, sprayed with Dick's semen, bound with silk and leather, to be slicked and mounted again and again by this beautiful young savage. And he would, oh he *would*—if not now, another time. The future for both of them unfurled bright with promises and dark with men's desires.

Dick's belly rubbed against his; his mouth moved up from shoulder to throat, gnawing wetly on Bruce's Adams-apple, sly fingers at his back moving south

oh dear god oh my god you're going to

moving strongly over the round hard buttocks, stroking so deeply they would leave score-marks for days in the skin, moving between and inward

i can't i can't take much more of oh dick dick

and then the strong fingers found his center and depressed the nerves, breaching him, filling him

ah god ah my sweet oh darling oh dearest

The mouth caressed his neck. The fingers moved.

And only the coarse pain chafing Bruce's cock kept him teetering, a hair's-breadth from spraying out his hot need all over Dick's jeans.

Dick released his throat, gasping and damp with sweat; his trapped swollen cock rubbed blindly at Bruce's belly through the heavy jeans. His panting breath puffed hot on damp flesh, stirring their musks together to eddy around them in a narcotic cloud of lust.

Bruce sucked in a breath and skewered the glorious eyes with his own. "I want you naked," he hissed. "Strip for me." He wanted to see that cock hard and wanting him.

Dick grinned his daredevil grin and released Bruce all at once, dazed and gasping and bereft of all touch. He shrugged off the black leather jacket, heeled off the sneakers, tugged off the T-shirt, unzipped and peeled the jeans away from his body like the skin off a banana, tugged off the socks, hooked his thumbs into his cotton jockeys and kicked them off. The whole thing had taken less than ten seconds. "There, I'm naked," he said, and his eyes glowed. "Now what?"

Bruce looked. He saw that the flattering codpiece on the Robin costume had not been an exaggeration of Alfred's. "The Boy Wonder," Vicki Vale called Robin in her gossip news column. If she only knew...

His perusal was cut short by a yell and a flying dive from Dick that sent both of them onto the bed. Bruce flipped Dick over his head and whirled to face Grayson, crouched on all fours and grinning like a tiger. Dick landed, rolled and was up again. Bruce countered his next lunge with a scissors kick and leaped on Dick with a war-cry.

They tussled and grappled, laughing, and Bruce's heart flew like a bat's. This was a brand-new sensation for him—it was playing with a younger brother, wrestling with a playmate, and training a partner all at once—beyond the constant physical contact and stimulation that sensitized and aroused him to a high sharp pitch.

Dick came in over one shoulder. Bruce simply ducked and pinned the panting, grinning Dick when he overshot and missed. He was grinning widely himself. "Change your fight pattern, Dick. You don't want your opponent able to guess your strategy. This is why you need more training," Bruce said smoothly.

Mine.

Smoothly Bruce leaned his weight on the hands pinning Dick's strong round shoulders. His thighs casually parted Dick's.

The strong hands moved down the limber, muscular



torso, swept to the back, gathered up the hard round buttocks like green peaches. He wanted this flesh split open and wrapped hard around his cock. To thrust deep, to the balls, into that eager young muscle, and just *take* him until he was spent—

“Gonna fuck me now, Bruce?” Dick whispered hoarsely. “You wanna go up my ass and fuck me?”

“Since I first saw you,” Bruce snarled. “You’ve been in my dreams since that night.” No apologies for brutal thoughts or brutal words. They were the same. They understood the darkness inside each other.

A lazy, ruttish grin curled on Dick’s face and his thighs parted. “Then do it,” he whispered through his teeth, a challenge. He reached one hand over his head and under the single pillow still on the bed after the rumpus. When it emerged it was holding a tube. “Stuck it there for safekeeping when you threw me on the bed.” He uncurled his fingers from around the offering and grinned like Coyote.

Bruce doubled over and laughed, giddy with love. Oh god, this man was *never* going to stop surprising him, ever—“You do it,” he gasped.

Dick’s eyes glowed, but he tsk-tsk’ed as he unscrewed the lube dispenser. “You rich guys have to have everything done for you, don’t you?” The gel oozed out in a clear sparkling line across his fingers and he reached for his lover; Bruce gasped at the cold as he was anointed, then whimpered as the strong fingers warmed their slippery charge and stroked harder.

The gel was handed off to Bruce. Without a word Dick smiled, then doubled over himself as only a lifelong acrobat could, and Bruce found himself facing Dick’s lean hard upturned ass and his legs split in a perfect V over Dick’s own head.

That beautiful ass that had first mesmerized him in the circus...

Bruce bent forward and planted a kiss on each smooth cheek. The flesh trembled under his lips. He nuzzled the buttocks, savoring their proximity and his ability to do what he’d done only in fierce dreams since that night.

His heart was moved beyond belief at this tenderness between them—but his cock cried out for the rawness of sex. Bruce pulled away. He squeezed more of the cold lube into his hand and closed it in a loose fist as he looked quite frankly at the tiny puckered opening that would take him in. “I’m going to fuck you,” he said calmly to Dick. “I’m going to thrust myself so far up your ass you’ll never be rid of me. I’ll mount you like a dog on a bitch, and I’ll stay there all night. I’m going to make you wet with my come, and I’ll keep fucking you long

after you’ve gone to sleep. Your sex is mine now, and I’ll take what’s mine whenever I want.”

“You’re a lot of words, Wayne,” Dick gasped from beneath his splayed thighs. “But I don’t feel anything—”

The strong lovely legs and beautiful ass tensed like harp strings beneath Bruce’s hand that slid smoothly over the beckoning entrance, gliding with every application of the lube he had been warming in his hand. Over the parted buttocks, along the rimple of flesh from taut, tightly-drawn-in balls to the sweet pucker, over and around the glory hole itself. Bruce stroked his lover’s anus as tenderly as he had caressed the young man’s head and kissed his body. He huffed a single hot breath on the wet flesh, and Dick’s cry and convulsion made him harder and hotter. One stroking finger disappeared and moved gently in this new territory; it was eventually joined by a second and then a third, while Dick whimpered and begged and swore. When Bruce finally pulled his fingers away from the clutching ass, the entrance was rosy from the work and eagerly opening and closing, begging for more.

Bruce’s head bowed toward that exposed flesh.

“Bruce for god’s sake fuck me, stick it up me, put your cock up there and—”

The body arched and froze as Bruce planted one last tender kiss, his lips sliding on the warm puckered skin of the musky opening before pulling away and rising high. He felt immense and invincible and omnipotent as he had never done on his best night on the streets; warm and loving and tender as he had never felt with Vicki, with Selena, with Chase; primal and brutal as he had never dared let himself feel before in any situation.

Bruce moved into perfect position atop his partner, his hands on the backs of the man’s thighs, fitted dick to Dick; then he went limp, and let his own weight sink him deep into that eager flesh. It was like sinking into fire. From on high his eyes seized those of his completion and held them transfixed as his cock transfixed that completion. Flesh moved and convulsed beneath his during the long gliding impalement; but Bruce did not stop until his hipbones bracketed Dick’s ass and every millimeter of his length was buried.

Dick’s body bucked beneath Bruce, and he gripped the thighs, riding with pleasure and lust pounding through his blood.

“oh fuck oh bruce oh god oh fuck...” The arms reached for him, the legs pushed hard against Bruce’s big hands, seeking, seeking...

Closer, come closer together.

Bruce let go of Dick’s legs and they immediately came down to wrap hard around his broad shoulders; he



leaned in closer, closer, arms reaching, taking Dick's arms, pulling him closer, locking them together even tighter. His hindquarters flexed and Dick convulsed with a cry.

That sound burnt away whatever inhibitions had remained; Bruce moved again, harder, a deeper thrust into that clutching heat in a cloud of eddying musk. He remembered the sweetness of his helplessness at Dick's hands, and gave it back in full measure to his pinned lover as he fucked him with no mercy and no gentleness—

mine *you're* mine *you're* mine *you're* mine—

Dick moved hard, emitting short sharp cries like a hurt puppy, his ass opening wider to this plundering sex, this wild fuck.

Bruce teetered, plummeted. A long cry spiralled out of him, rising higher, louder. He was falling into himself, his younger self, climbing into his skin, remaking him, blossoming outward stronger warmer full of love—

love *you* love *you* love *you* love *you*—

Dick arched upward. Bruce arched back. The room vanished in a burst of white noise.

And after, darkness fell.

▼ No nightmares. No half-remembered coffins, journals, rain, pious cruelty, or plummeting into the darkness of caves. Only the aches of exerted muscles and the warmth of the body curled around him under the covers, bare skin to bare skin.

Bruce stroked the small marks across Dick's neck and shoulders where he had bitten him. He tingled and ached from his own collection of teeth-marks.

Bats bit each other when they mated, too.

Bruce once again rested his chin in the cropped fuzz at the top of Dick's head and closed his eyes. His left hand kept stroking the round smooth shoulder beneath it, and his mouth kept turning up at the corners.

"Master Bruce?"

Bruce blinked his eyes open again. Boneless and content, he angled his head up and to the side to see Alfred.

The old retainer was just entering the room with the breakfast tray. "Good morning, sir," he said, setting the tray down on the side-table and arranging the items. "The time is nine-twenty. I have copies of all the newspapers in my room, and will provide them should you wish to read them later. You have an appointment this afternoon at one with the board of the Second Bank of Gotham to discuss enhanced security systems, and one at four-thirty with the metalworkers you hired to repair the Statue of Lady Gotham. I will be in my room should

you or Master Dick require anything else." The old man straightened from setting the table, said "Good morning" again, and left.

And not a word or look from Alfred concerning the fact that "Master Dick" was quite obviously in the bed beside Bruce, or that Bruce's left arm was around the younger man's shoulders.

Bruce raised his head a little to look at the breakfast table. Two covered plates; two sets of silver; two flutes of orange juice that looked suspiciously foamy at the top; two coffee cups flanking the silver pot. And a single orange aster in a crystal vase.

"He didn't faint?" Dick mumbled, pulling away from Bruce to give a bone-cracking stretch.

"Not one subliminal sniff," Bruce concurred.

"Crafty old fart." Dick yawned and rubbed his eyes, groaned and rubbed a few aching places.

And there it was, the riddle solved—Alfred's complicity in making the Robin-suit, his broad hints about Master Bruce acquiring a life outside the Batcave, hiding Dick and covering for him, all to spring Robin on him when he most needed a second pair of hands. And Alfred had given Dick the key to his room last night. It all boiled down to the non-expression on Alfred's face just now, and a tray that just happened to hold breakfast for two hungry men.

He'd have to have a talk with Alfred. Later. Much later.

"I think you're right." Bruce leaned over his ward, partner and new lover, and Dick grinned. For a long time they were mostly silent, enthralled with deep communication, their mouths a joined umbilicus wet and strong between them. "Hungry?" he asked when they separated from the kiss.

"Starving." Dick rolled out of bed to look for his discarded jeans and tee shirt while Bruce groped for a robe amid his scattered clothing and suitcases. "I'll do my warm-ups after I eat."

"Agreed. And I think we should shower *before* we hit the gym," Bruce added, pulling the robe closed.

"Definitely." Dick's nose wrinkled and he grinned as he pulled up his pants.

Bruce sat at the table and uncovered a steaming plate of eggs Benedict, his favorite breakfast dish. He sipped the orange juice and tasted the tingle of champagne. He was definitely going to have to have a talk with Alfred.

As Dick took his seat and uncovered his own plate, Bruce said, "Make sure you get some kind of nap in this afternoon while I'm at my meetings. Batman and Robin hit the streets after sunset."



Dick Grayson’s grin lit up the golden-hued room and he gave Bruce the look again.

“Nothing heavy tonight,” Bruce warned, trying unsuccessfully to quell the sunburst inside him at the sight. “Not until you’ve had more training. This will just be a routine patrol. We might stop a few robberies or muggings in process but that’s it.”

“Got it, Bruce,” Dick said, grinning joyfully, and dove into his food.

Bruce turned to his own plate and found himself beaming at his eggs; he shook his head and began eating. It was the best meal he’d ever had. He’d enjoyed the post-coital hum of pleasure through his nerves before, with Vicki, but this sensation was as if the black iron ball inside him had turned into a big ball of light driving away the darkness and the pain. He felt light and beautiful and kind, and the black wings in his soul wrapped him close as a mother bat securing her kitten for the day’s sleep.

About halfway through his plate, something pulled and tugged gently at his mind, tugging, pulling...

“So whatcha thinking, Bruce?” Dick’s voice was as warm and bright as the eyes regarding him over the younger man’s already-empty plate.

“Considering logistics,” Bruce replied absently, possibilities still warming his mind.

“Of what?”

Bruce fixed his lover with the same piercing look from last night. “Me. In the suit. You. Over a motorcycle.” He returned to his coffee without another glance.

and if i shed a tear i won't cage it i won't fear love

All quotes are from Sarah McLachlan's Fumbling Towards Ecstasy album.



and his foot tapping as he absorbed the bassy emanations from the Walkman clamped to his ears. Ray too was scruffy, sweaty, and unkempt—but that style suited Ray Doyle, from the stubble on his chin to the well-worn look of his jeans and the light drifting odour of his sweat: While Bodie, in creased cords, mouth like a vulture's crotch, felt rank and bristly. He had in fact many complaints, and from time to time he would list them all in his head, a little entertainment for himself. For example: they had left home at seven this morning—correction, yesterday morning—and it was now five AM the next morning. They had been travelling 22 hours: they would not arrive at their destination until seven tonight. He wanted a shower. He needed a beer. He had never needed a beer more. There was of course no beer, but instead the grumpy driver's assistant would arrive by each seat every five hours offering cups of boiling water, brownish in hue, which he called coffee: he would then take fifty pence from you and slop the drink into your lap. Bodie felt the man could learn a lot from air hostesses—

"Let's fly next time, Doyle," Bodie said aloud.

"Me wings get too tired," came the mumbled reply.

Presumably conditions were similar in the many other coaches which were all part of this ongoing convoy bound for Rome. Their own coach was number 99, which seemed somehow to suggest it was a bit of a failure of a coach, undistinguished, not even smart enough for triple figures. Its occupants were all packed as close together as 64 sardines in a sardine tin. Bags and plastic carriers spilled everywhere, in every free centimetre of space. Everyone else seemed to eat more or less constantly, crunching and munching their way through vast mounds of provisions. When they weren't eating they were asleep, dozing, mouths agape, heads lolling to one side, snoring, or in their brief moments of consciousness having rivetting conversations about the weather and kids' TV programmes from the 1960s.

Bodie looked down at the map again. 9" inches till page 36. It's Hell, Bodie thought with conviction, that must be it: he'd died and gone to Hell. The coach would never arrive. It would just travel on, and on, into Eternity.

▼▼▼▼▼

Inches and hours and continents later, when the door of the coach finally opened to disgorge its bleary-eyed, unshaven, unwashed passengers it was 8 PM Italian time.

Ray Doyle unfolded himself like a flower beneath the sun, breathed in the fresh Italian air, and grinned as he bounced on the balls of his feet.

"This is a bit of all right, isn't it?"

"Yeah," croaked Bodie, stumbling along behind him on woolly legs, one huge grip bag in each hand. Doyle lightly tossed his Walkman from hand to hand and looked around. "No, look, Bodie. It's brilliant."

From somewhere Bodie found the energy to lift his hanging head.

All around them, reaching high to each side, were snowtipped mountains, little redtiled houses perching on the slopes as far up as the eye could see, nearly up to the clouds. They were standing in a little piazza, the sun was shining, and the scent of fresh coffee was in the air. Bodie's nose lifted. Doyle was watching him, grinning.

"Glad you came?" and behind them the coach, unloaded, melted away as if it had never been.

▼ Neither of them spoke a word of Italian. In the clean, sparse bedroom allotted to them they were surprised to find not two beds, but one.

Admittedly it was a huge bed, five feet or more across. Bodie was already on it, stretching out, really luxuriating for the first time in 36 long, cramped hours. They had their own little bathroom and a small wrought-iron balcony with views to the mountains and the little piazza below. But Doyle was not happy.

"Does it really matter, Doyle?" Bodie yawned, a hand over his eyes.

"Yes, it does. If you think I'm sleeping in there with you—! You need all that space, my son."

So, after they had showered—no shower curtain, indeed, no shower tray, the water flooded the bathroom floor and drained slowly into a hole in the corner—the two agents went down to the lobby to explain the problem to the grimfaced Italian proprietor.

"One bed," Bodie shouted. He pointed at Doyle, then turned the finger towards his own chest. "Two of us."

Like an opera star the proprietor made a flamboyant gesture in the air, and all but spat on the floor. "Maricones!"

"He doesn't get it," Doyle said, amused now, from where he leaned against the wall with his arms crossed. "In fact, I think he thinks you're saying we're the sort of fellas who want one bed."

Bodie turned violent at that. He grabbed the proprietor's jacket, puce in the face. "Look, mate. We've got one bed. One—fucking—bed. We need two—fucking—beds." He accompanied this with a double-fingered depiction of the numbers involved. The proprietor appeared to misinterpret this.

Doyle would have separated them earlier, but laughter prevented him. They ended up back in the room some minutes later.

“Looks like one bed then, mate.” Bodie still wasn’t over it. He slouched about, brooding. “If that greasy eyetie’s not careful, I’ll bloody well remind him about Italy’s performance in the last bloody world war.”

Doyle tilted his head. “It’s Germans you mustn’t mention the war to, innit?”

“This isn’t *Fawlty Towers*, Doyle. Come to think of it though—”

“Don’t think we’d better eat here, mind, d’you?”

▼ Sitting, not even chilled, at a pavement cafe while the stars came out, a pint of good beer in front of him, replete with pasta and roast veal and potatoes, Bodie felt—bloody wonderful.

“This is good, innit, Doyle?”

“Makes a change, yeah,” Doyle agreed, leaning back in his chair, finishing the last of his coffee, picking up his glass of red wine.

Bodie felt mellow and relaxed; almost too relaxed. Muzzyheaded with the beer and fatigue. “About time we got back, innit?” he yawned.

Doyle looked disappointed. “Can’t stand the pace, eh?”

“All right for those who slept nearly all the way,” Bodie pointed out waspishly, but Doyle merely smiled enigmatically. “Where we off to tomorrow, then?”

Doyle extricated from his wallet a yellow square of itinerary, unfolding it and scanning. “Pompeii in the morning. Some monastery in the afternoon.”

“Mm,” grunted Bodie, who had vaguely interpreted ‘Italy’ as a beach, and comely young women in bikinis.

Afterwards they walked in the town for a while, through the territory of flowery squares and pavement cafes until they came to a more commercial area, hotels everywhere. Stopping at a tiny, very foreign ‘supermarket’ they bought some bottled water and a litre of whisky for nightcaps. Bodie also stocked up on bread and cheese and some vacuum-packed sausage—somehow he had a premonition about breakfast. All this came to 18,000 lire. Doyle nearly threw an apoplectic fit.

“About £6,” Bodie said, amused at him. Doyle calmed down and stopped feverishly checking his wallet. “And you’re paying for the next meal, matey, because I paid for tonight’s—in case you’d forgotten.” He felt—bone-weary. No-one would believe that sitting down in a coach all day could wring you out so limp.

They were walking back now, towards their own little pensione. “Gonna hit the town tonight, then?” Doyle was asking, swinging along at Bodie’s side. “Find some signorinas?”

They were entering the doors now, Doyle plucking their room key off the hook at Reception, dodging the lift

shaft where five morose old people queued, leaping up the stairs with Bodie behind him. “Not me, mate,” Bodie answered secretly into his ear as he often did. “I couldn’t get up a ladder tonight, let alone anything else.”

Doyle sighed. “Wish I could say the same. However—” the key went into the lock, turned— “I can manage by myself for one night.”

Bodie was amused by him. “Sex with someone you really love, Doyle?”

They were passing in through the door now, into their own clean, white little room. “You’re not kidding,” Doyle observed seriously.

The bed beckoned like a vision of paradise. Bodie threw himself across it and yawned hugely. “Well. You could always have me. If you don’t mind the fact that I’m a fella.”

“Yeah?”

“Just don’t wake me up till you’ve finished, okay.” His mind clouded thickly with sleep: the bizarre wanderings of dreamtime began.

“D’you mean it?” Doyle asked casually.

Bodie’s eyes sprang wide open. “Mean what?”

“Doesn’t matter. You sounded for a minute like you meant it, that’s all.”

“Come off it, Doyle.”

“Okay, okay, don’t make a big thing out of it.”

Sleep had flown away. Bodie stared across the room at Doyle’s back. “And what if I had? Don’t tell me you were going to say ‘right, here I come then’, were you?”

“Well, you’ll never know now, will you?” Doyle was in the bathroom by now, stripping off his clothes, leaving them in a pile on the floor while he cleaned his teeth, then sweeping them up, grimacing as he found them damp. Too tired to care, he threw them over the chair by the desk and then lay down next to Bodie naked, on top of the covers.

Bodie’s turn to get up now to strip. “Remember Captain Pugwash,” he remarked, his mind replaying a conversation he had overheard on the coach.

“What?”

“Ever watch that when you were a kid?”

Doyle la-la-ed the theme music slowly and tiredly in answer. Bodie had to cut in after a minute—

“—was very risqué, y’know. Dunno how they got away with it, but it was the ’60s—they were so bloody innocent in those days, they never noticed.”

“Noticed what?” Doyle was kicking down the covers by now, scrambling in and drawing up the sheet over his shoulder as he turned onto one side to face the middle of the bed. Bodie grinned at him as he got in on the other side.

“You obviously don’t remember old Puggers shouting: ‘Roger the cabin boy!’”

Doyle wasn’t convinced. “Just your dirty mind, that, mate.”

“Yeah? Well, what about the first mate—remember him? Master Bates.”

A crease appeared in Doyle’s cheek, a flash of white teeth. “Really?”

“Not forgetting,” Bodie played his trump card with a flourish, “good old Seaman Staines—!”

Doyle choked on a gurgle of laughter. “You’re kidding me.”

“—I’m not.”

“Seaman Staines!” Doyle chuckled, rolling onto his back.

“Logical, innit? Master Bates, Seaman Staines,” Bodie grinned with him, highly delighted, but Doyle’s laughter subsided into a sudden groan.

“Well, thanks, Bodie.”

“Wha’for?”

“There I was, tryin’ to keep me thoughts on the straight an’ narrow. I’ll have to do it now, never get to sleep otherwise.”

Doyle was flinging back the covers, a lean and compact figure darkly shadowed at chest and groin. He stalked into the bathroom, but he didn’t shut the door, and tossed himself off standing there, ten or twelve fast strokes, used a piece of toilet paper, chucked it down the loo, washed his hands, came back and got into bed where he settled himself down, turning this way and that until he got comfortable, said ‘night’ and closed his eyes.

Bodie’s heart was still thudding with shock. Well, that just about took the prize for cool, didn’t it?

Cool—or kinky.

He was forever getting little hints about Ray Doyle’s offbeat sexuality, just little things, the way Doyle never missed the chance to take a look at Bodie’s cock, for example: nothing furtive at all, just that in the men’s room Doyle would stand nearby, back against the wall, might even keep talking, and his eyes would move down and never leave until Bodie tucked himself away and zipped himself up.

Bodie had lost count of the times Doyle had done that.

Well, everyone had their own little quirks. Bodie himself had a bit of a thing about women in football shorts. Not an obsession, exactly, nothing as strong as that. Just he found it a fierce turn-on, that was all.

But to toss yourself off, five feet away from another

man then walk back into the room as cool as you like...

Weird? Or not?

Doyle might have his kinks, okay. But it didn’t stop one of Bodie’s girlfriends, who had gone out with Doyle some months before, from describing him as the sexiest man she had ever made it with. Given Bodie something to live up to, anyway. Never knew whether he’d succeeded or not, but he’d risen to the challenge. Yeah, Doyle had it all right. Knew how to turn a woman on.

Bodie too, right at this moment. He wanted nothing so much as an action replay as he lay there in the near-dark, eyes closed, feigning sleep while his heart pounded with excitement and his body ached for him to touch it. It had happened too quickly, it was already fading in his mind, the little movements of Doyle’s elbow as his hand blurred on his cock, the tiny sounds he had made, the way, practical, he had held the tissue to the end of his cock as he came, wiped off the spunk, and dumped it down the pan.

Wouldn’t he, if he’d been lying down in the bed and alone, have played with it for a while? Bodie would have expected him to dabble with it, admire the silken slippery texture of it, maybe even the milky taste—

But perhaps that was kinky. Maybe Ray Doyle would think that more perverted than what he had just done.

Bodie fell asleep, into restless dreams.

▼▼▼▼▼

Breakfast time at the Pensione Alberto. Bacon, eggs and a fried slice he had not been expecting. But the little basket of stony bread with two stamp-sized butter pats and a thimbleful of yellow jam—

Doyle eyed it without appetite. “No thanks. Think I’ll wait for the cereal.”

“Doyle,” Bodie said patiently, “there isn’t going to be any cereal.”

“Sausages?” Doyle hazarded.

“Coffee,” Bodie said, and held out his cup meaningfully as a haughty dark-eyed woman passed by with two steaming jugs. She had done several circuits of the tables, he reckoned, without ever actually pausing to fill anyone’s cup. It was a little game, probably: she would try to evade his eye for as long as possible, but when it persisted she would have to capitulate and fill his cup without a grudge. And yes: she did. First round to Bodie, then. But one battle won didn’t mean the end of the war: there was still the matter of the refill.

“Where’d you say we were going today?”

years, now disinterred for modern man to get his eerie kicks.

Those people had been real once, and here was the proof. There was a rich man's villa, with a pool, a garden, and frescos on the walls. One of the paintings was very rude. At Bodie's side Doyle looked at Priapus weighing his overlarge male organ on a pair of scales and laughed crudely with him.

"Looks like yours," Doyle snorted, hitting him on the arm, and Bodie noticed one or two people in their party glance their way. Next stop was a little house with a low doorway: this was, their guide explained, one of the many brothels in the town. And indeed, remarkably preserved and explicit pictures on the wall depicted the many and varied services Pompeiian man might like to avail himself of on the way home to the wife. And all for the price of a cup of wine.

"Isn't it open today?" Doyle mourned into Bodie's ear as they jostled for position in the crowd for a better look. Again several people heard him and smiled; Bodie thought that at least it might wipe out the effect of Doyle's earlier remark which seemed destined to mark them out as a pair of nancys.

He sighed. "Can't do without it for one bloody week, can you?" Abruptly he remembered last night, and his eyes flew open wide.

"We'll see, won't we?" was Doyle's reply, and the dark glasses which shadowed his eyes made him enigmatic as the sphinx.

The tour was topped off by a visit to the museum. Here, plaster poured into the holes in the lava where bodies had long ago rotted away meant that one could view the death agonies of many citizens in nastily graphic detail. Bodie turned away from the cast of a dog, teeth bared in rictus, legs frozen as they paddled in panic while the boiling lava melted its skin—

"Bit creepy, this, innit?"

"Don't let it put you off your lunch."

"Nothing puts me off my lunch, Doyle." And they left the haunting, timeless drama of the ruined city behind and passed out through the City Gates, there to run the gauntlet of the countless souvenir stalls manned by small dark hyperactive Italians grabbing at them, pestering them to look, to hold, to buy. The driver of Coach 99 informed his passengers that there would be a three-course meal available at a nearby hotel for a very reasonable price. Bodie was tempted by the thought of it, tablecloths, waitresses, a hearty main course between two tasty fripperies, but Doyle didn't fancy it so instead they bought warm pizzas and a beer at a roadside stall and sat on a wall to watch the world go by.

A happy interlude: the pizza was filling and tasty, the beer cold and moreish. So moreish, in fact, that they had another bottle. After all, they were on holiday, the sun was warm, the air fresh, and they had had a rare glimpse into precious antiquity this morning. It was all a long, long way from the hot plastic aroma of CI5, the tensions there: the 'keep your wits about you or you die' frame they lived in day by day. This was what normal people did: sat in the sun, drank a beer.

"We could come back in October," Doyle said, uncanny, right there with him, sunglasses dangling idly from one hand.

"Yeah," Bodie drawled, uncomplicatedly happy, and on a swift alcohol high he slung his arm around Doyle's shoulders. It was only after a moment he realised that Doyle's green eyes were dwelling curiously on him as if he were mad.

He withdrew his arm so quickly it seemed to enhance the awkwardness of the moment; did Doyle think that was some kind of a pass at him or something?

"Next time we'll bring some birds along," Doyle said, reflectively, which only seemed to confirm it.

He ought to feel sorry for Doyle really. Bodie had met people like him before, far too many of them, never content with what they had in the here and now, a pint of beer and a full belly and the sun on your back and the company you had, instead of the company you wished for.

He didn't reply. Doyle nudged him after a moment. "Agreed, eh? Next time we bring Sylvie and whatsername along."

Bodie got down from the wall and began to dust himself off. "Shall we go? About time we meet up with the coach, I reckon."

"Don't you fancy it, then?" Doyle asked him as they trekked down the hot dusty street towards the coach park.

"Fancy what? There. Pliny."

"Coming back in October."

"Ah, come off it, Doyle. Can't look that far ahead. *Carpe diem*, and all that."

"It was you who said we ought to come back."

"Yeah, pipe dream." Try as he might, standing in a hot carpark in a long queue for a stinking urinal, he couldn't recapture the euphoria that had made him suggest it in the first place.

"Bit bitter and twisted all of a sudden?" Doyle was jogging gently on the spot, the beer obviously on its way through.

"Look, Doyle, you can tell yourself anything you like. Don't need my say-so, do you? Let's see, bringing Sylvie,

“Could we ‘ave died without noticing, Doyle?”
 At the top was another courtyard and more steps.
 “Can’t be Heaven, even if we ‘ave,” Doyle said grimly. “There’d be at least a coffee machine.”
 “God,” Bodie groaned with feeling, “Doesn’t Architecture say anything to you, Doyle?”
 “Yeah,” Doyle drawled. “It says—build a coffee shop. About there.”

No coffee shop, alas, but instead a chapel. Here the annoying child from three seats behind raised a smile when its perpetually cross mother, clearly desperate to keep it quiet in this most hallowed place, hissed at it:

“Be quiet!”

“Why?” it questioned, predictably, as it did one hundred times a day.

Mother said slowly and impressively—“This is God’s House.”

Pause. The child whispered at fifty decibels “Is he in?”

▼ Even Doyle sniggered. But God, were he indeed in, would surely care little about the antics of mere Humans in the face of this, perhaps one of the more minor of his Houses, but glorious for all that. “Wait till you see the Sistine Chapel,” whispered Fred, gliding past, but this one here was good enough for the obviously lower cultural expectations of your average CI5 agent; Doyle was even silenced on the subject of coffee shops (lack of) as they prowled slowly around the magnificent interior of the chapel. Huge Renaissance-style Old Masters in rich oil colours stretched along every wall, and every candlestick, every scroll, gleamed dully with the opulence of gold. Every seat was furnished with the plushiest, deepest crimson velvet. Far from striking one as an ideal setting for the purity of prayer, it was like wandering around the insides of a rich lady’s trinket box. And here it was, right out in the middle of nowhere, in acres of barren olive-growing land. Bodie doubted that many people even knew of its existence.

“This say anything to you about man’s relationship with God, Doyle?”

Doyle smiled, said deeply, “No, but it says quite a lot about this order’s relationship with church funds.” He stopped and craned his neck to stare upwards at the mightiest organ he had ever seen; it stretched from floor to the huge domed ceiling, and each of its massive pipes was richly golden in hue. “Imagine that belting out ‘Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus’ come Sunday morning.”

“Wanna watch out,” Bodie warned him. “Some people hear voices, y’know, calling them to be Saved.”

Doyle cocked his head. “Ang on—is that what I heard?”

“Shall I,” Bodie asked primly, “propose you as a

novice?” Having completed the circuit by now they were heading out through the huge carved wooden doors and briskly taking the steps down, Doyle’s head swivelling about from side to side as if checking for assassins. Or—
 “Don’t tell me,” Bodie said into Doyle’s ear, “Now you’re looking for the souvenir shop?”

But ironically enough, a souvenir shop there was, albeit souvenirs of the oddest kind: lumpy beeswax candles—“Hand-hewn by the monks,” Bodie opined—rosaries by the dozen, and little plastic models of the Virgin Mary.

They signed the visitors’ book under the names Leyton and Bentley and left the splendour of religious glory behind, taking the trail downwards and finding something much more to their taste, an ice cream stand. They sat on a wall to eat, waiting for the rallying-call to rejoin Coach 99.

“Does have a certain appeal, though, doesn’t it?”

“What does?” Bodie shoved the last of his cornetto down his throat, licked his fingers and looked sideways at Doyle as the other man dangled his shades from one idle hand.

“Life of a monk,” Doyle replied, meditative, and lifted his eyes.

“You a monk?” scoffed Bodie, to escape the strange green blaze. “Not got the nature for it, Doyle.”

“How d’you mean?” Doyle asked him, and yawned: the heat rising off the gold stone walls was making him sleepy, hazy.

Bodie gazed in disbelief. “Come off it. You’d have to give up too many earthly pleasures, m’lad.”

“Ah. But you get unearthly ones in exchange,” Doyle remarked; and strangely enough, at that moment Bodie could imagine him as a monk, every day the will of steel battling to subdue his leanings to sin. And what a battle it would be: Doyle, with his tastes for wild sex, and mood-altering substances both legal and illegal, and the flair he had for seriously harming other people who got in his way: killing people, dealing out the retribution of death, was a part of Doyle’s life, and not often a part he seemed particularly to regret, either.

Challenging material, to say the least.

But then those who had the greatest struggle and the thorniest path attained, it was said, the greatest glory. Purity: to extreme. Bodie could just see Doyle there alone in his cell: the whips, the bleeding palms, those eyes burning green fire from that strange saint’s face.

Bodie tensed all over with shock as he realised that for some reason he was hard: cock straining at the fly of his cords. And all tied up with it was the sudden memory of last night: Doyle, masturbating for him, the

tense sighs he had made, those thin strong fingers flexing on his own body as he came—

He came back to himself with a start. Doyle was leaping off the wall, brushing his hands down his jeans, grabbing his hand peremptorily: “Coach.”

▼ Hot. Stuffy. Claustrophobic.

“What did you think of that then?” Suki was leaning across to address Bodie: Gianni was clearly in trouble again, head drooping, large frame bent over in utter chagrin.

Bodie shifted in his seat. “Yeah, pretty impressive. Ray liked it so much he’s thinkin’ of taking Holy Orders.”

“He’s not a monk already then?” and Doyle gave an earthy little chuckle, sleepy green eyes flashing over to her: acknowledging in that look that she was a very pretty woman, and alone with him she would be in serious trouble—

Bodie noted all this. No wonder Gianni took the aisle seat, fending off all-comers! And from the high radiation of the glance Suki was sending back to Doyle the attraction was mutual. Either that or Gianni was very out of favour today: bought the wrong Cornetto, probably.

“What does he do?” Suki asked of Bodie.

“Civil servant,” Doyle answered for himself. “Just like ‘im. On the same pepsin scheme.” And the dark glasses were tipped back on his nose, robbing his face of any expression.

“I can’t make you two out at all,” she said, shaking her head, settling back into her seat with her travel pillow behind her head. Going to sleep again—! Bodie marvelled at these people who could doze on and off all day between stops.

He felt restless. If he shut his eyes disturbing images came to mind. It was a relief to accept a mini swiss roll from Fred and Edna in front; it took his mind off sex, pain, and Ray Doyle, which for some reason seemed for the moment to have become entangled in it.

Beside him Doyle passed him the guidebook without speaking. Bodie finished off his swiss roll, accepted another, and settled back in his seat as the coach crawled down the side of the mountain. After a few moments of gazing out at what he could see past Ray Doyle’s head of curls, his gaze dropped down to the book Doyle had placed so carefully on his lap.

It was open at a full-colour photograph of the oversized Pompeian Priapus.



Most of the other Coach 99 inmates had apparently opted for the evening excursion of a Dinner-and-Dance

at a restaurant in a local village. Bodie and Doyle decided instead on a meal out near their hotel, which decision, Bodie fancied, rather disappointed some of the other passengers who were hoping, perhaps, to see the two of them embark on a tango or a quickstep and put an end to speculation.

He said as much to Doyle over two wonderfully chilled pints of beer at an open-air cafe in the little spa town’s main square.

Doyle regarded him with those heavy-lidded eyes. “You reckon?”

“Yeah,” Bodie said grimly. “‘Twinkies’, and all that.”

His partner was looking so pronouncedly butch at that moment, short hair, leather jacket, sulky macho pout etc., that Doyle had to laugh. “Don’t worry, Bodie, you ‘aven’t got the looks for it.”

Bodie said gloomily, “Yeah, but what about you? If you will keep wearin’ that bracelet. No wonder people talk.”

Doyle’s glance flicked down to the copper circle around his wrist and then up again to engage Bodie’s eyes for a curious little moment: Bodie’s heart missed its beat and he kept his gaze, steady as Doyle’s own while his thoughts raced ahead of him:.

Come on, Doyle. Flirt with me. I want you to.

But at that moment their meals arrived, borne aloft by a cheerful Italian waiter: omelettes, chips and salad. Putting it all away took quite some time, not to mention washing it down with another couple of beers, and normality reigned once more.

“Wanna look for a bar, disco or something?” Bodie offered; because that was the last chance. A woman: that was what he needed, and so did Doyle. Something dangerous was hovering round them right now, he knew it, he was just in the mood for it. And they should be trying to fight it off, they really should. But it was not relief but a stab of excitement he felt when Doyle shook his head, leaning back and draining the last mouthful of beer: “Knackered. Couldn’t be bothered to put me best bird-pullin’ act on.”

“I thought you just had to stand there, and they all got knocked over in the rush.”

Doyle shook his head. “That’s your luck, my son. Some of us ‘ave to work a bit harder at it.”

When they had first met, Bodie had categorised Doyle as no threat in the looks department. His perceptions had since undergone a dizzying tilt. Doyle might not be good-looking in the conventional sense, but he was put together in an interesting way. A sexy ease of movement, a harmony of line: viewed in a soft light everything slipped into place. He never had any trouble

getting birds, despite what he said. Mind you, Bodie had nothing to grumble about on his own account: women found him attractive, full stop. Dark hair, eyes, powerful male strength. Never one to be modest, Bodie knew it. But Doyle, Bodie considered, had something of his own. A remote kind of—it could take you unawares, stop your heart, the way he looked sometimes.

Bodie jumped as a pair of lean fingers snapped briskly underneath his nose. “You there?” Doyle said caustically.

“Just thinking.”

“Something good, was it?”

“Why’d you say that?” Bodie said sourly. “You’re right, mind you—I was thinking about my chances of getting you to pay the bill.”

“All right,” Doyle said amiably enough, and Bodie did a double take as Doyle raised a finger and an eyebrow to summon the waiter.

“Starting on that long hard path to salvation, Doyle?”

▼ They were back at the hotel in five minutes. “Drink?” Bodie jerked an eye at the gloomy bartender, alone in the empty bar, polishing a glass very slowly.

“Nah, he’d only have to dirty another one. We’ve got something in the room, haven’t we?”

Only one toothmug (plastic) and they took turns with it. The little room looked clean and cosy as the day outside grew darker. For a while they had the balcony doors open so that they could see the stars and the lights of the villages dotted about the mountains and let the smell and the spirit of Italy enter: but by ten PM the air blowing in was too chilly, so they shut it. At one side of the room was a desk and one chair which looked uncomfortable, so they shoved a bolster along the head of the bed and lounged on it side by side.

Doyle had a paperback Harold Robbins which he read with one arm propped behind his head, legs crossed at the ankles. When it was his turn for the toothglass of whisky he balanced that precariously on his belly and risked a spillage every time he had to let go to turn the page. Bodie was reading the guidebook from Pompeii: he found a page with illustrations from the brothel wall and held it up for Doyle to see.

“What d’you think, eh?”

Doyle passed over the empty glass and took the book, which he brought close to his eyes—then took it abruptly away. “Ang on. Just trying to get me going, aren’t you?”

Bodie raised an eyebrow. “Would I?”

“Yeah, you like to watch me suffer.”

“Shouldn’t wear such tight jeans then, should you.

Go on, Doyle, at least you can tell yourself it’s Art.”

One of the scenes depicted fellatio, one a man taking a woman from behind. “Pretty forward for their age, weren’t they?” Doyle commented.

“How d’you mean?”

Doyle took his time: clearly the whisky was taking its toll on the transfer of electrons. “What I mean is, considering the human race ’ad only been on the evolutionary clock face about half a second, seems funny they got into fellatio that early on.”

Bodie was wincing. “It rhymes with ‘ratio’, Doyle.”

“How d’you know?” Doyle challenged swiftly.

“Debriefing from Cowley, was it?” This he found amusing, convulsing with a fit of laughter. Bodie stayed dignified.

“Hasn’t anyone ever put you right before?”

Doyle stopped laughing to observe: “Well, I’ve never had to ask for it.”

No answer to that. Bodie tried to snatch back the book. Doyle put up a fight for it then surrendered, sweeping his paperback off the bed and onto the floor and closing his eyes. “Fellatio,” he tried out, a couple of times

Bodie yawned suddenly. Long, hard day. Another tomorrow. Rome.

“What time shall I set the alarm for?” Doyle was reaching out for the little clock.

“Breakfast at seven,” Bodie yawned again.

His partner said grimly, “We get breakfast tomorrow, do we?” He threw back the covers; the bed creaked.

The moment was upon him.

Bodie’s hand shot out and caught Doyle’s vanishing arm. Doyle turned, brow mildly creased in query.

“Don’t go away, “ Bodie said, low, strung-out, and Doyle stared at him as if he were unreal.

“Wha—?”

Bodie swallowed over the sudden dryness in his throat, but his smile was devilish enough as he tilted his head at Doyle:

“Shouldn’t have started something if you didn’t want to finish it, Ray.”

“What are you on about?” Doyle said, but Bodie saw the very moment that sudden understanding struck in and Doyle’s eyes narrowed on him, still as a cat and tensed: Bodie grinned again.

“Ah, don’t be like that. Weren’t so innocent last night, were you? Why else’d you do it, if not to give me a thrill? Well, I gotta hand it to you. Thrill’s about right.” He lifted a finger, touched Doyle’s hand, trailing it down and around to his palm, making a caress of it; perhaps a sardonic one. “Must have felt pretty good for you, came

off in about ten seconds flat, didn't you? Got me wonderin' what it looks like with a better view, that's all."

Doyle took a deep breath, his chest expanding hugely, and he breathed out fast. "What exactly are you suggestin', Bodie?"

"You get yourself off. I watch."

"Bodie. That's wicked," Doyle said, with the glimmerings of a smile, almost provocative in the way he glanced at Bodie. The other man shrugged.

"Who cares?"

Doyle took another deep breath; his eyes were wide-pupilled with alcohol and alarm. But he made a quick decision: "Lock the door, then."

Bodie had done that automatically when they came in; nevertheless he got up to check it. "Put the big light off," Doyle said behind him.

"No." Bodie denied him that. He came back to the bed and threw himself down next to his partner, turning so that he was propped on his elbow. Doyle was already unzipping his Levis, pushing them roughly and impatiently down his thighs, shoving his T-shirt up under his armpits, and then dragging down the waistband of a green slip of cotton to grasp his cock in his right hand, his left hand sliding automatically into his groin to press against his balls. And Bodie's response was instantaneous, a leap of astonished desire whipping through him, his cock up-thrust and ironhard.

"All right then... Be quicker with a copy of *Playboy*," Doyle said, shutting his eyes.

"Use your imagination. And I'll just bet yours is something else." They were both a little drunk, which helped. Doyle's cock as he touched himself was already semi-hard; clearly the idea of doing this turned him on even if he wasn't going to admit it. He sighed as he arched his back, hand sweeping up the strong shaft, caressing the head of it with his fingers, coaxing the slippery slit. "If Cowley ever gets one whiff of this we're dead, you know that?" he said, without opening his eyes.

Bodie felt dizzy, almost sick with excitement. "Well, who's gonna tell him."

Doyle's eyes came wide open at that: his left hand came away from the snugness of his groin though his thumb still slipped over and over the tip of his cock as if he could not bear to stop, "I'd never put it past you to gloat about this with one of your mates."

"What mates?"

"Guess what Ray did in Italy'—"

"Of course I bloody well won't."

"Well, you'd better not, that's all, or I'll kill you."

"Look Doyle, I swear it, it's just between you and me. It's no big deal, is it? Some blokes do this kind of thing all the time, ever been to a porn flick, have you?"

Doyle gave a grim smile, almost more like a snarl. "Not quite the same thing, is it?"

"Why isn't it?"

"Fifty blokes all jerking off together at the movies is one thing, you wanting to watch me do it is something else. Something, I dunno, a bit perverted about it, I'd say. So you'd better make bloody sure you keep it to yourself." Again that thumb slipping in a sweet, caressing pattern over the rosy, shining tip of his cock. Bodie had to swallow as he watched. "Now shut up," Doyle said, losing his breath a little, and the fingertips of his left hand went in to press his balls again, his right beginning to fly.

Bodie watched it all, to the very end. Doyle didn't go in for anything exotic, not this time anyway, didn't even touch his nipples as Bodie had always imagined he would, didn't spit into his hand for something wet to stroke himself with, didn't do any of the interesting things he might have done, and yet it was still the most powerfully sexual charge Bodie had ever had, watching Doyle with his jeans and pants almost casually down his thighs, the T-shirt pushed up above his nipples He watched with breath held the way Doyle listened to the inner voice of his body, touching himself delicately at first then working swiftly to the end when he tired of playing, the way his hips thrust off the bed and his hands stilled as his cock was shooting off, and then his fingers moving gently again, giving himself the very last gentle pleasure, right at the end of it all.

His stuff had flown everywhere: when it was all over he sat up, swearing, dragged his T-shirt over his head and mopped himself up with it.

Strong emotions were moving within Bodie; he wanted—

So many strange things.

When Doyle glanced over at him Bodie managed a shaky grin.

"Enjoy yourself, did you?" Doyle asked him almost sourly, still swabbing himself off, then chucking the soiled T-shirt into the far-off corner of the room. There were still little semen pearls in the dark hair on his lower belly, and one silvery trail of it along his ribcage which he had missed; and as Bodie watched he opened his hand, looked at his palm without expression, obviously about to go and wash it off.

Half-mad with wanting Bodie grabbed the hand and jerked it downwards and murmured into his ear, "Please, Ray. Please."

Doyle's whiplash rebuff was instant, every sinew in his wrist resisting. But Bodie, ruthless, overpowered him and pressed Doyle's slick hand to his cock and closed the fingers around the aching, throbbing length of it. His voice sounded harsh, sadistic almost: "Just do it, Ray." He squeezed his eyes shut: erotic visions beguiled him. "Do it for me."

"Oh, Bodie," Doyle murmured; angry? disturbed? but he stroked Bodie's cock, oh the sweet feelings that evoked, kneaded it hard, harder, and Bodie convulsed as he got there, painful lust melting suddenly into a wonderful release, holding Doyle's hand hard onto himself until the very last.

Even in the fading glow he clutched Doyle hard and would not let him go.

"Jesus, Bodie," Doyle whispered to him again, breath warm and close against his face.

"It's all right," Bodie murmured. "Ssh, it's okay." Sleepy now, he muttered a little protest as Doyle extricated himself from his grip, and then fell back into sleep.

Doyle put the light off: went to the bathroom and washed, used the toilet, then came back to bed. Stretching over Bodie, careful not to touch him, he switched out the bedside lamp and the room went dark.



Bodie opened his eyes to the morning light coming in between the shutters, his brain engaging bit by bit, running the startup routine: who am I—? where am I—? Feeling okay—?

Everything checked out. But then higher brain function struck in and caused instant chaos.

Did I really—? Did he—?

Doyle was still peacefully asleep, breathing light and quick. Looking at him, at the hand curled around the bedclothes, Bodie experienced a detailed physical memory of Doyle touching him last night, making him come the way he had. His insides dissolved: they were not tender men, and yet it had been a peculiarly tender thing they had done.

He looked at Doyle's sleeping mouth, the shape of it, and knew what he was going to do. Careful to move gently he slipped an arm around Doyle and pulled himself closer, close enough to catch the warm, sleepy smell of his body and his breath. He kissed him on the mouth. At the same time his fingers brushed against Doyle's cheek.

"Wha' the hell—"

"Ssh," Bodie said. He closed his eyes in bliss and moved himself against Doyle's warm thigh.

"Bodie—"

"Just shut up, will you?" His hand rubbed down Doyle's chest to distract him and went lower, found his warm and willing cock waking up and ready to play. He gave it an encouraging squeeze and it seemed to like him, shy but sexy, nudging gently at his palm.

Bodie murmured again in pure pleasure, and then Doyle whipped himself and his sweet cock away. He glared.

"What the hell are you up to?"

"Oh." Bodie murmured in reproach, "He was enjoying that." He threw back the covers and nodded down at Doyle's cock, now drooping disconsolately over his belly.

"Well, 'e shouldn't have been, then," Doyle snapped. "For godsake, Bodie... are you trying to turn me queer or something?"

"Why not, you haven't got far to go, have you?" All this time Bodie was following him around the bed and Doyle was trying to evade him, not always successfully, slapping his hands away, eventually laughing:

"Bodie, stop it—! Stop it now!"

"Ah, come on, Ray," Bodie said, serious now, sitting back on his heels. "We did it last night."

"Yeah, but that didn't mean we 'ad to do it again this morning."

"Ah, just once more. Please."

"Get off me, Bodie! Look, for the fifth and final time, I'm not queer, okay? An' I'm beginning to wonder about you."

Bodie groaned in exasperation, hands resting empty on his thighs. "Lots of blokes do it, Ray, doesn't make them queer."

"Yeah?" Doyle challenged. "Mates of yours, are they?"

"Look, we're both in the mood for it, and there's no women around unless you fancy trying your luck with Edna. They even have a name for it in the States—"

"Yeah, I just bet they do."

"Fuck buddies," Bodie pronounced.

Doyle looked as if he were going to be sick. Seizing his chance Bodie was on him again, seizing him by the upper arms and pushing him down to the pillow and throwing everything he could into the look he gave him—

"Just a kiss then, Doyle. One kiss."

Utter stillness and silence. Doyle looked up at him, and Bodie smiled down, as tender and intoxicated as he had ever been in his life.

Meaning to let fly with something sharp Doyle looked up into his partner's eyes; soft, dark blue, a sort of gentleness about him as he waited: "All right," he heard himself say, astonishing himself, and Bodie came in for it: he knew, somehow, just how to kiss Doyle to make him want it, and as his tongue, gentle, dipped into and caressed the inside of his mouth he ran his hand down Doyle's chest



“Too late now,” Doyle shrugged. “Gonna look even worse, innit, if I tap ‘im on the shoulder now going ‘you know just now, when you thought I said ‘the bed’s comfy’? What I really said was, the beds are—”

“Ah, stoppit and shuddup.” Bodie stretched out as far as possible—about three inches—and pressed his thigh to Doyle’s. The answering pressure he perhaps imagined, for when he opened his eyes Doyle was looking away from him, out of the window.

Bodie dozed, jerking in and out of sleep with the swaying of the coach and the piercing chatter of the child. The journey seemed, as ever, very long. As they turned onto the Rome ringroad he foolishly imagined that they must be nearly there, and sat up to look around with interest. However, one and a half hours later he began to understand that Rome consisted of 31 huge Zonas, through every one of which they had to pass before they arrived at the tiny bit in the middle containing anything of interest. And by the time they did he was hot, tired, bored, and fit to strangle the singing child behind.

“Shame, innit,” Doyle muttered beside him, “Just think, they could have bought a cat instead.”

And then the coach swung around a corner in heavy traffic to enter a long, impressive avenue. Huge white marble columns every few yards along the wide pavements signalled grandeur, the sense that the road led to somewhere highly important. The roadsides were lined with coaches, and at the end of the avenue could be seen a domed edifice.

“What’s that then?” Bodie said blankly.

“Church or something,” Doyle shrugged.

Fred turned around, unable to overlook such ignorance. “That’s the Vatican.”

“The Vatican!” Bodie breathed, and when Fred’s eyes had swivelled frontwards, wiggled his eyebrows irreverently at Doyle. Their driver gave them their instructions, two and a half hours of freedom before they were collected up again. The next thing was to stand up, wincing with cramp and stiffness, shuffle down the aisles hopping over people’s legs, bags and rubbish, waiting politely every so often for exceptionally large, slow people to amass their bags and waddle, puffing, out of their seats—Bodie grimly remarked they’d need a week of training to recover.

“You absolutely must go to the Sistine Chapel,” Edna instructed them with great firmness.

They never got there. Perhaps the glories of an imagined Paradise meant less to a CI5 agent than to the average man in the street: they had seen death, they

knew it. And as they could testify, death was not about some dazzling golden vision of angels, trumpets, and the Lord. Far more pressing than such fancies were the calls of freedom—fresh air—! so that, perfectly happy in their own way, they wandered along the streets between the columns, bought warm pizza from a street vendor and chilled cans of drink. They investigated dozens of dark little shops selling jewellery, clothes, postcards, with old Italian women dressed in black sitting beady-eyed behind the tills. Bodie bought a Liverpool football shirt—

“What the ‘ell’s that for?”

“Always wanted one,” Bodie said shamefaced, “and it was cheap.”

Doyle spent a long time browsing through the racks of T-shirts which, they discovered, cost no more than £1 each: but being particularly fussy, despite there being a choice of thousands he found neither the exact shade nor style to please him.

“Come on, Doyle. There must be one you fancy... how about this one?”

“I don’t want a picture of the Coliseum stretched across me chest.”

“Don’t blame you, mate. Why’d anyone want a flickhouse on his chest?”

Doyle looked at him askance. “D’you think we’d better buy a guidebook—?”

But there was so much to do and see in that one street that it took them over an hour to walk the 200 yards to St Peter’s Square. And they found it wonderful: a huge circle laid out like the rays of the sun, and after so much time in their half a cubic metre of Coach 99 it was bliss, just to stand out in the sun in so much open space. There was even a fountain and squabbling pigeons in case they felt homesick for Trafalgar. Before they could enter they had to pass the inspection of the Swiss Guard, who took a distrust to both of them and frisked them officiously. Bodie rolled his eyes as he raised his hands; so strange, these young uniformed men so arrogant, so important of themselves, versus himself and Doyle, so apparently tame, Doyle standing so patient and still for the search: and yet Bodie had the feeling that for all the guns and the Hitler boots and the macho posturings of strength they were cream puffs: that he and Doyle could take them all if they tried.

The thought of violence and Doyle on to kill set off a chain reaction; he looked down at his partner kneeling casually on the stone paving adjusting the focus of his camera, and Doyle, acute, looked up. Time stopped: it froze the moment like a snapshot, sealing them into a private world.



“Remember tonight,” Bodie said, low, warm.

Doyle cocked a quizzical eyebrow at him, rising slowly on well-toned muscles to stand. He applied his eye to the viewfinder, reached his hand around the front to fiddle with the zoom as he said: “How can I remember tonight? It ‘asn’t ‘appened yet.”

And that seemed to Bodie full of promise for the night to come: a hint, nothing certain, still the challenge of seduction before him. “Stand there,” Doyle ushered him into place, pointed the camera at him. “Say cheese—”

His finger pressed the shutter release, the lens blinked once. Click.

In the photograph, which exists today, Bodie, in cords, a black T-shirt, dangling his jacket from one finger, looks not at the camera but through it to some unimaginable yonder: a man with something on his mind. Behind him there are rows and rows of chairs, and beyond those, the steps of the Vatican, upon which there is a tiny red dot—

Slinging his camera over his shoulder, “Look, Bodie—” Doyle nodded towards the dot— “I reckon that’s the Pope.”

Bodie crossed his eyes like a gibbon. “Who?”

“That’s who lives in the Vatican, innit?”

Bodie squinted. Certainly the crowds in the thousands of seats arranged before the steps seemed to be getting excited: a swelling roar had gone up, and then subsided to a simmering murmur. The little red dot had placed itself centrally at the top of the steps. It raised its arms, held out its hands. The crowd roared again.

“I dunno. Looks like George Cowley to me.”

“He’s come all this way just to check up on us.”

“Can’t get away with anything, can we?”

A voice began to intone something sonorous through loudspeakers over the whole of St Peter’s Square. Bodie winced. “Not old George, after all... because, if I’m not mistaken Ray m’lad, that is a prayer.”

Doyle was grimacing, holding up a hand to fend it off. “Time to go?”

On the way out they passed Fred and Edna at the back of a queue as long as the Serpentine, winding its way all around the sides of St Peter’s and round to the back: “Sistine Chapel!” Fred mouthed at them.

Of one mind about the Sistine Chapel and the queue thereof the two CI5 men turned back to walk along the street again: this time they took the other side and browsed there, buying a guidebook, two cans of beer, and a postcard for the office. They sat on a marble seat to consume the beer and compose the postcard, pleased with their final effort, which encompassed Rome,

Pompeii, and the monastery in a few well-chosen words:

“HAVING A WONDERFUL TIME—SEEN THE POPE, VISITED A BROTHEL, BEEN TO HEAVEN.

3.7, 4.5.”



In search of a postbox Doyle turned off the main street into a side one, popped the card into a box, and spotted a bridge arching over the horizon in the distance. They walked to it, crossing en route a major road between streams of mad Italian Grand Prix traffic, and found their bridge. It was an immensely imposing and ancient structure of grey stone, crossing a wide river which was a strange pale green gooseberry shade. “Just like your eyes,” Bodie said inconsequentially to Doyle, who was gazing down into the waters with some vestigial long-ago classics lesson tweaking at his brain—

“Isn’t that the Tiber?”

“The what?”

“The actual Tiber.”

“Could be, I suppose.”

“Amazin’, innit?”

“Yeah, amazing,” Bodie humoured him.

“It was there all those years flowing through ancient Rome, and here it is—”

“—still flowing. And still in Rome! As you say, Doyle, amazing.”

Doyle hit him on the arm. “No soul, Bodie. No feeling for the past.” But in fact as they leaned on the stone parapets, for a moment it was there for both of them: literature browsed once long ago had left its legacy of words, the Senate, the Forum, Caesar and the legions, *Et Tu, Brute*. Doyle leaned against Bodie, and for a moment history came alive, here on this ancient bridge crossing a river of green water.

And then it was time for their rendezvous upon the Via del ???, the Street of Many Coaches, to pile back into the warm, fuggy atmosphere of Coach 99, its inhabitants all agog with the beauty of the Sistine Chapel, or the horrors of the queues in the money-changing banks.

Bodie didn’t mind about the Sistine Chapel. They had had the Tiber instead.

The sightseeing tour was next. First port of call was a high viewpoint where huge antiquities and monuments could be glimpsed all over the city, popping up like incongruous mushrooms amid the office blocks and flats. Doyle leaned on the wall overlooking the panorama and gazed out, the wind blowing back his hair: Bodie materialised at his side bearing two cornettos. “Don’t say I never buy you nuffink.” Taking one, Doyle



blew him an impromptu kiss. Sharp-eyed Suki spotted it and telegraphed a speaking glance to her husband. Bodie saw Doyle track the exchange but not react to it. Good on you, Doyle. What do we care what they think, anyway?

But in a way he did care.

The next stop was the Coliseum, a giant antiquity, far huger than one would ever imagine from its regular appearances on mugs, jugs and ladies' headscarves. Doyle and Bodie peered through solid iron bars at the vast circus ring inside, the tiers of seats rising to the skyline, and tried to visualise screaming Christians scattered by leaping, pouncing lions as crowds of ancient Romans roared and cheered. The violence of the past seemed so much nobler and more magnificent than the violence of today: it was only moments before they faced their first brush with the roguery they had been warned was rife in modern Rome when a crowd of narrowfaced blank-eyed gipsy children milled about them, young girls who looked no more than twelve carrying dirty, pretty babies on their skinny hips—

"Oi!" Bodie jumped and slapped a hand away from his pocket: Doyle caught the offending wrist as it withdrew bearing Bodie's wallet. "Prego, prego, signori," muttered the girl and melted away into the crowd, but others were not so lucky, several inhabitants of Coach 99 returning to it without their purses.

Back onto the coach. On and off again. After a while it all became a bit of a blur. People began to argue about which famous antiquity they had just been whisked past because after a while everything began to look the same, all huge, all fabulous, all ancient.

But there was one place they never forgot. Hustled off the coach, whisked down narrow alleyways, all 64 inhabitants of Coach 99 arrived in a tiny square at the back of which loomed a huge snowy marble sculpture of pillars and men and horses ejecting plumes of water into a bluish pool. Tourists thronged around this pool in their hundreds. Bodie and Doyle pushed their way right to the front in seconds: they were young, they were arrogant, they had no manners. Doyle knelt and dipped a hand into the cool water.

"Wait a minute," Bodie said, looking down at Doyle meditatively, "This is something famous, this is. 'Ang on. It'll come to me."

"Well, don't force it."

"No, it's coming. 'S a fountain, innit? Three coins—something about three coins in a fountain—"

"It's the heat, Bodie, it's getting to you. Here—sit down. I'll duck your head in."

Dodging—"It's the Trevi Fountain," Bodie arrived at it

triumphantly. "You 'ave to throw a coin in, it's traditional."

Doyle snorted where he knelt, one wrist draped artistically across his knee. "Yeah, sounds like a tradition worth encouragin'."

"Cynic. You throw in a coin, see, and that means you're sure to come back to Rome one day."

Obviously thinking deeply Doyle tossed up the alternatives and came to a decision. "Nope: think I'll keep the money." He began to rise and Bodie thumped him. Laughing, Doyle half-fell against the low fountain wall, might have tipped backwards over it if Bodie hadn't rescued him with a lazy hand.

"Tighter than Cowley's arse, aren't you, mate?"

"—only you would know that, Bodie—"

"Okay, okay. I'll pay for you, that's what you want, isn't it." Bodie fished in his pocket for a coin but Doyle slapped his hand away.

"No thanks, I'll pay for meself. Won't work otherwise."

They stood there on the steps of the Trevi fountain, each with a lire coin in their hand, looking at the blue water, the dazzling white marble, the thronging holiday crowds. Then Doyle drew back his arm, let gently fly with his coin: it twisted through the air, glistening in the strong sunlight and fell with a gentle splash into the water. Bodie did the same, the coin describing an arc through the air before it fell. Bodie had a good eye for such things; he reckoned that if he could dive beneath the surface his own coin would be as near to Doyle's as it could be, perhaps even atop it. And Doyle turned and grinned at him, acknowledging without words the little feat of skill, and Bodie watched his hair change colour as the sun drifted in and out of clouds, and the patterns of moving water rippling across the green of his eyes; and into his mind came the thought, curiously exact and complete:

I'm going to fall in love with you. And you won't fight.

A shout recalled them to rejoin ranks: rounded up and counted they left the Trevi fountain and their coins, slumbering together on the ancient fountain floor.

They were going back up through the maze of alleyways, Bodie and Doyle dropping back to the rear of the party, loping along at a steady pace, soaking up the unexpectedly atmospheric aura of this back-street vista, not intended for tourists—narrow cobbled paths, scraggy washing hanging everywhere from windows, rubbish in the gutters and urchins running barefoot. Squalour: but somehow rather splendid squalour, the smell of Italian cooking herbs in the air. Then they became aware of a

little drama taking place ahead: the cross Coach 99 mother had lost, it seemed, the Coach 99 child.

"So there is a God," murmured Bodie, reverently bowed head, and "I'd just cut me losses and run, meself," was Doyle's offering, which made them both inclined to laugh: that was until they saw the woman's utter panic and distress and joined in the search without further ado. Mother love! inexplicable.

Going down one street so narrow it was more like a cart-track, Bodie turned a corner and ran into trouble. There was Fred, three youths with him, and they had hold of the elderly gent's camera strap. The expressions on their faces made the encounter instantly recognisable: "Hey!" Bodie shouted, and powered up into a run, and wrenched the strap away, interposing himself, solid and brutish, between the little gang and Fred. He even allowed himself a grin as he put up his hands: nice odds, just the way he liked it. He was definitely going to enjoy this, missing infants were really not much in his line at all.

Until three more thugs arrived as if from nowhere—and two of them carrying knives, sharp wicked-looking things, the sort of knives which could do a lot of damage in an unethical hand. The hands holding these looked very unethical indeed. Bodie judged right and left distances quickly, dived, grabbed a wrist, jerked its owner towards him and kneed it in the groin extremely hard. It fell to the ground writhing in a most satisfactory way. The remaining thugs seemed to take this up as a challenge: five swarthy, grinning Italians, the scent of garlic and sweat hanging heavy in the air. "Fred?" Bodie said over his shoulder, "Get back to the others—and if you see Ray anywhere—"

Alert, he leaped to one side as the knife went for him, got in under the man's armpit and threw him off, chopping his hand down hard on his wrist so that the hand flew open and released the knife: misguidedly brave, Fred had not left after all, was muddling about behind getting in Bodie's way: one more softskinned target for Bodie to protect. By now his reflexes were zinging into gear, sending messages like lightning along his nerves: he didn't even feel the knife that caught his wrist, but it was all getting nasty and it made him angry. Bodie thumped and chopped and ducked with violent intent: and then, there behind him, was Ray Doyle.

"About bloody time." Relief, and yes: excitement: this was more like it, this was the life they knew and the game they always won. Doyle was taking off his jacket, looping it swiftly around his arm.

"Big strong lad like you—and you need me?"

"Good experience for you, m'boy. Watch and you

might learn something." He saw the thugs weighing up the new arrival: not rating it overhigh on first impressions. They moved in closer. Watching them, Doyle gave a quick, ferocious smile. "You wanna watch 'im," Bodie warned, "'e kicks—" And in a blur of action Doyle's boot was jabbing a vulnerable Italian crotch with a vicious-sounding crunch.

"—told you." Bodie said with a smug smile.

The balance of power having tipped, the Italians were soon on the run. Exchanging a look, just one little glance of acknowledgment of a job well done, the CI5 men turned their attention to Fred, who far from being exhilarated was obviously very shaken up.

"You'd never have thought it," he kept repeating as Doyle's hand eased beneath one armpit to guide him gently on his way, "You'd never think it would you? Not when you're on your holidays."

As they rounded a corner and recognised the way back Doyle nodded at Bodie's wrist—"That need a stitch, does it?" It was bleeding quite profusely. Bodie was pinching it between the finger and thumb of his other hand.

"Nah, the power of my will's enough," Bodie said impressively, but he accepted the offer of the clean white hanky Doyle flourished at him and stood still while Doyle neatly and tightly tied it around the wound. They had reached the rest of the party now, standing around in the square where Coach 99 awaited them; there was an excited babble of speech all around as Fred tried to tell the story of his adventure, himself and Bodie and Doyle fending off a crazed gang of robbers, while others regurgitated the tale of the found child, and from one side came the sounds—

"Don't you ever—" slap, slap, scream—"ever—" slap—"ever do that again, do you understand me?"

So much excitement, the glories of Rome, the lost-and-found child, the Muggers and the Heroes, united Coach 99 in a tight band of gang-spirit: the return journey had the feel of a travelling party, quite rowdy at times, duty free booze passed around in plastic cups and eagerly downed. And when they spotted from the coach window a line of men peeing into a stream and the child asked loudly what they were doing and its mother replied quickly 'fishing', Doyle's audible snort of "Short rods!" brought the house down. It had been, everyone agreed, a good day, a really Good Day, the stuff of lifetime memory.

Later on people were quietening down, and the child was evidently asleep—either that or, as Bodie cruelly suggested, had been garotted by the man behind with the strap of his sunglasses; Doyle too was dozing,

swaying with the rhythm of the journey, heavy and limp against Bodie as the coach took corners. Bodie, as always the only one left awake, took the opportunity to unwind the bloody hanky and examine his hand—the cut, extending from his wrist to his forearm, was long but not deep and the bleeding had slowed to a reddish ooze.

He looked up from the wound to find Doyle's eyes unexpectedly watching him, drowsy green. "That bothering you?" Doyle asked, yawning; he took Bodie's hand into his and drew it onto his lap, turning it gently this way and that. The touch sent little shocks racing along Bodie's nerves and raised all the hairs on his skin. Doyle's fingers were so tender on him, the small pain he was causing quite exquisite—"I'll look at it later for you," Doyle promised, green gaze dwelling intently on his face; Bodie wondered, winded, if Doyle knew what the look, the touch, was doing to him. His hand lay on Doyle's lap; gently, almost imperceptibly, he pressed his knuckles against him. Doyle stayed very still, head down, as if just looking at Bodie's arm; beneath his touch Bodie sensed a tension, a springing to life. Heart pounding, head spinning, he lifted his arm away and stared for some time out of the window across the aisle without seeing a thing.

What a risk to take, all but touching Doyle up in public. Yet it had been—thrilling. He felt—brilliant, boundless with life and energy and excitement. He was just, so, glad that they had taken this path. Whatever came of it, something, nothing, it was a strange and wonderful new dimension to his life.

He must have dozed off himself, for the next he knew was the world filtering back into his ears and Doyle shifting about next to him as the coach drew up outside Pensione Alberto. The time was 6.30PM. They went to their room for a pee and a wash. Doyle came out of the bathroom yawning widely: "Hard work this, innit?"

"Need a holiday when you get back to recover from the holiday," Bodie agreed, flopping back full length on the bed.

"I tell you what, though. We'd better jog off to the shop—no chance tomorrow, full day out."

"Where is it tomorrow. Just remind me."

"Capri. Where the cars come from."

"Ah yeah," Bodie sighed romantically, "Napoleon's Isle."

Doyle canted a disbelieving glance his way. "Nah, don't think so. This is the one with the volcano."

"No way. You're thinking of Sicily."

"What makes you think Capri's an island anyway?"

Doyle was opening the bedroom door. Wishing he could

stay where he was Bodie swung his weary legs off the bed and followed him.

"Why else would we be going by boat, Mastermind?"

"Because we're on an island now, of course."

"Italy isn't an island, Doyle. What's the matter with you?"

"Well, it's part of one, innit? Came across by ferry, didn't we? Can't walk off Italy, can you?"

"Yeh, you can. But only if you're going to Switzerland." They were clattering down the narrow stairway by now, jostling and laughing as Bodie tried to get past Doyle and take the lead, Doyle neatly retaining pole position by dint of some fancy footwork. "Going out to eat?" kindly Fred asked of them as they arrived in the foyer.

"Haven't decided yet," Doyle was answering, flying off the bottom step with the help of a hefty thump to the small of his back. "Of!—But I can't say I fancy Bodie's cold sausages and bottled water."

"We've found a little place down the road. Fancy joining us? Suki and Gianni are coming, and Don and Eileen, and—"

Bodie met Doyle's eyes, read no violent dissent there, so that was settled. First of all though they went to the little supermarket because it might be their last shopping opportunity, and stocked up on beer and bottled water and a few duty-frees to take back home—some Italian Scotch for Cowley, which should annoy him nicely, and a fancy bottle of olive oil for Doyle, who had chef-like pretensions. Then they joined the others on a party-spirited expedition to the local pizza restaurant.

Throughout this evening Bodie was peripherally aware of a feeling of alienation: it didn't unsettle him, he was too used to it: he could watch these ordinary human beings at play, even join in for a while, but he was essentially apart. Doyle too. Was it that life in CI5 was so desensitising, so that everywhere they looked they saw life's blackest side, always ready to draw a gun and fire, that they had lost the knack of being normal?

Or, Bodie mused, was it the other way round entirely. That they had always been different, and that was how and why George Cowley had spotted them, and recruited them for CI5?

Of all the people here, he could be close only to one: another outsider, like himself, one who would also be a devil if he had not been cast by George Cowley in the role of saint. They did not fit in here among this party of chattering tourists; six days away playing in this dreamtime was long enough, it was time he and Doyle were back in their world.

Doyle nudged him. "Oi. What's on your mind?"

"Dunno really. Just feel—"

"Homesick?"

"Nah, not really."

Doyle studied him for a moment longer. "That wrist okay?"

Bodie had forgotten it, looked down at it in surprise. Oozing redly through the clean hanky he had applied in the room.

"Let's get back," Doyle said, rising.

Bodie looked around. The party was in full swing, Suki was in a violent mood with Gianni who had apparently ordered her the wrong sort of pasta, spitting fire at him; everyone was a little bit drunk, but dessert had not yet arrived. "Bit difficult to get away, don't you think?" Social nicety was not high on Doyle's agenda; Bodie sat back and watched, detachedly admiring, as Doyle sorted out payment with Fred and made their understated farewells. Someone, however, noticed their premature departure:

"Off so soon?" bright-eyed Suki asked, head on side. "Anyone'd think you two were a pair of honeymooners."

Doyle had his claws sheathed among the general public, but all the same there were not many people who ever walked away smiling from a joust with Ray Doyle. He leaned over the table and smiled a blazing smile and spoke through his teeth: "Well, sweetheart, no-one'd make that mistake about you."

▼ The streets were dark, and they walked side by side in silence. Lacking a gun to fondle, Bodie had his hands thrust into his pockets, but Doyle, that most harmonious of movers, had his thumbs tucked through the belt-holds of his jeans. Neither of them went in for idle chat, and it wasn't until Doyle noticed something— "Starting to rain, innit?" that the first word was spoken. Doyle was wearing a white jacket, Bodie a cream one— "Better run—" and they darted through the streets beneath a sudden drenching rush of rain, finally tumbling, wet and panting, in through the doors of the pensione Alberto.

In their room Doyle flung open the balcony doors and the shutters and let the fresh, rain-chilled air roll into the room while Bodie pushed past him and went in to use the toilet. Doyle followed him in and began to wash his hands at the basin, looking in the mirror at himself as he did it. Lifting his eyes from the lavatory bowl as he tucked himself in, Bodie met his eyes in the mirror: Doyle looked solemn, eyes wide, rosebud mouth set in a grave repose, but Bodie looked pale, skin almost translucent, a ghost behind. Impatient, Bodie shoved him out of the way and began to wash his own hands, turning the soap over and over to get a good lather; it got

in his cut which began fiercely to sting and he snatched it out of the water, wincing. Doyle noticed: "Lemme look at that again."

They looked at it together in silence. Finally Doyle shook his head. "I dunno, Bodie. Even on holiday you can't leave it alone, can you? Got a first aid kit on you?"

Not as such: but he had a little tin army box of aspirin, stomach pills and plasters. "Come on then, Dr Doyle." He sat on the edge of the bed and extended his arm. Doyle took Bodie's hand in his and flexed his other arm so that it rested on Bodie's thigh, and looked again at the sliced wrist. It was a clean cut, no ragged edges. Used to years of small injuries, the two of them no longer believed in Savlon or the like: they had learned from experience that wounds healed faster the less they were mucked about with. But—

"I dunno, Bodie, nasty innit? I reckon it could do with a stitch."

"Don't be daft. Just stick it back together, will you?" Bodie was always loftily heroic about his injuries. Shrugging, Doyle cut some little strips of plaster and began to work in silence. Not moving, Bodie looked down as Doyle knelt before him; his curls were soft with the heat and brightened by the Italian sun. Bodie breathed in deliberately; Doyle was very close to him, leaning against Bodie's thighs; he smelt warm, a little aftershave, a little sweat, the tang of alcohol. An erotic sensation began to crawl across his skin, a moth's wing brushing on his nerves. It might go either way: might be killed off before it gained a life, if Doyle did or said the wrong thing, or seemed cold, or ugly, when he looked up—

And when he did, the shadows in the room played across his face; half in shade Bodie saw there again the face of the monk, the ascete, a purity astride whatever inner demons he might have. Seemingly lost for words Doyle looked into his eyes, and held Bodie's hand lightly in his own, his other wrist draped negligently across his own denim-clad thigh. Bodie cleared his throat and tried out his voice: "Thanks."

That seemed to remind Doyle that he had finished: he let go of Bodie's hand. "Feel any better?"

"Yeah, much. Thanks."

"Better get ready for tomorrow?" Doyle said, almost with the lilt of a question, bouncing on his haunches, ready to rise.

Bodie roused himself. "Yeah. Yeh, good idea." They assembled stuff in silence, clothes for the morning, money, passports, a jacket each for the boat, camera. Finished, Bodie went back to the bathroom, washed, brushed his teeth, looked at his pale face and his

darkened eyes in the mirror. Still that sensation in the pit of his stomach: dread? excitement? When he got back into the bedroom Doyle was closing up the shutters and locking the windows. The air in the room was fresh and chilly. Bodie threw off his clothes quickly and got in between the covers, lying on his back with his hands behind his head.

For the first time in his life it felt odd to be lying here with Ray Doyle in the room, and to be naked. Yet to abandon normal practice and wear some token garment would be equally odd: what sort of message would that give out? I am unafraid to be naked with you = you are no threat to me: I must garb myself in your presence = there is some doubt about your intentions.

Oh yeah, it was even almost funny, put like that. Maybe one day they could share the joke. He lay quite still, open-eyed, as Doyle pulled back the covers and got in beside him. Bodie said nothing, and had nothing in mind to say. For Doyle must know how he felt. Bodie knew quite well his response must have been obvious as Doyle knelt there before him: if not quite trembling, he had certainly been hard enough to show.

"Light out?" Doyle queried.
"Yeh."

The sudden blackness and silence was disorienting. Bodie's senses fought for and gained some meaning out of it: gradually dark shapes appeared here and there around the room. Still Doyle did not touch him.

Oh, get real, Bodie. Doyle wasn't going to, was he?

The realisation came to him in a rush, and almost as a relief. His fingers began to unclench on the sheet. It had all been a fantasy. He had been mad to even dream that Doyle might be going to make some sexual overture towards him: no such thing was ever going to happen, and that was just how it should be.

"Bodie?"

The whisper made him jump. "What?"

And in disbelief he heard Doyle do it, take that astonishing leap into the dark: "Still fancy it, do you?"

Bodie had to force the answer out through dry lips. "How d'you mean?"

"Ah, come on. You haven't forgotten this morning, have you? I've been thinking about it all day."

Christ almighty. His heart jolting and his blood singing in his ears Bodie said, lips hardly moving, "Have you?"

"Course I have. Haven't you?"

Bodie swallowed, and made the no-way-back admission: "Yeah."

"Well, come on then."

As Doyle moved closer to him Bodie felt the brush of

his skin across the lifted hairs on his body, Doyle's breath light and warm on his face. "We've gotta keep this closer than MI5, Bodie," the soft voice warned, "We'd lose our jobs just like that if anyone even knew about last night, let alone anything else."

"You think I don't know that? I read the bloody small-print too, y'know."

"Just wanna get it straight. Whatever we do out here—it's not going back with us, okay?"

Bodie always had lived for the moment in hand and the promise came from him easily: "Yeah—now stop carryin' on like an old woman."

"And if anyone did twig it—let's get the story right—we're on holiday and these things happen," Doyle improvised rapidly, "—we 'ad too much to drink one night, we tried it for a laugh, can't remember exactly what we did but nothing much happened, that sound okay?"

"Look, Doyle," Bodie was surprised at the acid thinness of his own voice, "it's not gonna make the *Nine O'clock News* when we get back, y'know."

"Just in case. What if Cowley put a tail on us?"

"Why the hell would he do that?" Bodie gazed at him in disbelief. "And use your bloody common sense—where would it all end? If he's that suspicious he'd have to put a tail on the tail, and another tail on that and he's short of manpower as it is with us away. We've never been asked to tail anyone, have we—3.7, 4.5, would ye mind tailing Murph and Jones tae Amsterdam, just tae make sure they're no' bonking each other on the quiet, ye understand—!" and he felt Doyle laughing a little beside him, paranoia edged out by absurdity. He went on, groping for and finding Doyle's hand, placing it on himself, "And in any case, even if we did have a bloody tail it's not here in the room with us now, is it, so shut up or I'll lose interest."

Doyle moved closer, seemed to be hesitating. "I'm nearly asleep as it is," Bodie yawned, "reckon you can wake me up?" He shut his eyes as he felt Doyle's hand pass across his chest in a brief, heartstopping caress; then, implausibly, deliciously, thin cool fingers travelling lower, running lightly over his sensitive skin. Bodie winced and shivered as Doyle touched him on his nipples, rougher than a woman but surer; after a moment he seized Doyle's wandering hand and pushed it down to where he wanted it. Doyle seemed to understand that, murmuring sexily to Bodie: "Yeah, you liked this last night didn't you, you made me do it," and squeezed him long and hard. Bodie made a low, helpless sound, turning his head away from Doyle and then towards him again, searching for his face, but he could

see nothing more than shadows, the gleam of an eye, a tooth.

“Put the light on.” And Doyle reached out over him and switched on the small bedside light. Bodie lay on his back, arms behind his head, and Doyle came back to him, laid his hands along the sides of Bodie’s face and found Bodie’s mouth with his own, parting his lips with a gentle tongue, dipping inside and tasting him slowly. The kiss was long and fluid. “You’re so sexy, Ray,” Bodie murmured against his mouth when they paused to draw breath, “Watching you doin’ it last night—got me so hot—”

Doyle gave a little sigh, remembering. “Yeah, wasn’t that something else?” He moved in again to kiss Bodie’s mouth, his cheek, his ear, dipping his tongue inside to make Bodie shiver again.

“How often d’you do it, Ray?”

“Do what?”

“You know.”

Doyle nuzzled his sensitive earlobe and broke off to whisper into it: “When I feel like it.”

“Once a week—? Once a day—?”

“Bodie.” Lightly, Doyle straddled the other man’s body and looked down at him, palms massaging Bodie’s nipples slowly, eyes closing as he found Bodie’s cock with his own and pressed into it, moving in a slow, sexy way.

“How often, Doyle?” Bodie persisted, voice a little hoarse, thrills of pleasure shooting through him as Doyle sighed again and kept up the slow and gentle rhythm of massage, answering him:

“Oh Bodie, I dunno. I don’t write it in my diary, y’know.”

“Don’t you?” Bodie whispered, hands rising to take hold of Doyle’s hips, guide him more firmly.

“Why d’you want me to tell you, anyway?”

“Why d’you think?”

“Turns you on, does it?” Doyle had it now, that certain tidal rhythm, rubbing their cocks sweetly together, the bliss of it closing his eyes for a moment then opening them to stare down in a hazy sort of way: “This doesn’t turn you on enough, then?”

“Yeah. Oh, yeah... Doyle. Keep it going, will you?”

He fought to hold it there, keep that sense of lazy pleasure building, knowing all the while that in the way of things it could not last. Doyle moved on top of him and he made himself be still, not to spoil Doyle’s perfect timing; Doyle raised himself on his elbows and looked down into Bodie’s face, his gaze drifting, his lashes lifting and falling as he breathed, quite hurried now, almost panting. Bodie could no longer be still, thrusting

hard upwards again and again and the rhythm broke; it became a struggle, Doyle wild, nipping and plunging, desperate only to please himself, and Bodie left to fight alone. At one point there was a scuffling outside the door of their room, and voices shouting: Doyle raised his head, tensing, and appeared for a moment to be listening, but then, shuddering, he dropped his head again to Bodie’s shoulder and thrust himself violently at Bodie, freezing perfectly still: Bodie, sweating and trembling, felt the tremors of the other man’s ejaculation pulsing sharply, wetly onto Bodie’s skin.

Doyle slumped on top of him, limp, heart pounding right on top of Bodie’s own. Bodie grabbed him and threw him off and rolled on top of him, thrusting urgently between thighs which tumbled apart for him, coming in seconds, Doyle’s hand over his mouth keeping in the long, imploring moan he could not help but make as the orgasm ripped through him.

Bodie slept for a moment afterwards and then awoke, and watched over Doyle, fiercely, in the silence of the Italian night.

▼ When at last his eyes unclosed to bright morning light, he was alone in the bed. He lay on his back for a moment, and tracked Doyle’s whereabouts at last: he was on the little balcony, fully dressed, leaning out.

“All right?” Bodie said, and had to try his voice out again before it worked.

“Nice mornin’,” Doyle said, coming in. He was wearing a green v-necked jumper today, and the lighter denim jeans. He had washed his hair.

“What time is it?” Bodie asked, yawning.

“No hurry. Got time for breakfast this morning.”

Right. He knew where he was, then. Bodie had a thorough shower and washed his hair. The slash on his wrist was healing nicely so he gritted his teeth and yanked the plasters off. Then he had a complete change of clothes, clean white cords, cream shirt. Good job they were going home tomorrow; his dirty garments now outnumbered the clean by about two to one.

And if Doyle was going to play it cool today, well, fine. He needed a breathing space himself; he didn’t know where he was any longer, life seemed to have changed.

Suki just happened to look their way and happened to wave just as they entered the dining room, so they sat with the London couple for breakfast. The bread and jam routine was unchanged, as was the battle for the coffee. However, here Gianni’s Italian birth came in handy as the waitresses rushed to fill his cup even before he lifted it into the air, and then he would graciously indicate to

them Bodie's, obviously enjoying the little condescension: Bodie then had to fight with himself to get the expected syllable of gratitude out. Suki seemed to spend most of the time leaning across the table and staring deeply and meaningfully into Doyle's eyes, at least when he deigned to lift them from his plate.

"Ever go to any of the London clubs, Ray?"

"Yeh, sometimes."

"He go with you?" she nodded at Bodie.

"Nope," Doyle said, "Not a clubbing type."

"Oh, you never asked me," Bodie camped. Doyle ignored him: Bodie's expression did not change, though his senses registered the direct hit. Reaction's certainly set in there, then.

Doyle left the table soon afterwards to go back to the room with five minutes to spare. "You two fallen out?" Suki asked Bodie, big brown eyes peering over the rim of her very expensive glasses.

"Not as far as I know... still, Ray's the moody type. You won't believe this. He's booking again for October, got the idea to bring his bird back with him: good luck to her, I say." Bodie dropped this in with a cool smile and did not look their way as they tried hard not to exchange glances. Doyle was weaving his way back through the tables at that point: "Isn't that right, Ray," Bodie said as Doyle came within earshot

"What?" Doyle picked up his last piece of dry bread and looked at it without appetite.

"Bringing Sylvie with you next time, weren't you saying?"

"Not if she hears about breakfast," was Doyle's only comment, dropping the bread back onto the table.

▼ By 6.30 AM they were on their way. In his seat Bodie shut his eyes and tipped his head back and made no attempt at conversation. He was, he realised, very tired: travelling nonstop, so many impressions coming and going, lack of a regular routine or even the chance to stop and breathe and take stock between things of large historical or cultural importance. Every minute of their time seemed to be accounted for by the tour itinerary, except of course for the hours between dusk and dawn, and those too had their story.

He was awoken by a nudge in his side and there was Doyle, holding two steaming cups of the liquid which the driver's grumpy assistant passed off as coffee.

"Thanks," Bodie grunted, still half asleep, and took it.

Doyle pushed back the bracelet on his arm and grinned at him as he yawned and stretched in his seat. "Worn you out, have I?" His voice was quiet, but not unduly so.

"You're not kidding." He took a sip of the coffee, grimaced. "Talking to me now, are you?"

"Shouldn't I be?" His hand was lying alongside Bodie's between them, and for one moment Bodie felt the hair-raising sensation of a fingertip touching his, though Doyle's head was turned away, looking out of the window.

"Thought I'd upset you," Bodie said, and took another cautious sip.

Doyle turned his way, and his expression was cool, appraising: "Oh, you have."

Bodie's heart flipped over in his chest. He gulped the coffee down and crumpled the plastic cup in his hand, staring ahead.

"Might never be the same again," Doyle added, unsmiling; and then he seemed to look away from troubling inner thoughts to see Bodie himself, his lips curving up, his eyes suddenly friendly, warm. As if he would touch him, if he could. Kiss him, perhaps.

Bodie's heart quickened in a way it did not under gunfire. Things had changed; it scared him a little bit, excited him more. And there was still the night to come.

Meanwhile there were the motions of tourism to be gone through. Coach 99 was left forlornly at the Naples harbour alongside Coach 101 to watch all of its 64 inhabitants board a ferry and sail away across the Mediterranean. Today had a truly holiday feel to it, away from the dusty roads of cities ancient and modern and out onto the deep blue ocean. On deck it was breezy, and they soon got chilled standing there by the railings watching the ferry's white and foaming wake streaming out behind them, the hot reek of engine oil in the air; it was time to go below decks, where to their delight they found a bar. Also many of their fellow Coach 99-ers, but as Bodie said, nothing in life was perfect. He bought two beers—

"Bit early, innit?"

"We're on holiday—" they chorused together and rounded the corner in search of a private spot to drink it. And there behind a capstan coiled about with thick rope lurked the Coach 99 child, with something sticky in its hand. Bodie smiled at it pleasantly then goggled his eyes— "Boo!" he said quietly. The child fled, wide-eyed.

Acknowledging the success of this Doyle raised an eyebrow at Bodie, then took up a pose leaning on the capstan and had a swig from his can. "Like kids, do you?"

"All right in their place, I suppose."

"Want some of your own?" Doyle tipped up his can again, one hand raking through his hair; he looked out to sea, at the factories and the smoke of Naples all along the coastline.

"I dunno. Maybe one day." Odd question. "Don't just get 'em out of the blue, y'know. But I suppose I'd like to leave something behind."

Doyle nodded, eyes fixed on the view to sea. "Yeah, I reckon most people feel like that."

Bodie didn't like the mood of this conversation. If Doyle was trying to send him some subliminal message by it he sensed it was a message he did not want to hear. "Look, Doyle, I'm not looking to the future at the moment. Can't see further than tomorrow right now. Leave it at that, yeah?"

Doyle just looked at him, eyes grey and reflective, the wind blowing back his hair. "Tomorrow may never come, remember?" Bodie continued determinedly. He stamped disparagingly on the somewhat scruffy deck. "They say 'see Naples and die' don't they? This boat's on its last legs, for a start."

That did the trick. Doyle's lip lifted cheerily. "Yeah, noticed it was listing to the left just now. You were stood over that side at the time, but I don't know if—"

He was gone, and Bodie after him, armed with a dripping can.

▼ Capri rose up like a jewel set in the sea: it sparkled. Emerald greenery crawled up the sides of its cliffs; white houses, pink houses, blue houses were set higgledy-piggledy around the harbour they were fast approaching. "This is the life," Doyle yawned as he leaped with lazy energy off the ferry onto the gangway.

"Yeah, isn't it?" The place was bustling with life and vigour, pleasure boats and fishing smacks side by side at the quay, souvenir shops and cafe-bars clustering along the narrow street. But any thoughts they might have had of freedom were quelled by the appearance of a guide bearing down upon the Coach 99 crowd; he carried a rainbow-coloured golf umbrella for easy recognition, but this did seem superfluous given his huge and shining bald cranium, and the fringe of hair to his earlobes beneath just like a cake-frill.

Cake-Frill rounded them up, coralled them into sections, loaded them onto several minibuses which then took to the narrow streets and up hills to the smart and stylish little square named AnaCapri, where expensive shops for leather, marquetry, lace and jewellery predominated. Most of Coach 99 seemed keen to browse here but Bodie had thoughts of insurrection on his mind. He pushed through the crowds to find his partner.

"Fancy going off with me?"

"Oh, Bodie, you know how to tempt a bloke," Doyle automatically fluttered his lashes and Bodie swatted him

on the rear.

"—I mean, shall we make our excuses and go?"

Doyle merely raised an eyebrow at him this time, his glance significant, and Bodie felt a shockwave strike right through him: Doyle had lain on top of him and come all over him last night. It didn't bear thinking about, not now, and soon not ever. "Yeah," was all Doyle said, and took things immediately in hand, strolling over with that easy swagger to the coach driver, who was soon shaking his head, obviously not keen on splitting up the party. Bodie saw the insolent tilt of his partner's head; Ray Doyle could be rude for England if called upon.

"Okay?" Bodie asked as Doyle shouldered his way back through the throng to him.

"Yes—" Doyle stopped to consider, lips pursed: "But we mustn't get lost, we must be back by 3.30, we must remember we are ambassadors for our country and—" he paused again, primly— "we must wash our hands if we go to the toilet."

"No problem," Bodie said, "Brought up proper, we was," and heads together, laughing, they made their escape.

Once they had got through the crowds and run the gauntlet of lace stalls they found a beautiful walk along a high coastal path, passing by the cool and shady gardens of a lovely classical villa: they came to a viewing point and paused there to look out at the sparkling sapphire sea and the white sands beneath.

Doyle mused: "Bet the likes of George Cowley retire somewhere like this."

"Yeah," Bodie agreed with him, "and bloody Clacton for the likes of you and me."

Doyle propped his elbows on the railings and gazed out. His skin had turned an easy brown and his teeth looked very white; he looked fit and strong and healthy. His shirt, shortsleeved white aertex, was damp here and there; the hairs on his honey-coloured forearms were stiffly raised, trying in vain to bring his body heat down. There was nobody about; on impulse Bodie ducked his head and laid his cheek there for a moment on Doyle's arm, breathing in the warm scent of the other man's body, always a familiar background to a life where he was often confined in small spaces with Ray Doyle: sweat and soap and sometimes, but not today, gunsmoke. Here in Italy he and Doyle were just men, just tourists: but they had something very special about them today: they had kissed in the night and made each other come, and nobody in the world knew it, a secret they would never share with another living soul.

Withdrawing his gaze from the view, Doyle looked down at the dark head, felt the graze of Bodie's mouth gentle on his skin, and said: "If Fred and Edna come around that corner right now you can do the talking," but he didn't sound bothered.

Against his lips the other man's skin was salty, warm. Bodie said, quiet, intense, "I want—"

"Yeah, I noticed."

"Let's do it again. Ray. Let's."

"Right here?" Doyle scoffed, but there was tension in his own body now, the veins in his forearms standing out stark and blue. Desire spread through Bodie's blood like a sickness: he slipped an arm around Doyle, found and fingered the tiny bud of his nipple through damp cotton. And Doyle stood there registering the shock of it, eyes closing for a second, blanking out the blue dazzle of the sea and Bodie's eyes beguiling him, the better to focus on the feel of Bodie's warm, strong fingers pinching him, sending thrilling messages all across his nerves and down to his cock.

Bodie came closer still, grazed his sensitive ear with the lightest of whispers, a thought which had come to him last night at a crucial moment—

"I'll go down on you, Ray, just say you want me to."

The offer was mad, extravagant, dangerous: anyone could come round here at any moment, but Doyle's eyes, wild, tempted, met his, and for a moment time stood still for them—

"Oh yes, I want you to," Doyle whispered back to him at last. "Gonna swallow it for me, are you?"

A huge jolt hit Bodie just like that, his cock swelling, throbbing. He stared at Doyle without saying anything. Electricity alive between them: the heat in the air beating down. And then a sudden babble of voices nearby, coming nearer. Doyle actually jumped, fingers whipping into his armpit for his gun, and then his arm dropped empty down by his side as he moved to look out at the view again, and Bodie's own hand trembled as he raised it to smooth down his hair and aim a friendly grin at the tourists coming their way.

Without a word Doyle swung away from the sea view and began to move off fast down the narrow path. Bodie followed him, heart like a hammer in his chest; sweat prickled all over him, his loins as heavy as lead, the pulse of his blood banging in his veins.

That was the end of Bodie's sightseeing: to this day he could tell you nothing about the elegant little town of AnaCapri and the beautiful white villa of Axel Munthe, save that the heat of the sun beat down on him and his head swam with the wine they had with an untasted lunch, and desire for Doyle intoxicated him still more

than that; so that every sense in him urged him on to hunt him, kiss him, force him if he had to.

They were lunching on the terrace of the first hotel they had come to, overlooking the magnificent panorama of the cliff and the ocean: the food was going to cost a packet but Bodie was not thinking about that. In the shade of a potted cypress tree, beneath the white iron fretwork table his knee pressed against Doyle's, hard. His partner was leaning forward, chin almost on his forearms, peering out over the terrace to the cliffs below. His curls shone copper in the sun; the nape of his neck was damp.

"Come in the heads with me," Bodie said, low and fast, and Doyle turned a fierce little smile on him, the chipped tooth flashing.

"No thanks, Bodie, be just my luck to get done for indecent behaviour."

Just the way he said it, low and sexy, *indecent* made Bodie's heart thrill and flutter, nor less the knowledge that Doyle had said it to arouse him. He sought out Doyle's eyes and stared at him very hard. "You look good enough to eat today."

Doyle lowered his lashes. "Yeah, so you said." He looked up quickly, to catch the hard and hungry gaze. "What is it with you today, Bodie? Oysters or something?"

"It's you, something about you's just getting to me."

Doyle met his eyes amused; but Bodie's intensity, the moody passion of the man, seemed to be altering the very air around them; he was finding it very hard to breathe. Bodie looked very trim today; wearing the white trousers which suited him, almost a James Bond figure, cool and dark—and sexy. If Bodie just touched him again—

And Bodie did touch him; his hand gripped Doyle's knee under cover of the table then slipped upwards over the hardness of his thigh and traced over the line of his cock with a finger.

"You're half way there already," he said softly, oddly touched by that, and it made him all but beg in uncharacteristic submission, voice low: "Come to the heads with me Ray, just get ourselves off so I can think straight again."

Doyle shook his head, his cock throbbing under the careless touch of Bodie's hand. Oh, brilliant. Now he was as desperate as Bodie. But not quite to the point of insanity.

"In a hotel? Come on, Bodie, this isn't a Hampstead cottage, y'know. Be waiters and tourists an' all in and out the whole time. Forget it. Look down there."

Leaning right over him to look, fingers still caressing

Loners by nature, the claustrophobic togetherness of Coach 99 did not suit them, and it was so beautiful here, the sky azure blue and the sea sparkling and glittering beneath, the little yacht, the fresh warm air. Then they began to lope up the path, enjoying the sheer physicality of it, making a little unspoken war of it, keeping in front, taking the shallowest breaths etc., until they came out onto the streets again, back in mainstream life.

They took a minibus down from the elusive heights of AnaCapri down to a halfway point, where there was a pleasant park to wander around—more of those glorious views out to sea—Bodie snapped Doyle sitting on a wall with a palm tree behind, brown skin, white shirt, cheeky grin. Then they meandered through the narrow cobbled streets window-shopping and found themselves eventually back at the harbour.

“Ever ‘eard of the Blue Grotto?” Bodie asked of Doyle, reading one of the many signs chalked on blackboards.

“Nope,” said Doyle thoughtfully, “Blue as in movie, d’you think?”

“Go and find out, shall we?”

Another magical experience, though Bodie had not been expecting anything. They went in a motorboat with about twenty other tourists, captained by an Italian youth with a deep and swarthy tan and the habit of crooning throaty Italian love songs to the lady passengers as he pulled the tiller this way and that and the boat sailed around the spectacular coastline. Bodie leaned over the edge of the boat and thrust his hands into the cool water rushing past the prow. Doyle raised an eyebrow at him, commenting deeply, “Sticky fingers?” and Bodie grinned back at him, knowing, cocky as the wind blew briskly and coolly through his hair, and Doyle’s hands joined his in the water, feeling the pull and the force of it as the boat ploughed on through. They must be in deep water, and perhaps over rocks: the sea was a dark blue, the darkest, with a silvery sparkle in it put there by the rays of the sun.

“Colour of your eyes,” Doyle said. He looked from one to the other, assessingly.

“Exactly.”

It struck through him like a power surge: Ray Doyle, looking at him in that way. Made him shiver— “Careful, Ray,” Bodie warned, low, sardonic. “As you keep sayin’, no point starting off the romance of the century.”

“Just makin’ conversation,” was Doyle’s comment, and stayed quiet thereafter, eyes drifting over the horizon.

Loud shouts heralded arrival at their destination—which was an uncompromisingly small hole at the foot

of a huge, black cliff towering to the skyline. Little rowing boats lay at anchor nearby, each crewed by another sunblackened Italian, now upping anchors and rowing as fast as they could towards the pleasure boats in the race for customers. When their turn came Bodie followed Doyle over the edge into the narrow, rocking boat indicated to them and the boatman began to row fast and furious for the hole.

“No preety ladies,” he observed, looking back over his shoulder.

“Not this time,” Doyle said.

“You like preety ladies?”

Doyle met Bodie’s eye, gave him a little smirky grin. “You bet, mate,” Bodie said, amiably enough, just in case the chap had some sort of a threesome in mind, though surely nothing much could be accomplished in a narrow rocking rowboat. The boat, propelled by those muscular Italian arms, was now approaching the impossibly tiny hole in the side of the cliff.

“Tell me we’re not going in there,” Bodie said, claustrophobia or whatever phobia it would be regarding tiny holes in the sides of mountainous cliffs striking in, but yes, going in they were, ordered imperiously by the boatman to lie almost flat on the floor of the boat as the low arch of rock passed overhead and sudden darkness made them blink.

They emerged into a vast black rocky cavern, highroofed. In here where no sunshine ever reached the air was dank and chill. But, astonishingly, the seawater had changed into the lightest, brightest turquoise, sparkling like liquid aquamarine all around the boat.

“That’s amazing,” Bodie said.

“You being sarcastic?”

“No, it’s really amazing.”

“Yeah, I was thinkin’ that.”

“Underwater floodlights?”

“No, I think it’s a natural phenomenon. Didn’t that American guy back on the boat say so?”

“Engleesh?” The boatman, moodily lounging on his oar, interrupted this exchange.

“Yup.”

“I donta like Engleesh.”

“Oh, right,” Doyle said faintly, exchanging a look with Bodie.

“Know where we stand then mate, don’t we?” Bodie said with a humorous curve to his lips.

“Smoll teeps,” said the boatman with meaning.

Bodie met Doyle’s eyes. “I suppose we could swim out if it came to it.”

“Just give ‘im a beeg teep, Bodie, and let’s stay dry.”

Bodie handed over a 5000 lire note. The boatman

beers as well and set off back to the Pensione with his shopping bags, meeting Fred and Edna on the way and managing to be a touch more gracious than he felt he had probably been of late. When he got back to the room he shut the door and locked it behind him and turned to look at the bed.

The shutters were closed and the curtains drawn. It took his eyes a moment to adjust. Doyle was lying on his back, asleep, long legs sprawling. His jeans were in a heap on the floor; he wore only the white aertex and dark underpants, one leg drawn up with bent knee, one hanging off the bed.

Bodie remembered to breathe after a moment, his lungs sucking in a vast amount of air; slowly, quietly, he set the shopping down on the floor, eyes never leaving the bed.

Christ, but he was turned on to Doyle at the moment and no mistake. Every hair on his skin was erect; he was so fiercely aroused, cock throbbing with an urgency he seldom felt these days, nerves screaming at him to whip it out and jerk himself off just standing there and who cared if Doyle woke up and saw him? That need not stop him, not any more.

And it would be wiser, too: get it over with, get rid of it before it had a chance to settle and take root, because he was getting into trouble here. He knew all the signs: deep, deep water. For he knew what he wanted now. What he wanted was not to mess around with Doyle on the fringes: he wanted to take him all the way, as far as they could go, take them both out to the limit and stay there.

His hand clenched. Sorry, Ray. Doyle, who had only wanted to play around a bit, have his fancy tickled for him; caught instead in the web of Bodie's obsession. Unless Bodie could stop it in its tracks before he ever knew.

And he did not want to. He knew he should be shocked at himself, but what he wanted now was the clearest, most direct and most primitive of urges, expressed at its most crude: to give it to Doyle long and hard up the arse, spit him like a pig on the prong of his cock and never mind if he squealed, thrust and thrust until he emptied out this huge and terrifying desire into Doyle's body. Here it is: pass it on.

Perhaps alarmed on some psychic level by the resonances in the room, Doyle stirred; his breathing faltered, then changed its rhythm. He opened his eyes to see his partner standing at the foot of the bed staring at him. He smiled, but Bodie did not smile back, just kept up that powerful smouldering stare.

"Whassamatter?" Doyle said, coming fully awake,

propping himself up on an elbow, and at the sound of his voice the demons fled back into the shadows, the fixed blaze of Bodie's eyes shattering as he blinked. After a moment the tense set of his mouth broke and reformed into a smile, a smile of great charm, tenderness almost, and it dragged an answering smile from Doyle.

"Did you get it?" he yawned, remembering Bodie's mission, and the bed dipped under Bodie's weight as Bodie rapidly knelt and took Doyle's bare foot in his hand, bringing it to his mouth and kissing the sole.

"Christ, Bodie, you're shaking." Doyle's head was falling back onto the pillow as Bodie kissed warmly and swiftly from his ankle bone right up his leg to the sensitive inner thigh. "Wha'happened? Suki chase you back or something?"

"Ssh." Bodie was deftly pulling the tight underpants down a little more. Doyle lifted his rump obligingly off the bed but Bodie did not take the offered chance to rip them off, simply settled them beneath his cock so that the tight cotton band rubbed against his balls, a welcome pressure which made his eyes fly wide: clever of Bodie, intuitive, or perhaps more intimate even than that, perhaps an echo of Bodie's own secrets "Nice," he said aloud, his body springing to life. He reached behind him to thump the pillow back into plumpness, propped it behind his head so that he could watch Bodie touch him, stroking his balls very carefully, stretching the skin tight over the precious sacs inside, tracing the line between them with a fingertip. Something women didn't seem to know about, yet it could bring him off quicker than almost anything. Then Bodie's lips touched him there, gently, almost reverently. "Oh, Bodie," he said, and shut his eyes for an instant.

"Bodie," he said again after a moment, just for the hell of it, just to hear his name. The touch of Bodie's mouth was so sweet it was making stars dance before his eyes—I didn't know anything could be so bloody wonderful, I want him to go on doing this forever—and that was when he remembered Bodie's promise.

"Want me to have a shower?" but Bodie shook his head briefly, nuzzled at his groin in the dark curls of hair there, and Doyle remembered that Bodie had a thing for words—

His voice was soft, seductive as he reached down and ran his fingertips through Bodie's dark hair: "Gonna make me happy, then? Suck it for me." His cock leapt off his belly as he spoke: obviously wasn't only Bodie liked to hear it.

And he watched all the while, stiffly aroused by the sight of Bodie opening his mouth wide and taking in his cock, sucking it immediately and deliciously deep, lips



closing tightly over the root, then drawing sweetly down the length of the shaft in one gliding motion, making Doyle shudder and gasp.

This could be the quickest blowjob on record. Again, that sliding pleasure, and then Bodie's tongue flickered across the slit at the tip and fluttered around the frenulum in the most exquisite way. "Oh yeah Bodie, that's it—" and in willing response that delicious tongue fluttered around again and his balls lifted up, pressed and soothed by the constricting band beneath them. Christ, he was going to come—

Had Bodie remembered to lock the door? He could hear noises outside, people talking, passing by just a few feet away from them. God, he was so nearly there. He looked down at his own body in a sensuous sprawl, seeing what someone would see if they opened the door and looked into the room: his legs wide apart, Bodie's dark head moving at his groin in unmistakable activity, unchanged since the days of Pompeii. As Bodie's mouth glided again from root to tip Doyle reached down to touch Bodie's lips with a finger, touching too his own cock in Bodie's mouth, and the thought flashed into his head that a photograph of this would be a high security risk, blackmailable material, a matter of national security: 3.7., in an Italian bedroom, sucking off 4.5.

His hips lifted off the bed: he cried out.

Bodie finished it off. Doyle's last, yearning thrust hit the back of his throat: the liquid pulsings slid sweetly down. He swallowed it all before he had to cough. There. Easy. What a way to make someone happy. He rested his head on Doyle's belly near the damp curl of his cock, pleased with himself: that had been good for Doyle, a damn sight better than being fucked up the arse by a big hard cock. He had the urge well in hand now, Doyle was safe. Just as well too: how nearly had he blown it? Rape was probably not on Doyle's list of fantasies: not that way round, anyway.

He had even enjoyed it in an odd sort of way: it had been a thrill to see his cool partner so wild for it. If Cowley had marched into the room and stood by the bed uttering shocked Scottish oaths—och, ye bad, bad laddies—Doyle would have begged Bodie to carry on regardless, he'd lay money on it. Doyle was stroking his hair gently as Bodie's head lay on his belly; and that made him feel—

"Bodie." The throaty whisper above him made him lift his head.

"What?"

"Come up here."

"Hang on a bit." He rolled over and got off the bed, went to take off his clothes, folding them automatically

and leaving them on the chair. Then he lay back down on the bed in the circle of Doyle's arms; Doyle was kicking off his underpants then lying still, half under him. Bodie laid his head on the aertex shirt Doyle still wore and listened to the kick of his heart.

"Well," he said deeply, "can't tell me you can do that better by yourself."

Doyle chuckled near to his ear. "Wasn't going to."

"Ever tried?"

"Have you?"

Bodie stroked a fingertip very carefully around the contours of the other man's lips. "You've got a beautiful mouth."

"Is that a hint, yeah?"

If not exactly enthusiastic, Doyle sounded perfectly cool about it. As if he would. God, the thought of it: Doyle's gorgeous mouth closing willingly around his cock.

"There are other ways, you know," came the low voice in his ear.

Yeah, right. But getting sucked off by Ray Doyle was not something he was going to pass up in favour of a handjob. Come on, Doyle. You can do it. It's better than doing it to a bird, I promise you.

Impatient with his silence, "Oh, come on, Bodie, don't tell me you haven't thought about us fucking."

Well, that was—Bodie's head shot up off the pillow: he stared. In the semi-darkness of the shuttered room it was not easy to read the subtler shadings of expression.

Doyle remarked, "Must be your lucky day, mustn't it? You get to fuck me, and no, I haven't ever done it before." He gazed at Bodie consideringly. "Will that make it—special for you? Yeah, I reckon that'll push your buttons, Bodie. I just bet deflowering virgins is right up your street." Silence. Bodie said nothing. Doyle prodded him with a lean hard finger. "Ey. This is the only chance you're gonna get, mate, so I'd say yes quick if I were you."

Bodie closed his mouth, his heart thudding in shock, and then opened it again. "You don't really want to, do you?"

"I don't want to go back and always wonder what it might have been like."

Finish it off with one final act, the ultimate. No daydreams necessary to disturb their lives back home, never to have to wonder what it might have been like: they would have done it all, played it through to the last card and they could shut the door on it for all time. Still Bodie said nothing.

Doyle was lying flat on his back, staring up at the ceiling. "And while we're on the subject—this is another thing, mate, that you aren't going to tell Murphy—'Oh,



by the way Murph, good old Doyle let me screw him when we were in Italy'—"

Bodie was shaking his head in disbelief. "Ray, you know I wouldn't."

Still lying there, cool and relaxed, Doyle gave him a smile, surprisingly sweet. "Just checkin'. Wouldn't do much for my macho image if they knew I let you up my arse, now would it?"

He meant it. Bodie felt a sense of disbelief: he was going to get what he wanted. For all the wrong reasons, probably, but anyway he was going to get it. He leaned up on one elbow over Doyle, touched his hair, stroked a curl around one finger, hardly aware. "You won't like it," he said, bluntly, abruptly.

Doyle looked up at him for a moment, and then a quirky little smile twisted his mouth; the flawed tooth flashed rakishly. "Well, that's okay, Bodie. I don't plan to get the taste for it, y'know."

Something about the way he said it, a sort of sadness, courage, moved Bodie: go out in a blaze of glory, is that what you're thinking? Well, how wrong can you be.

Helpless nonetheless, Bodie leaned down to kiss him, and found the taste of his mouth intoxicating enough to stay for a while. But all while thoughts raced around his mind: temptation warred with intuition. And temptation won. At last he withdrew to whisper ironically, "I've got a feeling we shouldn't do this, Ray. So don't blame me afterwards."

Doyle said, almost bitterly, "I won't."

Bodie kissed him again, and let his hands range over him freely and possessively, and whispered to him, "Suntan oil?"

Doyle only took a moment to answer, though Bodie heard him catch his breath; perhaps that made it all too real for him, brought it right down out of the hearts and flowers, blaze of glory league, but Doyle was always practical: "Olive—in my gripbag."

Trancelike, Bodie got out of bed and groped around in the bag and the heavy bottle came straight away to his hand. Back on the bed he unscrewed the cap and the peculiar aromatic scent of it was in the air: very Italian. His erection seemed to have subsided, awed perhaps by the sense that something more profound than sheer lust was abroad, but Doyle took care of that for him, sitting up, stripping off his own shirt, and Bodie looked at him, the neat, well-defined muscles overlying bone, and touched his nipples then kissed each in turn, lips suckling, yearning, while Doyle caressed his cock, stroking it back into stiffness, finger and thumb ringing him as carefully and exactly as he might oil the barrel of his Browning.

Doyle poured the stuff into the palm of his hand and smoothed it onto Bodie's cock and Bodie tipped his head back to watch: the tall rod rising, redly tipped, from the dark hair at his groin and Doyle's fingers on him, stroking, then slipping beneath to cradle his testes in a firm, comforting grip and Doyle's curly head tilted up to look into Bodie's face, a slow grin beginning: "That nice, was it?" He tossed Bodie the bottle. "Do me—just for fun." And as Bodie began to unscrew it— "Ang on. This is going to be messy, Bodie, better chuck some towels on the bed."

Good job one of them was thinking straight. Bodie eyed the white counterpane with horror, stripped it off and left it over the chair, then got their own bath towels from the bathroom, where they still hung over the rail ready for last-minute packing in the morning. While Doyle shunted over Bodie laid the towels side by side on top of the sheets. "Just make sure you don't slip through the crack."

Doyle leaned back on both elbows and grinned lopsidedly up at him. "As the actress said to the bishop."

"Drycleaning bill arriving in London could be embarrassing." Bodie poured out the last of the whisky, took two small sips, and gave the rest to Doyle, whose eyes regarded him thoughtfully over the rim of the glass as he downed it in three rapid swallows.

"Think I need to be anaesthetised, do you?"

"Might help." He poured some of the oil into his hands, rolled it about to warm it. Doyle's cock grew bolder as he rubbed it sweetly and seductively, but it was time to move on, his body was arrogant, demanding my turn. He's had his.

"Turn over," Bodie said. If Doyle was nervous he wasn't showing it, rolling in one neat quick movement onto his stomach, then drawing himself up onto his knees and burying his forehead in the hard white pillow. The muffled voice floated back to Bodie, "Leave enough for a stir-fry, will you? That was expensive, you know, extra-virgin."

"Like you then." Bodie bit him lightly on the buttocks: lean, muscular, very different from a woman's. He laid his face there for a moment. The smell of the oil and Doyle's body was making him feel strange, heated.

"Ray..."

"What—?"

"Nothing." He was thinking—that for all their bravado, this was a tragedy in the making. The end of it all, before they were truly ready for the beginning. And like the song—*there's no-one left can help us now/we're in too deep/there's no way out.*

Bodie stroked him between the cheeks of his arse,



finding the little depression there with his oily fingers, circling it then pressing inside. More oil—and Bodie looked down at his own cock, darkly swollen, rearing up towards his chest. “What’s that thing—about passing a camel through the eye of a needle?”

“Yeh, but take heart, kingdom of heaven’s supposed to be just the other side.” Doyle, flip as ever, wringing from Bodie a tortured grin..

“Well, I’ll let you know.” He shook out more oil and stroked it inwards. In other circumstances he would have enjoyed something like this for the sheer crude thrill of it. Doyle’s body was relaxing for him now, opening outwards. Doyle shivered and thrust back at him, which looked like encouragement. “Ah, that’s—” Bodie heard him swallow— “Yeah, I like that.”

“Think this is all a dream, Doyle?” Bodie asked him shortly; he was having difficulty breathing, looking, privileged, at the shining entrance to Doyle’s body.

“Could be, I suppose. Had one like it once. That must be enough...”

“Look, if it means that much to you, I’ll buy you another bottle.”

“Oh yeah, and where will you get it?”

“Harrods do it. And it’s cheaper there.”

“You say the sweetest things.”

Doyle was so cool, so together, just lying there waiting to get screwed; Bodie didn’t trust himself one half so much as Doyle seemed to. The vulnerability and the courage of the man was doing peculiar things to him, really getting to him: in another minute he was going to lose it, his body on a countdown now, all too ready to run away with him. There was something he had to say—

“Ray?”

“Yeah?”

“Tell me if it hurts, will you?”

“Oh yeah, you know me.”

He did know him. Doyle would draw blood on his tongue first. “I’ll try to go slow, okay?” He straddled Doyle’s back, knees outside his thighs, hands on his shoulders, and let him feel the tip of Bodie’s cock at his anus. Just that much made Bodie swallow, hard. “—But don’t count on it.”

“Just do what you have to do, all right? Want me to lie down?”

“No, stay like this—” He settled one hand on the small of Doyle’s back.

“Can you—” and with that same intuition that kept them alive on the streets Doyle used his hands to open himself up. The sight of that made him less careful than he had meant to be and Doyle sighed slowly, a moan

perhaps held back by gritted teeth as Bodie’s cock passed through the tight muscle and sank into the other man’s body, where it was hot, and tight, and desperately exciting.

“Okay?” he whispered, holding himself back with a terrible effort; drops of sweat slid down his temples and fell onto the sharp planes of Doyle’s shoulder blades.

Doyle’s ‘yeah’ was only a sigh but it was too late now to change his mind, Bodie knew it and Doyle must know it too. His cock was committed now to see it through whether Doyle liked it or not. And he probably didn’t: this whole thing was an abomination, a sin against nature, a crime still in several parts of the world, including this one for all he knew. But the funny thing was that Bodie’s body had gone off the scale on it, electric with delight, reacting as if this was the best and only way to do it and for Doyle’s sake he was having to fight it every step of the way.

But trying it slow and gentle only seemed to stimulate him more. When, soon, one quick hard thrust was irresistible only Doyle’s answering gulp of breath gave him the strength to stop. Then he stayed just exactly where he was, trembling with the effort of it, one hand reaching around Doyle to toy roughly with his nipples—

“Sorry—”

“S okay.”

“S just, it feels so—”

“—so, what?”

Bodie half laughed, half fought for breath— “wonderful—”

“Does it?” Doyle sighed, curious, exhilarated. In the moment of stillness Bodie reached down to touch his own body where it joined Doyle’s, immediate heat flashing over his body at the sight of the tiny glistening opening stretched so wide around the base of his cock. It nearly did for him: he felt his balls draw up, get ready for it—

With a superhuman effort Bodie pulled himself out, very, very gently, wincing

“Now what’s the matter?” Doyle’s head poked up from the pillow.

“Nothing.” He took one sharp breath, and then another. “Just—too good, that’s all. You’re so—Turn over, will you?”

After a moment Doyle rolled onto his back. “Well, make your mind up.” He looked very pale, shadows and pain and the marked cheekbone giving his face a sort of delicacy. Kingdom of heaven was about right: and here I am, fucking an angel.

“Gotta slow myself down, my angel,” Bodie said aloud, looking down into his partner’s face, taking



another deep, calming breath, "Or it's all going to be a bit too fast and furious for you... You've got the sexiest mouth on the squad," tracing it with a slow finger.

"Anyone ever tell you that?"

"Nope, you're the first," Doyle said, considering, breathing. Probably relieved at the break he was getting. Die before he'd admit it, though, and Bodie loved him for that.

"Mm. Lovely mouth. I'd love to see it round my cock..."

But now I never will.

As a calming thought this was not well-qualified. Maybe kissing him, with its diffuse pleasures, would slow the dizzying pace of things. Still it was only moments later that Bodie raised his head, a last lingering parting of their lips, and breathed in again, gathering strength. "This isn't going to take long, Ray. Can you stand it this way?" Rearing up he slid his hands beneath Doyle's thighs, urged them onto his own shoulders, and his cock, quick on the uptake, found the angle for him. Doyle the yoga expert adapted to it with ease, knotting his legs behind Bodie's neck and arching his hips:

"Come on then Bodie, go for it, I can take it."

"I know you can," whispered Bodie, eyes closing as he entered Doyle for the second time, *the last time*, easier now, as if Doyle's body knew him now. As if he belonged.

And he did belong.

Oh, we shouldn't have done this.

We shouldn't...

Once and once only. A sweet, sharp pain stabbed Bodie's heart, like the pain he was all the time aware of causing Doyle, and Doyle taking it for his sake without a murmur, with a sort of tender understanding that Bodie could not help it, did not want to hurt him, it was just implicit in the act. He tried to hold onto the feelings, every one of them, so that he would have something to remember; Doyle's wide-open eyes the only glimmer of light in the darkness of the room, the sweetness of the mouth beneath his own, the abrasion of stubble as their chins grazed together, the willing lips that parted for his tongue. Doyle's hands gripping his hips, not to hold him off but to pull him closer; the sights and sounds and smells, oh, the sweet intoxicating scents of the two of them, his sweat rubbing on Doyle's, his cock deep, deep inside him, lovely, the feeling of it...

He rested his head against Doyle's on the pillow, and felt their hearts beating together, and the pulses of his own body inside the other man's, way outside his control now, he had lost it for sure, lost it all.

"You see? I knew it. Now look what you've done—"

and Doyle's eyes were wide, wider as he began to understand: "I'm going to come, Ray," Bodie whispered, feeling it start to happen; a last moment of stillness, of peace for them, and then it began; the last and most powerful thrust, the moment of glory suddenly there inside him, spreading, and then a shattering shockwave of pleasure breaking inside him, his body lifting and coming and falling apart all in one go.

And then afterwards an astonished, exhausted wonder at the beauty of it all, and the fierce, possessive gratitude for Doyle, who had let him do this, not knowing what he would unleash upon them: well, but how could he have known? How could either of them: Bodie had earlier dreamed of rape and feared it; by what means could he have known it was not violence but tenderness which would defeat them?

He was gripping onto Doyle's hand like a lifeline. At one point he lifted his head, but Doyle drew him back down again against his own wet body, sweat drying, cooling off now. They lay there together, quiet, hit by all the same things. All the universe off-centre, and only themselves to blame.

"Sorry, Doyle," Bodie said at last, his cheek pressed, hard, to the thinly fleshed bones of Doyle's shoulder, "Just happened..."

"Can't blame you. My idea, wasn't it? And it was special for you all right, wasn't it?"

That bloke had got it wrong, about the universe. Not with a whimper, but a bang... "Bit too special, mate... I'll get over it," Bodie added, harshly. In about ten years.

"Will you?" was Doyle's response to that.

Bodie lifted his head again and looked at the clock, and deciphered the numbers. It was still early evening, they could go out, get a meal, try to rediscover some normality.

But at the moment he could not stand that there were other people in the world: all he wanted to do was stay here, and lie close against the other man's side, and look at him, and feel him breathe.

He felt so possessive that it hurt him, fiercely jealous, another side-effect he had not counted on. What price the lovely Sylvie now—? He would take a gun and make her eat it if she so much as looked at Ray as if she owned him.

Owned him! She wasn't fit to touch him.

"This must be how women feel," Doyle said, a little later. "Virgins. You know." Outside the window someone shrieked down in the square below and someone else replied. Fun and games. "The first time. No wonder they fall in love."

"Don't, Doyle." He squeezed his eyes shut.

inhabited it and took the coach back home, the longest journey they had ever made and with nothing for them at the end of it.

▼ Thanks for everything, mate. Was nice, while it lasted.

“The best part of our lives was over much too soon”

My journey through Italy inspired this story... Some of the things happened—except that I did not (quite) fall in love, and I did not lose the dreadful Coach 99 child in Rome—though by that time I would quite have liked to.

Some names have been changed.

*Coach 99, however, appears as itself.
Background listening essential for the creation of this story:*

Bon Jovi—These Days (the stars ain't out of reach)

Gin Blossoms—I'll follow you down

Soul Asylum—Runaway Train (we're in too deep, we can't go back...)

Belinda Carlisle—In Too Deep (likewise)

Dodgy—In a Room

And, most of all—

Pulp—Something Changed. Jarvis Cocker's sighs are inspirational.

Sebastian, June 1996



SPLENDOR IN THE GRASS

jane mailander

"MARILYN,

what's going on in town?" Joel Fleischman asked as he walked into his warehouse-turned-doctor's-office. "There's people all over that big stretch of land behind the Brick. I didn't miss one of Maurice's self-promotional stunts, did I?"

"It's first grass," his receptionist said from behind her desk. For once, Marilyn Whirlwind was not knitting anything. She still wore her jacket, and her knitting bag was on the desktop.

"First grass?" Dr. Fleischman shook his head in disbelief. "That again? Do you mean to tell me that everything stops for one whole day every year so people can go outside to, to look at some grass growing?"

"It's the first grass of spring." Marilyn rose and took up her knitting bag. "You walk on it." She walked past her dumbfounded employer.

"Wait a minute, Marilyn, wait a minute," Fleischman snapped, holding up one hand. "Just, just hold it for a second. This is Thursday, not Saturday. You're just going to, to walk out on me because of this? What about my calls?"

"You don't have any." Marilyn left the office and joined the other people headed toward the meadow.

Joel Fleischman shook his head angrily. Every year since he'd come to this *cockamamie* town he thought that the springtime madness would end with the ice-crack and the Running of the Bulls (he gave a quick reminiscent shiver at that most recent memory).

But no, every year another quaint old Cicely custom reared its weird head with no warning. First grass. You walk on it. *Meshugeneh!* He didn't do grass, he was a city boy; the closest he'd ever come was watching the *tai-chi* people take over Central Park again some April morning.

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Granted, the idea of seeing green growing grass again after six months of sunless snow, mud, sleet, slush, salt and ash might make some people a bit giddy, a little *fershtimmeled*. Walking on it...well, the smell of crushed grass could be very...

Joel shook his head. Since it seemed that half of his patients were going grass-walking he might as well make himself comfortable. He settled in behind his desk to read the latest *Microbiology Today*. The sounds of the Cicely residents were a muted rumble in the meadow's direction, and then a roar. Joel shook his head and kept reading.

But the next noise made him drop his magazine and bolt upright in his chair, his heart pounding hard. It sounded like a scene from Hitchcock's *The Birds*. It sounded like a whole flock of mad crows descending on Cicely, cawing at the tops of their lungs.

Joel ran to the window.

It was the town. Men and women tore through the streets from the meadow. They were flapping their arms and cawing as they ran and drove and biked down the single main street.

Good *God*. Angrily, Joel stalked out, determined to collar somebody about this behavior and—

He leaped out of the way just as a familiar gold Caddy roared past. Maurice Minnefield was at the wheel, his mouth set, his eyes glaring and cold. He did not even turn at Joel's angry shouts and gestures; the Cadillac continued in a savage beeline for the Minnefield mansion.

Mad, the whole town was—

"Dr. Fleischman, Dr. Fleischman! Awk awk awk awk!"

Joel jumped back again as the cawing woman rushed up to him. He blinked as he realized it was Shelley Tambo Vancoeur. The young woman's face was flushed, her eyes sparkling, her blonde hair blown back. She looked beautiful and overjoyed, and she pumped her arms up and down.

"Shelley, it's okay, calm down, I don't—"

"It's *Raven* grass, Dr. Fleischman! Raven grass this time!" Shelley said happily. "This is gonna be so *bitchin'*! I've never walked on Raven grass before!" She yelled, "Hey Melissa! Awk awk awk!" and waved her arms wildly at someone in the cawing crowd.

Joel shook his head in bewilderment (but shaking his head hadn't helped since he'd been here, and he had a feeling it wasn't going to help now). As a dark-haired girl about Shelley's age ran up to both of them, someone Fleischman recognized as Shelley's friend Melissa Kanguak, he said, "Well, if you or Holling would *tell* me what—"

And then he could only stare as the two young women embraced and kissed each other passionately on the mouth, right in front of him.

Joel blinked, his jaw hanging. He looked around him at the whooping people to see if they noticed what Shelley and Melissa were doing. Only then did Joel Fleischman notice that many people were hugging and kissing each other in the same fashion, jumping and dancing as if at a celebration.

Except that men were kissing men, and women were kissing women.

Fleischman felt as if he'd walked into an ACT UP demonstration. He stared as a big red-bearded logger was dipped by an equally burly and hirsute trucker.

"Oh, this is *cool!*" Melissa said when she and Shelley separated. "Shel, let's go to Makeout Ridge and do some more stuff, I'll get my dad's car." She ran off.

"Okay, but just second base and stuff," Shelley yelled, running with Melissa in the river of cawing townspeople. "I'm still hitched to the Big H!"

Joel stared after both, his mouth still open. He didn't even react when big black-bearded Jack Jenkins threw his arms around him and kissed him on the mouth before running off.

▼▼▼▼▼

"All your life,

You were only waiting for this moment to arise..."

A cheerful voice overlay the final sweet warble of the Beatles' "Blackbird." "Good morning, fellow Ravens. This is Chris in the Morning at KBHR.

"Well, looks like the old Trickster dropped one on the first-grass yesterday, and we're all waking up to new and different dance partners this morning.

"Now for all the newcomers out there like me, a temporary bout of reversed sexual attraction can be unsettling, so I've scheduled our morning's readings to reflect our Raven theme. I'd also like to salute Ron Bantz and Eric Hillman who will be carrying the torch of heterosexuality for the rest of us until the grass is over; they'll be providing pointers for us newcomers to their neck of the woods. And don't worry, guys; being straight is just a phase you're going through right now.

"For those who've heard on the rumor mill...yes, it's true. Cicely's own Inspector Javert, Sergeant Barbara Semanski, was caught shoplifting a box of condoms and a bag of Doritos from Ruth-Ann's store yesterday afternoon. When caught, she paid for the items and all charges were dropped over her objections. To those of us who know Barb, this is like catching Sherlock Holmes



taking a kickback from Professor Moriarty. Sergeant Semanski says she doesn't know why she felt the urge to break a law; she's put herself on report and she feels really bad about it. So please, people, if you run into her—*don't* try to cheer her up.

"And since it's Raven grass this year, that means it's also time for the Great Minnefield Hibernation. Hey, Maurice, far be it from me to dictate your personal life, but I'd think that taking a ride on the lavender elephant would be more fun than getting drunk and pretending it isn't in the house with you—but that's just me. Sweet dreams.

"The First-Grass Dance this year will be held next Saturday night in the union hall, starting at 8. Bring your new partner, or come alone and go home with someone new. And you're all big people, so I don't have to remind you to bring your latex.

"And just for Maurice, I'm opening with his favorite poet."

Chris Stevens reached for his dog-eared copy of *Leaves of Grass*, pushing aside a box of Whitman's Sampler chocolates with a card inscribed "To Chris—From Ed." He thumbed open the "Calamus" section and began.



*Passing stranger! you do not know how longingly I
look upon you,
You must be he I was seeking...*

Walt Whitman's gentle erotic verse unrolled over the air. The young deejay who was also the town's minister kept his eyes focused on the words, his thoughts on reciting the poem correctly. His hands trembled and knotted on the book. He did not look at the unopened box of chocolates, nor at the tufts of grass decorating the windows.



Joel walked into his office, his rubber-gloved hands holding a tray full of petri dishes, to find Maggie O'Connell sitting in a chair near Marilyn's desk. Both women were knitting. "Well, Marilyn, it's nice of you to decide to come into work today," he said sarcastically, his voice muffled by the air-filter over his nose and mouth. "So, when do the cherry blossoms come out and give you an excuse to walk out on me again?"

Marilyn didn't look up from her knitting. Maggie O'Connell only gave Joel a disgusted look before returning to the large afghan emerging from her own needles.

Fleischman changed his tactic. "When did you get into town, O'Connell?"

"Got in this morning, Fleischman, as a matter of fact," O'Connell said, looking Joel in the eye. "I always come in for first-grass. I took a walk, and found out it was Raven grass." Marilyn looked at Maggie as she spoke, then continued her knitting.

"Well, you're not due for a checkup for another three months, and I know I didn't have you order any pharmaceuticals. Is there any particular reason you're in here today?"

"Yes," Maggie said, and kept knitting.

"What, what? Spring? Pollen? You need your antihistamines?"

"Fleischman," Maggie said disgustedly, "I didn't come to see *you*."

Only then did Joel realize what Maggie meant. He stared at her, at the unflappable Marilyn Whirlwind, and back at Maggie. "I don't *believe* this. You've got to be kidding. This isn't anything like you, O'Connell, I know this isn't! What is this, some kind of joke?"

"Typical Fleischman, you can't explain something that doesn't fit your little male-centered view of the universe so you dismiss it. I'll bet you haven't walked on the grass yet."

"Damn right I haven't, not with this effect on people!" Joel snapped at the angry woman. Marilyn watched them both and said nothing. "This could be any kind of dangerous agent working on people's systems, and it's dangerous to succumb to anything this behavior-altering!" He hefted the row of sample dishes. "I've got to isolate whatever it is that's making people react like this, so it can be dealt with."

O'Connell looked at Joel, and now there was a kind of angry pity in her eyes. "So you can reason it away, and find a shot for it, is that it, Fleischman? You might as well find a cure for spring-fever.

You know, you ought to just hole up with Maurice getting drunk if that's going to be your attitude. Don't worry, it'll be over soon and the town will go right back to nice safe heterosexuality as far as the eye can see." She turned her attention away from Dr. Fleischman. "Pea soup okay for dinner?"

"I'll bring bread," Marilyn said as quietly as if nothing had transpired in the room.

Joel retreated into his office at full speed, leaving the two women peaceably knitting together in his anteroom.

At lunch he confided in Holling at the Brick, trying hard not to notice all the tables filled with men or women holding hands with each other. There was a tuft of green artificial grass in a vase on the table, and a dusty-looking Raven Christmas ornament perched within. "I don't understand any of this. It's ridiculous, illogical!"



“Raven grass can be hard on newcomers, Joel,” Holling said soberly, wiping the table as Shelley whisked by him with a full tray of moseburgers, fries, Cokes and beers. “Especially if you’ve been raised a certain way. It was tough for me the first time, but Bill was an old hand at this and he got me through it. Maurice—well, that’s another story.” There was a sad faraway look on Holling’s face. “Some things you can’t fight, and some back-grounds can’t be alleviated.”

Joel blinked and stared at the man in his mid-sixties earnestly telling him this information. From the corner of his eye he saw Shelley start, turn and scold Jackie White Sky for patting her bottom. He blinked. *Dave’s wife?* “Doesn’t any aspect of this *bother* you, Holling? This sudden attack of, of homosexuality?”

“It’s not an *attack*, Joel,” Holling said as gently and patiently as he would explain autumn leaves to a four-year-old who thinks the tree is dying. “It’s the grass. It’s more like a...well, a toss of a coin. Most times it comes up heads. Most years when you walk on the first-grass...” Holling got a reminiscent gleam in his eye. “Shelley and I don’t come out of the bedroom for a couple of days.”

Come to think of it, Fleischman realized, since he’d come to Cicely it was this time of the year he bought more girlie mags than he did the rest of the year. He felt fourteen again, almost living in the bathroom either in the cabin or at the office, slavishly re-reading every erotic passage in books of old poetry and prose as he’d done in his early teens. Hadn’t Melissa Kanguak come on to him during her checkup last year—and hadn’t he had to restrain himself from climbing on top of her on the table...? He’d been horrified afterwards, all the more so because he’d reacted to her advances as if there was nothing wrong with them.

“Well,” Holling continued, “every ten years or so, the coin comes up tails; those are the years we say it’s Raven grass. The story is that Raven defecates on the new grass as he flies over it, and it makes everyone’s desire topsy-turvy. Raven’s a trickster; he makes things go backwards. That’s why Raven’s the patron of homosexuals; it’s said he’ll put a man’s soul in a woman’s body or a woman’s soul in a man’s body just for fun. Some Indians think homosexuals have special magic because of that.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Joel said, angrily averting his eyes from the sight of Jack Jenkins holding hands with Walt Kupfer at a table. What was worse were the longing looks Walt was giving Holling.

“That may be, Joel,” Holling said gently, “but I’ve never heard of Indians who believe that story waiting

outside gay bars with baseball bats and golf clubs, the way some people who quote Leviticus do.”

Joel was silent after that. “Every ten years,” he mused. “Every ten years. That’s a starting place, any way.” He heard Shelley giggle. “Doesn’t it bother you, what Shelley’s doing?”

“No,” the older man said. “I told her about Raven grass, so she knows. She’s curious—but we’re married, Joel, and that means being faithful. And this year, for the first time, I’ve had to tell Walt no for the same reason.”

Joel blinked. He put two and two together. And he understood the longing looks Walt was giving Holling. “Y-you mean you two...”

“Ever since Walt moved out here to become a trapper,” Holling said matter-of-factly. “Bill took me in tow, and I took Walt in. It’s tough on Walt right now. I told him we could date, I offered to take him to the dance Saturday night. But Walt doesn’t need a date, he needs sex—and I won’t cheat on Shelley, not for any reason.”

“Other couples...” Joel stammered. More than one man or woman holding hands in the Brick was wearing a wedding band.

“Are other couples,” Holling said firmly. “Some think it’s just a fling, and it’s all right for them—but it’s adultery all the same. And at first-grass Shelley would be hurt whether I slept with Walt or with Melissa. That’s why she’s dating her friends, but not sleeping with them.” He looked up. “More customers, Joel.”

Holling got up and left, and left Fleischman thinking.



“Yes?” Ruth-Ann said pleasantly to the giggling pair of girls that approached the counter. They both looked about sixteen.

“Um,” one girl said, and blushed. Her friend giggled and covered her face in her hands. “W-we’d like some, uh, some stuff? Y’know, we’d kinda like to, y’know...”

The old woman nodded matter-of-factly to dispel their acute embarrassment. “Of course,” she said. “Would you like literature, assistants, or protection?”

“Um...”

“A magazine!” the other girl chirped, and both giggled.

“We’re *girls*,” the first girl said to Ruth-Ann. “Like, we don’t need, you know...thingies. You know.”

“Do you mean condoms?”

Both girls turned bright pink, and nodded.

“I didn’t say *condoms*,” Ruth-Ann said sternly, “I said *protection*. From unsafe sex. There are some items women can use; they’re called dental dams and finger cots, and they’re next to the condoms on the back wall. Read the instructions and decide what you want.”





The second girl tsk-ed. "Guy, that's such a hassle! I thought being both girls saved us from that stuff!"

"If you're old enough to have sex, you're old enough to act responsibly for your own health. It doesn't matter if you're both virgins. Do you know each other's blood history? Transfusions, drugs taken, heredity?" At the blank stares on both faces, Ruth-Ann nodded and said, "Now go on. Take your time."

Ruth-Ann rummaged among the adult magazines she kept behind the counter as she heard the girls whispering and giggling over the boxes in the back. When they returned to the front, they bore a box of dental dams. They tried to act cool, but both were beet-red.

Ruth-Ann had produced several erotic lesbian magazines and had them spread on the counter. In a matter-of-fact tone she said, "*On Our Backs* has some pretty rough stuff in it; you might be more interested in *Sappho* or *Labyrinth*. Go ahead, check them out. I won't faint." She waited as the girls thumbed through the pages—as she suspected they quickly rejected the S/M magazine (with an "Ew, gross," at a particularly graphic spread) in favor of the softer eroticism of the other two publications. Ruth-Ann rang up the dams and *Sappho* and handed their change back.

"Thanks, Ruth-Ann," the first girl said. "My mom and dad would really freak if I talked to them about this—they think I'm like Virgin Mary or something."

"You're welcome, dear," the old woman said kindly. She watched the two skitter out quickly with their purchases, blushing and holding hands in the throes of puppy-love. She smiled reminiscently after them. Then she opened the *On Our Backs* to the infamous page and continued reading.



The full gynecological spread of the *Hustler* centerfold lay sprawled in all her glory upon the bed, alongside copies of *Snowbound* (Alaska's foremost bondage magazine) and *Penthouse*.

Ron Bantz stared at his purchases. "I don't believe I did this. I actually bought a *Hustler*!" He shook his head and snorted. "Maybe I should call Dad and tell him—I'll be welcomed back with open arms."

"Until the Raven grass is over," Eric Hillman said practically. He flipped open the *Snowbound* and whistled. "I didn't know a Mountie and a wolf could *do* that." He picked up the *Penthouse* and scanned the pages of balloon breasts and butterfly vaginas. "Sure brings me back. When I was twelve, I used to buy one of these and stash it under my pillow to throw everybody off track. Better to get grounded for buying *Playboy* than have them find out I'd rather buy *Playgirl*." He grunted,

shook his head and kept flipping. "Now I see why other guys buy these things."

"And it's the same damn problem, now that we're taking a walk on the tame side," Ron said. "We're surrounded by people turning us on, and they're not attracted to us."

"Wouldn't do any good anyway," Eric said firmly. "We don't trick any more—and I'd say that includes tricking with girls. And we promised each other ten years ago. 'Forsaking all others,' remember?"

"If this stupid country, this stupid *state*, would let us get married!" Ron snarled.

"As soon as it's legal, hon. Sooner, if we ever get the guts to ask Chris to have us recognized, at least in this town." Eric flashed the grin that had made his grunts wet their pants. "Who knows? Maybe it would give Maurice a heart attack." He exhaled, and took up the *Hustler* again. "Meantime, we buy a few more of these. We spend the next few weeks in the john thinking about Dionne Warwick. And then it's over for the next ten years, we don't get out of bed for two days, and these get donated to Dr. Fleischman's waiting room." He grinned at his lover. "Maybe we could try cashing in on this. You know, contact one of those televangelists who offer rewards for gays who 'cure' themselves. We get on TV, 'repent,' take the money and run."

Ron chuckled. "And get lynched by the guys in San Fran." With a wry grin he pulled the swimsuit issue of *Sports Illustrated* from the bottom of the pile. "At least there's a good article about figure skaters in here. Mentions Brian Boitano."

"That's good," Eric said. "We'll have a reason to keep it when we go back to normal." He leaned over his lover's shoulder, looking at the photo spread. "Mmm. Nice conch shells."



"Oh! I want to put my arms around you, I ache to hold you close. Your ring is a great comfort. I look at it and think she does love me or I wouldn't be wearing it."

"Words of one of our finest First Ladies, Eleanor Roosevelt, in a letter to her very special friend Lorena Hickock. No real secret that Eleanor and Franklin's marriage was one of friendship rather than passion. These letters indicate that Franklin wasn't the only one who slept with another woman."

Chris' voice wavered a little, and he cleared his throat. "It's Day 5 of the Raven grass. This morning's readings have been grouped under the heading Famous Closeted Politicians, and we'll have more after this."

Phranc's version of "Surfer Girl" warbled out over the air.



A small pot of yellow tundra-flowers sat on the desk beside the empty box of chocolates. The card was in Ed Chigliak's handwriting.

Chris clenched his sweaty, shaking hands. He thought he was going to be sick to his stomach; and at the same time he thought shame would swallow him whole. He watched with dull eyes as Sgt. Semanski ran the red light right in front of the radio station.

Deep in the woods, in a small clearing, two big bull moose ate the new grass together in contentment, velvet still covering the big lumps of their regrowing antlers. Occasionally they scratched their chins on the tops of each other's rumps, or nuzzled and butted each other with playful affection. They did not copulate—the mating season for moose was in October—but they were still not immune to the grass. Bull moose were solitary creatures, as a rule; for now these two enjoyed the comfort of a male friendship denied them at all other times.

Joel kept a tree between himself and the placid couple as he dug in the ground, breathing heavily through a surgical mask as he tipped some soil into a petri dish.

"It could be a fungus of some sort, Maurice. Microscopic fungi, dormant nine years out of ten. There's a lot of mind-altering substances in the mycological side of the tree..." Joel tapered off and looked at the sacked-out man before him.

Maurice Minnefield resembled nothing so much as he resembled a sullen bear roused from hibernation. He was dressed in a loose-fitting terrycloth robe over his trout pajamas. He hadn't shaved in a week, and it looked as if he hadn't opened his eyes fully in that length of time either. He smelled of sherry and his half-open eyes glared out at Joel Fleischman from whatever plateau of detachment he'd managed to attain. "If you find a cure for this, Joel," the bear rumbled, "it'll be worth all the money the great state of Alaska's paid you to work in Cicely for five years."

"This happens every ten years?"

"Every ten years God sends, the town I love gets hit with a bout of moral malaria," Maurice growled. "And I'm the only red-blooded man with the guts to stave off temptation. Just costs a few hangovers. Worst thing that happens is I dream, and enough booze turns them into nightmares."

Joel froze a shudder between his shoulder blades. He'd bolted upright in bed that morning, hideously embarrassed about the state of his sheets, and even more

so at remembering the dream—featuring himself and Ed Chigliak—that had caused the reaction.

"Afterward..." A faint grin spread over the bear's face. "Let's just say I reward myself by going back to normal with extreme prejudice for two or three days. Women, Joel. Nonstop. Younger the better. No more booze, no more sleeping pills, no Holling in my—I mean no more pervert dreams bugging me, no town full of perverts. Just those two nancy boys runnin' the B & B."

Joel stared at Maurice. He blinked. "Holling—?"

"I never touched him, I NEVER touched him, anything he's sayin' is a damned lie!" Maurice snarled, sitting upright and glaring at the stunned Joel, who had backed off at the flurry. "Twenty years go by and some people's memories get warped. You just tell him that, Dr. Fleischman." The roused, furious bear suddenly collapsed back on the sofa, looking half-asleep again. "Keep workin' on it, Joel, sounds like a good lead. Cure it, Joel. Find a cure."

Joel nodded, cautiously rose and left the huge house.

Ed was bent over his splicing machine late into the night, fiercely clipping film.

A loud cawing came in from his half-open window. It sounded like laughter.

"I know, Raven, I know," Ed moaned, hard at work on his art. "You don't have to rub it in. Least I'm doing something creative, okay?"

The clock showed a single-digit hour of the night—too deep in the wee hours for either filmmakers or ravens to still be up. Ed kept splicing film. The raven flew off.

Barbara Semanski stopped, shuddered in horror at what she'd done, and dropped the can of red spray paint. But the damage was done. *Vive la loi!* sprawled across the white wall of Dr. Fleischman's office in big red block letters, as did her signature. She compounded her offenses of vandalism and littering by fleeing the scene of the crime.

"Sorry I'm late, H," Shelley said, rushing in to lend a hand with the condiment sorting. She was mussed and ruffled and happy-looking; there was a smudge of lipstick on her mouth lighter than her regular color. "Me and Melissa were at her place watching Madonna videos and makin' out on the couch. It was so awesome. Now I know why studs dig Madonna so much! It's been really hard not to go all the way, but Melissa's boyfriend would kill me for boffin' his chick."

"Of course, Shelley," Holling said quietly. He kept



filling ketchup bottles, remembering when he was twenty.

"Hey. Big H." Shelley hugged her husband from behind and kissed his neck. "I know it'd hurt you bad, that's why I really don't do it. But you'd just get quiet and mad, the way you do. Benny Runsfar's a goalie. He'd kill me, I mean *really* kill me. Then Melissa'd get tee'd at him for killing her best friend. And you'd get tee'd at him for killing *your* chick."

Holling nodded. His faint hint of pain was gone. Even though they were not attracted to each other right now, they still loved each other fiercely. "Adultery gets very complicated very soon, Shelley. That's why it's best to stay out of it completely, once you're married."

"Yeah. It's weird, I used to think getting hitched would feel like a ball 'n' chain but it makes this stuff a lot easier.

"But I can still see why a chick would want to do the horizontal polka with another chick. It's like you know the secret code, y'know? The different stuff studs and chicks like. You don't have to worry about crossing signals."

"Exactly," Holling said. "You know, Shelley, before I met you I used to spend Raven grasses with Walt—and before you were born, I'd go with Bill. It felt like a cross between a hunting trip, and the camp-outs we do." He smiled.

"Ohhhh, yeah," Shelley reminisced, the same smile on her face. "The ones where we don't get out of the sleeping bag except to pee?"

"Uh huh."

"So it'd really be a guys' night out, huh?"

"That's exactly how it felt." Holling looked a little sad. "I miss that, a little. 'Course, I don't go hunting any more anyway."

"Melissa and me are going to the First-Grass Dance tomorrow night. You gonna go with Walt?"

Holling shook his head and wiped the ketchup bottle necks clean with a damp rag. "Walt needs sex, not dancing. I feel kinda bad leaving him alone, especially now that Ruth-Ann's with Betty Whirlwind. He doesn't have anybody right now."

"He'll find someone, H. Maybe at the dance. Raven grass is tougher than everybody. 'Cept Maurice—he is *majorly* freakin' out."

Holling shook his head. "It's in his nature, Shel. He hates homosexuals, and when he's temporarily homosexual he hates himself, and all his friends." A shadow passed over Holling's clear eyes, and was gone. He gave more attention to the relish squeeze-bottles than they deserved for a few minutes.

Shelley tsk-ed. "Bummer. I thought he was tougher than that. Well, it's his loss."

"Yes," Holling said firmly, a faint hint of old anger in his eyes.

"So, let Maurice get drunk and sleep this out like an old bear. How bout you, H? Checkin' out the studs?"

Holling laughed. "A little. I can see what Ron sees in Eric, he's very appealing. I'm sorry for Walt, but I hope he goes to the dance and goes home with someone. And Dave's offered to go to the dance with me. He's a good dancer—and he's bisexual, so Raven grasses are like any other first-grasses to him. I'm sure his wife won't mind."

"She'd better not," Shelley said indignantly, "not after she pinched my butt the other day."



The Village People shouted and thumped as the younger townfolk boogied in the union hall, decorated with Raven Christmas decorations as well as with First-Grass banners and tufts of green plastic. Older couples sat at chairs and tables around the dance floor and waited for slower, older songs to appear on Chris' turntable. Two tables held a punch bowl, beer and sodas, and cookies in baskets full of fake Easter grass. Wallflowers sat or stood, drinking and eyeing each other. The noise was not quite as head-splitting as such a dance required; people could actually talk to each other across a table without shouting.

"This is so *wonderful*, Marilyn," Maggie enthused, looking around the dance floor from her seat at a table. "Look at all of us out there! There's Ruth-Ann and your mom, there's Shelley and her friend, there's Mrs. Jenkins and Jackie White Sky. This is what being a woman is all about—communing with other women. Unleashing that feminine energy we keep *wasting* on trying to grab a man. Women socializing with each other, communicating with each other, being at one with each other. *This* is what Cicely is all about—the spirit of Cicely and Roslyn! I just haven't been able to get over it all week!" Maggie turned back to the table with a big smile, and found herself facing a half-full Sprite and an empty seat. "Marilyn?"

"Marilyn?" Ruth-Ann looked up from her punch at the placid-faced young woman standing before her. Peggy Whirlwind stared at her daughter, puzzled.

"She talks too much," Marilyn said simply, and sat down with the two older women.

"Macho Man" thundered to a close and sweaty couples applauded. Shelley and Melissa staggered off, gasping for breath, their arms around each others' necks. Ron and Eric moved off as well, laughing. "Well, we can still steal the dance floor," Ron said.



Holling left Dave White Sky and approached two tangled male bodies in a corner of the hall; he gently tapped the brawny shoulder of the oil-rigger who had been kissing his way down a co-worker's body, nearly on his knees before the other glaze-eyed young man. "You two had better go get a room," he said kindly but firmly. "This is a dance. There's some motels south of here with special first-grass rates. Don't forget these," and he proffered a wooden bowl from the refreshment table.

Sheepishly the men helped themselves to the condoms and left the hall. Holling watched them leave, aching fiercely. Those two beautiful young men had been so lovely to touch, they'd smelled so good...

"Dave," he called hoarsely, "I'll be right back."

"No problem," Dave said, and gave a little smile of sympathy as his boss stepped gingerly to the men's room; first-grasses were hell on celibates. "Take you out on the floor when Chris plays a zydeco."

"Preciate it," and the door shut.

Jack Jenkins upended his second beer, his big black beard bristling, and set the bottle down with a thump. Walt pulled at his own bottle beside him, his eyes never leaving the men's-room door.

Ed's camera circled and subdivided the room, taking the young man behind it around and through the revelry. The camera paused to take a long lingering assessment of the way Chris Stevens' hands deftly handled the big black LPs and little silver CDs like a jester juggling fragile plates and saucers; the camera moved on, taking Ed with it. Chris looked up as the camera passed him, a 12-inch disc twirling between his fingers as "The Boy in the Bubble" thumped out of Paul Simon's *Graceland* album.

Sounds of breaking glass and a roar of aggressive rage halted the dance mid-step. The music was cut. The dancers parted to give wide berth to a disheveled, drunken Barbara Semanski. Her neat dress uniform was gone; the big broad woman wore a black sweater and jeans, and her hair hung down in a mussed braid. In one big hand was a broken beer-bottle; brown bits of glass littered the linoleum. "Come on, come on!" she shouted at the blinking dancers, waving the beer bottle. "Take me on, come on! I dare you!"

Maggie's rhapsodic paean to sisterhood lay still in her mouth.

Ed kept well away from Semanski, but kept filming.

Dave edged to the men's room to get Holling back as one of the official chaperones, and one well-used to dealing with aggressive customers.

Jack Jenkins' attention riveted on the angry police-woman. "I was afraid she'd be a mean drunk. Stay here,

Walt." The big hairy man got up from his table and walked toward the big angry woman. Barbara was still turning in circles, threatening the dancers with the jagged edge of the beer bottle. People were backing away, not meeting her eyes to avoid triggering aggression.

"Sergeant Semanski," Jack said gently, receiving both her full attention and the sight of the business end of the bottle. "It's me, Jack Jenkins. You're committing a 402. You've taken me in often enough on the same charge."

"Damn right," Semanski snapped, "wanna make something of it?"

"This isn't like you, Sergeant," Jack said, not raising a hand or moving back as the big woman lunged and fainted with the brown bottle. "You haven't been acting like yourself for ten days. You've always upheld the law. You respect the law. You love the law, above everything else in the world."

A ripple of indrawn breaths swept the hall, around the tightly-focused attention of the two figures at the center. Everyone present knew what had happened to the policewoman; Barbara's behavior all week was suddenly understandable.

Raven grass reversed the object of your love.

Semanski snarled and thrust with the bottle again, something wild and grief-stricken in her eyes.

"And Maurice is temporarily gay and hibernating until it's over, so you can't sublimate with sex," the logger said gently, and sidestepped another lunge.

In Barbara's mad, drunken eyes were the beginnings of tears.

"It's not your fault, Sergeant. It's only the Raven grass. When it's over you'll be back to your old self again. And the extenuating circumstances will exonerate you," the burly black-bearded man said gently.

She shuddered. Her lower lip quivered. The bottle quivered.

"Please, Sgt. Semanski," Jenkins said. "Put the bottle down."

Semanski's eyes shut tight, hard, blinking away moisture before it could trickle down her cheeks. Her eyes opened. She turned, and put the broken bottle in the trash bin Holling was holding out to her.

"Thank you, Sergeant." Jack Jenkins walked over and put a big hand on her broad shoulder. "I'm making a citizen's arrest. Your sentence is to spend the rest of the Raven grass in your holding cell."

Semanski nodded, turned around and put her wrists behind her back. Her handcuffs dangled from the back belt-loop. "My keys are in the rear pocket," she said quietly. Jack cuffed her. "Thank you."



"We'll take turns guarding you," Marilyn said, and half the people in the hall nodded.

"I'll keep an eye on your dogs, Barb," Walt said. "Used to have a Shepherd m'self."

"Thank you," Barbara Semanski whispered, eyes full of gratitude to the town she had patrolled so faithfully for so long. "Thank you all." Then she straightened and began to mutter to herself as Jack led her peacefully outside. "You have the right to remain silent. If you give up this right..." The doors closed on the little drama and people quietly swirled in to fill in the gap.

Chris turned back to the turntable. "Okay, let's hit the floor again, people!" he said into the intercom, and seconds later a lively country-western tune stirred up a floor full of line-dancers.

Meanwhile Joel Fleischman was back in his room reading medical journals; the 6-inch high stack of magazines on his desk carried articles that dealt with endocrinology, mycology, spore-carried infections and airborne viruses.



He was trout fishing in a boat on the lake, his line dangling from a peeled hazel wand and his hook baited with a red berry. A massive white-bearded man with a gentle face fished beside him, one arm thrown around his shoulders in the most loving fashion imaginable. An engrossed, massively-Afro'ed young man stared into the water from his other side, the fishline dangling from the neck of an electric guitar.

He looked from Walt Whitman to Jimi Hendrix, these two powerful male influences on his life, and love swelled inside him until he thought he would burst with joy. He embraced Whitman and stroked his white beard, felt a whiskery kiss on his cheek. He leaned over and kissed Jimi on the mouth, tasted his sweat that not even the headband could keep back.

Then he pulled out a double-barreled shotgun, aimed at them and pulled the triggers, one after the other. Their bloodied bodies splashed into the water and were gone.



Chris bolted upright, horror sloshing through him. He thought he was going to vomit.

Throwing on his leather jacket and jeans, he staggered outside toward his motorcycle, hand groping for the keys. The cold night air slapped him awake, opened his eyes wide. But he needed more than wakefulness to banish that nightmare—he needed light, noise, people to drive down the evil worm in his soul, the black pit at his center that had stalked him ever since the grass had crushed beneath his heel.

The Harley roared awake and Chris zoomed off to town.

The Brick was still open, Buddha be thanked—if it was proper to thank an abstaining religious figure for the availability of beer. Beer—was a drunken stupor what he wanted or needed? Was he to take Maurice's route through this time of reversed sexuality? It was a horrific thought, but if that black worm wouldn't stop eating at him—

"Shot and a beer, Holling," Chris said quickly, pulling up a stool and patting his pockets for his wallet. It was just past one; the only people in were Holling cleaning the counter, Eugene sweeping the floor, and Jack Jenkins and Walt Kupfer playing pool.

The shot made Chris gasp and clutch the counter, his eyes watering. Single-malt. Holling knew.

"Oh, hullo, Chris," Walt's gravelly voice came over his shoulder. The older man was picking up a mug of beer himself. "Not doing the night shift on the radio?"

"Automatic tonight." But a night shift on top of the morning show just might wear him out and make him stop dreaming. Tomorrow... "You're with Jack, Walt?"

The Wall Street broker-turned-trapper shrugged. "He's here to play pool. I'm here to drink beer. Beats staring at a bathroom wall with a *Mandate*. At least this way I can look at Holling and remember."

Chris dropped his head, fiercely ashamed and angry at the ugly little black worm that had just popped up again.

"Chris, is there something wrong?" And that older voice was so gentle, so understanding.

He's been through Raven grass before, since I was born.

He looked at Walt. He listened to his intuition.

"Walt," he said tentatively. "Can I talk to you, privately?"

"Of course," Walt said instantly. "Come on."

The old man and the young man settled themselves and their beers in a booth as far from the other people in the Brick as possible.

"Walt," Chris said, and dropped his head. "This is something I'm not proud of. I've been trying to fight it, but I don't know how. Maybe you can help, you've been through Raven grass before."

"Twice before," Walt said. He sighed. "But Holling's married now, so I'm sitting this one out."

The worm loomed. Quick, expose the little bastard to the light—

"I'm homophobic," Chris blurted. "Enough. Right down at the core. It's lying there in a little knot, and it makes me angry or sick or disgusted at the thought of men with men."

Walt watched and was still. Chris continued.



“Women with women doesn’t enter into it for some reason, my mind dismisses them completely, but every time I think of men together there’s this little Cotton Mather inside me chasing me off the grass. I never thought I’d sit out an orgy in my life, with *my* chemistry. But all I’ve done this past week is stroke my own ego, if you know what I mean.” He shook his head. “And even then, every time I start to think of men, my mind chokes up. I have to conjure up some genderless Annie Lennox/ David Bowie mix to finish the job.” He laughed a little, painfully. “Some hypocrite, huh? Been telling people all week to do what the grass says, and *I’m* the one acting like Maurice.”

Walt exhaled heavily. “Old baggage. I know that. It’s bad.”

Chris made himself look Walt in the eye. “I thought I was better than that, y’know? But this nurture stuff—I’m from Virginia. In that place, if a boy doesn’t have a gun by the age of five he’s called a sissy.” The word hissed out of his mouth. “The one thing your dad would not forgive you for. You could rob a liquor store, beat up black kids, kill people, no problem—but you were a disgrace if you liked flowers or music.”

“Or poetry,” Walt said gently, and saw Chris’ tiny reaction. “Especially Walt Whitman poetry.”

Chris buried his head in his hands. “I *know*. That’s what makes it worse. In prison we all knew who the punks were, but that was more a power thing, a King of the Castle, that was okay.

“When I went on retreat a few years ago, Walt, I found myself attracted to one of the monks. I mean sexually attracted. I wanted to kiss him, I dreamed about him. I was angry and shocked. I was relieved when I found out it was a woman disguised as a man. Why is that? Exactly the same thing happened as before I knew—nothing. She was a monk, they take vows of chastity, we did nothing, but I didn’t mind being attracted to a monk any more, once I found out the monk I was attracted to was a woman.

“This is stronger than that, Walt. Far stronger, overwhelming. This is a big part of being human and I’m crippled. I should be dancing on the grass and loving my fellow man, not huddling in my john imagining a music video.” The last words were mumbled in the barely-touched beer. “I feel like a failure as a human being.”

“So you think about sex between men, and you get sick,” Walt said, his gnarled fingers laced together before him, his keen blue eyes missing nothing in the young man’s anguished posture.

“Yes.” One finger traced mug-rings embedded in the

varnished table. “I...” Chris took a breath. “Ed’s been sending me signals.”

“Signals?”

“Candy, flowers, a book of poetry, a copy of *Babette’s Feast*.”

“Signals, all right,” Walt said, nodding.

“I...I *want* to get over this thing. I *want* to respond to Ed, to make him happy. I *want* sex that’s gonna knock me sideways and make me see God. But when I start to think of the physical part of it my mind freezes.”

“Well, there’s your problem right there!” Walt exclaimed. He leveled one thick finger between Chris’ eyes, his own eyes under arched brows. “*Thinking*. If you were to just *do* it you’d feel a hell of a lot better. You dump a lot of baggage once you’ve got some actual data to compare to the theories you grew up with.” Walt leaned back and cleared his throat, as if he was about to recite a hunting story. “Y’know, Chris, the first time I gave Holling a blow job—”

Chris shuddered.

“Ah ah, you’re *thinking*,” Walt snapped, tapping the man’s hand with his own in a mock-reproving way. “Don’t think! Don’t picture it, just hear the words. It was the first time I’d sucked a cock, the *thought* of doing it made me sick. I made myself do it because Holling had done it to me. But once I was actually *doing* it—making Holling moan with pleasure, feeling that warm skin and that flesh in my mouth, *knowing* how good I was making him feel because I’d felt it myself—it was the sweetest thing I’d ever done.” The mustache turned up at one corner. “Then I panicked at the last minute and pulled away, I nipped him with my teeth, he yelled loud enough to wake the dead, he lost the hard-on, we had to wait a couple of days before we could try again—but the important thing was that I’d *done* it instead of thinking about it. And the next time it was wonderful, because my fear was all gone.

“That’s all it is, Chris. Fear. Homophobia—not hatred, fear. And this is something you’ve never done before; it’s always scary to do something the first time, whether it’s flying a plane, conducting a leveraged buy-out, or having sex with someone shaped just like you.”

Chris nodded. He looked very relieved. “I hadn’t thought of it that way, Walt.”

“Just do it, Chris,” Walt insisted. “Do it with someone who won’t make fun of you or treat you badly. Someone who’s had some experience in these things, and can give you some tips. Someone who won’t mind if the first time is awkward or clumsy or a last-minute choke.”

Chris looked at Walt. Walt did not leer, smile, wink or arch his eyebrow; he simply met the young man’s perusal with a frank gaze.

"I'm not offering this out of the goodness of my heart, Chris," the older man said bluntly. "I do want to help you, but mostly I just want to get in your pants. You're a beautiful young man."

Chris blinked and shook his head. "I'm not thinking," he assured Walt. "Listen, why don't you try something quick and easy so I can—"

Walt's hand was on Chris' crotch under the table before he'd finished the sentence. The hand moved strongly against the tender flesh protected by heavy denim.

Walt grinned to see Chris' dark eyes glaze over, his mouth hang open in stunned realization. He fondled some more, pleased to feel the cock hardening against his hand, and let go. Chris made a small noise of protest.

"There," Walt said, as if he'd been teaching Chris how to tie a fishing-fly. "That wasn't too bad, was it?"

Chris blinked, coughed, cleared his throat.

"Practice is all you need. Didn't you ever choke when you were up at bat with one of your lady friends?"

"Never," Chris said, still a little dazed. He wasn't boasting, simply stating a fact.

"Well, there's a first time for everything," Walt said. "Interested?"

Chris looked at Walt. He looked, and just saw his everyday friend. But his cock remembered the feel of that wonderful hand. He hadn't wanted to puke when Walt had touched him; no little black worm had raised its ugly head. "Yes. Follow me back to the trailer? I took my bike—"

"I came in Jack's truck. Let me tell him not to wait up for me and we can head out together."

They arose from the table, bringing their half-empty beers to the counter to save Holling the walk.

At the bar Chris said, "Let me try something," and kissed Walt on the mouth. Walt responded appropriately, and what was begun in haste ended at leisure. When they separated, Chris was beaming. "Nice mustache," he said sheepishly, and stroked the gray bristle under Walt's nose before rubbing his own upper lip. "Itches."

"Come on," Walt said, in a low tender voice that did not sound at all like his normal gravelly tones. "Let's go get some preliminaries worked out. Need rubbers?"

"Got plenty. Let's go before I get cold feet."

Holling kept wiping the same immaculate spot on the bar, his face neutral. Only when the two men had left the Brick did he let a smile cross his face.

As Walt settled in behind Chris on the Harley, the younger man laughed out loud.

"What is it?" the trapper asked.

"I came out here tonight to find something that would

distract me from morbid thoughts." Chris laughed again. "Looks like I found it!"

They roared off to the lakeside trailer Chris Stevens called home.

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*"...The shepherds' swains shall dance and sing
For thy delight each May morning:
If these delights thy mind may move,
Then live with me and be my love."*

Chris finished "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love" and closed the book. "Today's reading's going out to Ron, Eric, and all other good Cicelians who normally share the proclivities of our town's founders—a dab of token heterosexuality. In memory of Cicely and Roslyn." He coughed, and reached up to rub his still-irritated upper lip; he had no objections to being kissed until his lips were swollen, but this was the first time he'd done so with a mustache attached. "Hey, guys, forgive me if I'm a little dazed or unresponsive today. But yours truly lost his cherry last night. That's right, I have officially gone up the down stair case and am proud to announce my arrival as a fully functional *Homo sapiens*. Many thanks, Walt.

"I've had a little problem all week and it seems to be in full remission." That was an understatement—Chris and Walt had spent hours attacking his "problem" from every conceivable angle; what the older man had lacked in stamina he made up for in experience, and for Chris vice versa. "In fact, it's gotten me thinking about other social diseases—racism, sexism, classism, jingoism—that sit inside like malaria; every time you think you've got it licked it crops up again. It's a lot easier than finding answers in that murky moral gray area where we all live; that's why we do it, we want quick simple answers where there are none. Nothing but steady and constant remedies will solve them. So for all you people out there who have to keep reminding themselves every day not to use the easy answers, my hat's off to you. Take it from me, cold turkey's the only way to do it.

"This one's going out to Ed."

The Beatles again—this time, "I Wanna Hold Your Hand."

Fifteen minutes later, a bright-eyed Ed Chigliak showed up outside the plate-glass window of KBHR Station that overlooked the single main street of Cicely. For the first time since Raven grass began, Ed was not carrying his movie camera. His eager face and bright eyes through the window were all the question he needed to ask.

Chris' answering beam and nod were all the answer

the young man needed; Ed's grin lit the mid-morning street like a Raven totem pole at Christmas as Bessie Smith crooned "Dirty But Good."



"That's it! That's got to be it!"

Dr. Fleischman stared at the slide through his microscope like a man in red on a horse catching sight of the fox. This particular fox was a scattering of tiny y-shaped formations amid the more conventional spirals and spheres of the microscopic world. Spores he'd never seen before—a new species, maybe even a new genus.

"A dormant spore, acts like a virus, appears on the first growth, affecting the pheromones, airborne, released via physical contact—I've got it!"

Joel leaped to his feet, all exuberance, the joy of the detective solving the crime, Helen Keller understanding W-A-T-E-R, DeSoto setting eyes on the Pacific Ocean.

He had to tell *somebody*. He looked at his office wall-clock, a Hanukkah gift from Maggie in exchange for the Christmas tree. Eleven-thirty-seven at night. Who'd be up? Holling and Shelley would be tending the Brick. Ed—Ed would be up working on his movie, Ed had been helping him in the lab. Ed!

Joel called. Four rings later, he got Ed's answering machine. He left a message, excited and angry. Probably so caught up in his editing he didn't want to leave it.

He called Maurice. What the hell, wake him up!



"Mm. Who was that?" Chris murmured sleepily, lifting his head from Ed's chest.

"Think it was Dr. Fleischman," Ed mumbled, blinking, his heart returning to its normal rhythm after the startlement of the phone's ringing jolting him out of his sated sleep.

"We'll have to thank him later," Chris said, and kissed Ed again.

Ed smiled, and his arms came up around Chris as their bodies tangled together again, both blessed with the stamina of young men.



The next day Joel Fleischman was looking at his y-spores in the lab, muttering under his breath. He'd isolated the cause, now he had to find the treatment for it. Find what agent the y-spore worked with, what worked against it, distill it, test it for purity, a few lab mice later and he had a cure. Had a nice ring to it: *Dr. Joel Fleischman, winner of the Nobel Prize in medicine for his work with dormant fungi*. Well, he could dream.

Maurice had sounded very pleased; there was the definite implication that a successful counteragent for

this grass-effect would be exceedingly and personally profitable for Dr. Fleischman.

A cure for this viral infection. A cure for this reversed sexual preference. A cure, even, for...?

"*Ausgezeint, mein kerl!*"

Joel looked up at that, and saw a man in a white lab coat behind him. This man looked like the ideal scientist; lean face, keen intelligent eyes behind flashing round glasses, long white hands holding a clipboard. It was he who'd said, "Outstanding, my boy."

Joel had seen him before, in black-and-white pictures.

"This is excellent work," the clean man with the clipboard said in approval, bending over to look into the microscope over Joel's shoulder; he smelled of carbolic and bleach. "This is a neat clean method for removing homosexuals—the Solution takes a great deal of manpower, ammunition, train fuel, and Zyklon-B, even if we do reuse what we can. Even the cost of the ink must be accounted for in the cause of science!" he said with a flash-toothed smile, and tapped Joel's left forearm. "Why so glum-looking, Jew? This lab work has saved your ass so far. This may even bear your name someday, to honor a cleanser of the Race."

Joel stared at the pristine man who smelled like a clean, sterile morgue, and who had treated the camps as cages full of tattooed, shorn-headed lab mice—some of whom had worn lavender triangles instead of yellow stars—and who had wanted to make the world neater and cleaner for the right kind of people—

"*Kizzisch meine tuchas!*" Joel spat at the scientist, and grinned like a death's-head to see the man rear back, startled. He snapped off the microscope light, jumped off his stool and strode out of his office/lab, past the knitting Marilyn and Lightfeather Duncan who never looked up, and onto the street, his head pounding. Both hands went up to his temple to massage away the throb, and before he could stop himself he'd pushed his left lab-coat sleeve up to stare at his pale, smooth, un-tattooed left forearm. He exhaled, long deep breaths, quelling the terror-seized pounding of his heart, walking away from the center of town, getting away from his office for a while.

All right. All right. He'd isolated the fungal virus. His little y-shaped spores could bear his name. And ten years from now, it would still be called Raven grass, and people here would still run cawing through the streets while his dissertation on *Sporos fleischmani* moldered in a scientific journal. Well, that was the way of it, in science. He'd write up his study and submit it and see what it did for his reputation. But he would not try to





find a cure for it. Let Maurice tear his hair and curse about stifled scientific endeavors, let *him* talk to the clean man in the white coat...

He took a deep breath again, and held still, trying to think of what he'd smelled. It was lovely: sweet and fresh and strong and wild all at once. It was a homey feeling in the pit of his stomach, like the smell of fresh hot bagels in a white paper bag. Outdoorsy smell like a lawn mower. And the feeling of being fourteen again... He choked on a horrified laugh, and a groan, and covered his groin. Which only made the problem worse, or better.

He looked down, and saw tender green grass squashed beneath his Nikes. He'd wandered out of town and had walked out onto the bright green growth. It was the first time he'd gotten a whiff of the stuff without a mask on.

"Oh, God," he groaned, clutching himself. The idea of beating off in public was too humiliating to think about—and yet he could think of nothing else. He'd never gotten so hard so fast in his life. Anyone, anything, a hole in a tree for God's sake, it was like holding his breath, turning blue, needing to inhale, he was drowning—

"Hey, Joel. Where you going with that gun in your hand?"

That gentle voice arrowed straight for Joel's groin. He turned around.

Right at that moment, Chris Stevens was the most beautiful and desirable human being Joel had ever seen.

"You looked like you needed company when I saw you stagger out of your office," Chris was saying. "So I put on side A of *Jakov Mennen*. We've got twenty-five minutes till I have to get back to the station."

Joel wanted to die of embarrassment at being seen by anyone in this state. But whether he'd been caught hunched over clutching at his groin in an unmistakable hold, or whether he had merely been bowed over and his erection tenting his trousers, Joel never could remember afterwards.

Chris advanced on Joel, who could now inhale the man's clean wild smell. He must have been aware of that smell a dozen times before, performing checkups on the town's deejay and spiritual leader. It had never before made him moan and bend over like this. It was stronger and more lust-inducing than even the sweet grass; this curled in his guts and wound tendrils all along his nerves till he was pitched at a level nearly to scream.

And Joel remembered the sexual heat Chris insisted he went into twice or three times a year, when he was literally irresistible to every straight female in Cicely; his

promiscuity at that time was nothing less than a seasonal mating urge. None of the women had been jealous of each other, any more than does are jealous when one buck mounts them all.

It seemed that the Stevens sexual cycle had peaked in time to coincide with the occurrence of *Sporos fleischmani* in the grass.

Chris smiled gently at Joel. "You look the way I did a week ago," he said. "It's all right, Joel. It's nothing to be scared of. It's just sex. It's life, man; spring's returning."

Joel, frozen in his tracks, was gently surrounded, held close. Chris' smell overwhelmed him, and he whimpered. But then warmth and love and belonging covered his mouth in sweetness, yielding moist surfaces to mingle with his own, joining them together.

To be unraveled, by a kiss...

Chris took Joel by the hand and led him further from the buildings and into the trees. Joel stumbled blindly after; the thought of being separated from Chris was too painful to bear. He found himself pushed to lean against the broad rough-barked trunk of a lodgepole pine. "Let me show you what Walt showed me," Chris was saying, matter-of-factly undoing Joel's belt and trousers fly.

"We," Joel managed, one tiny thread of sanity whirling in the haze of his lust and need, "we need...something, it's not safe—"

Chris stuck one hand in his jacket pocket and pulled it out in a fist; three condom packets were clutched between his knuckles like *shurikens*. "Ribbed or regular?" he asked.

Joel stammered something, and soon he was blindly gripping the tree behind him as if bound to it, gasping and moaning. His core of pain was engulfed in heat, supple wetness that twined round his own heat, pulling, sucking him, sucking. Oh God, Chris was eating him alive, eating him, his strong hot hands wrapped around his ass, keeping the tender skin away from the tree bark, and sucking, taking it all down. He cried out as lights flashed in his eyes, lightning gathered in his groin, built to a charge—

One finger slipped in hard, drove in on the downsuck, twisted—

What sounded like an eagle scream echoed back through the town's main street.



When Joel could think again he stared down at his exposed groin as Chris cleaned him with a moist towelette—stolen from the Brick during one of their rib dinners, no doubt—and tossed it in a crumpled paper bag he'd pulled from his other pocket and in which the condom had been disposed.



“That wasn’t so bad, was it?” Chris said, looking up and grinning at Joel as he cleaned his hands with another towelette. “Doing anything tonight?”

Joel blinked, still dazed by the glory of orgasm. He frowned and blinked again. “Don’t—I don’t think so.”

“Now you are.” Chris redid his trouser fly and gave him a brisk, friendly kiss. “See you at eight in the Brick. We’ll have dinner. See where it goes from there. Maybe you can repay the favor.”

Joel nodded. And smiled.

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Chris emerged from his trailer and blinked awake in the brisk cold of the Alaska spring morning. The air was biting, the sun a wan presence on the horizon where it would linger for most of the day. In a pallid dawn haze he walked to the end of the dock, dipped his pail in the lake and headed to the circle of stones and charred wood; the year had turned and he could once more cook outside. Another month and he could bathe in the lake again.

The coffeepot was almost boiling when Chris heard a familiar motor. A grin spread across his face and he stood to face the approaching Harley Davidson, and the black-clad figure who pulled up to the trailer. “You’re just in time for coffee, Bernard!”

Bernard cut the motor, pulled the helmet off his head and straightened his glasses. “I ate at the Brick before I came up here, Chris, but I’d love a coffee.” He dismounted and walked over to his half-brother, and they embraced.

“My thoughts exactly,” Chris responded exuberantly. “Let me just get another mug out of the trailer.”

Bernard squatted by the fire and looked at the two mugs already there. “Company last night, eh?”

“And still asleep,” Chris added as he returned from the trailer. He poured and did not offer Bernard the sugar when he sweetened his own cup. He had known Bernard did not take sugar even before they knew each other.

There had been a subliminal bond between the two men who shared a single wandering father ever since they had discovered each other’s existence only two years ago; even before they’d known each other’s identities, they had completed each other’s sentences, responded simultaneously with identical turns of phrase, and had been an unbeatable bridge team. Chris had always thought that he might have a long-lost brother somewhere; Bernard had had the same thought, but had assumed that his sibling would also be black. Bernard had motored up from his native Portland several times since then to visit Chris, and even to lend a hand with the radio show.

For a while the two brothers drank coffee and caught each other up. Chris smiled when Bernard told him that Ann McGrath sent her best to her former lover.

“So, do I know her?” Bernard inclined his head toward the trailer as he drank.

“Yes, you know him,” Chris corrected. “It’s Dr. Fleischman.”

Both Bernard’s eyebrows lifted. “New development?” “Very new.” Chris beamed. “I’m telling you, Bernard, it’s made me feel more like a complete human being. I’ve gotten in touch with my feminine self, declared myself a person of color, and now I’m a full-fledged bisexual.”

He took a deep drag on the powerful coffee he always made after a busy night. “It’s a victory, man, I feel it in my heart, because I’ve overcome the way I was raised. I just don’t know if this will last beyond the grass—but even if it’s just the grass talking, I’m listening to it.”

“Grass?” Bernard was still a little poleaxed. Chris had always seemed a cheerful, easy-going fellow, but had been sexually attracted only to women in all the time Bernard had known him.

Chris explained about the first grass and the Raven Grass. Bernard only nodded and drank his brother’s coffee. He’d once shared a dream with Chris about riding in a truck driven by a one-eyed Carl Jung; it was not such a big step from there to believe that grass could change one’s sexuality.

Bernard tossed his coffee dregs into the fire and walked to the lake shore to rinse his mug. Chris added more water and coffee to the pot, preparing for Fleischman’s awakening. But a moan at the shore caught his attention at once. Chris stood, alarmed at the slightly bent-over figure, and walked over to put an arm around his shoulders. “Bernard? Hey, bro, what’s wrong?”

Bernard moaned again. By now Chris recognized what that moan meant. And he saw the tender new lakeshore grass under Bernard’s booted feet.

For a moment Chris was afraid as Bernard straightened and looked right at him, a piercing gaze of agony. But then he smiled, and so did Bernard.

“It’s all right,” they said simultaneously.

Incest revulsion was hard-wired into the human brain to protect the genetic material from contamination. There was no danger of such damage here. And both were adults; there was no coercion or force at work.

Raven must be laughing his black-feathered butt off over this one.

Chris smiled tenderly at his handsome, bookish-looking half-brother, crooked a finger, and caressed Bernard’s black mustache, his finger pale and



pinkish against the brown skin. Bernard smiled at him again.

A few moments later Chris pulled away and said, "I see what Ann means. You're a great kisser." Without another word he set the coffeepot off the fire. He straightened and linked arms with Bernard, and they headed toward the trees, away from the lake.

Only one last shadow tugged at Chris' thoughts as they reached the thick growth of soft vegetation. "Ann..." She and Bernard were still steady lovers.

"She loves you too," Bernard replied. "She wouldn't mind." He removed his glasses and slipped them into his jacket pocket even as he ground the grass beneath his heel. "After all, you're just a passing...crush."

They grinned. And simultaneously they moved forward into another, deeper kiss. They sank into the sweet, wicked green growth. "I've got condoms," both said simultaneously.

Two bull moose stepped carefully around the entwined human bodies on their way to the middle of the clearing for better grazing.

By the time Joel Fleischman stumbled sleepily out of the trailer and was slapped awake by the brisk cold air, both men were at the fire making more coffee, and he gratefully accepted a mug. "Hullo, Bernard," Fleischman mumbled. "Watch out for the grass."

"I'll remember that, Joel," Bernard said solemnly, and Chris took a long drink of coffee to hide a smile.



Green carpeted the world, peeping through the melting snow everywhere. The grass was tall and strong, darkening under the Alaska sun, flourishing everywhere in that brief sub-Arctic spring.

As easily and naturally, the change had happened in the people too.

At the Brick, the sound of the radio was juxtaposed with muffled laughter and thumping sounds from Holling and Shelley's bedroom upstairs. Eugene looked up and smiled as he broke open rolls of change into the cash register, and Dave emerged from the freezer with a batch of frozen moose patties to thaw for the lunch rush.

The town's B&B bore a big sign on the door—CLOSED/GONE FISHING/BACK ON WEDNESDAY. Behind the shuttered window upstairs, Ron and Eric were a single curled ball under the blankets on their bed, sleeping the sleep of the profoundly exhausted.

At Ruth-Ann's house, a peaceful Walt hoisted his coffee cup. "Here's to insatiable young men."

"Hear, hear," Ruth-Ann agreed, tapping her own steaming mug against his.

Ed Chigliak ran his film and smiled at the fluttering black shape that flitted across his title sequence.

Joel was bent over his word processor, a cup of tea and a donut beside him as he tapped out the prologue for his dissertation on the fungus. His room looked exactly the same as before, except for a print of Michaelangelo's *David* now tacked up beside the *New Yorker* cartoon map of the United States.

"Good morning, Cicely," a cheerful Chris Stevens was saying from every radio, from the KBHR booth. He looked out over the green blush upon the ground, and the red blush upon Sgt. Semanski's cheeks as the big beaming woman strode up and down the sidewalk outside the station happily writing out parking tickets for all the overnighters. "Looks like Cicely's as back to normal as it ever gets. The Raven has flown off, the grass is up and strong, and libidos have un-inverted."

"Brother Bernard is heading back to Portland—have a safe trip, bro. And thanks. Give my love to Annie."

"Dave and Eugene will be running the Brick for a few days, as the proprietors will be reacquainting themselves with each other. Ron and Eric's place will be closed for a few days for the same reason."

"Observe traffic rules, people—Barbara Semanski's been sprung by Maurice and it looks like her weekender at the Minnefield Mansion's put her back in the swing of things."

"So the Raven grass ends for another decade. Hope it's been as enlightening for you as it was for me. And speaking of growing things, here's a few words of wisdom from an unlikely source."

Chris opened his book to a marked page and read.

"What a lovely thing a rose is! ...Our highest assurance of the goodness of Providence seems to me to rest in the flowers. All other things, our powers, our desires, our food, are all really necessary for our existence in the first instance. But this rose is an extra. Its smell and its color are an embellishment of life, not a condition of it. It is only goodness which gives extras, and so I say again that we have much to hope from the flowers."

Chris closed the book.

"Those are the words of Sherlock Holmes. Not the first person you'd think of when you conjure up an image of someone with a poetic turn of phrase. But people can surprise you."

"So surprise each other. It beats the boxes that we normally live in. 'Normal'—fight it every chance you get, people. Push those boundaries that hold human beings apart."

The opening riff of The Kinks' "Lola" boomed out of





the sound system. Chris leaned back in his chair and watched the rosy-cheeked Barbara Semanski move down the sidewalk, a spring in her step and her ticket book in hand, her whole demeanor testimony to the fact that ex-astronaut Maurice Minnefield did indeed have the right stuff.

Far out on the field, where he could just see past the houses of Main Street, Chris noticed a solitary figure grazing the strong spring grass. It was a single bull moose. It moved across the meadow and vanished into the trees. Chris stared after the big loner, inexpressibly sad for him. He was back to normal too.

