

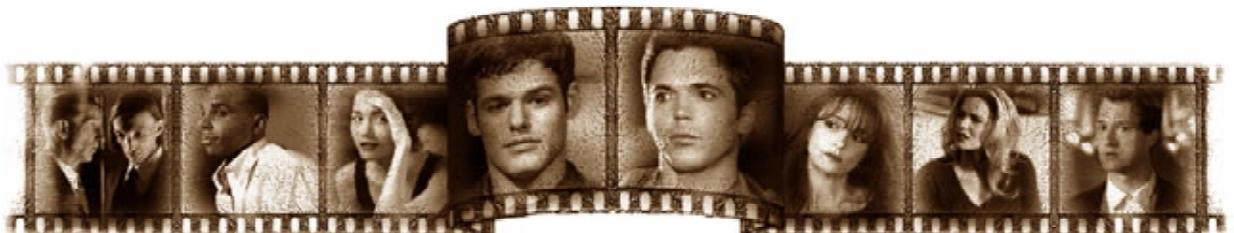
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Work With Me

by Anne Higgins

'Work with me.' Mac Ramsey resisted the urge to roll his eyes when Victor Mansfield's plan to lure Dobrinsky into an ambush turned down the well-worn path of their unresolved feelings for Li Ann Tsei. What a moron. If Victor had half a brain, he would have figured out Mac had gotten over the third member of their team long ago. It was just so much damned fun giving Victor a hard time about it that he'd not bothered to stop.

Not that this was any fun. Quickly, Victor's ill-chosen path led to hurtful barbs that left Mac more than relieved when Dobrinsky entered the fray. "Look, will you two shut the hell up," he shouted, rising from the sofa. "The key word in both cases, fellas, is 'loved.' Past tense. As in she loves you no more."

So much for relief. The kicked-puppy look on Victor's face both upset and irritated Mac. How could the guy still want Li Ann when she'd dumped them both flat on their asses? Didn't Victor have any pride?

Worse, Dobrinsky was returning to the sofa and his magazine without even approaching a distance near enough to either of them to risk trying to jump him. 'Great plan, Vic.' Mac opened his mouth to say as much, then got another idea. At the very least it would get rid of the kicked puppy.

"He's right, this is pointless," he said, shifting closer to Victor. "And I don't want to fight."
"You don't?"

"No, baby. I don't."

The puppy did indeed vanish. Instead, a wide-eyed deer stared at him as if he were the proverbial headlights. Mac almost chuckled. He'd never actually seen the expression before, but it was unmistakable.

'Baby?' Victor's lips formed the word, but no sound emerged.

Out of the corner of his eye, Mac could see Dobrinsky echoing the wordless gesture and rising from the sofa. 'Gotcha, big man. Now get over here and separate us.' He gave his nervous partner his best smile. "Almost lost you this morning. You know how crazy that makes me."

He was close enough now to force Victor to tilt his head back a fraction to maintain eye contact. It made him look extremely kissable. A few more sweet words and Dobrinsky would be upon them. They could jump him, escape Mac's apartment and go help The Director and Li Ann track down whoever was trying to kill all the male agents. No, no need at all to do anything else until their baby-sitter was in position. But... ah, what the hell. He could always pass it off as part of his plan.

He gathered Victor into his arms and kissed him. Warm soft lips beneath his own. Mmm. A delightful contrast to the hard muscle of the body he held so close. His own arousal lacked an answering hardness, and the lips did not kiss back, but Mac considered it a good sign he was still kissing Victor and not lying on the floor trying to clear his head enough to start picking up his missing teeth.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Dobrinsky's meaty paw jerked at Mac's shoulder, but he only let the momentum of it pull him a few inches backwards, keeping most of his body in close contact with Victor's.

It was Victor's play now. One fast move and Dobrinsky was toast, leaving them free to escape protective custody, never to speak of this moment as anything other than a brilliant ploy on Mac's part.

Victor didn't move, not so much as to blink. His wide, green eyes shone with shock and vulnerability. So it was Mac's choice. He either laughed, passing it all off as a joke to wind up Dobrinsky, or...

He glared at their keeper. "Do you mind? I'm trying to kiss and make up here."

"That's disgusting," the big man snapped, but some of the tension left Victor's body, and Mac snuggled him closer.

He resisted the urge to smile as Victor's head came to rest against his shoulder, but the tremor that followed seemed to have too little to do with arousal for Mac's taste. Victor was afraid. Of him. Every instinct Mac had screamed it. He had to get him into the other room to talk, but first he had to deal with their watchdog.

"What's the matter, Dobrinsky? Love make you nervous?" Another tremor. "Or are you just pissed off that we're not going to punch each other's lights out for your entertainment?"

"You hate each other!"

"It was a game, you moron!" He snapped. "Now, if you'll excuse us." He started to guide Victor toward the bedroom, but Dobrinsky grabbed his arm again.

He jerked free; making certain his other arm kept Victor cuddled close. "Sorry, Dobrinsky, we don't do threesomes."

The bane of Mac's life all but jumped away from him. Whatever wild side the man walked with The Director, it seemed all-male sex wasn't part of it. "TV remote is all yours, man," he told the retreating back. "Knock yourself out."

Victor gave a little jump as Mac started moving again, but didn't resist the slight push steering him towards the bedroom. "It's okay, baby. It's okay."

He got them into the bedroom, and, keeping Victor in the crook of one arm at all times, he closed the panels to block them from Dobrinsky's view.

Victor didn't resist. Not even when Mac eased him down onto the bed, then stretched out next to and on top of him. It felt like heaven. It also hid Victor as much as possible from the eye of the inevitable camera The Director kept positioned over her agents' beds.

"Wh-what are you doing?" Victor finally found his voice. Even if it did squeak a little. Might have been an annoying sound if it weren't part of a whisper, but as it was, Mac found it almost endearing.

"Making love to you," he murmured nuzzling Victor's earlobe.

Victor swallowed hard. "If you're bored—"

"Shhh, I wouldn't do that to you." He kissed Victor's forehead, the tip of his nose, then his mouth. "I won't hurt you."

A snort of disbelief answered him. Unsurprising since, as Mac understood it, pretty much everyone Victor had ever loved had hurt him. But Mac had wanted him from almost the moment they'd met and had put a lot of thought into what bedding the man would mean.

He shifted back so his mouth was near Victor's ear and the faintest of whispers could be heard. "I know you, know what you need."

Another swallow. "What?"

"You need to belong. Well, you belong to me." He rose up so he could look into those green eyes. Let The Director hear this part. Maybe she'd let him listen to the tape. He knew he'd never tire of hearing the words. "You hear me? You belong to me."

Victor stared at him, the shock and fear falling away into probing examination.

Mac smiled. "I love you. Have for a long time." He caressed the side of Victor's face. "Sorry it took me so long to decide to do something about it."

The tension bled out of Victor's body and his arms went around Mac's torso. "You said something about making love."

"Answer me first."

"I'm yours." Victor smiled as if he too liked the sound of it. "Now, shut up and claim me."

The flash of spirit made Mac grin. He did know Victor and knew what he was getting into. In addition to all the sterling qualities that made him an excellent partner on the job, Victor also had a big, trusting heart he gave too easily and unwisely. The pain of those past mistakes made him needful and insecure in any relationship. It also made him a lot of work. Work Li Ann, and those who had come before her, hadn't wanted to do. Mac had been disgusted with Li Ann the numerous times she'd bent his ear on the subject, but it had given him a good idea of what to expect and do. "You're wearing too much, pretty man."

"You going to keep doing that?"

"Doing what?"

"Calling me silly names like 'baby' and 'pretty man.'"

Mac grinned again. "What can I say? I'm an affectionate kind of guy."

"Ah." Victor shifted then a boot dropped off the foot of the bed. Another squirm, and a second boot followed. "You'll have to take care of the rest, Ace."

'Ace?' Hmm, Dobrinsky's annoying nickname for Mac sounded quite different coming from Victor. Mac decided he liked it and rewarded his lover with first another kiss, then a smile.

Although eager as a kid on Christmas morning, he managed to restrain himself from pouncing on Victor. He needed to make love, not ravish him. This time. 'Steady, fella,' he told himself, his fingers moving slowly down the length of the soft denim shirt and easing the buttons open while his lips caressed each inch of bared flesh.

He hummed while he worked; Victor purred.

When he ran out of shirt, Mac paused to admire the impressive bulge pressing up against the button fly of Victor's jeans. Within seconds looking wasn't enough, and he went to work on those buttons. That finished, he hooked his thumbs around the waistbands of the jeans and the boxers beneath them, then said, "Lift up, baby."

Victor's legs tensed and his hips rose.

Mac pulled down, baring Victor to his thighs. He stopped again to admire the view, then nuzzled the hard shaft, filling his lungs with Victor's scent. A loud groan made him smirk, then before Victor could quite grab hold of his head, Mac shifted downward.

"Mac," Victor wailed.

"Patience, my lovely," he murmured, licking strong, firm thighs.

"Sadist. Oh, God..."

A kiss to each knee, then he pushed cloth down further to nuzzle the back of each calf. He snagged Victor's socks when he reached his victim's feet, and a quick jerk left Victor naked except for the arms still encased in the denim shirt. Opting to draw the line at sucking on toes which had spent most of the day trapped in boots, he stood up to survey his handiwork.

Bright eyes, flushed face, chest rising and falling in a rhythm bordering on panting, and—best of all—a gorgeous cock weeping with need for him. Life was sweet. "Mac..."

"Shhh. Watch me, baby. See what I have for you." He opted not to try to make getting out of a sweater look sexy and simply stripped off the maroon cashmere pullover, then dropped it to the floor. He ran his hands down his bare chest, caressing nipples already hard with arousal.

"Mac," Victor moaned, his hand straying toward his own cock.

"Don't touch," he said with as stern a look as he could manage when his entire body was tingling with pleasure. "Just watch."

A sound very close to a whimper answered him, but Victor let his hand drop back to his side.

Deciding to reward obedience, Mac let his own hands move to his trousers. Button open, zipper down, a tug here, a wiggle there, then he stepped out of both slacks and underwear.

Victor's eyes roved over his body, and Mac almost came from the hunger smouldering in the green gaze. "Please," he whispered holding out his arms for Mac.

Unable to resist the invitation, Mac knelt on the mattress. He dealt with his socks quickly, then crawled up both the length of the bed and Victor's body. He lost himself for a time in the delicious depths of Victor's mouth, but the hardness pressed against his own couldn't be ignored for long. He lifted up on one elbow so he could see Victor's face while his free hand roamed.

"How do you want to come, baby?" he asked. He nipped Victor's earlobe, then gently tugged on the gold earring decorating it. "In my mouth?" He ran a finger down the underside of Victor's cock. "In my hand?" His finger kept going, over the balls, then to the opening he ached to breach.

Victor arched up against him at the intimate touch. "Like that," he gasped. "With you in me."

He couldn't see any doubt or fear in Victor's eyes. Maybe he'd gotten lucky and Victor really did want it exactly the way he did. Or Victor was better at hiding how he felt than Mac thought. But he'd asked and been answered. No reason to hesitate. Especially since doing so might be misinterpreted as rejection. Or was he simply rationalizing because he was going to die if he didn't get himself buried in his lover's tight heat? He'd figure it out later.

He reached over to the nightstand and rummaged around in the top drawer for something to add to the lubrication of his favourite brand of condoms. He settled on a thick hand cream he'd bought to get through last winter's near terminal case of chapped skin.

'Condom in place, goo on the fingers, time for distraction mode.' He kissed, nuzzled and caressed while he prepared Victor. Tight. Very tight. Tight enough to make Mac think his partner had never done this before or, if he had, he hadn't liked it. An alarm bell began to ring in the back of Mac's brain, but before it could ring loudly enough to make him stop, Victor buried his face in Mac's neck and took a deep breath. As Victor exhaled, the body beneath Mac relaxed, allowing the third finger.

"Do it now, Mac," he whispered, then took another deep breath.

Mac positioned himself, then pushed inward when Victor exhaled. A slow, but steady entry. No pauses, no haste. No out and out signs of pain marred Victor's features, but Mac saw no trace of pleasure either.

Buried to the hilt in paradise, Mac didn't quite know what to do. His body said, 'thrust' so emphatically, he wanted to whimper. But his brain said, 'Don't move; wait.'

Long eyelashes fluttered against Mac's neck, then Victor lay back on the pillow and stared intently into Mac's eyes. "It's you."

Mac resisted the urge to blink in confusion. An odd thing to say, but instinct told him to re-enforce it. "Yeah, baby, it's me." He bent down, kissed him, then moved back so Victor could see his face. "It's me. And I love you."

The eyes closed. Victor pulled him close, then whispered in his ear. "So move."

He reached toward Victor's cock, which had softened during the penetration, but Victor grabbed his hand and intertwined their fingers. "Don't touch," he repeated Mac's earlier words. "Just move. I need to feel you."

Certain this wasn't a good idea, but unable to resist both Victor's commands and the urging of his own body, he began a gentle rocking. An inch out, then back in. Slow, steady. In. Out. Two inches. No faster. Three. More speed. Four inches. Victor was hard again. Time to make certain he stayed that way. Five inches and shift the angle a little.

"Oh, God!" Victor gasped, his eyes going wide.

Got it on the first try. Mac grinned in triumph and kept moving, making certain every thrust made contact with Victor's prostate. Soon he had his lover writhing beneath him, Victor's fingers tightening around his own to a near painful degree.

Victor came with a wordless shout, both the sound and the shudders of his climax, pulling Mac over the edge as well.

Mac collapsed for a moment, bracing himself as best he could to keep from crushing his lover. When his head cleared enough to let him move again, he began to pull out of Victor with the same care he'd used to enter him.

Victor's arms and legs tightened around him, holding him motionless. "You'll do that again?"

Mac smiled at him. "Every chance I get."

"Good." Victor relaxed, allowing Mac to finish withdrawing. A soft whimper as the head of Mac's cock pulled free, then Victor shifted curling up against Mac. "Nap time."

Mac sighed, content. Snuggling Victor into his arms, he decided a nap sounded like a marvellous idea.

It was still light when Victor opened his eyes. No, not still. Again. It wasn't the dwindling light of approaching twilight streaming through the bedroom, but the morning sun. They'd slept through the night.

They. He was in Mac's arms. The man undoubtedly had a numb limb or two to pay for the gesture. One more thing to deal with when Mac woke up. Oh, God, this wouldn't be pretty. Victor couldn't begin to deny it had been good between them, but he wasn't so certain Mac wouldn't find a way.

Sweet words before climax never counted or never trust a man with a hard on. Not the wisest pearls of wisdom for him to forget, but he'd been in love with Mac for a long time. It had made him stupid.

Morning light tended to point out such things. Now he could either wait until Mac woke up and face the music or run for it now.

The body he rested against shifted then did so again. It occurred to him similar movements had woke him up. Oh, he didn't have to wait—Mac was already awake. "Mac?"

"Oh, thank you, thank you." Mac's mutter seemed aimed at some higher power, then he shifted, and directed his attention to Victor. "Baby, I've got to get up before I spill."

"Huh?"

A quick kiss on his forehead, then Mac fairly erupted from the bed and dashed to the bathroom.

Victor sat up staring after him in bewilderment, then he heard the distinct sound of an impressive stream striking water. A smile began to spread slowly across his face. It had reached grin proportions by the time Mac finished and returned to the bed.

"What?" he asked, his arms snaking around Victor's waist.

"You didn't want me to wake up alone."

Mac looked embarrassed then fell back onto the mattress, dragging Victor with him.

Deciding to have mercy, Victor kept quiet and settled in to enjoy snuggling. But something was nagging at him. "Mac?"

"Yeah?"

"You really think I'm a goof?"

"Did," Mac said without hesitation.

Victor stiffened, but the arms around him refused to let him pull away.

"Hey, I figured anyone who loved Li Ann instead of me, had to be a goof."

"That really the reason?"

"Yeah."

"Then I'm not a goof."

A kiss pressed against the top of his head. "Guess not."

He sighed happily, then couldn't resist adding, "But you're still argumentative."

Silence, then, "Am not."

"Are so."

"Not."

"A—"

Mac shifted suddenly, throwing Victor back onto the mattress, then he pounced. Fingers skittered across Victor's ribs in a teasing touch. He jerked, he squirmed, and they both laughed until they cried.

—

Mac smiled as he dressed. Life was good. The tickle fight had led to other things. So had the shower afterwards. Damn, he loved the feeling of having Victor in his arms, of being inside his body. Not for the first time, he thought of what a fool Li Ann was. Well, Mac Ramsey might be irresponsible, egotistical, immature and argumentative, but he was no fool.

He turned around in time to watch Victor pulling on a clean shirt. A baggy olive coloured one to replace the baggy denim one from yesterday. Hmm. Suddenly he understood why some women insisted on dressing their men. Ah, well, wardrobe failure was something Mac could fix easily enough, but he'd need to be sneaky about it. One item at a time. No more than once or twice a month. A trial when he wanted to burn Victor's closet to the ground and go on a shopping spree, but survivable.

"What?" Victor asked, letting Mac know he'd been staring.

"Just enjoying the view," he said with a smile.

The smile Victor returned was slight and revealed equal measures of discomfort and disbelief.

Mac didn't like it at all, and made a mental note to compliment Victor often. Starting now. "Hey, pretty man," he said, walking over to Victor, "I need a kiss."

Victor complied with an ego-boosting eagerness, and when he drew back his eyelashes fanned over his eyes in a way that made Mac think of a contented cat.

"You have to most beautiful eyes I've ever seen," he murmured, pressing a gentle kiss to each eyelid.

Victor's smile was a little more genuine, but doubt lingered. Time and patience, Mac reminded himself. He'd known that's what it would take before he'd even thought of his plan to distract Dobrinsky.

He groaned.

"What?" Victor asked.

"Dobrinsky."

Victor frowned. "That's not something I ever expected you to whisper in my ear."

"He's still out there."

"Oh. We could stay in here?"

"Not if we want to eat."

Victor sighed, thought a moment, then said, "Okay, here's the plan. We raid the kitchen, grab everything we can, then hide in here until The Director let's us go."

"Good plan." He gave Victor a big smooch. "For luck."

Victor gave him a look.

"Hey, I saw it in a movie. Now, let's go."

Mac pulled open the central panel and peered out into the living room. "Coast looks clear."

"Not good."

"Huh?"

"Mac, your apartment only has so many rooms. If he's not in the living room, he's either in the guest bath or the kitchen."

"Oh. You got your gun?"

"Yeah."

"I say we go for it."

"You that hungry?"

"Hey, what can I say? I've got a hot number draining all my energy. I need to refuel."

"You're impossible."

"Daddy's got to eat to keep baby happy."

"I could grow to intensely dislike that pet name."

"Would only increase the joy of using it. Now, focus, Vic. I need food."

He sighed. "Cover me."

"Not until after I've eaten."

"Spare me the humour," Victor muttered, then stepped out into the room.

Mac followed. The bathroom door stood open. No Dobrinsky. "He must be in the kitchen."

"Stay here."

Mac grabbed his arm. "And let you face him alone? I don't think so."

"He doesn't hate me as much as you."

"That was before you slept with the enemy."

"I'll scream if I need rescuing."

"No screaming unless I'm responsible."

"I thought you wanted food."

"I'm changing my mind."

Victor snorted. "Then 'baby' will keep all the fuel for himself. I'm not going back into that bed without at least a box of crackers."

"Vic, I didn't know you were kinky."

"Shut up and stay."

Mac made a soft, barking sound.

Victor shook his head, then stalked toward the kitchen. He stopped halfway there—a spot Mac knew had a good view of the kitchen nook—and frowned. "He's not there."

"Huh? He has to be," Mac insisted, joining him, but no, Victor was right, the kitchen was empty. Which meant Dobrinsky wasn't in the apartment. Mac turned on his heel and hurried over to the front door. A quick check of the hallway and he announced, "The guard's gone, too."

"They must have wrapped up the case."

As if on cue—and, of course, The Director never could resist one—the phone rang.

Mac sighed, gave Victor a 'you just had to say it' glare, then snatched up his phone. "Ramsey."

"Since you boys have come up for air," The Director's throaty voice purred over the line, "you might as well report in."

Not wanting to waste time guessing where the camera in this room was, Mac aimed his look of intense dislike at the phone. "I trust we've kept you entertained."

"Oh, my, yes. He does seem to inspire you."

Some day, he would kill her. He really would. But not until after he got copies of the tapes. "Then I'm sure you'll be pleased to hear we're taking the rest of the day off. Consider it the price of admission." He hung up the phone before she could answer.

"She'll kill us."

He smiled. "Nah, there's nothing good on television this week."

Victor blushed, obviously not as nonchalant about the hidden cameras, but there wasn't anything they could do. Mac had learned as much when he'd rebelled enough to try and clean out his apartment. No matter how many devices he found, he was always greeted the next morning with a full report of the previous evening's activities. He'd found the reports more tedious than the cameras embarrassed him, so he'd given up.

The phone rang, and he picked a random spot on the ceiling to speak to. "I'll take him to a hotel."

A second ring while the Leather Queen undoubtedly considered the chances of them finding a hotel she didn't have bugged, then it cut off mid-way through the third ring. Hmm, better odds than he'd thought. Maybe he'd treat Victor to some privacy on their anniversary.

Grinning in triumph, he turned his attention to his lover and found Victor staring at the floor, his face glowing bright red. "Um, ba—Vic, you did know about the surveillance stuff, didn't you?"

To his relief Victor nodded. "I just..." He sighed. "I try not to think about it."

"Me, too. But sometimes it comes in handy." He slung his arm around Victor's shoulder. "Let's get something to eat, then maybe we can come up with something else to think about."

The Director watched Mac waggle his eyebrows, listened to Victor laugh, and frowned. While the show was undeniably delicious, she wasn't certain how she felt about this burgeoning relationship.

Her files were appallingly complete, and Mac was young. Perhaps too young to deal with Victor Mansfield. Li Ann certainly had been.

She regretted allowing that relationship. On the surface Li Ann had seemed like someone who could handle it, but she had proven herself fairly shallow on the personal interaction front. Fortunately, Victor had taken the break-up far better than she had expected, but she'd suspected it had been because he was falling in love with Mac. Beyond the obvious visual delights, she took no satisfaction in being proven right.

If she read Victor correctly, Mac Ramsey would either save him or destroy him. Was the chance of the first worth the risk of the second? Of course, she'd always known Victor would self-destruct one day, but she'd planned to use it to her advantage. A part of her continued to cling to the notion, but despite her efforts to the contrary, she'd grown fairly fond of the members of her most troublesome team. Fondness lacing her pity for Victor made it difficult for her not to give into protective urges. Perhaps she should stand back and let things happen. Either result should give her the room she'd need to absolve herself of responsibility for the troubled man's fate.

Another glance at the monitor showed her lambs had moved into the kitchen, raiding the refrigerator between nibbling on each other. How precious. Not much chance of interference working at this point. She needed them beyond the first glow before making her move. If she decided to make a move. In the meantime, she could build up her video collection.

She remained comfortable with her decision not to make a decision for the rest of the week. Fortunately things were slow, leaving her with no real need for all three members of the Ramsey-Mansfield-Tsei team. Of course, Mac would have been perfect to send after the transsexual assassin ring, but assigning Dobrinsky to help Li Ann suited her sense of irony. It would be a long time before her right-hand man would be foolish enough to bet against her again. She'd told him time and time again all that hostility was nothing more than a cover, but he'd insisted it was honest hatred.

The thought of Dobrinsky's fate kept her amused most of the day. Some might have dared to describe her mood as good when the proximity alarm for Victor's front door pinged. Curious she activated the monitor and an anxious looking blonde wrapped in a blanket or sheet filled the screen.

Victor gasped his release, his seed spilling on the mattress beneath him as he struggled to keep his knees from giving out. Mac's bellow of triumph, followed by most of his weight pressing down on Victor's back didn't help matters. If he hadn't found the notion of collapsing onto the wet spot distasteful, he might have given in, but he managed to stay on his hands and knees. "Mac?"

"Mmm?" came the lazy reply along with a nuzzling of lips against the back of his neck.

"I'm going to fall."

"Huh? Oh, sorry, baby." Mac shifted to sit back on his heels, his cock slipping free of Victor's body as he moved.

With a sigh of relief, Victor manoeuvred around to lie on his back—a good foot away from the wet spot. Satisfied with his level of comfort, he tilted his head back and his lips upward in a demand for a kiss.

Mac obliged him, murmured a few nonsensical words about how sexy and wonderful Victor was, then returned to his kneeling position. With annoying ease, Mac stripped off the condom, knotted it, then tossed it into the trash along with the rest of the used rubbers. It was a fairly impressive collection, but, despite the pleasure each discard represented, Victor hated the sight of them.

He wanted to feel Mac's flesh sliding into him, feel the teasing trickle of spent seed oozing from his body. Not... plastic. No, it wasn't as bad as that. Mac moving against him was nothing like making do with toys, but it was so far from what Victor wanted... He wanted to speak of blood tests and eliminating the need for safe sex. It was the most absurd fantasy he'd ever had. Which was saying a lot.

Mac had told him he knew him, knew what he needed. Translation—he knew what Victor had needed to hear and had said the pretty words. They meant nothing. Mac was a passionate man, but he fell in and out of love too easily, and was too fond of beautiful, unobtainable things.

While Victor had never qualified for the beautiful part, he had been firmly in the unobtainable category until yesterday afternoon. Soon Mac would move him to the ‘well, that was fun, time to try something else’ list. He didn’t even want to think about how much it was going to hurt.

“What’s wrong?” Warm lips caressed his temple as Mac stretched out beside him.

“Nothing,” he answered, then decided it didn’t sound too convincing. He forced a smile, Mac’s arms moving around him giving it a genuine quality. “You’ve just worn me out.”

“That’s the problem with you old guys—no stamina.” Before Victor could come up with a suitable retort, Mac lost control over a huge yawn and both men chuckled. “Guess I need to work on my timing.”

“Might be a good idea.” Victor yawned himself, then snuggled close to Mac. “Sleep now?”

“Mmm, sleep now.” He pressed a kiss to Victor’s forehead. “Love you.”

Sweet words. If only he could believe in them. “I love you, too.”

A soft sigh of contentment, then Mac drifted off. Victor would have liked to follow—he was exhausted—but sleep eluded him. His mind was too busy conjuring up every possible way Mac could tell him he wanted to end it.

After an hour of this he remained wide-awake and was sinking into a depression. With the regret of someone who feared each casual embrace was the last, he slipped out of Mac’s arms and his bed.

In his sleep, Mac reached for him, but seemed perfectly happy when Victor put a pillow within his reach. There was a metaphor in that, Victor was certain of it, but he didn’t have the energy left to figure it out.

Needing to get away from the bedroom, he headed for the kitchen. Coffee? No, not if he wanted any hope of sleeping. Maybe one of those weird herbal teas Mac liked. Quietly, Victor put the kettle on, then went through the cabinets and found the tea stash. A sniff here, a sniff there and he came up with something he thought smelled drinkable.

To his mild surprise, he found the first sip not only tolerable, but pleasant. Maybe it would do what the box promised and help him to unwind. Collecting his mug, he padded into the living room.

Somehow—perhaps because he’d been waiting for her to show for days—he managed not to make a sound or spill a drop when the lamp near the chair switched on. Once his eyes had adjusted to the light, he said, “I expected you over three hours ago.”

The Director gave him a long look, obviously enjoying the sight of him standing there stark naked. Well, he couldn’t have that. With a defiant glare, he sat down on the sofa and pulled an afghan over his chest and lap. Getting a small thrill out of spoiling her fun, he made her wait through a few more sips of tea, then said, “So how many days am I suspended?”

It was the way she normally punished him. Which was stupid. The ‘shadowy government agency’ they both worked for provided for all his basic needs. The most a suspension deprived him of was something to do so he sat around his apartment contemplating things like what kind of agency was so secret it didn’t have a name and could they start using the acronym SGA?

“Now, Victor, did I say anything about punishing you?”

“We’ve failed to report for duty for almost four days. That should be worth a week of thinking for me, and two of Mac doing Dobrinsky’s bidding.” No suspensions for his Mac. No, his lover was always handed over to do dirty jobs like cleaning sump pumps or washing cars. Make Mansfield think; make Ramsey sweat.

“I’m afraid poor Dobrinsky is still a little too shaken to come up with an adequate task for our Mr. Ramsey.”

Smiling was undoubtedly a mistake, but Victor couldn’t help himself. Mac had finally gotten the better of Dobrinsky. Victor figured his contribution to the victory would keep Mac interested in him for at least another week. Maybe two. Cheered somewhat by this line of thought, he decided he had the energy to be direct. “So, if it’s not to announce our punishments, why are you here?”

“To give you this,” she said, tossing him a thick white envelope which jingled as he caught it. “Keys and directions to the executive retreat. Luxury cabin on a lake, secluded and no surveillance devices.” She smiled slightly. “Or at least none I’ve ever been able to find.”

Victor stared at her.

She seemed not to notice. “I’m giving you and Mac another week together. I don’t care what the state of your relationship is when you return as long as you get it to the point it doesn’t interfere with your work.”

It almost made sense. Perhaps too much sense. “Why do I suspect ulterior motives?”

A smirk answered him. “Because I don’t waste my time employing fools.” She stood up, her movements artfully displaying long legs encased in leather trousers. “Let us just say that it would be best

for all of us if someone," she glanced toward the bedroom, "were incognito for a few days. The past can be such a messy burden."

Alarm made Victor's stomach twist. "The Tangs?"

She shook her head. "Not quite as deadly, but she does have a rather intriguing accent." She opened the front door, then gave him a long look. "Take him away from here, Victor. The locals can help the damsel in distress, and I don't want the agency involved in her little games."

On the way out, she flipped the light switch, plunging the apartment back into darkness.

His mug of tea cooling in his hand, Victor sat there. Thinking. About what he knew of Mac's past, and of The Director's fondness for clever evasion. After an hour or so, he set the mug aside and reached for the phone.

Mac woke to the sound of someone moving around the bedroom with the exaggerated care needed to dress in darkness without making much noise. "Vic?" he muttered, pushing away the Victor-scented pillow he'd apparently been clutching in his sleep.

"Sorry, Mac," Vic whispered, leaning over the bed to kiss him.

Always one to take advantage of a situation, Mac grabbed him, pulling his now fully clothed lover down on top of him. Victor melted into his embrace and the following kiss, but he squirmed away when Mac tried to rid him of the clothes he'd just finished putting on. "Vic," he growled, finding his arms annoyingly empty.

"I'm sorry, but I've got to run home."

Mac frowned and glanced at the clock on his nightstand. "At 3 a.m.?" he asked, turning on the lamp, making them both blink in the sudden brightness.

"The Director came by. And I got suspicious so I called my answering machine. Gloria's in trouble and—"

"Stop!" Mac ordered holding up his hand, not awake enough to absorb the babbling. "Let me get dressed and you can explain in the car."

"Car?" Mac, you don't have to get up. I—"

This time he silenced Victor with a dark look. The last thing Mac wanted to do was drag himself out of bed at this hour in the morning when they could be doing some serious snuggling, but his lover was obviously agitated. He'd also said the secret words—"The Director." Mac had learned quickly that trusting in any situation where she was involved came under the heading of a major bad idea. So, if Victor was determined to escape their love nest, then he was damned well going with him.

Mac also insisted on driving, leaving Victor's truck in the parking lot beneath Mac's apartment building. Having control of the only means of immediate transportation might come in handy. Besides, it also meant that no matter what happened, Victor would have to return to Mac's building at least once. Insecurity wasn't exactly Mac's middle name, but he'd also processed that this was about some woman. "So who's Gloria?" he asked when they were about halfway to Victor's place.

His lover jumped at the sudden break in the silence which had reigned since Mac had announced he was going with him. "An old friend."

"Old friend or old girlfriend?"

"Old girlfriend of an old friend."

"So where's the old friend in the lady's hour of need."

"Prison," Victor answered. "Donny's in prison. Guilty of what I wasn't."

They hadn't talked about Victor's past, but Mac knew the bare bones of it. Victor had been a narcotics detective for a relatively short period of time when drugs had gone missing and the evidence had pointed to him. Even when Mac hadn't liked the man, he'd had no trouble believing Victor had been the victim of a set up. He wasn't the type to be a corrupt cop. Mac almost laughed. One thing his own criminal background had done was make him a good judge of cops. Even when he didn't want to be.

"Okay, so how did we get involved in all of this?"

As he listened in growing disbelief, Victor told him about The Director's late night visit. Mac had heard stories about the executive retreat. Luxurious didn't begin to cover it. The idea of having Victor alone there was very close to Mac's idea of paradise. "And why aren't we on our way to nirvana?" Hey, he knew there was a catch. This was The Director they were talking about, but there were ways around such things.

"She tried to make it sound like someone from your past had popped up, but after she'd left I realized she'd never directly referred to you," Victor answered. "So I got to thinking it might really be me she wanted out of town. On a hunch, I checked my answering machine."

"Enter Gloria," Mac muttered. He already didn't like the sound of this. Lying by evasion was one of The Director's true talents. No way she'd be so coy and obvious. And if there wasn't some way she could

erase the messages on their answering machines from across the country, he'd eat his sports car. It all smelled of a scheme within a plan within a puzzle. He hated that.

"Yeah, she turned up on my doorstep around midnight. One of my neighbours took her in for the night."

"She that important to you?" Something else not to like.

"Might have been five years ago. Might have been five days ago." His hand covered Mac's on the gear shift. "Now, I just need to know what's going on, and why The Director was so anxious for me to find out about it."

Mac managed to hold in his sigh of relief, but his silence must have been telling.

"I don't believe this!" Victor snatched his hand away. "You thought I didn't know she was playing me. What sort of idiot wouldn't know that! Gloria was an art student, not a member of the Tangs. She'd have been gone by morning with no idea of where to find me if not for The Director's visit."

Damn. Victor was the brains of this duo. Needing some coddling in the bedroom didn't change that, yet Mac had let himself start to think otherwise. Not a mistake he'd make again. "Hey, I'm sorry. I'm half-asleep and still in protective mode. Give me a chance to shake both conditions, and I promise I'll do better."

Victor didn't answer him, his attention firmly on the view out the passenger window.

Great. Just great. They were about to walk into some situation with some woman Victor obviously once had the hots for while Victor was ticked off at him. Could this day get any worse? And was there anything more depressing than 'one of those days' lining up when dawn was a good two hours away?

He pulled into Victor's assigned parking place and glared at his apartment building. Somewhere in that building the mysterious Gloria lay in waiting. He supposed it would be too much to hope for that she'd become a nun or something. The passenger door opening snapped him out of his impending mood, and he quickly followed Victor to the building entrance. If the security door closed before Mac reached it, he'd have to pick the lock. No big deal, but he didn't know which neighbour had the prize and he doubted the residents would take kindly to his conducting an apartment to apartment search at this time in the morning.

So intent was he on catching up, he almost collided with Victor when he paused to wait for Mac. To his relief, Victor used the unexpected contact to turn and snuggle up to him. "I like it when you're in protective mode," he whispered, resting his head against Mac's shoulder. "But—"

"Time and place, right?"

"Right."

"Gotcha." Mac sealed the bargain with a kiss. Pleased with himself, he followed Victor to his floor and the door of the apartment across the hall from his own. "Shouldn't we wait until morning?" he asked as Victor rang the bell.

"Probably, but I've got this guy pegged as one of The Director's security stooges. Doesn't make me feel very polite."

Mac nodded his agreement. He figured there was at least one, if not two or three, of those types in his own building. He'd never bothered to protest about it because he knew Ms. Stiletto would either deny it or purr they were there for his protection while she copped another feel. Even for him, some things came under the category of 'why bother?'—Unless he was in the mood to get groped.

He smirked to himself, but the feeling didn't last longer than the door opening to reveal a rather exotic looking blonde. Perhaps he'd made his bargain with Victor too soon?

"Victor, you came!" she breathed in a lilting accent that had a tendency to make a man want to curl his toes.

Mac scowled as Victor was enveloped in her embrace and downgraded their bargain to bum deal. This was definitely one of those moments when a possessive snarl would have been a nice touch, but he supposed he should try to behave for at least a few hours after promising to do so. Nope, he couldn't snarl, seize, mark or otherwise pounce on his mate. Instead, he followed the two of them back to Victor's apartment, dropped into the nearest chair and settled into a long, satisfying sulk.

He grunted a greeting when Victor formally introduced him to Gloria Cadot, then grit his teeth to keep from commenting on her technique as she tried to seduce Victor into helping her escape a dire threat. Apparently a fellow art dealer wanted to break her high cheekbones. Mac understood the feeling.

To his disgust, but not his surprise, the lesson in feminine wiles ended with Victor agreeing to pay a visit to the lovely man who wanted to dump Gloria down the nearest elevator shaft. Imagining the moment put the first smile on his face since he'd laid eyes on the woman.

He glanced at the clock and discovered he'd been good through almost two hours worth of reminiscing and flirting. Enough was enough. "Too early to go visiting, Vic," he said, nodding to the window where dawn was beginning to break. "How about we get a couple more hours of sleep?"

Victor nodded and stood up.

Either ignoring or misunderstanding the significance of Mac's presence, Gloria gave Victor a wistful, come hither look. Caught between that and Mac's glare, Victor froze, giving Mac a chance to announce, "I'll just get our guest a pillow and a blanket."

He took a chance on what he needed being in the hall closet, then fought a small crow of triumph as it did indeed yield the required linens. Mac snatched them up, then all but shoved them into Gloria's arms. "Night," he said, then tugged Victor after him into the bedroom.

Victor walked into the Kingman Gallery with Mac on his heels. He didn't know whether to laugh or start shouting. Sulking and rudeness did not come under Victor's definition of appropriate behaviour. On the other hand, while he hoped he'd hidden it better than Mac had his feelings, Gloria had shaken him.

A part of him had listened to her melodious voice speak of the old days as if there had been something special between them and had wanted to believe in it with a pathetic level of desperation. The rest of him had known he was being played by a pro. The worst thing was he suspected the desperation would have won the day if not for Mac.

Angry with Mac and hating himself for being so pathetic, he'd opted not to speak to him while they'd pretended to sleep, but he had snuggled up into his arms, using body language to insist Mac hold him close. Mac had done so. Which brought them to this gallery, irritated with one another at the same time they wanted to crawl inside each other's skin.

Knowing Mac needed to blow off some steam, Victor left the hired stooge to him and headed for the office area. He heard a thud, then a crash, and winced at the thought of what might have been broken. Mac must have used some fancy move that required a lot of room. He loved the man. He really did, but subtlety was not one of Mac's strong points. Of course, subtlety could be highly overrated.

He opted for some verbal strong armed tactics with Kingman. Made him think he was with the police, then let him worry that he wasn't, but in any case he made it clear he was the man to deal with. Most of all, he tried to give his opponent the feeling that Gloria was the only thing he truly cared about. Not difficult to do since even with Mac around he was fighting the urge to believe in her enough to trust she wanted him. Someone to want him after Mac came to his senses and dumped him for the pathetic loser he was. In any case, Kingman bought the act and told him what he wanted to know. Even gave him a photo of the object in question.

"Stolen, right?" he asked, handing the large envelope to Mac the moment they were back in the car.

Mac pulled out the photo, then snorted. "Oh, yeah. From the royal house of Thailand no less."

"That makes it international. But it usually requires more than that to get The Director involved." Victor shook his head. "It still doesn't make any sense." Had he been wrong? Was it nothing more than paranoia to think The Director was trying to manipulate him? "Maybe she just likes toying with us and there's no better reason."

"Whatever. Can we get rid of Gloria now?"

Victor rolled his eyes. Strong, handsome, brave, but never a model of maturity. "As soon as we find out who she sold the statue to. Then we can turn her over to the local authorities."

Mac made disgruntled noises, but he kept out of the way while Victor manoeuvred Gloria into giving him the answer. By sunset Gloria and Kingman were in jail awaiting arraignment and the Thai consulate had been informed of the missing statue's whereabouts.

Victor decided to work through the depression this caused by having Mac drag him off to bed at an obscenely early hour. Despite his lover's spectacular efforts to exhaust him, Victor was awake to watch the clock move from 1:59 a.m. to 2.

His sigh caused Mac to tighten his embrace. "What's wrong, baby?" he asked, his lips brushing against Victor's neck. "She can't have meant that much to you."

Mac's tone dripped of a demand for reason. Had their situations been reversed, Victor knew his own words would have been a fearful whine—if he could find the courage to even speak them. "No, I love you." A sense of near pride swept through him at the lack of tremor in his voice. He loved Mac, but Mac would leave him.

"I love you, too."

He wanted to believe. Oh, how he wanted to believe. Instead he found himself wondering how many people Mac had said those words to and how long he'd stayed with each of them. Maybe Gloria had simply been more honest than Mac. She'd used him with every intention of discarding him. Mac pretended otherwise, but in the end Victor would end up alone with his heart torn to shreds. Family, friends, lovers—it never failed. Something about him wasn't worth loving.

His eyes burned, but they did not tear up. Although often given cause, he never cried in the presence of others. Odd as it seemed, even a pathetic waste like him had a small measure of pride. A cold comfort

in and even colder existence, but it was all he had. "Go to sleep, Mac," he whispered, afraid his voice would betray him if he spoke louder. "I'm fine."

Mac cuddled him even closer. "I'll figure it out, you know."

"Figure what out?"

"How to convince you I really do love you."

Victor almost smiled. "I already do." Not a lie really. He thought Mac might believe he loved Victor. But belief and truth could be two totally different things.

The Director contemplated the blankness of the ceiling above her inner sanctum and considered replacing all the bland beige with a mirror or two. Might come in handy the next time she allowed Dobrinsky to come upstairs. She smiled slightly. The man did have an endearing way of restoring her good will. But back to business.

With a resigned sigh, she shifted her gaze to the latest in a long line of reports to hit her desk. This one dealt with the bellows of a company which had fallen victim to industrial espionage. Normally nothing of interest to her. As far as she was concerned it was all part of doing business. No, she didn't mind the crime, but the item stolen did catch her attention. A C15 detonator. A nasty little device which when combined with Isotope U235 made a very effective nuclear hand grenade.

To her consternation, a sample of that very isotope had gone missing a matter of days after the company started wailing about their plans being stolen. Not good. Not good at all. But at least they had a suspect—Claire Holland, a noted consultant The Director had long suspected of industrial espionage. It seemed Ms. Holland had gained access to the plans in the course of her legitimate job. Yes, The Director was certain the woman was the solution to half the puzzle, but that left the theft of the isotope to deal with. No suspects there.

A trap was needed. If the intelligence gathered on the suspect were to be believed, she was not only a talented thief, but a lonely one. It might prove useful to have someone get closer to her. She pulled out the photo of the attractive blonde. The task shouldn't prove too distasteful for one of her agents, but which one?

She mentally ran through the list, then frowned at herself when she realized she'd left her two best men off of it. Mac and Victor. Or rather Mac. Victor's profile would never allow for a successful honey trap operation—too great a risk of empathy with the subject—but Mac would have easily been her first choice less than a month ago.

"I must be going soft," she said to herself. Soft in the head. Love was all well and good, but this job required sacrifices. It was time she reminded her boys of that not to mention how useful it might be for them to get a good look at how Mac would handle temptation. Her decision made, she reached for her phone.

Mac stared at The Director in disbelief. He'd been prepared to be outraged on Li Ann's behalf as soon as their slinky boss had announced their current assignment would involve a honey trap. No way was he going to let Li Ann go through that. Victor and Li Ann agreed—a first for this team—but all for naught.

The unsuspecting bee in question was a woman, and Mac the lure to draw her in. At another time he might have cackled with glee over an assignment all but ordering him into a beautiful woman's bed. Instead his stomach churned. Not in distaste. Love had made him neither blind nor less appreciative of the female form. No, the reason acid ate at his stomach lining was pure worry.

A single glance told him the tale. Victor's face had drained of all colour, his stare riveted on the image of the woman Mac needed to seduce. Damn it, they'd had less than three weeks together. They weren't ready to handle this sort of operation. And she knew it.

He glared at The Director. Bedroom confessions happened in fiction, not real life. Or at least not within the day or two they had to solve this one. Sex might get him through the door, but the odds against it getting him any answers made it far from worth causing Victor any pain. He considered pointing that out. Considered demanding she at least find someone else... someone not currently in the room to do it.

She smiled at him, and he knew. She was waiting for a protest. Waiting for him not to do his job and give her an excuse to break up his relationship with Victor, perhaps even the team itself. 'Bitch,' he thought, hoping his eyes were broadcasting the message loud and clear.

She smiled harder, a smugness entering the mix.

Fine. She wanted to mess up his life; he'd do what he could to mess up her plans. "I'll see what I can do," he said with a silky smile.

Her eyebrow arched. The smug smile vanished into a 'what are you up to?' gaze.

He responded with a 'worry about it' cock of his head.

She sighed. "On your way, children," she announced with a shooing motion of her hand. "There's work to be done."

Victor leapt to his feet and bolted for the door.

Mac had expected as much and used his long legs to his advantage, catching up to his lover before he could make his escape. He let Victor pull him out into the hallway, then he dug his heels in and jerked him around and up against the wall.

Victor gasped at the impact, although Mac made certain he didn't hit hard enough to hurt him, but it did get his lovely lips parted.

"I love you," he growled, then swooped down to capture the delectable mouth in the most possessive kiss he could manage. 'Mission accomplished,' he thought when Victor all but collapsed against him, his arms going around Mac to tighten their embrace to an extent that not even air molecules could separate them.

Li Ann succeeded where the molecules failed. "Oh, my God!"

Her shout caused them to jerk apart and spin around to face whatever dire threat had invaded the building. Instead Mac discovered the hallway empty of anything but a gaping Li Ann. Oh, yeah. She didn't know as they hadn't gotten around to telling her.

He tried to think of something to say, but the best he could do was, "Uh..." How helpful. 'Focus, Ramsey, focus! And grab the pretty man while you're at it.' With a sigh, he caught hold of Victor's arm, preventing him from slinking away. A pull reeled him in enough for Mac to tuck him into a one-armed embrace very similar to the one he'd used when confronting Dobrinsky. "Sorry, Li Ann," he said once he'd prevented Victor from going off to find some dark corner in which to brood, cry or whatever he did when out of Mac's sight. "I didn't mean for you to find out this way, but Mr. Insecurity here wouldn't let me tell anyone until I was certain I wasn't going to get tired of him." Said time to be determined by the aforementioned insecure mess. A major flaw in the plan as far as Mac was concerned, but he had been trying to give Victor time to adjust to the concept of someone not leaving him before getting pushy about announcements and generally having fun flaunting things.

She stared at them. Not good, but he didn't have time to soothe her feelings and Victor's. It made for an easy choice, especially since it meant he could leave his lover to deal with Li Ann. He knew that bit of convenience bordered on cowardice, but what the hell. "Catch you later, Li Ann," he said, dragging Victor far enough away to keep their conversation as private as an empty hallway in a public building could allow.

"Mac—" Victor whispered, darting a worried glance at Li Ann.

"Ignore her," Mac answered, pressing close. "I wish I had time to make love to you until I was so sated you knew I couldn't get it up for anyone else, but *she*..." He paused to glance at the door shielding them from their pit viper of a boss. "...is up to something."

Victor nodded, and a tiny trickle of relief wove itself through Mac's embattled stomach lining. His lover might be an insecure mess, but he wasn't a stupid one.

He used the tip of his nose to brush against Victor's long eyelashes. "Do something for me, baby?"

"What?"

"Stay at my place. I'm going to have to play this by ear, so I don't know what's going to happen, but I want to know you're at least some place where my stuff can watch over you."

Victor's gaze dropped to the floor. "Sleep in your bed while you sleep in hers."

"Sleep in our bed while I do my job," Mac corrected. "And I'm not going to do a damned thing more than that."

His head lifted and he held Mac's gaze. "She's beautiful."

"So are you."

Colour returned to Victor's face in the form of a blush. "Mac..."

He kissed him to stop the denial. How Victor could look in a mirror and be so blind was well beyond Mac's understanding. "Stay at my place, baby, please."

Victor nodded, then glanced toward Li Ann or at least the empty spot she'd occupied the last time they'd looked. "You're leaving her to me, aren't you?"

"Life's a bitch, Vic," Mac told him with an unrepentant grin.

A look of pure disgust answered him. "Kiss me again," he demanded in the sort of tone that told Mac 'fuck you and your little dog, Toto, too' was the alternate choice.

He complied, then stepped back. "My place?"

"Your place."

Mac smiled, caressed Victor's cheek, then turned on his heel and headed for the exit. He didn't look back, but he swore to himself and the gaze boring a hole between his shoulder blades that he'd make this as quick as possible.

Victor let himself into his apartment and gave his sofa a wistful look. A nap would feel very good right now. Whether born of true weariness or depression, sleep tugged at him, but he knew himself well enough to know settling on his couch would make it all the harder to keep his promise to Mac.

Better to have not come home at all, but the last few days had been too busy for domestic chores, so it was come here for some clean clothes or do laundry, and he wasn't in the mood for sorting whites from colours at Mac's. It would all be too much like the naïve housewife working away while her husband slept with someone more exciting.

He sighed, heading for his bedroom. Mac would yell at him for even thinking of such an analogy, but it didn't make it less true. Opening his closet surprised him. Most of the clothes he wore this time of year were gone. Already at Mac's and waiting for the washing machine. Like it or not, in another two days, he'd have to resort to laundry. He quickly discovered anything resembling luggage had also made its way over to Mac's place, so he made do with a pillowcase.

Luck having a certain negative pattern in his life, it did not surprise Victor when he opened the door to leave and found Li Ann hovering in the hallway. Damn. He almost retreated inside to familiar ground for the inevitable conversation, but again he knew that would lead to breaking his promise.

He closed the door behind him, forcing her to step back to keep any distance between them. "I'm going over to Mac's. We can talk there."

She flinched, but nodded. Neither of them spoke on the way down to the parking lot, and Victor could have wept for joy when he found himself alone in the relative safety of his truck. Thank God it didn't make any sense for them to drive over together. Nothing more than a delay, but he'd take what he could get.

Damn, what a day. Not only did he have to deal with a weirded-out ex-fiancée and the loss of his lover to some gorgeous industrial spy turned arms dealer, he'd had to suffer through the most bizarre interrogation of his career—and he'd spent a large part of his career working vice.

Victor would be the first to admit he wasn't on top of his game today, but could he be so far gone he'd lost all his instincts? Every one he had kept screaming Dr. Harry Melnick was telling the truth. Which wouldn't be a problem if the truth hadn't been that some vampire babes had ravished him and stolen the uranium. Somehow, Victor thought such an eventuality came under the heading of unlikely. Which meant he couldn't even trust himself to do his job.

Such cheerful thoughts entertained him through the drive, and it was with a no greater sense of joy that he let himself into Mac's apartment. He never should have agreed to this. Mac would spend the day being reminded why beautiful women were one of his favourite things, then come back here to tell Victor to gather his things and go.

He left the door propped open for Li Ann, then went to the bedroom to dump his pillowcase in the nearest chair. Convinced he wouldn't need the contents until he'd been sent home, he left it stuffed and easily grabbed on the way out.

When he returned to the front room, Li Ann had arrived and was pouring herself a glass of expensive scotch. He preferred beer. There in a nutshell was the reason he didn't belong with either of his partners. They liked the finer things in life and he was the bottom of the barrel.

Too depressed to get the symbolic beer, he opted to drop into a chair and stare at the far wall as he spoke. "It's nothing but a phase of his. He'll come to his senses any minute now and be all yours again."

"I don't—"

"Oh, please, spare me the protests." He sighed. "Look, I might have denied it a million times, but I've known from the instant he walked back into your life that our engagement was nothing beyond a rebound reaction to his 'death.'"

Silence. A confirmation of sorts, he guessed. Almost a relief to have the ugly truth out in the open.

He swallowed, anxiety making his throat dry while at the same time making the thought of putting anything in his stomach out of the question. "You got used to the idea of not having him around, but underneath all of this 'I don't want either of you' nonsense, you always figured he'd be there when you wanted him back."

"You sound very certain of that."

"I was trained to be observant," he answered with a shrug. "I guess the real question is whether or not you really *do* want him back or just like the ego-boost of having him waiting for you."

A long pause, then she answered, "I'm not certain."

"Figure it out, Li Ann, then take him back or let him go."

"To you?"

Victor shook his head. "I told you—he won't stay with me. Probably be out of the picture by morning." What would he do then? Could he continue to work with Li Ann and Mac? Would The Director even give him a choice one way or the other? He sighed. It didn't matter. Victor would do whatever survival demanded. He'd learned long ago to never expect more than existence out of life. Whenever he managed

to forget that lesson a Li Ann or a Mac worked through his defences and the resulting pain brought him back to his senses. Until the next time.

Her hand touched his shoulder. "Vic?"

"Yeah?"

"He didn't tell me he loved me until the moment he knew he was going to die." When he didn't look up at her, she shifted to kneel in front of where he sat. "I heard him tell you he loved you in a public hallway with no threat of death in sight." She gave him a wane smile. "That means something, but I don't think I'm ready to deal with it yet."

It meant Mac had learned the words were said easily enough when it got him what he wanted—a memorable 'final' moment with Li Ann and a promise from Victor. He knew it. Knew hoping otherwise would lead to a pain he doubted he could survive. But somehow, the look on Li Ann's face made him doubt his certainty for the first time. And it scared him. Desperate to give them both a way out, he settled on today's other glorious event "Maybe... we could talk about the case?"

She gave him a pat on the leg, then settled onto the sofa beside him. "What did Melnick tell you?"

Feeling like a fool, he told her about the vampires. As seemed the natural order of their team, the obscure made sense to her and she ran off to check out some local Goth club. Beautiful, brilliant and in the enviable state of having something to do—sometimes he could almost find it within himself to hate Li Ann.

Mac liked Claire. She reminded him a lot of... well, himself. A true kindred soul, and a beautiful one at that—it was no hardship spending the day with her, even if he would have a few bruises from their paintball game. In the past, he would have been quite happy to have let the day wind down to its inevitable conclusion, but he no longer considered such an evening one of the perks of the job.

But he did have a job to do. He knew he'd been right in his first reaction to this assignment—she wasn't the type to confess all because of a romp between the sheets. Briefly he'd entertained the notion of giving her a chaste kiss and forgetting the whole thing. But the entire day had been a seduction and it might make her suspicious if he hesitated on the follow through. With hidden regret, he accepted her after-dinner invitation back to her place. The sex like the company was good. The snuggling afterwards wasn't... unpleasant, but he was more than happy when enough time passed for him to make an excuse about an early morning meeting and leave.

He drove straight home. Mac knew Victor would have kept his promise, but it still gave him a warm rush when he opened his door and found his lover asleep on the sofa. A lovely sight to come home to, but he made for the bathroom not Victor.

The scent of sex and Claire's perfume clung to him. He needed to rid himself of both before he woke sleeping beauty. The hamper took care of his clothes while a quick shower dealt with the rest.

When he emerged from the bathroom, he found a sleepy-eyed Victor sitting on the corner of the bed nearest the chair. Mac didn't recognize the over-stuffed pillowcase his pretty man seemed so fascinated with. He almost made a crack about Victor's idea of designer luggage, but he could see the tension radiating from him.

"Mac?" he whispered, looking at him with those 'wounded puppy' eyes.

Obviously, he expected Mac to tell him to leave. Damn, what did it take to get through his thick skull? What had left Victor so damaged he couldn't believe it when told he was loved? Mac had taken on quite a challenge when he'd seduced this one. Too much of one? For a moment he understood how Li Ann and the ones who had come before her had felt. It might never get better. He might spend the rest of his and Victor's lives constantly reassuring the man, never really being believed. But the difference between him and the others reared its head—daunting task or not, Mac knew Victor was worth it.

He sat down beside him and put his arm around Victor's shoulders.

"Mac?"

"I did my job," he answered, drawing him close when Victor tried to draw away. His voice dropped to the faintest whisper he could manage and be heard. "Nothing more than that."

"You enjoyed it."

Easy enough assumption given the need for a man's active participation in the deed. "Yeah. Just like I have countless times before. But I make love with you, and there's no comparison." He kissed Victor's forehead, let go of him and crawled up the bed, then under the covers. "Come to bed," he murmured, holding his hand out to Victor.

Those sad, lovely eyes stared at him for a long moment, then Victor stood up. For a moment Mac thought he was going to run and his mind raced to think of some way to stop him without ruining everything. But Victor did not run. Instead he stripped, then joined Mac in the bed.

A heavy sigh of relief shuddered through Mac as he settled Victor in his arms. Figuring his lover might want to sulk about the evening's events for a few hours at least, it surprised Mac, when Victor began to rub against him. "Vic?"

"I need it, Mac," came the answer as strong arms encircled Mac's torso. "Please."

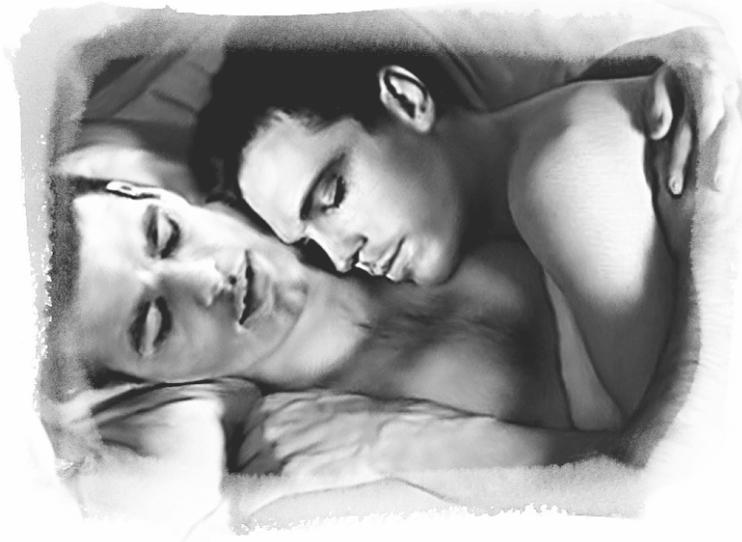
Mac was tired and his round with Claire had left him satisfied enough to not need anything else for the evening, but he could guess what Victor wasn't saying. He didn't want Mac to fall asleep with someone else being the last one to give him pleasure. He needed some assurance Mac would dream of him, not her.

Putting out when he didn't want to. Mac supposed it was one of the things that made the difference between a sex partner and a lover. He smiled. "As if I could deny you anything," he teased gently, then rolled to put Victor beneath him.

The gentle rhythm of their thrusts matched the sensual care of each caress and kiss. They came within moments of one another, and Mac had the pleasure of watching Victor fall asleep in his arms before sleep claimed him as well.

Victor woke in the middle of the night and sighed. He'd known he shouldn't have taken that nap while Li Ann did the preliminary investigation on the Dark World club, but he hadn't had anything else to do until she came back certain it was what Melnick had been talking about.

He'd done some checking of his own after she woke him. Dug up the paperwork on the owner, harassed him, got his rap sheet, and planned to harass him again tomorrow. All in a day's work, but not very fruitful. In the end he'd had far too much time to dwell on Mac's assignment. He knew depression, not exhaustion had sent him to the couch shortly before sundown, knew he'd slept merely to have an excuse not to think. A successful diversion, but he now found himself wide awake at 1 a.m.



Mac shifted, drawing Victor closer and snuggling him like a child with a favoured stuffed toy. A marvellous sensation, but the notion of 'stuffed' gave him an idea. No, Mac needed his sleep. Selfish to even think of waking him. Nobility got him through another half hour, but he found himself fighting not to squirm. He loved cuddling, but his senses were under attack. Mac's scent filled his lungs, body heat enflamed his skin, the gentle rise and fall of a chest rubbed against him.

No, Mac needed his sleep. The argument which had sounded so good thirty short minutes ago was less convincing this time. In their time as lovers, Victor had lost count of the times Mac had decided to wake him in the middle of the night for some fun. Insecure, but not stupid, Victor didn't need a psychiatrist to know his hesitation to do the same thing had more to do with the fear Mac would be angry with him than consideration.

If Mac were telling the truth, he wouldn't mind a sexy lover demanding his due in the middle of the night. If not... well, the pillowcase had remained packed and the suspense would be over. 'All right, Ace,' he thought, gently extracting himself from Mac's embrace. 'Let's see what happens.'

He pulled the lube out of the nightstand drawer, then got himself ready. He'd never indulged in such an intimate touch before and he had to bite his lip to keep from gasping as his fingers penetrated flesh full of stimulation-hungry nerve endings. Despite the pleasure, he stopped easily enough. He'd had more than enough self-pleasure in his life. Now he wanted outside attention.

Another moment of lip biting while he considered his next move, then he smiled. He squirmed down under the covers manoeuvring himself into a comfortable position, then gave Mac's limp cock a kiss. Another kiss, a nibble or two and the organ began to stir. Grinning in triumph, he took it into his mouth and began licking and sucking with enthusiasm.

The cock grew harder, Mac's long legs shifted, then the covers flew back and a loud moan of pleasure rewarded his efforts. Victor let the erection fall out of his mouth, gave it one last kiss, then stretched out on top of Mac.

"You stopped," a sulky, sleepy voice growled in accusation.

"Mmm hmm." His next kiss claimed the mouth moving into a pout. Sulking or not, Mac kissed back with growing enthusiasm, then groaned loudly when Victor once again stopped what he'd been doing.

"Vic!"

Smirking at Mac, he pulled himself up, letting his legs fall to either side of Mac's hips. "I want you," he announced, pushing his ass back against the cock behind him. "Like this."

He could see Mac's answering grin in the glow from the city lights. Strong hands cupped his ass cheeks. "Then saddle up, baby, and let's go for a ride."

"Ah, romance," Victor grumbled, shoving backwards to take the thick, long cock into his body. Oh, damn, that felt good. The control gave him a rush of its own as he pulled forward then rammed back hard enough to make himself gasp. He liked it so well he did it again and again. Mac's hips lifted up to meet each downward thrust, but Victor set the speed and depth.

His back arched, and Mac's hands moved up his chest, long fingers toying with Victor's nipples, mirroring the tone of Victor's fucking. Hard thrust, hard pinch. Slow and deep, gentle roll. Victor moaned loudly, tossing his head back and forth as if to deny that anything so good could be survived.

He could feel his muscles tightening in climax and clenched his ass muscles. With a scream of pleasure Mac came. Victor followed him, then collapsed forward into his lover's embrace.

For several minutes they lay panting in each other's arms, then Victor felt a trickle of fluid escaping from his body. His eyes widened. He'd forgotten the condom. Tonight of all nights, how could he have been so stupid?

Mac's hand shifted down to Victor's ass and ran a finger through the wetness. "I didn't forget with Claire," he said. "But... um, I'd sort of like to 'forget' from now on with you."

"Me, too, Ace," he answered, shifting so he could curl up beside Mac. "Just as soon as we both take another test."

"Deal." Mac kissed him, told him he was incredible, then the rotten bastard bounced out of bed.

"Where are you going?" Victor wailed.

"We are going to work."

"Work?"

"Claire's office is empty, and I got a look at the security set up. Which is, by the way, pathetic." He began to dress in one of his standard basic black getups. "It's better at her apartment, so I'm guessing that's where the grenade is, but we might as well eliminate the office while we can."

Victor sat in the bed glaring while Mac moved around the room gathering his toys with an obscene amount of energy. Hadn't the lousy so and so ever heard sex was supposed to make men drowsy? Trust Mac to be different even in that. With a resigned sigh, he got out of bed himself and dressed.

This begrudging co-operation earned him a tonsillectomy masquerading as a kiss. "Hurry up, pretty man. Claire strikes me as an early riser."

Victor growled, which Mac seemed to take as some sort of agreement. He gave Victor a beaming smile and another quick kiss, then zipped out of the bedroom.

Muttering under his breath about the disadvantages of younger lovers, Victor found his shoes. "I heard that," Mac called from the living room. "And you're not that much older."

"Tell that to my muscles."

Mac poked his head back into the room. "Come on, Vic, everyone knows you just have to get used to the saddle."

Victor threw the pillowcase at him, but a cackling Mac had already fled.

Shaking his head, he finished dressing, then walked into the living room to find Mac going through a cabinet filled with keys. "Do you have a skeleton key for her place?"

Mac shook his head. "No, but sometimes appearance is everything." A small cry of triumph and he pocketed a gold key with an octagon head. "Ready to go?"

Victor nodded, then frowned. "Why are you so happy?"

Another beaming smile. "Because, my pretty love, you are."

Victor blinked, then considered the statement. Yes, he guessed he was. "Oh," he said and followed Mac out the door.

Mac let Victor drive. Partly because it was wiser to take a vehicle none of the targets had seen and Mac wouldn't be caught dead driving Victor's truck, but mostly because it let him sit back and watch his lover.

He couldn't believe it. Victor had actually fucked him. Well, not in the traditional Tab A in Slot B sense, but his lover had decided he'd wanted something and gone after it. Mac considered it a triumph on the security scale of events. Victor had even inadvertently given them the chance to discuss the safe sex thing and officially enter the 'we are in a long-term relationship' phase.

Of course, backsliding was to be expected and no relationship, let alone one involving two people in their profession, was without pitfalls, but all in all, Mac felt like throwing a party. Now if their damned boss would cut them some slack, they might have a chance. What was she up to anyway? Breaking them up was the obvious answer, but it seemed an odd thing to do. Did she really think they could work together after the smoke cleared? Maybe Victor could handle it, but as far as Mac was concerned civilized break-ups required more maturity than he ever wanted to possess. Victor left him and he was going to give new meaning to the words 'petty' and 'vindictive.' Which he supposed pretty much put his relationship with Li Ann into perspective.

They'd stayed friends with nothing more than a few hurt-filled moments. He really had believed he'd loved her, but Victor had taught him a whole new definition of the word. No, he loved Li Ann, but not the way he loved Victor. He had endured losing Li Ann with relative ease. If he lost Victor, he'd drown in a sea of bitterness. Oh, he wouldn't be one of those nutcases who went on a killing rampage, but he'd be damned if he'd continue to work with his ex-lover. Nope. No way.

"Mac, what are you thinking?"

"Just contemplating the future," he purred, stroking Victor's nearest thigh.

Victor gasped and the truck jerked to the right, then back into place. "Damnit, Mac, do you want me wreck the truck?"

"And yet another benefit to groping you rears its head."

A sigh of exasperation answered him, but the thigh stayed put. Mac grinned into the night.

—

The office proved the lack of challenge Mac had predicted it would be. From what he had told him about the woman, Victor guessed she really didn't trust her associates enough to keep anything of value there. It was simply a place to have meetings and keep undesirables away from her home.

By sunrise they were in a dark corner of a parking lot across from the entrance to the garage of her apartment building. They passed the time in each other's arms, snuggling and kissing while trying to get comfortable in a passenger seat meant for no more than one adult male. "We shouldn't be doing this," Victor murmured as Mac nipped up and down his neck. Dimly he recalled it was his turn to watch for Claire's BMW, but Mac's attentions were making it very difficult to think.

Mac made a non-committal sound in the back of his throat and continued to make breakfast out of every inch of Victor's exposed skin.

Victor had managed to remain strict on that point. Absolutely no messing around with buttons, belts, zippers or any other span of cloth designed to keep covered what was supposed to be kept covered in polite society. Mac had called him a killjoy then he'd focused on causing as much mayhem as possible within Victor's 'unreasonable' guidelines.

The suction on his Adam's apple almost caused Victor to come in his pants. Fortunately for his sense of modesty, the sky blue car he'd been watching for chose that moment to emerge from the garage. "There she is."

Mac cursed, but abandoned his feast. "I knew I hated this job," he grumbled, letting Victor get out of the truck.

Once out of Mac's inspiring embrace, Victor filled his lungs with the chilled morning air. To his relief his erection did what an erection faced with a Canadian Fall morning and no long coat to cover it should do—it wilted.

"That is a crime against art and beauty everywhere," Mac hissed in his ear and goosed his backside.

He yelped, then hurried after Mac, who was stalking towards the building. Briefly Victor considered revenge, but it was time to go to work. Darkly he promised himself there would be another time, then asked, "So what's the plan?"

"There's a security guard in the lobby, but I made a point of being friendly to him when I left last night. Shouldn't be too difficult to bluff our way past him."

"And if he doesn't co-operate?"

"Well, I've been told I'm fairly good at Kung fu."

Victor groaned and mentally crossed his fingers in aid of the bluff. To his relief and surprise—luck never being one of their strong suits—a fifty, the flash of the key 'Claire had given him' and a bullshit story about having left his briefcase behind last night saw them safely into the elevators.

Mac picked three locks to get them inside the apartment. He tapped a code into the keypad next to the door, and Victor's eyes widened in alarm when the red light continued to flash.

"Don't panic," Mac told him, tapping in a second code. The light went green.

"How—?"

"She's smart enough to know a guest might see her code and have a different one for morning and evening, but most people don't trust their memories. I just guessed the morning sequence would be the reverse of the evening."

Victor stared at him. "And if you'd been wrong?"

"I still would have had fifteen seconds to rewire the thing." He said it in the tone of voice which implied this was something he could do blindfolded and with both hands tied behind his back.

Having seen the fallout of Mac's tendency to overestimate himself, Victor scowled at him.

Mac laughed, then kissed him lightly. "Have a little faith. I really am very, very good at this."

Victor took another moment to glare, then began looking for the nuclear grenade. Cabinets, chests of drawers, under the bed, he checked every likely hiding place for something that really wasn't very small. Nothing.

When he returned to the front room, he found Mac half hidden behind a watercolour of some village. "Safe big enough?"

"Umm hmm," came the distracted answer. Victor had never been very impressed by this part. Mac attached some fancy gadget to the opening mechanism and after a few beeps and clicks a readout panel told him what the combination was. Mac and Li Ann had frequently insisted it was the knowing which thingamajig to use that made them such good thieves. He remained unconvinced.

In any case, the safe opened followed by Mac's "Ah ha!"

Victor pulled out the Geiger counter Melnick had given him and pointed the sensor at the device nestled inside the safe then frowned. "No, 'ah ha'," he said. "No uranium."

Mac pouted, then smiled. "No problemo." With a smug expression, he picked up the phone.

"What are you doing?"

"Calling Claire. What else?"

"Huh?"

"Victor, Victor, we've just broken into her home. It's only fair that we let her know."

"Have you lost what passes as your mind?" he demanded, snatching the phone out of his hand.

Mac gave him a long look. "You know, you're right. This is something we really should tell her in person." He headed for the door, towing a sputtering Victor in his wake.

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Mac was beyond smug. Even he hadn't expected things to work out as well as they had. Not only did they have the uranium back where it belonged, but he and Victor had actually managed to bring in the bad guys without Li Ann having to arrive at the last minute to save their asses.

"And Ms. Holland got away." The Director did not share his high spirits.

"Sadly, yes," Mac answered. Which was pure bullshit. Claire was too much like him for Mac to ever seriously entertain delivering her into The Director's clutches. With his luck, she'd end up part of the team and Victor wouldn't like that. He'd simply offered Claire a head start in exchange for the name of the person with the uranium. Turned out to be one of Lord Charles' Goth girls. He'd told Claire not to look at it as losing, but as a compromise. She did know how to make the nuclear hand grenade and that had some value even without the radioactive junk that made it go boom. She'd still make a fortune— in another country. Maybe not as impressive a fortune, but was the difference between millions so great as to not get the hell out of the country when she had a chance?

Li Ann scowled at him. While he might have known Claire, Li Ann knew him, and he could tell she suspected the truth. "I would have found out what was going on in a day or two myself."

In other words, 'you didn't have to let her go.' But he'd wanted to.

The Director didn't seem fooled any more than Li Ann did, but neither had proof, and if he hadn't been forced to romance Claire, he might not have been so inclined to let her go. After using her, it seemed the least he could do.

To his relief and surprise, Victor had agreed and, while quiet this morning, the lingering depression had not returned.

Beyond content, Victor at his side, he sat back and waited until both women finished trying to get him to admit something he wasn't about to. He gave them a sunny smile, then said, "Thank you, thank you. You're gratitude over a job well done makes my life worth while. There is but one other thing I might ask for as a reward." His gaze hardened as he turned his full attention on The Director. "I want some answers. What the hell are you trying to pull?"

Li Ann choked, muttered something about needing to be somewhere else and fled.

Wrapping her usual icy hardness around herself like a cloak, The Director looked at Mac as if he were a bug she hadn't decided whether or not it was worth her effort to squash. "What makes you think I owe you anything?"

"Oh, I don't think there's a chance in hell we'll get anything close to what you owe us. I'm just willing to settle for the answers." He leaned forward. "You sicked Gloria on Vic, then ordered me into someone else's bed. Why?"

She arched her eyebrow at him and for a moment he thought she might deny it all, then she shrugged. "Call it a reality check. Grand passions can be... amusing fantasies, but you still work for me, and I will use you when and how I see fit. Now, go away."

He opened his mouth to protest, but Victor stood and gave his arm a small tug. "Let's go, Mac. She'll tell us when she's ready. Not before then."

"Yeah, I guess you're right." He felt her eyes boring into his back all the way to the door, but he ignored her. Instead he kept his eyes focused forward. On Victor.

The Director walked into the private office she maintained above her meeting room. There were a hundred things to do, but she turned on her VCR instead. Victor's image filled the screen. His face flushed with passion, his head thrown backward, body taunt with ecstasy, Mac spurting within him. Beautiful.

She stared at the frozen frame for a long time, then glanced toward her files. In those cabinets the folder marked 'Mansfield, Victor' held report after report insisting he would self-destruct before he reached his fortieth birthday. Some of her experts predicted a mental breakdown; others that he would 'forget' to move out of harm's way. None predicted survival.

A waste. And she hated waste. "That which does not destroy us makes us stronger," she whispered. A favoured piece of wisdom, but sometimes she'd found it was best to give random chance a helping hand in what had to be confronted when. Jealousy when love was new and wonderful instead of when age and familiarity made it easier to stay asleep than wake up a lover for needed renewal was a start. Devastating timing for some, but perfect for her two problem children. Yes, the right timing. As dictated by the files that foretold doom. Not the most reassuring success she'd ever had.

Use the files to prevent their predictions. A dangerous gamble. She sighed. "Don't make a fool of me, boys," she told the frozen lovers. "I'm betting on you, and I loathe losing."

Mac headed for the stereo as soon as they got home. He reached for one of his favourites, stopped, then picked up a James Brown CD instead. He turned the volume down to less than ear-shattering levels. It would be a long time, if ever, before he learned to like Victor's idea of music enough to enjoy cranking up the sound, but it wasn't half bad.

"Thank you," Victor said, moving into his arms.

He sighed happily. If James Brown got him this, he'd play the damned CD every minute of every day. "I want you to move in with me." His own eyes widened in surprise. He hadn't thought about it, but the words had come tumbling out. He liked the sound of them and hugged Victor close.

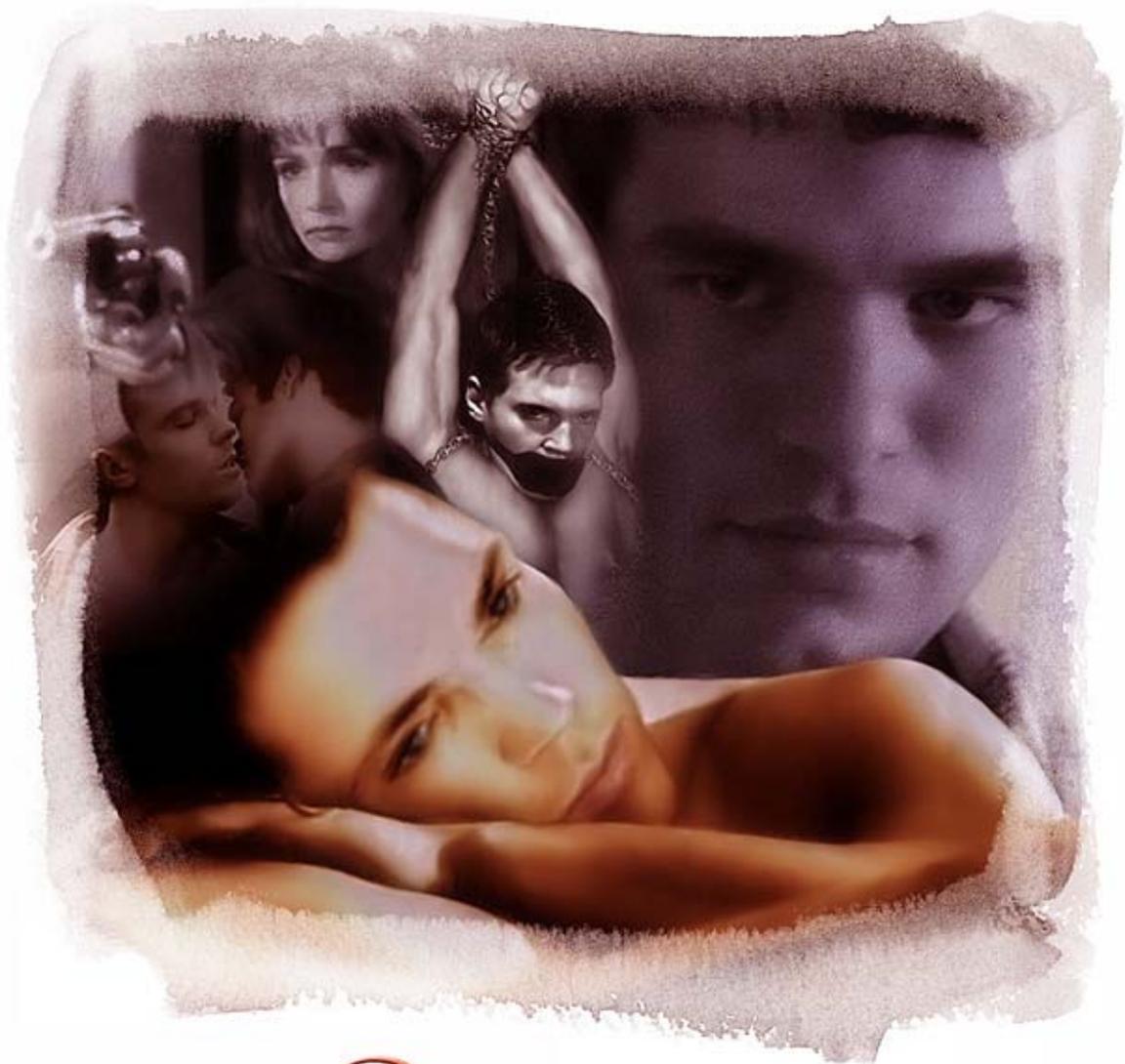
"I want to, but... Are we really ready for this?"

Mac shrugged. "All I know is I want you here. With me. Always."

Victor looked up into his eyes, searching for something, then he smiled. "All right. Most of my stuff's here anyway." He looked at the stereo playing the music he loved. "Maybe we could celebrate by ordering some of that awful authentic Hong Kong food you like so much."

Mac laughed. "That's it, baby. Work with me."





Designs on You

by Aqualesia

Tuesday, September 26

Victor sat at the table in the briefing room idly wondering what mission the Director was going to send them on this time.

He'd been woken by a phone call from Dobrinsky, telling him to get here by 10 am. So, he was here at... he looked at his watch, 9:57 and he was still alone in the room. He leant back in his chair, put his feet up on the highly polished table, and stared up at the ceiling.

He hadn't yet spotted a camera up there, but he was almost certain that the Director would have one hidden somewhere in the room.

The door behind him opened and he tilted his head back to watch Mac wander across the room and take a seat, leaving the usual empty chair between them.

Mac's watch chimed as he sat down, and he grinned impishly at the older man. "Dead on time," he boasted, gesturing to the timepiece.

"You'll be dead if you don't turn that chime off," Victor muttered.

"Aw, c'mon Vic. Where's your sense of humour? Don't you just love people looking round for where the sounds of "Big Ben" are coming from?"

"Not when they are also shooting at me," Victor replied, angrily.

"Boys, boys, boys. Can't I leave you in the same room for just a few minutes without you arguing?"

The Director, carrying four files in the crook of one arm, came up behind them.

Mac slouched down in his chair. Vic took his feet off the table and sat up straighter.

The Director placed a hand on Mac's shoulder and squeezed hard. "Remember, Mr. Ramsey, that I would be very annoyed with you if you should cause the death of one of the team. I would probably put you on the first plane to Hong Kong myself. Just because Michael Tang is dead, doesn't mean that the bounty on your head has been removed."

She shook him slightly, hoping that her words would penetrate his sullen disposition, then ruffled Victor's hair as she moved past him to take her place on the other side of the table. The door from the corridor opened again and Jackie almost ran to her seat on the other side of Mac.

Looking pointedly at her watch then at the empty chair between the two men, the Director asked, "Does anyone know where Li Ann is?"

The three agents looked at one another, then back at her, shaking their heads.

With a moué of displeasure pulling at her mouth, the Director placed the files she'd been carrying on the table in front of her chair, then stood glaring at the door as if the force of her will would make Li Ann appear.

For almost five minutes the four people in the room were frozen in place... waiting. Finally the sound of heels tapping on the floor brought them out of their stasis. Li Ann strode through the door and said good morning as she slid into the chair between Vic and Mac.

"You're late." She got stereo sound as both men spoke at the same time.

The Director slapped her hand in the table to get their attention, then sat down. "Now that Miss Tsei has deigned to join us, I can brief you on your next assignment." She picked up a remote control and pointed it at the wall monitor. "This," she said, as an aerial view of a town appeared, "Is the town of Leggett Falls. It has been expanding steadily in the last few years, as a growing number of computer and electronics companies have moved into the area. The population has expanded too. As you can see, new housing almost surrounds the original town. Naturally, with such an expanding economy, people from all over have been drawn to the employment opportunities being offered in just about every profession."

She touched a button and another slide came up showing a pleasant looking young man with dark brown eyes and almost black hair. "This is Christian Fawcett, a distant cousin of Brian Fawcett-Smythe, of whom I'm sure, you have all heard.

"A leading member of GAC," Vic interjected.

The Director smiled at him in approval, then went on. "It would seem that Brian has a soft spot for his young cousin. Although a distant relative, their families have always been close, and as he has no children of his own, Brian has always taken an interest in Christian." She paused, then went on in lecturing mode.

"To cut a long story short, Christian Fawcett has drifted from job to job in the six years since he dropped out of college and about eight months ago he went to work in Leggett Falls. Much to his family's surprise, and relief, he seemed to have finally found a job that he liked."

The Director looked at her audience over the top of her spectacles to make sure they were still paying attention.

"Brian has been in the habit of bankrolling Christian's "enthusiasms", and though he seemed settled in this job, the pay until he was more senior was a bit low, so he'd decided to continue to provide a small quarterly remittance, paid directly into his cousin's bank account. The last payment, due five weeks ago, was returned 'account number unknown'. Brian, naturally, queried this with the bank, as it was a regular payment, and was told the bank account had been closed the week before..."

A derisory snort from Mac made her raise an eyebrow. "You had a comment to make, Mr. Ramsey?"

"No way can that be real," came the unabashed reply. "I mean, if I were receiving money on a regular basis, I'd make damn sure my benefactor knew where to send it."

The other three nodded in agreement.

The Director gave a slight smile, inwardly pleased that they now seemed to be thinking more like a team instead of always trying to score points off one another.

"What about his employers?" Vic asked.

"Or his Landlord, if he rented?" was Li Ann's query.

"Car?" Mac asked almost at the same time.

"Has he any credit cards?" was Jackie's contribution.

"If so, has he used them?" Vic followed up on Jackie's comment.

The Director's smile widened. "According to his employers, Chris Fawcett had sent in a letter of resignation. His landlord had also received notice that he intended to quit his apartment. His debit card was returned and the outstanding amount on his credit card was paid up before the bank account was closed. A watch has been put on the credit card, but so far it has not been used.

His car, a two year old Lexus, has not been seen, despite a request to both local police and the RCMP to report any sightings."

She pointed the remote at the screen and the picture changed to Fawcett leaning against the hood of his car.

"After the mandatory delay, a missing person report was filed. The local police investigated but didn't manage to find out much more. He was last seen by his neighbours on the day that his resignation was dated. His employers were surprised he'd left, as he was in line for promotion, but thought that he had been head-hunted by another company. He had booked two weeks off of work for a vacation, and on the first Monday, his employers received the resignation letter. Another week had gone by before the police report came in, and Chris still hadn't got in touch with Brian."

The Director swung round in her chair to face her team. "The most damning piece of evidence for foul play is the next part of the report. After he had been in Leggett Falls for a couple of months, he opened a bank account there and had the bank here in Toronto close the account and send him a cheque for the balance. He also notified his cousin's bankers of the change of account. Until then he had always just used a debit card to access his account with the Dominion Bank. This was compelling enough for the RCMP to take up the case."

She glanced down at the notes in front of her. "They put one of their best undercover agents on the job, and while he didn't manage to find out any more about Christian Fawcett's disappearance, he reported there had been at least three other people, two male, one female, who had 'left town' in similar circumstances. Unfortunately, before he could make another report, the agent was killed in a car accident. His death was investigated closely, but they couldn't find any sign of foul play, which is when Brian and Captain Taylor from the RCMP came to me for help—neither man was convinced that the agent's death was a coincidence."

The Director gave a slight smile. "While the agency made their inquiries as to the whereabouts of the four missing people, I had you sent on some training courses which would better fit you for the roles you are about to play. Even if we had decided not to take part in the investigation, the training would always be useful for any future undercover work. The plan is to integrate you into the community. These folders detail your *public* biographies: that is, that which can be verified. We have put in answers to any question you are likely to get asked about your pasts, and why you have chosen to go live in Leggett Falls."

She opened the top folder and took out some loose pages on the top. "Most of Jackie's training time was spent getting the appropriate certificates to enable her to get employment as a professional trainer. Her application for a job in the gymnasium at Neville's has been accepted and she starts work there next Monday. Neville's is a large leisure complex to which all the known victims belonged. She is your point of contact. You will all join the club and be able to pass messages along without seeming to be connected."

She looked up and smiled at the former mob queen. "Well done, Jackie. Your trainer in computer skills also had high praise for your willingness to learn."

The telephone shrilled, and the Director scowled at the interruption. Picking up the handset, she asked irritably, "Yes? What is it?" Her face smoothed out as she listened to the caller, and before she replaced the receiver, said, "Thank you for telling me."

Ignoring the curious expressions on the faces of her agents, the Director consulted her notes again. "An apartment near the leisure centre, which has a nice view of the golf course, has been rented for you. Dobrinsky will give you the keys and final instructions after the briefing. Neville's is on the west bank of the Leggett River, running along the north side of Main Street which was extended across the river when they built the new civic centre and commercial district."

She put her notes aside and pushed the file part way along the table towards Jackie, then turned her attention to the notes she took from the next file.

"Li Ann already has excellent language, organization and logical skills, so her assignment was to gain secretarial and personal assistant experience, coupled with basic accountancy."

She looked directly at the oriental woman with a neutral expression on her face, "Apart from your timekeeping, which must be improved, your tutors were impressed with your grasp of the subjects you were being taught, and the abstract concepts of being a PA. Your presentation skills also garnered high praise. An appointment has been made for ten o'clock Monday morning with the Reid Agency. Please try to be on time.

"Again, an apartment has been rented for you, south of the commercial district, near the 5th street bridge. Dobrinsky tells me it's got a view of the river and Leggett Fort Park. He will give you the details later."

Placing the notes aside, she pushed the folder towards Li Ann, then opened the third file and frowned. In the growing silence, Vic and Mac glanced at one another, obviously wondering which of them had earned her displeasure, then the former cop looked down at his hands and Mac fidgeted in his seat.

"Mr. Ramsey!" The whipcrack of her voice made all four agents jump. Vic felt a certain amount of relief that she wasn't glaring at him.

Mac looked wide-eyed into the Director's stare.

"What am I going to do with you? I set you two tasks. One, learning to build and maintain PCs you seem to have been able to perform adequately; the second, software support... well, you proved so disruptive in the class, hitting on the female instructor and two of your fellow students, that you were asked to leave. I am most displeased. Your constant cavalier attitude is putting your companions' lives at risk."

The Director waited to see if he was going to make any comment. When he remained silent she went on, "Fortunately for you, we have found a trainer that will take you on a one to one basis to bring you up to speed. The company you are going to work for has been informed that your move to Leggett Falls has been delayed by last minute problems with the purchase of your new home."

She leaned forward, almost threateningly. "I do not give out these assignments on a whim, Mr. Ramsey. They are designed to prepare you to support your colleagues in the field. Victor is due to start work Monday of next week, and you are his back up should he need it. Dobrinsky will see that you get your training completed by this time next week, get you moved into your new apartment, and are ready to start work next Wednesday... Got that?"

Mac managed to look contrite and worried at the same time, then nodded hurriedly when she raised an eyebrow at him.

"Good."

Pushing Mac's folder towards him, she opened the last one. "Victor did very well on most of the courses we sent him on... though database design was a little shaky. You two will be moving in to your new home before the weekend. The company you will be joining is called Excalibur, which specializes in web design, hosting and so on for that area. Many of the companies in Leggett Falls are customers of Excalibur. You are going to become part of the design team. Sometimes the team works in-house, but they also do contract work, on site, for other companies. You are to take possession of your house on Thursday, and make sure you know how to reach the offices of Excalibur. On Friday morning you have an appointment with the personnel department. Again, Dobrinsky has the details."

She closed the file and pushed it towards Vic, then looked around at her most successful team. "As you've probably realized by now, we are taking this case very seriously. To be honest, we do not expect quick results, which is why we have put so much care and attention into your training and your cover stories, which you will be able to read later."

Taking off her glasses and polishing them, she added, "Please remember to become members of Neville's Leisure Centre and make regular use of the gymnasium to keep in touch with Jackie—fix a regular schedule for exercise and send Jackie an email if you are unable to make your normal meeting. You will find that your new homes come equipped with a PC and mail software. The passwords etc. have been put in your files."

Putting the spectacles away, she gathered her notes together. "Jackie, Li Ann, Mac, you'll find Dobrinsky waiting outside for you. Victor, I'd like a few words before you go."

Victor turned his head to watch the others file out of the room, then turned his attention back to the woman opposite him.

The Director sighed, knowing that whatever she said, her news was going to stir up some painful memories for the former cop.

"I have two pieces of news for you, Victor. Firstly, the phone call I received earlier was from Judge McHugh's office. The jury in the case against your former colleagues have returned a 'guilty on all counts' verdict when they resumed this morning."

"One of the defendants was persuaded to turn Queen's evidence and exonerated you of any wrongdoing, testifying to the fact that he saw MacDowell put the drugs in your locker."

"Officially, you were already out on parole when your ex-buddies came after you. Burns of Internal Affairs has been warned off your case. As far as his department is concerned, given the circumstances, you don't have a case to answer too. They tried to kill you, the video footage from the apartment proved that. Though it couldn't be used in evidence itself, they were able to utilise it in inducing the gang member to turn against MacDowell and the others. However, the fact that you admitted you would have transferred rather than report them to Internal Affairs counted against you." She paused, "The bottom line is that your conviction will probably be quashed, although your discharge from the police force will still stand. At some point in the future you will get a formal acknowledgement of all this."

Victor had dropped his head to stare at the tightly clenched fists resting on his thighs at the mention of MacDowell and an unaccustomed feeling of sympathy softened the Director's eyes. In the eight years since she had recruited him there had been other times when she had gone against her usual inclinations, and helped, or comforted him rather than scolded. Wondering if it might have been something to do with the fact that, unlike the others, he hadn't really been a criminal in the first place, she got to her feet and walked around the table to lay a consoling hand on his bent neck. "Another item which will be in the news today is that your friend Donny has been attacked in his cell; stabbed three times. He is in intensive care... When I hear any more, I'll let you know."

Victor nodded his head slightly, letting her know he had heard what she was saying.

She squeezed his shoulder, then said, "Stay a while... when you're ready, Dobrinsky will go over the final details with you." After ruffling the hair at the nape of his neck with her thumb, she moved away and disappeared up the stairs.

Left alone, Vic let his mind drift, going back to the night his friend Stan had died. He had almost managed to talk him into turning state's evidence, but MacDowell had made sure he didn't succeed... Carrying Stan's body down to the parking lot and putting it in the trunk had been one of the worst moments of his life. The good news that the nightmare accusations of drug dealing being lifted was tempered by the fact that he would never be completely free of the stigma of association... And then there was Donny... He shook his head. He didn't want to think about it... His relationship with Donny was a can of worms he didn't want to open.

With a deep sigh, he got to his feet and left the room, figuring that whatever this new case held in store for him it would, at least, take his mind off the events of the past.

Thursday, September 28
South of Leggett Falls

The helicopter carrying Victor came to rest in a field next to an 18-wheeler. Gripping his briefcase and the map he had been studying on the flight, he climbed out of the chopper and walked towards the trailer. As he did so, in a move that reminded him irresistibly of the TV series *Knightrider*, the back of the trailer was lowered to the ground and a very distinctive looking car was driven down the ramp, followed by two men in pristine coveralls.

Victor opened his eyes in surprise. He was being given a brand new PT Cruiser. He'd read about the new-old car in the press, and had been impressed by its specification, but had some reservations about the shape.

As he got closer, the driver got out and walked towards him.

"Mr. Mansfield. My name is Jack Edwards," he said as he handed Vic a wallet of papers. "These are your owner documents. You'll also find my telephone number in the wallet; phone me if you have any problems with the car. Its colour is Aquamarine metallic. As you can see, it is a PT Cruiser, Limited Edition. The Director asked me to remind you to memorize the licence plate."

Victor gave the map and briefcase to a silent assistant, licked his lips, and took a deep breath. Obediently, he studied the plate as directed, then took the papers from the wallet to study them too. He needed to make sure that there wouldn't be any nasty surprises lurking in the paperwork in case he should get stopped.

When he was ready, Jack showed him how the different features of the car worked, then stood aside as Vic placed his briefcase and map on the front passenger seat, and drove off.

Vic had been miffed to find that he would not be allowed to take anything of his own; not even any of his music tapes. All of the clothes he would need would either be in the suitcases in the trunk, or already at the house. The biography he'd been given had been very specific about how he was supposed to dress, what music he was supposed to like... He'd even been given a list of clubs he could frequent; any club not on the list was out of bounds. Not that there was a paucity of choice; his eyes had opened wide in amazement at the descriptions of some of the clubs appearing on the 'approved' list, complete with pictures of the patrons to enable him to dress appropriately.

As he drew nearer to Leggett Falls, it was easy to see that most of the buildings had been erected recently. There were builders' signs directing people to where new housing estates were rising from the ground.

After he entered the town limits, he only took a couple of wrong turns before he managed to find his new home and turn into the driveway. He sat in the car for a few minutes just relaxing and using his mirrors to take a look around. The houses were a lot bigger than he had imagined when he'd looked at the photographs. For some reason, he'd got it into his mind that *his* house would be small.

Suddenly realizing that he still had the engine running, he switched off and got out of the car, and walked up to the front door.

Taking the keys from his pocket, he let himself in and took a quick tour to acquaint himself with the layout. On the first floor, there was a dining room, lounge, kitchen, cloakroom and study, besides the double garage. While in the kitchen, he checked the contents of the fridge, the freezer, and the cupboards, making a mental note of the items he would need to buy.

Upstairs, there was a family bathroom, four bedrooms, two of which had en-suite bathrooms.

Going back outside to the car, he lifted the tailgate and emptied it, carrying cases and boxes into the house.

As he came out again to make sure he hadn't left anything behind, he came face to face with a good-looking blonde woman who held out her hand to him.

"Hi. I'm Tracy McMillan, and I live next door at 1014."

"Victor Mansfield," Vic introduced himself, shaking her hand warmly.

"Hello Victor," another voice said, and a statuesque brunette hove into view. "I'm Caroline Pelling, and I live the other side of you in 1012."

"I'm pleased to meet you both," Victor replied with a smile.

Tracy made herself the spokeswoman. "We saw the furniture arrive at the beginning of the week, and the agent called in yesterday with groceries and stuff. He said to tell you that if you needed anything, or if there's anything you're not satisfied with, you should contact his office and speak to Lillian, as he will be away for a few days. His sister's suddenly decided to get married this weekend. Howie said he really didn't want to go, but that he'd never hear the end of it from his family if he didn't." She paused for breath and Caroline took over.

"What Tracy's trying to say in her roundabout way is, if you need any help finding the stores or anything, we're willing to help."

Victor smiled, completely oblivious of the effect he was having on them. "Thanks. I appreciate the welcome, and I'll be sure to ask if there's anything I need to know..." Wanting to end the conversation, Vic checked his pockets to make sure he still had both sets of keys, then pulled the front door shut behind him. Giving them both another smile, he said, "Please excuse me, ladies, I have some errands to run before I can finish unpacking."

They moved aside and let him through. He got in the car and pulled away, following the Director's instructions to locate the office building where he had an appointment in the morning. Not that it was difficult to find; a few blocks north, and a couple east, found him looking across some formal gardens at the building housing Excalibur Inc.

He calculated the time it had taken him to get there, and what time he would have to leave home to be on time for his appointment, then went to find a supermarket to buy the extra items he'd noticed were required to make the meals he enjoyed.

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Li Ann looked around her new home and was pleasantly surprised to find she actually liked the apartment that had been chosen for her. Going out on to her 17th floor balcony, she found she had a magnificent view of most of the town north and west of the 5th street bridge. As she looked around, she was able to identify the area where the Leisure centre was and couldn't help wondering whether she could see where Victor and Jackie were going through the moving-in process... and eventually Mac, of course. She grimaced; he was so juvenile at times. She sighed sadly as she recalled her adoptive father's words, "no sense of responsibility". He had been reckless then, taking unnecessary risks, and he hadn't really changed very much.

She knew she had. Where she had laughed at his exuberance, and loved him for it, she was now only irritated. It was, she realized, because she had grown to like her job at the Agency, and was finally beginning to understand the way the Director worked, and why she didn't always give them all the information at once. It made them better investigators, finding out more things than they might have otherwise. She, and the others, owed a lot to Victor for their investigative skills. His experience in law enforcement had, as the Director had prophesied, been invaluable, even if Mac didn't want to acknowledge it...

Shaking herself out of her reverie, she went back inside to see what shopping she needed to do to make herself at home—a bunch of flowers or a pot plant, possibly both, was definitely high on her list.

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Friday, September 29

The next morning, Victor, smartly dressed in a dark grey suit, joined the morning commuter traffic and was pleased to find that his estimate of the amount of time it would take him to drive to Excalibur House had been just about right. He had arrived outside the building ten minutes before the usual start time of 9am, although he wasn't due here today for another hour and a half.

He looked at his map and found a small mall marked nearby, so he went and found a coffee shop to while away the time before his appointment.

Mac woke early and crawled out of bed into the shower. He sighed in relief as the hot water started to relax muscles that had stiffened up overnight, and thought back over the last couple of days. After the reaming he'd received from the Director, he'd expected to be immediately hauled away for punishment by his nemesis. Instead he, like the other three, had spent the next two days immersing himself in his new biography; learning the layout of Leggett Falls and who were its most prominent citizens.

He stretched and grimaced as the sore muscles protested. Then yesterday, with the others already on the way to their new homes, Dobrinsky had collected him from his apartment and he'd spent the day washing and waxing all twenty-three of the man's cars.

In a reflective mood, he started lathering himself, thinking over what Li Ann had said to him before she'd left, and sighed. She was right of course, and it was something his adoptive father had said too; he had no sense of responsibility. He sighed again. He really should know by now that the Director didn't get them to do things with no reason, even if it wasn't obvious to them at the time.

Jackie, of course, had grinned annoyingly at him, flaunting the fact that she had done far better than had been asked of her.

Vic hadn't said anything about his lack of commitment, but he felt guilty that the older man would be without backup for a few days and had been cautioned against taking any unnecessary risks.

Ever since Vic had hauled his ass out of Pucci's trap at the warehouse two years ago, their relationship had been different. For one thing, it had forced him to take a really good look at the man who'd risked death to come back for him. Up until that moment, he had always seen a not-quite-hated rival for Li Ann's attention. With the Director injured, Vic had taken charge, getting their boss medical attention, reporting the death of Gerald Pucci to Dobrinsky, and ordering the medic to check Mac over to make sure that he hadn't suffered any cuts or other injury from when the light fitting had hit him.

He realized that what he had been doing, acting irresponsibly and saying more and more outrageous things, had been just to get a reaction out of Victor. His latest stunt, the watch with the 'Big Ben' chimes, was a joke which had backfired in spectacular fashion. Somehow, probably while trying to illuminate the face in the dark, he had managed to turn the chimes on, and, of course, they had split the silence at just the wrong moment.

Vic had been right to be angry. It had ruined their silent approach and any chance to gather valuable information. One of the suspects had opened up on them with a machine gun. It was only Victor's quick reactions that had saved him from being cut in half, then to cap it all, only the ex-cop's mania for having more than one, or even two, guns on his person, had saved them both that night.

He sighed again. These days, just thinking about Victor was enough to make his dick rise to attention. Closing his eyes, he turned his head up to the spray to rinse off, allowing images of Victor to flow across his mind's eye as he thrust into his hand. An image of Vic, working alongside him in tank top and cut-offs, was more than enough to send him over the edge, and his semen splattered the tiles, then he had to lean against the frosted glass side until his legs stopped trembling.

Sensing that he hadn't left himself a lot of time, Mac quickly dried himself, dressed and grabbed a couple of breakfast bars to eat while riding with Dobrinsky.

Going back to Excalibur, Vic parked in one of the visitors spaces at the front of the two story building.

Precisely at 10:30, Victor was shown into the office of David Prentice, the personnel director, who got up from behind his desk and shook hands with him.

"Welcome to Excalibur, Victor," he said genially. "I have some papers here that you need to fill out. Then at 11:30 you have an appointment with Dr. Patterson at the Harper Medical Centre, which is a short walk along the road, for your medical. When that's over I'll take you to our restaurant for lunch. We'll talk more then. If you'll come through into the next room, we can get started. I'll have Alicia get you a drink."

Victor nodded, then followed the rotund little man into what was obviously a conference room next door. A petite young blonde was already there, and as soon as Prentice had introduced her as Alicia, she asked him what he would like to drink.

Settling for coffee, Victor sat at the highly polished oval table, where some forms had been placed on a pristine blotter.

"Alicia sits outside," Prentice told him, while making sure that everything was in order. "As soon as you've finished, let her know and she'll contact me."

"Yes sir."

Prentice nodded, and went away.

Victor had just started the first form when Alicia came back bearing a tray, which she placed on the table beside his blotter. On it was a thermos of coffee, cream and sugar and several two-finger packets of Walkers Shortbread. Thanking the girl, he helped himself to coffee and a couple of the shortbread fingers before turning his attention back to the forms.

Jackie looked around the compact apartment, not quite sure if she liked it or not. She was annoyed that she hadn't been allowed to bring any of her own clothes apart from her gym kit, the rest having been vetoed as being too expensive for a person in her supposed salary bracket. Still, it could have been a lot worse. At least it was new; light and airy, and she had all the essentials, living room, bedroom, kitchen and bathroom.

One thing that had surprised her was a small bouquet of flowers from her new boss, Adrian Marston, and a three day guest membership so she could use the facilities before she took up her post on Monday. It was a very nice gesture, and she made a mental note to say thank you when she met the gym manager again.

For a while she pottered around the apartment, finding out where things were stored and rearranging some of it to suit her own tastes, but the three day pass kept catching her eye, and eventually, she gave in to its siren call. Picking up her gym bag, the pass and her purse, she left the apartment to take a good look around the leisure complex. While she was there she would make the most of being a 'member' and use the coffee bars and restaurant, deciding she might just as well enjoy herself while getting information for the Agency.

Victor followed David Prentice into Dr. Patterson's office and shook hands with the tall woman who stood up from her desk as they entered.

Having made the introductions, Prentice told Vic to come back to his office when the medical was over, and left when his new employee nodded.

Victor eyed the Junoesque woman warily. She was within an inch of his height; with well coiffeured dark hair, and dark eyes set in a face that was neither pretty, nor plain. Striking was perhaps a better way to describe her.

Miranda Patterson stared back at the handsome man who was appraising her, noting the long legs and broad shoulders with the hint of muscle underneath the stylish suit.

Before their silence could become uncomfortable, she gave herself a mental shake. "Mr. Mansfield, I have read the preliminary reports from the clinic in Toronto, which gives you a clean bill of health. However, to validate your participation in the company's health cover, I am obliged to run certain tests, even if they have recently been done elsewhere." She paused and raised an interrogatory eyebrow.

"I understand," Vic replied quietly, trying not to show how disturbed he was at the thought of being naked in front of this woman.

She indicated a door on the other side of the room. "If you would go in there and undress please. I'll be with you in a few minutes." She watched him go into the examination room then turned to her PC as he closed the door.

Vic removed his clothes with economical movements and put them neatly away in the space provided. When he had finished undressing, he sat on the edge of the table, waiting for the doctor to appear.

He'd been sitting there for maybe 30 seconds before the door opened to admit Dr. Patterson. Vic stood up politely, awaiting instructions as to what she wanted him to do.

First she checked his height, weight and chest expansion, then did some calculations which proved he was within the weight limits for his height and build. Next she had him blow into a machine to test his lung capacity.

Vic stared stoically at the ceiling while she examined his testicles, and tried, unsuccessfully, not to react when the doctor had her fingers up his ass feeling his prostate. He was more than half erect by the time she had finished, and couldn't help feeling that she was laughing at him. There was definitely a twist to her lips when she then got him to touch his toes so that he was almost kissing his dick.

As she turned away, she said, "Thank you, Mr. Mansfield. Please come back into my office when you are ready."

By the time he was dressed, she had signed the medical forms. She gave them to him to take back to personnel.

Lunch was next on the agenda, and although the staff restaurant was comfortable and the meal superb, Victor was glad when it was over.

Prentice had taken him into the department where he would be working and introduced him to his soon-to-be colleagues. Frank Prowse, the department director, Martin Pridmore, Steve Noyes and Steve Benton, the other members of the team he would be joining, then invited them along for lunch. There seemed to be some animosity between Prentice and Prowse, which soon stifled conversation. Though Vic felt better about joining them when one of the Steves grinned and mouthed "see you on Monday" at him as they parted after the meal.

When he arrived back home he felt drained, tired, and relieved that the ordeal was over. He stripped out of his clothes and flung himself down on the bed for a rest, wondering if the house was bugged as much as his apartment was, although the more he thought about it, he didn't think so. In this environment where anyone could be an enemy, it would be taking too much of a chance. He wriggled on the bed, feeling a long-unaccustomed burn where Dr. Patterson had gotten 'intimate' with him. Which reminded him, it was a long time since he'd got laid, and on this assignment he was actually being encouraged to 'get to know' the other inhabitants of the town... he grimaced when he thought of the comment written on his biography by the Director.

Your time in the vice squad should tell you how to act... just don't do anything that would get you arrested.

When he'd looked in the closets, there were, besides the expensive suits to wear to work, some outfits which rivalled those he'd worn while working the clubs.

He felt a frisson of excitement. Maybe it was time he ditched the 'responsible' image and went out to enjoy himself... he'd start at some of the more conservative places first though... until he'd got settled into his job, knew more about the town and had Mac for backup.

He would be on an induction course on Monday, and sitting in on various meetings as an observer to see how the Company operated. In an odd way he was looking forward to this job; the courses on web design had tapped into a hitherto unknown creativity within him and he reckoned that, given a chance, he could produce some innovative designs.

Deciding he'd had enough rest, he showered and dressed in slacks and a polo shirt, then drove to the leisure centre to sign up to become a member.

After a good workout and dinner in one of the centre's restaurants, Victor, dressed in a skimpy T-shirt and tight blue jeans with a matching jacket, went to the first club on his 'conservative' list, Zeros.

Looking at his reflection in the bar mirror, Vic compared himself to the crowd around him and to the vice-cop he'd once been. He came to the conclusion that he wasn't much different from those around him, nor did he look much older, now he had shed his more staid clothing, from when he had worked in Vice.

Shaking off thoughts of the past to concentrate on the here and now, he settled in to enjoy himself and to immerse himself in the club scene; he felt alive for the first time in a long while.

By the time he climbed into bed in the early hours of Saturday morning, he was feeling rather smug. He'd received quite a few subtle, and some not so subtle, invitations to spend the rest of the night in another person's bed.

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Mac had taken one look at his new instructor and groaned inwardly. It was the same one who had rebuffed his advances, and who was now frowning impatiently at him.

"Mister Ramsey," she said in an authoritative tone, "Mr. Dobrinsky has assured me that you will behave yourself this time, so I am willing to give you one more chance."

Mac smiled, keeping the need to be there to back up Vic in the forefront of his mind...

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Monday, October 2

After his first full day at work, Victor was glad to get home. He closed the door behind him and headed for his study to check on his email. While waiting for his computer to boot up, he cast his mind back over the day.

He'd spent the morning on an induction course, learning about the company and its aims. Then, during the afternoon, he'd been taken on a tour of the offices and shown some of the diverse websites the company had created for their clients.

After leaving Excalibur, he'd gone to the gym for a light workout and to check in with Jackie. He quickly told her about his day, but she didn't have any information for him. Not feeling like cooking for himself, he again used one of the centre's restaurants.

Not very exciting, to be sure, but there was that list of clubs for him to pick from...

Having passed the various password checks, he opened the mail program and read the two messages waiting for him. The first was a forwarded message from his sister, Alice, telling him how she was getting on at University. He was pleased that she had decided to go back to school, to get the qualifications which would help her in her chosen career. He replied to her, sending some encouraging words about the one

part of the course she was not enjoying very much, then read the second email. This was from the Director, which just gave the URL for a web page. Following the link, Vic was presented with a newspaper article reporting the death, in hospital, of his one-time friend, Donny.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to keep hold of his emotions, but was unable to prevent a tear escaping from his brimming eyes. Setting the PC to do its auto shutdown, which would also clear his cache of any trace of the messages, he went into the living room and took a bottle of Glenfiddich and a tumbler from the sideboard.

With somewhat unsteady hands he poured himself a generous measure and gulped it down, then went to sit on the sofa. After pouring himself another drink he placed the bottle on the coffee table, leaned back, tilting his head up to stare unseeingly at the ceiling.

Why was it, that practically everyone whom he had called 'friend' had betrayed him in one way or another? Of the "Three Musketeers" who had gone through the Academy together, only he was left. He and Donny had gone into Vice, and Stan had been taken into Narcotics.

Donny had been his first male lover; they had been thrown together in an undercover operation. One thing had led to another and they'd ended up in bed together. Then Gloria had come along, and although he and Donny had remained friends, their more intimate relationship had ended.

It was partly because of his growing frustration with the situation between himself, Donny and Gloria that he had been so eager to accept the position in Narcotics when Stan and Joe MacDowell had put the proposition to him. Then had come another betrayal, which had ultimately led to him sitting here, in the dark, contemplating the past and choices he had made...

Wednesday, October 4

Mac arrived at Tolehurst Computers full of apologies about his tardy arrival, having taken possession of his apartment late the night before. Ms. Fernandez, the personnel officer, sympathized with his moving problems, saying that she had been subjected to quite lengthy delays when she had moved into the area.

She filled out the final details of his employment, then gave him a large envelope to take to the Harper Medical Centre, telling him that they had made an appointment for him at eleven o'clock, and requested that he returned to the personnel department when the medical had been completed. Almost as an afterthought she gave him a map with both the Tolehurst offices and the Medical Centre marked on it.

He arrived early for his appointment, and was settled in a very pleasant waiting room by the receptionist, who told him that Dr. Patterson would call him in when she was ready.

Just after eleven, Dr. Patterson looked out of her door and called out, "Malcolm Ramsey please". Mac put down the daily paper he'd been reading and followed her into her office.

"Come in, Mr. Ramsey. I'm Dr. Patterson, and I shall be conducting a few tests to validate your company health insurance. Please go into the examination room, and undress." She gestured to a door on the other side of the room, "I'll be with you in a few minutes."

Suppressing an urge to come to attention and salute, he went into the examination room and closed the door behind him. As he removed his clothes, Mac was reminded of the first day at the Agency, when he had been told to strip, and the Director had walked in on him. He remembered that he hadn't come out of that encounter very well, and wondered if Vic had fared any better, since she'd said 'I meet all my new agents this way'. He sat on the bed, waiting for the doctor, imagining how his staid partner had dealt with the embarrassing situation, and wondering if he had ever been subjected to her sexual predations.

His musings were interrupted by the doctor coming in to start the tests. Although he was fairly well prepared for some of them, the anal exam and then having to touch his toes straight afterwards brought a flush of embarrassment to his cheeks.

He was very glad when the examination was over and the doctor told him to get dressed. Back in her office, she gave him the signed forms then ushered him out.

Back in the personnel department, Ms. Fernandez looked over the forms, then took him to see his new boss, George Varney.

After the usual tour around the department, introducing him to those colleagues who were present, Varney welcomed his new employee by taking him to lunch, explaining the workings of the department during the meal. Then, in the afternoon, he sent the new recruit to answer his first service call.

Friday, October 6

Feeling a little uncertain about what to expect, Victor walked into Octavian's, described on his list as 'a rather uninhibited place to spend an evening'. It was a member's only club, and they were rather picky about who they accepted for membership. The applicant had to be a resident of Leggett Falls and be able to prove they were in full time employment.

When he stated that he wished to become a member, he was taken into an office near the entrance. There, Victor presented his credit card, his company identity card, and the telephone installation bill as proofs of his identity.

The initial membership fee was expensive, then he had to pay quite a high entrance fee, but that did include some differently shaped tokens and a free buffet, which, as he hadn't eaten any dinner, he investigated first.

The food was plentiful and good, with something to please everybody. He discovered from one of the servers that the square tokens, with a fountain design etched on to them, could be exchanged for a bottle of beer, a goblet of wine, a shot of spirits, or a tall glass of fruit juice. Water came free.

While eating he read the small member's booklet he'd been given with his membership card, which, amongst other things, listed the tokens and what they were for. The blue round ones with different numbers on them were gambling chips, white rectangular ones could buy thirty minutes of time in a semi-private alcove, or fifteen minutes in a private room. The red hexagonal ones, again available in different denominations, could be used for buying services from the bazaar. More tokens could be bought, or exchanged, at booths located on each of the three floors of the building.

There were a few restrictions which would cancel his membership. Staff were off limits; don't have sex with them or proposition them. No fighting. No drunkenness. Sex and other games with fellow members was encouraged, so long as it was between consenting parties. The management would prefer you to use an alcove or a private room, but they didn't insist on it.

When he'd finished eating, he found the money changer and traded some of the round tokens for hexagonal ones, just to see how the system worked. He then set off to see what the rest of the club was like.

A tall, patrician-looking woman, who had followed him up the stairs, accosted him when he reached the top. Holding a hexagonal chip with 100 inscribed on it in one hand so he could plainly see it, the other caressed his leather-clad ass while she suggested he accompany her to an alcove so they could get to know each other better.

The tips of his ears burned red as he politely declined her invitation, explaining to her that he was a new member and he was just taking a look round.

"Well, maybe later then," she laughed, not at all put off by his refusal.

He had a good look round the floor. Where the floor below had been decorated in modern style, this was more classical looking, with ionic columns and friezes of naked men and women, and the staff were dressed appropriately. Ignoring the private rooms, he, like many other members, prowled the corridors and public rooms.

So, hugs and kisses on the first floor, raw sex on the second, and 'the Bazaar', whatever that might be, on the third.

He looked around him, many of the alcoves were in use, their heavy velvet curtains drawn closed. However, a few users had eschewed privacy, couples, trios, and more, enjoying each other's bodies, totally oblivious of the audience gathered just a few feet away.

All this sex on display was making him feel horny, the front of his leather pants now distorted by a growing erection. He really needed to do something about that... he had the choice of his own hand in a bathroom cubicle, or of finding a companion, which wouldn't be difficult... However, there was still one floor to investigate, so before taking the decision on how best to deal with his 'problem', he climbed the stairs to the third floor.

He pushed through the doors from the foyer, and was surprised how different the atmosphere was on this floor. It wasn't just the décor, either, which depicted masters and slaves amongst the naked bodies. There were no alcoves here, only public or private rooms. He wasn't really into BDSM, though he doubted that there would be any really heavy play here.

He was just thinking about going back downstairs, when the woman who had approached him earlier was by his side again, eyeing the now much larger bulge in his pants.

"Are you sure we can't get to know one another better" she asked.

He grinned. "Depends on how good you are at spanking," he dared her.

She ran a finger along his trapped erection. "We deal with this first, then you'll get what you deserve."

Vic nodded and allowed her to take his hand and lead him towards the private rooms. He had a feeling he was going to enjoy this.

Later that night, after his shower, he looked into the mirror and studied his reddened butt. He'd been right, he had enjoyed himself. She'd straddled him and made him come, then laid him over her lap and spanked and caressed his ass until he had come again. He smiled to himself as he switched out the lights and climbed into bed. He was very tempted to go back to the club another night, just to see if she would care for a repeat performance...

Mac had spent some time reading through the list of clubs, picking out those he felt would benefit from a visit by him. One of them in particular had immediately piqued his interest: The Jack of Clubs. It was noted that only groups of two or more people were allowed inside, and one of the group had to be a club member. How one became a member was not known, although the investigator had questioned some of the men and women who hung around outside, hoping to catch a member's eye and be taken inside. The investigator had not managed to get inside.

Never able to resist a challenge, he had dressed with care, and at about the same time that Victor went into Octavian's, Mac got out of a taxi in front of a large well-lit building.

As expected, he was refused entry. What he hadn't expected was the stony silence that met his enquiries on how to become a member. Frustrated, he joined the growing number of men and women who were standing under a cluster of lights a short distance from the entrance, hoping to catch a member's eye. He hung around for a while, and although he didn't gain an invitation, he studied how those who were picked, dressed and acted so that he could try again another night.

Mac then moved on to plan B, a rave club not too far away called Arthur's. He paid the fee to get in, and enjoyed himself dancing while keeping his eyes open to see whether this was a cover for any other kind of action. When he was satisfied it wasn't, bearing in mind he had to get up early the next morning, he left and hailed a taxi to take him home.

On the way, they passed a place called Octavian's. He was surprised to see Vic come out and get into a taxi.

So, Octavian's is on Vic's list, but not on mine. I wonder why? Maybe I'll do some extracurricular activities and find out.

Saturday, October 7

At eight the next morning, the four agents met at Mario's Motors, an abandoned motor shop provided by the Agency for their use, situated on the same block as Mac's apartment. On the first floor they found a sleek black van with their breaking and entering tools locked inside, plus changes of dark clothing for all of them. On the upper floors they found bedrooms, a fully stocked kitchen, a conference room and an office complete with the latest in equipment. In the office, they found a locked document chest in which were the building plans for the companies which had employed the four missing people.

Taylor, Drew & Associates, Inc. had employed Chris Fawcett as a software engineer in their offices near the centre of the town.

JayCee Consultants Ltd. had employed Gina Martino as an Administrative Assistant, again in an office near the centre of town.

Graham Precision Engineering Inc. had employed Lee Whiting in their accounting department.

Gascoigne & Partners had employed John Bolton as a paralegal. Their offices were right next to the new civic centre.

They studied the plans and read the reports compiled by the Agency's surveillance teams, and were agreed that getting inside Graham Engineering without alerting anyone to their presence was going to be their greatest challenge.

The second most difficult would be the lawyers' offices, not only because of the high security building, but because lawyers often started their working day early and finished late.

Deciding to concentrate their first effort on the one person they knew really was missing, they devised a plan to get into the building. They would put it into action that evening.

Sitting in the van outside Taylor, Drew & Associates, Inc., they synchronized watches and set the vibrating alarms. Then Vic, Mac and Li Ann left Jackie keeping watch from the van, and slipped through the shadows to the side of the software company's building.

Vic kept watch while Mac and Li Ann worked on getting them into the building. Once inside, they made their way to the personnel department, then waited for the guard to go past them on his rounds, adding on fifteen minutes more, by which time the guard should be back in his office, then they got to work.

Mac slipped a floppy disk into one of the PC's and hacked into the system, while Vic and Li Ann hunted for Fawcett's file, hoping that it hadn't been either destroyed or sent away for archiving.

Once they found the cabinet holding the ex-employee's files, Vic took Fawcett's to a Xerox and started copying it, while Li Ann checked to see if any of the other presumed missing people had ever been employed by the company. She drew a blank, and after Vic had returned the file, she stood watching Mac copy files to the drive he'd brought with him. Vic put the copied sheets into the bag, then tried out his

fledgling safe-cracking skills as a way to pass the time. He was so engrossed in his task that when the door opened and Li Ann congratulated him, he visibly started.

He flashed a grin at her when she chuckled, then said, "Let's see if there's anything interesting inside."

They rifled through the contents and gave the two floppy disks they found to Mac to copy; otherwise there wasn't anything else that seemed to be of any use to them.

Vic felt the alarm vibration on his wrist as he took the disks back from Mac and returned them to the safe. He spun the dial and put it back on the number on which he had found it.

They methodically shut everything down, then waited for the guard to do his round again before leaving the building the way they had entered.

Back at their HQ they each took a bedroom and got some sleep. Then, after breakfast, they studied the information they had gathered. Later they transmitted everything to the Agency via email and fax for a support team to work on, then returned to their own homes.

Monday, October 9

When Li Ann walked into the Reid Agency offices on Monday morning, she was greeted with a huge smile from Judy, her employment co-ordinator.

"I've got a plum job for you this week," Judy said without preamble. "One of the Partner's secretaries at Gascoigne & Partners broke her leg over the weekend and they are desperate for a replacement."

"I'm sorry to hear about the accident, and of course I'd be happy to help them out for the week." Li Ann found it hard to keep calm; she was being handed access to the Legal offices, and possibly their files, on a plate.

Judy filled out the forms for Li Ann to take with her, then wished her good luck.

Li Ann presented her credentials at the building's reception. After they had confirmed her identity, she was told to take an elevator to the 6th floor and report to the receptionist there.

Two days later she was able to report to Jackie that she had copied the files and had delivered them to their HQ at Mario's Motors.

Vic, Mac and Li Ann all visited various night-clubs during the week, but none of them were anything out of the ordinary, and didn't appear to be a cover for any criminal activities.

On Friday night Vic was tempted to revisit Octavian's, but in the end decided that as he was working the next day, it might be a little too awkward, and uncomfortable, with a sore butt.

Saturday, October 14

Their second foray into breaking and entering, this time at JayCee Consultants Ltd., was very much like the first. The guards were not so conscientious and did their rounds in the minimum time they could, while still clocking in at their checkpoints.

Again the personnel department still had the file they wanted, but there was nothing else of interest.

Also as before, they slept at the Agency's house and studied the data before transmitting it to Toronto, along with the file that Li Ann had collected on John Bolton during the previous week.

With the two 'easy' jobs done and the apple that had fallen into their laps via Li Ann's temping job, they discussed how best to tackle the last organisation on their list.

Victor mentioned that Excalibur had a contract with Graham Engineering to provide contract staff, but that there weren't any vacancies on the contract at the moment.

"We need to get someone on the inside," Mac stated. "Maybe we ought to take one of them out."

Victor laughed. "Even if we did, there's no guarantee that I would be the one to take their place."

"There's no harm in trying it though—get the Agency to give one of them an all expenses paid trip somewhere, that has to be taken immediately, or offer them a high paying contract with another company."

"I like the sound of the second idea better," Victor replied thoughtfully. Using the auto dial on the phone, he called the Director, asking if this course of action was something that she could arrange.

When she said yes, he arranged to email the names and, if possible, the addresses of the contract staff currently working at Graham's.

After arranging a schedule of check times with Jackie, they went to their own homes.

A few days later, they heard from the Director that Excalibur had been offered a high price for the use of a couple of their most experienced contracting staff on a Government project. Naturally, Excalibur agreed. When the design director asked for volunteers for a week's work at Graham Engineering, Victor put his name down and, rather to his surprise, was accepted.

Letting Jackie know that he was starting his secondment on the following Monday, they arranged to meet on Sunday morning to do some surveillance of their own before Victor went to work on Monday, when he would be able to have a look around at ground level during his break times. They also arranged for the delivery of some ultra small communication devices they could use to talk to Victor without compromising his cover.

Friday, October 20

Just before midnight on Friday evening, Mac swivelled around on his stool, rested his elbows on the bar behind him, and studied the men on the dance floor. The majority of them were taking notice of a lithe figure who was dancing on the far side. The crowd parted and he got a good look and felt his mouth go dry. Tight, well-washed jeans seemed almost moulded to an ass so like the partner he lusted after, that he downed his drink with one swallow and wended his way across the highly polished floor as if drawn by a magnet. If he couldn't have Vic, his straight, uptight, gorgeous partner, then maybe this stranger could at least assuage the ache while he was on this assignment.

Almost mesmerized by watching the muscles ripple and move under the faded denim, he came to a standstill. Two men immediately bumped into him, both telling him in no uncertain terms what they thought about his abrupt halt.

He started forward again, aware that not only did he have a bulge in his pants, but so did many of the other watchers.

He started to dance himself, so he didn't draw too much attention while he took a close look at the man who was obviously fuelling more than just *his* fantasies tonight.

Trying to ignore the tempting ass, he took in the long shapely legs and the well muscled torso, enhanced rather than hidden by the skimpy tank-top.

Mac took another couple of steps forward, joining a ring of dancers who were slowly circling the sexy man and his lanky dancing partner. For a while Mac lost himself in the music as the dancers sidled and swirled, until he got a good view of the other man's face.

He stopped dead in his tracks, unable to believe his eyes. His sudden halt threw those around him into total confusion and quite a few profanities were yelled at him as the other dancers were forced to come to a halt too. The disturbance around him caused the dark-haired, centre of attention to look around.

Two pairs of shocked eyes met.

"Mac?"

Mac stared as green eyes opened wide in surprise and pink, bow-shaped lips mouthed his name. He took a couple of steps forward, his hand reaching out to touch, as if still unable to believe what his eyes were telling him.

"Victor!" Mac gasped, the messages from his brain finally getting through.

Vic grabbed hold of the outstretched hand and pulled Mac towards him, tilting his head up as the other man wrapped his arms around him and brought their mouths together. Completely oblivious to their surroundings, they stood kissing and rubbing against one another, until they were interrupted by a huge hand being placed on their shoulders, and Mickey the bouncer shook them to get their attention.

"Get a room, guys," he growled.

Vic and Mac broke apart and grinned sheepishly at Mickey before making their way out to the lobby to a chorus of whistles and catcalls.

Stopping by the desk Mac asked, "Yours or mine?"

"There's a motel across the parking lot which should do us just fine," Vic replied, opening the main door and holding it open for Mac to pass through.

Halfway across, Mac asked, "Why this motel?"

"There are cards for the Motel in the club lobby, so they probably get quite a few clients from the club, and are less likely to ask awkward questions about two guys wanting one room."

Mac laughed. "You have a point there. But, why not your place or mine?"

"Well, I don't know about you, but I have nosy neighbours, and until we get some leads on this case, everyone's a suspect." Vic sighed. "I guess we shouldn't even be doing this..."

"Aw, c'mon, you're not going to back out now, are you?"

"No, I'm not. Since we made it obvious we know one another, it would be stupid to deny we've met before. But I do think it would be best if we don't talk about our shared past, other than to admit, if asked, that we have met before, but were both in other relationships."



"Yeah. I guess you're right," Mac admitted, then fell silent as he followed Vic into the Motel reception. The clerk behind the counter, Bobby Keown according to his name tag, smiled as they approached, and asked, "Can I help you?"

Vic pulled some cash out of his wallet, and said, "We'd like a room, please."

Bobby looked from Vic to Mac, who was almost plastered against his partner's back, then turned to the key rack, plucked one from the bottom row and placed it on the counter. "That'll be seventy-five dollars."

Vic counted the notes out onto the counter, picked up the key and looked at the room number.

"Last one along the corridor to your right," Bobby told him helpfully.

"Thanks." Vic led the way through the fire door and along the corridor to the last room.

"A bit expensive, isn't it?" Mac queried.

Vic shrugged. "I'll settle for cash and no questions asked over cost, any night. Besides, I've heard a couple of good reports about the rooms here; or didn't you read the agency information sheets?"

There was a guilty silence, then Mac mumbled defensively, "I read the bits about night clubs, but motels..."

Vic shook his head. "When are you ever going to learn, Mac?"

"I'm learning a whole lot of new stuff today, maybe I'll even learn that."

"I wouldn't want to bet on it," Vic muttered as he opened the door at the end of the corridor. Going in, he ran his hand across the bank of switches on the wall beside him, setting the room ablaze with light. To his right was the dressing room with closets and the fridge, to his left a very large bathroom with an enormous sunken bath, and ahead, a super king-sized bed dominated the main room.

Vic walked over to the bed. He unlocked the night table's drawer taking out a handful of the foil packets and small tubes he found there then dropped them, and the key, on the polished surface.

The noise of metal striking wood finally galvanized Mac into action. He closed and bolted the outer door, and while Vic was toeing off his boots, he switched off some of the bright lights. Then, kicking off his loafers, he stalked towards the bed, discarding his other clothes as he went. Vic turned as he got close and Mac took him in his arms and kissed him, taking up where they had left off.

Thoroughly kissed, and thoroughly aroused by his lover's wandering hands, Vic found himself lying naked on the bed with Mac hovering above him, grinding their groins together.

Mac pulled back and grinned down at his partner thinking that he had never seen anyone so fucking gorgeous in his whole life: he looked good enough to eat. He leaned in and fastened his mouth on one of the rosy brown nubs, alternately gently biting and licking, teasing it to hardness before kissing his way across the chest to start on the other one.

Victor started to squirm. Mac grinned at the effect he was having. He licked one then blew gently on it. Victor squirmed some more. Mac studied the nub, frowned, then looked closely at the other, before raising his eyes to his lover's face.

"Victor."

"Hmmm?" Vic half-opened aroused green eyes.

"Your nipples are pierced."

"Um hum," Victor confirmed the discovery with a smile that went straight to Mac's groin. Shelving thoughts of asking more questions about those intriguing holes, he grabbed a condom and lube from the night table. They were both much too aroused for finesse, so he quickly prepared Vic and himself, then rocking their hips together, he thrust further and further, until his cock was completely buried in Vic's ass.

Taking Vic's cock in hand, he stroked it until he felt the first clench around his cock, then started thrusting in counterpoint to the strokes.

Vic's head tossed and his skin flushed pink before his body arched upwards, splattering Mac and himself with his come, the action of his internal muscles taking Mac over the edge with him.

When he felt able to move again, Mac disposed of the condom, grabbed a handful of tissues to clean them both up, then laid down beside Vic and pulled him into his embrace. Vic snuggled close... and they slept.

—

Just before dawn they woke, feeling chilled, used the bathroom, then climbed under the covers and snuggled down again.

When Mac woke again, the sun was shining around the edges of the thick velvet curtaining. He looked down at the darkhead lying on his left shoulder and with a tender smile, he touched his lips to the tip of Vic's nose.

After a moment Vic's eyes slowly opened and he smiled sleepily up at him, then frowned when he realized the sun was shining outside. Leaning forward, he gave Mac a quick kiss on the lips then got up and padded towards the bathroom.

"C'mon Mac, up and at 'em. We have to check out and get breakfast. We also need to have a talk and I don't have a lot of time this morning, as I have to be at the golf club by ten-thirty."

"Golf?" Mac sat up, staring at his partner. "You don't play golf," he went on, following Vic across the room.

"No, but my boss does. He's meeting a client for a round of golf and I have to be there."

"Oh." He started picking up their discarded clothing. "Erm... Vic... surely you're not going to wear these to the golf course..."

He heard Vic laugh over the sound of the shower. "Not likely! I've got a change of clothes in the car."

"You mean you were...?" Mac grappled with the idea that Vic had been on the prowl.

"It never hurts to plan ahead."

Mac shook his head in amazement, then went into the bathroom to take a piss then started shaving. He'd learnt a lot about Vic last night, most of it very surprising, and couldn't help wondering if Li Ann knew anything about what was hidden under the normally staid exterior.

He changed places with Vic in the shower and gave himself a quick scrub. When he went back to the bedroom, Vic was just putting on his shirt, so he hurried to get dressed too.

Vic watched his partner for a moment, then turned away, checking round the room to make sure they'd left nothing behind, and to give himself time to fight the urge to get on his knees in front of the other man.

Breakfast was eaten in an awkward silence, neither quite knowing what to say. It seemed as if checking out of the motel had moved them into a different world, and they were unsure how to deal with it.

Finally, over the dregs of their coffee, Vic said, "We can't let this happen again, Mac. Not so publicly, and not while we're working." He qualified this when Mac stared at him, aghast. "I do not want my sex life to be the butt of any of the Director's jokes and I don't think either of us want any accusations to be flung at us of not keeping our minds on the job."

Mac sighed and nodded, not able to disagree with what his partner had said, but unable to hide the disappointment in his eyes.

Vic leaned forward and placed his hand over Mac's for a moment. "I don't mean we can't spend the night together, we just have to be very discreet, maybe even a little devious, so as to keep our private lives out of the Director's files."

"Devious?"

Vic grinned. "Yes, devious. Like if we don't get asked about last night, don't say anything about it. However, if we do get asked, then say we were surprised to see one another, and decided to establish a willingness to engage in casual sex, so we spent the night in the same room. Sandwich a lie between two truths and most times you'll get away with it."

Mac grinned. "In other words, we meet on neutral ground, only arranged in advance, and not talking about it at any other time."

Vic nodded. "Exactly. I don't suppose we can keep it secret forever, but the longer we do, the less likely it is that the Director will make jokes about it. Hopefully, by then, we will have proved that it won't interfere with our work."

Mac thought of rejecting the suggestion just for the sake of argument, then remembered the vow he'd made to act responsibly; this was his chance to show Vic that it *was* something he could be. "Okay, that makes sense."

Vic, who had been braced for a smart-ass reply, quickly masked his surprise at the easy acquiescence. "Right. Unless we are working during the weekend, I'll meet you outside the Go Live at nine next Friday

evening. If we are working, then make it the following Friday. During the time we're together we'll work out where to meet next." He paused while Mac nodded, then looked at his watch and went on, "I really must go, or I'm going to be late." He gave Mac's hand a squeeze, then paid his bill and left.

Mac watched the jean-clad ass out of sight, still coming to terms with having had his cock buried inside the fantasy that had become reality. Vic's uninhibited reaction had been a big turn-on—the image of Vic laid open before him, his cock thrusting inside, was so vivid that he was instantly hard again, and was suddenly glad that the table was stopping anyone else from realizing his condition.

The waitress came over and asked if there was anything else he wanted. When he said no, she gave him the check. Wondering how he was going to walk to the door in this condition, Mac had a sudden vision of being stuck here until he managed not to think about Vic, which would be the talk of the town, which would get back to the Director—and just the thought of the scathing words she would say was enough to make his cock shrink back to normal.

Sunday, October 12

They met for lunch in the rooms above Mario's, and discussed their impressions of the case so far. Mac told them about the 'dead' PC that he had been called in to fix only to find that someone had unplugged it from the power socket. Vic reciprocated with a description of his walk around the golf course the day before carrying a notepad and jotting down comments from his boss and their client.

After they'd eaten, they went to take a look around the area where Graham Precision Engineering was located. Jackie drove slowly along the surrounding roads while the other three agents studied the steel-fence enclosed factory and office buildings through binoculars.

When they were almost at the end of the second side, Jackie called their attention away. "Hey, guys! There's a building site just over there that looks like we could use."

"Pull over," Mac ordered. When the van had stopped in front of the padlocked gates he made short work of picking the lock and opening them for the van to go inside.

They stared up at the partly completed building. It was obvious from the lack of machinery that no work had been done here for some time. Also, if there was any kind of security, it wasn't in evidence.

"I don't need to see inside, so I'll keep watch down here in case anyone comes around," Jackie said.

The others picked their way over the rubble and went inside the shell of the building. After climbing up to the roof, they found they had a perfect view over the engineering company's grounds.

They took some photographs of the area and tentatively discussed ways of getting inside, then arranged that Li Ann would take the day off from Reid's and help Vic to find the weak spots in the company's security.

Feeling satisfied with their day's work, they left the building site and made their way home.

Monday, October 23

Early Monday morning, Li Ann climbed up to the roof of the high-rise overlooking the premises Graham Precision Engineering they'd used the day before, to check on the comings and goings of the employees. During his meal and 'thinking' breaks from work, Vic walked around the compound, listening to Li Ann and answering some questions. He also checked out the lie of the land for her, making sure that the parking spot she'd picked out was not covered by any of the cameras, and the area wasn't overlooked by any windows.

Tuesday, October 24

The next day, Vic smuggled their gear inside the perimeter hidden under the 'shelf' of his Cruiser. He made sure that the vehicle was parked in the spot they had picked out on the plans, and went inside the building to get on with the work he'd been sent there to do. When it was the normal time to leave, he said he was in the middle of something he would rather not leave unfinished, and arranged to work late that night.

After dark, Mac and Li Ann came in over the fence. Taking their gear from Vic's Cruiser, they approached the building where the contractors were working, and Victor got them inside. Leaving him working, they clipped on facsimile IDs and walked through the almost empty building until they found the offices they needed.

After making sure the area was deserted, they searched for the file they required. Once they had found all they could, Vic let them out, and, having given them some time to reach his car, left the building and ferried them out, hidden in the back.

Wednesday, October 25

The Director looked up from the reports she was reading with an irritated frown when Dobrinsky came into the room. "I thought I asked not to be disturbed," she said abruptly.

The black man shrugged, then announced, "Brian Fawcett-Smythe and Captain Taylor would like to talk with you about the investigation."

She considered her options for a moment, then said, "Show them in here. It won't hurt for them to know about some of the progress we have made."

He nodded and smiled, obviously in agreement with her summation. "I'll send them in," he replied, then turned and left.

A few minutes later, he showed the two visitors into the briefing room. The Director took off her glasses and walked round the paper-strewn table to shake hands with both men, then offered them a seat. Returning to her own place, she asked what she could do for them.

The two men looked at one another, then Brian blurted out, "Have you found anything yet?"

She looked at them for a moment, then said, "Not that I don't trust you, but I don't necessarily trust who you might trust with the information, so I'm not going to go into details about the operation. I can tell you that I have four of my best agents living undercover in Leggett Falls, and five surveillance teams there. The papers you see on this table are their reports. I also have a team of analysts looking at some of the data that has been gathered." She paused for a moment, then went on in a sympathetic tone, "I did say at the outset that I did not expect to get quick results, as there is so little to go on. But, ultimately, I do expect to be able to tell you what happened to your nephew."

"Is he alive?"

"I have no reason to believe otherwise at this point. Much too much work has gone into making people believe he has moved away."

"That's what I said, too," Taylor remarked.

Brian relaxed slightly, then nodded. "I know you did, but the waiting, not knowing what has happened, is getting me down."

There was an awkward silence for a moment, then Fawcett-Smythe got to his feet. "Thank you for seeing us. We'll leave you to get on with your work." He walked away, and after a moment, the RCMP captain followed him.

The Director stared thoughtfully after them for a while, then turned her attention back to the report she had been reading before she had been interrupted.

Friday, October 27

On Friday evening Vic left work exactly on time. He was looking forward to his date so much that he had found it very hard to concentrate.

He drove to the leisure centre to check in with Jackie, and was pleased to find that she didn't have any instructions for him, so he was free to meet Mac later.

While using one of the exercise machines, he let his mind drift back over the week since he and Mac had got together in the early hours of Saturday morning. Fortunately, he'd been in time for the game of golf between his boss, Frank Prowse, and their client, Jonathan Tokehurst. Between shots the prospective new web site was discussed at some length. During lunch Vic had got out his pad and made a few suggestions. The upshot of it had been a meeting on Thursday to view a slide show presentation of the proposal.

Feeling on a high after great sex and a good morning's work, Vic found the address of a jeweller which also specialized in body piercing, and went along to have his nipples checked to see if the holes were still open. Two hours later he walked out with two pairs of rings. One of fine gold to wear every day to get used to wearing them again, the other larger, and heavier, gold hoops which came with a chain that could be strung between them.

No one had seemed to notice the rings at work, or if they had, they'd been too polite to comment. Each evening, as soon as he'd got home, he'd swapped them for the heavier pair to get used to the weight dragging on his sensitive nipples. Then, last night, he'd tried the chain for the first time. The way it had pulled at the rings as he'd moved had been a big turn-on. Tonight he would just wear the rings, and maybe take the chain with him; after all it might be fun to watch Mac's face when he saw it.

Jackie touched his arm to bring him out of his reverie. "Enough," she told him.

Vic grinned at her. "Okay. I'm going to leave my stuff in the locker. I'll check out a couple more clubs tonight. I'll pick everything up, including my car, tomorrow morning."

Vic said good night, showered and dressed, and asked the receptionist to get him a taxi for eight-thirty, then went into the restaurant for dinner.

He visited the locker again, changed into his 'club gear', and left almost everything else in it, except for his billfold and the gold chain, both of which he slipped into the back pocket of his tight jeans.

Going outside, he got into the waiting taxi and gave the address of his destination to the driver.

By the time Friday arrived Mac felt as if each day had been a week. He'd seen Vic the day before, when he'd been called in to fix a PC which had 'died'. Having stripped it out he started testing the components. As he worked he became aware of a sudden increase in sound as if someone had opened a door. At first there was a bass rumble, then had come Vic's husky voice... and he had stopped just to listen, until the door had closed again to bring him back to reality.

He arrived outside the Go Live club a few minutes after nine, and was surprised not to see Vic waiting for him. Not that he had meant to be late; his taxi had been caught up in a traffic jam caused by an accident. He stood there for about ten minutes in case Vic had been delayed by the same accident, then crossed the road and stood in the shadows, wondering what to do next.

Going over the conversation in his mind, he was certain that Vic had said outside the club. Shrugging, he crossed the road and went down the alley and around the back of the building, still no sign.

He went back out front, retreating into the shadows again to consider his next move. Vic was now forty minutes late. He needed to find a phone, to see if he'd left a message for him with Jackie. The nearest phone would be inside the club, so he could check to see if he'd mistaken the meeting place at the same time.

Paying the entrance fee, Mac went inside, got himself a drink at the bar and went upstairs to lean on the rails and take a look around. As it was still early, there weren't all that many people in the club, so it didn't take him long to make certain that Vic wasn't there.

Going out to the bank of phones near the rest rooms, he checked the men's room, then chose the phone furthest away from the door leading to the club. He dialled the leisure centre's number and asked for Jackie, but he wasn't really surprised she wasn't there. He left a message, asking that she call him as soon as possible, as he had to rearrange a training session. His second call was to the taxi company for a pickup immediately outside the club.

By the time he got home it was almost ten-thirty. He checked his phone and email for messages before dialling Jackie's home number. It was engaged, so he sent her an email with just two words in it: phone me.

A few minutes later Jackie called him and he launched into the speech he'd been mentally preparing since he'd left the club.

"Jackie, have you heard from Vic?"

"Not since I saw him at the gym this evening. He said he was going to change at the gym and check out a couple of clubs. Why?"

"We'd arranged to meet up at the Go Live, then look in at the Jack of Clubs."

"Oh yeah, I read about that place," Jackie giggled.

"Yeah, well, he was supposed to meet me, at nine, outside the Go Live... I checked all round the building; inside and out; he's not there. I phoned the centre and left a message there for you, then came home to see if there were any messages, then I tried to phone you." Mac took a deep breath and told himself to calm down; babbling on was not going to help, and might raise unwanted suspicions. "Anyway, I think we ought to contact Dobrinsky and let him know."

Jackie was silent for a moment, and Mac could almost hear the wheels turning in her brain. "Yeah, I agree," she finally replied. "I'll call him now and get back to you."

Mac put the phone down and paced around his apartment. He couldn't help worrying, wondering what had happened to Vic; wondering if there was anything else he could have, should have, done. Although he knew it was no use berating himself, there was the nagging thought that if he'd managed to get to the club on time, he would have found Vic waiting for him.

He was still walking aimlessly round the room, picking up things and putting them down again, when Dobrinsky called to tell him to be at The Meeting House in twenty minutes. Glad of something to do at last, he changed into suitable clothing and left his apartment. He was going to be early at the meeting, but he couldn't stand being alone with his thoughts any longer.

Li Ann arrived not long after he did. She made coffee and they sat drinking it in a strained silence. When Jackie arrived, she joined them at the table, and helped herself to coffee, saying, "I was told to pick Vic's things up from the locker and bring them here. We have to be in the briefing room, upstairs, in ten minutes."

Picking up their coffees they went upstairs to the briefing room together. A large, flat-screen monitor hung at one end of the room and a speaker-phone stood alone in the middle of the conference table.

The phone rang and Li Ann pushed the button on it to answer the call, then followed Dobrinsky's instructions on how to set up the visual part of the call. A few minutes later they were looking at the Director sitting in the briefing room in the Toronto agency building.

Jackie was sent to bring up the contents of Vic's locker. The clothes were searched then neatly put back in the carry cases. The contents of the pockets made a very small pile near the phone on the table.

After sorting through it, Mac said, "As near as I can tell, the only thing he had on him last night was his billfold."

"When did you last see him?" the Director wanted to know.

"We found ourselves at the same club last Friday night," Mac volunteered. "Then Thursday I was called to Excalibur to fix a PC and I heard him talking in one of the offices."

"And why were you meeting this evening?"

"We were going to take a look at The Jack of Clubs."

The Director nodded, but didn't say anything.

"Shouldn't we be watching Vic's house?" Li Ann broke the silence. "In case someone tries to make it look as if Vic has moved out."

The Director gave a predatory smile. "It's already been taken care of. If anyone goes near his house we shall know immediately."

"Is it bugged?"

Their boss shook her head. "No. Each of your apartments was chosen where a similar property was available nearby for a 'family' to move in. These families have been keeping an eye on your homes, watching for any signs of intruders, or indeed, anyone, trying to cover up the disappearance of any one of you. The fact that Victor appears to have become a target is a trifle surprising, but not entirely unexpected, since we had set all four of you up as targets.

"We have also activated a tracer the agency installed in Victor's car so that we will know if anyone tries to move it.

"In his last report to me, Victor mentioned that he had been sifting through the data you had retrieved from the personnel offices on the missing people. He had come up with one or two interesting statistics. It would appear that as well as membership of the leisure centre, each of the victims had at least one other thing in common. They all had their company medical at the Harper clinic, and in each case their forms were signed off by Dr. Patterson, and the company health insurance was arranged through the same broker's office."

Mac dropped his eyes and squirmed uncomfortably, remembering the ordeal of his medical with Dr. Patterson.

"Mr. Ramsey?"

He looked up to see the Director regarding him quizzically. "I had my medical with a Dr. Miranda Patterson. She was very—er—thorough."

"Yes, Victor mentioned her thoroughness in his report, as he'd also had his medical done by her."

Both Mac and the Director turned their eyes towards the two women as she asked, "Did either of you get to meet Dr. Patterson?"

Li Ann and Jackie shook their heads.

"Victor's disappearance could be totally unrelated, of course, but if it is related then we can't go around overtly looking for him. His biography says that he has cut all ties with his family. However, this could be a trial run to see if there *is* anyone who would miss him. It's possible that he could turn up sometime between now and Monday, with a perfectly reasonable explanation for his disappearance."

"I think it might be an idea if we took a look at Dr. Patterson's office," Mac offered.

"I agree," the Director replied, "But not during this weekend. If she is involved in any way we don't want to arouse her suspicions."

"Isn't there anything we *can* do?" Mac asked, sounding a little desperate.

The Director steepled her fingers and contemplated her highly polished desk for a while.

"Everything that we can do is already being done. Dobrinsky is doing a discreet check of the hospitals in case he was caught up in the traffic accident that delayed your arrival at the Go Live. There weren't any deaths, but there were a lot of injuries, and not everyone has been identified yet. I know it's hard, but the best thing you can all do is go home and pretend that nothing has happened. I'll get in touch with you on the usual schedule as soon as I know any more."

Mac got to his feet and fetched himself a cup of water to hide his expression from the others. When he was sure he could talk without giving himself away, he said, "Okay. I guess there's nothing useful I can do here. So, unless there's anything else, I'll go home to bed."

"Good night, Mac, Li Ann, Jackie," the Director said, then the screen went dark.

"Good night." Mac flung the words over his shoulder as he left the room, leaving the two women to shut everything off. He went home and tried to get some sleep. It was going to be a long weekend...

Victor felt like shit. His head ached and when he opened his eyes he shut them again quickly. The light in the room stabbed into them, making his head worse. He groaned and lifted his right hand to cover his eyes, becoming aware that his whole body hurt as his muscles protested at the movement.

Leaving his hand shading his eyes, he cautiously lifted the lids to take a look at his surroundings. There was a IV line snaking down to his left arm, and it looked as if he was in a hospital room. But, if he was, then how had he got here?

He thought for a moment, then looked around for a nurse's button, Finding one lying on the bed near his head. He pressed it.

Almost immediately, his summons was answered. A nurse in a grey dress with pink piping came into his room. "Hello, Mr. Mansfield. How are you feeling?"

Victor grimaced. "I've got a headache and, it would seem, most of my body aches too."

"I'll tell the doctor you're awake and get some medication for you." She left before he could ask how he'd got here.

Five minutes later the nurse returned accompanied by a woman who was introduced as Dr. Leillard.

"It's good to see you awake, Mr. Mansfield," the doctor said.

"How did I get here?" Vic questioned her, determined to get his question in first.

"You don't remember?" Dr. Leillard looked concerned and checked his eyes.

Vic shook his head and winced.

The doctor took a syringe from the nurse and inserted it into the IV tubing. "That should help with your aches and pains," she said as she withdrew the empty syringe. "As to what happened, it's now Sunday evening. You were involved in a serious accident on Friday night and suffered a concussion. Your wallet and other personal effects are being held at the nurses station for you. If you need to contact anyone there's a phone on the night table you can use; dial nine for an outside line.

"As you've been unconscious for such a long time, we will be keeping you in for observation. If there are no other complications we'll see how you are tomorrow evening."

Vic frowned. He seemed to remember getting into a taxi Friday evening, but he was damned if he could remember anything else.

As if divining what he was thinking, Dr. Leillard patted his arm, saying, "Don't rush it. Memory usually returns, given time." She gave him a sympathetic smile, then left.

As much as he wanted to contact Mac to let him know what had happened Vic resisted the temptation, just in case he was being watched.

With the painkillers making him feel tired again, he allowed himself to drift off to sleep.

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Just after nine the following morning, Victor phoned the office and left a message for Frank Prowse, telling him what had happened, that he didn't yet know when he was going to be released, and that he would be in touch again as soon as he knew any more.

Then he phoned the leisure centre and left a message for Jackie, telling her of the accident, and that because of it he wouldn't be working out that night. He added that he would contact her as soon as he left the hospital.

A short while later the nurse came in to change his IV bag.

"Do I still need that," he enquired. The needle in his arm was restricting his movement and beginning to get uncomfortable.

"Dr. Leillard said you still need hydrating, and she doesn't want you trying to move around yet." After changing the bag she put the television on for him, then left, saying she would be back before too long.

Vic watched the flickering screen for a while, then drifted back off to sleep.

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On Monday evening when Mac and Li Ann arrived in the briefing room, they found the Director waiting for them in person. "Have either of you heard from Victor?" she asked as they approached the table.

They both shook their heads. "Jackie will be here soon. She hasn't had any messages from him either, so we're hoping that he will turn up for his workout this evening. If he does, she will tell him to come here. In case he was caught up in the accident, Dobrinsky spent the weekend touring the hospitals. He managed to get a look at all of the victims who had yet to be identified. Victor was not amongst them."

Li Ann studied her hands and Mac leaned back to look up at the ceiling, trying hard not to show how lost and scared he was feeling.

While they waited she studied their faces. Neither of them looked as if they had slept well over the weekend, and Mac looked particularly haggard. He was probably blaming himself for being late at their rendezvous.

The door opened and everyone looked towards the entrance. Jackie came in alone and sombrely took her place at the table. "After Vic missed his training slot, I went to reception and asked them to make sure that there hadn't been a message from him. Nothing."

The Director slid a slim file across the table towards Mac who was, as usual, sitting between the two women. "This is what we have on Dr. Miranda Patterson, so far. It gives her home address and where to find her office, though Mac already knows where that is. I've put people onto finding out more about her, clubs she belongs to, previous hospital positions. You may be able to add to this knowledge once you've had a look round her home and office." She paused, pleased to see her agents' gloom lighten a little at the prospect of doing something, then said, "A word of caution. Do not do anything which might compromise your position in the community. No grand-standing. I do *not* want Dr. Patterson, or anyone else, knowing that we are interested in her."

Recognizing a dismissal, the three subdued agents went downstairs to get ready. Dobrinsky was already there, and when they entered the garage, he said. "I've packed everything you might need into the van, and I had a few special items sent to me from Toronto which might help."

"Thanks," Mac said, for once not even trying to needle the older man.

When they had changed into their dark clothing, they met back at the van, Jackie asked, "Where shall we go first?"

"Office," Li Ann replied quickly. "At this time of night a doctor in her position is more likely to be at home." She got into the driving seat and waited for the others to get inside before driving off towards the Harper Medical Centre.

Victor woke again, and looked around him. He appeared to be still in the same bed, in the same room, and much to his disappointment, still have the same headache. He moved his free arm to reach for the nurse's button and winced. He must really have wrenched his shoulder in the accident if he still felt this sore three days later.

The same nurse he'd seen the last time he'd been awake came in to answer the summons. He explained the problem to her and she promised to get the doctor.

About fifteen minutes later, just when Victor was thinking about pressing the call button again, Dr. Leillard arrived with the nurse in tow.

"I understand that you are still in pain, Mr. Mansfield," she said, picking up the chart from the bottom of the bed and studying it.

"Yes." Victor decided that nodding was superfluous, besides which, it hurt.

"In that case, we certainly won't be releasing you this evening. I did suspect that might be the case, so I booked you some time with our physiotherapist. I'll give you a mild analgesic for your headache, and get Lawrence to come along to see you as soon as possible." She accepted a syringe from the nurse and injected the contents into his arm. She then removed the IV needle and asked the nurse to take the stand away.

"Thanks." Victor murmured as the two women left the room. He drifted for a while and the headache was starting to abate when the door opened again and two muscular men came in, pushing a table hung about with towels and bags. The taller of the two came over to his side, while the other started setting up their equipment.

"Hello, my name's Lawrence Beck. Dr. Leillard has asked that I give you a massage to help get the blood moving around your joints again. Now just relax," he continued, as Vic made a move to sit up, "Maurie and I will do all the work, until your limbs have loosened up a bit, then, depending on how you feel, we might get you to do some gentle exercises. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Good." Beck turned away and adjusted the lighting so that the massage table they would be using was well lit. Then he and his assistant helped Victor to lie down on the table. Beck started the massage from his hands, and Maurice started on his feet. The aromatic oil they were using was quite strong and on top of the painkilling injection it made his head swim a bit.

The two masseurs had worked together for a long time and their practised movements soon made Victor feel a great deal better. Once the front was done, they turned Vic over. Beck took a small pillow out of a plastic bag and placed it under Victor's head to raise it slightly from the hard table, then they got on with the job of massaging the oil into Victor's back.

The doctors' consulting rooms were deserted when the trio of agents made their way into that part of the medical centre. Leaving Jackie to keep a look out, Mac and Li Ann went through Dr. Patterson's office

with great care. Putting his anguish about Vic's disappearance on hold, Mac used all his skills to hack into the state-of-the-art PC sitting on the doctor's desk.

Most of what was on the PC was standard medical stuff, but he was intrigued by the fact that it had a second, very large, hard disk with video authoring software.

In the folder named 'Video' there was only one file at the top level: instructions.txt. He opened the file and found step by step instructions on how to start the cameras and software up. Following them, he was startled to see the examination room, which Li Ann was currently searching, come up on the monitor. He called her over to see what he had found. He then shut the cameras off, and they started searching the folders to see if any of the videos were still on the disk. They found five videos in all, and amongst them were the ones that Patterson had taken of Mac and Victor during their medicals.

Mac took a look at the rest of the instructions; they were on how to create a CD-ROM of the resulting video file. As much as he wanted to, he knew they didn't have time for him to actually follow the instructions, so he changed his line of inquiry to her email program, copying the contents of her Inbox, Sent Items, Contacts and Calendar for them to study later. When they had all of the data they could find, they collected Jackie and left the building as unobtrusively as they had arrived.

Since their temporary HQ was between the medical centre and Dr. Patterson's home, they stopped to give the data to Dobrinsky as they went past, so that experts could get started on analyzing it.

"Come on! Wake up!" Victor was shaken vigorously, and he moaned as he climbed from the depths of sleep. He tried to lift a hand to push whomever it was away, but his wrist seemed to be tethered at his waist. He tried to lift the other one, and felt a jerk at wrist and waist as he did so.

"What the hell!" he exclaimed, his eyes opening wide in shock.

Lawrence Beck grinned down at him. "Good, you're awake."

"Let me go," Victor demanded angrily, trying to kick out with his feet, only to find that they were chained up, too.

"Keep quiet!" Beck ordered.

"Why should I?"

Beck held his nose until he was forced to gasp for breath, then a ball was inserted into his mouth. "I shall only warn you this once," the man told him in a conversational tone. "Speak only when you are given permission or asked a question. If you disobey this rule you will wear this all the time. Do you understand?"

Victor nodded, his eyes flashing green fire, but he kept quiet when the ball-gag was removed.

Beck waited to see if he was going to be obeyed, then said, "Maurice, Paul, whom you haven't met before, and I are going to be your trainers. We work on a reward system. If you obey orders you will be well treated. If you disobey you will be punished."

Deciding that with three men at least as well developed as he was controlling his movements, now was not the time to make any strenuous objections. He docilely allowed them to get him on his feet and got the first sight of himself in a full-length mirror. A leash in Beck's hand was attached to a black leather collar around his neck. A network of leather straps and chains ran over his body from ankles to shoulders, and his skin gleamed from the oil that had been rubbed into his skin earlier. The other two men each held tethers attached at shoulder and hip.

He took a step forward to ease the tension on his throat, and frowned as a object in his anus made its presence known.

Beck smiled as the captive wriggled, knowing full well what was causing the discomfort. His smile broadened as he took a remote control from his pocket and pushed the on button.

Victor's body twitched as the plug that had been inserted in his anus started to vibrate against his prostate, and his penis started to rise in response to the stimulation.

Having made sure that it was working, Beck switched the device off, then tugged lightly on the leash he was holding to start the captive moving. He led Victor along the corridor to a large room. The only light in the room was a spotlight trained on the lower portion of a metal column, where the three men chained him, then disappeared into the gloom.

Dr. Patterson's house was in darkness when they glided to a halt nearby. There hadn't been any alarms marked on the plans they had been given, but things could have changed since they had been drawn. Mac got out and walked around the outside to see if he tripped any sensor lights. Perhaps fortunately for his peace of mind, no lights caused him to seek cover, and he was able to verify that the house appeared to be deserted. He checked the garage; that too was empty.

Calling Li Ann, he opened the door and let them both inside, again leaving Jackie to warn them if it looked as if Dr. Patterson, or anyone else, might interrupt their search.

Another computer yielded yet more contacts, some club memberships complete with membership numbers. Again he downloaded everything he could find, while Li Ann looked around for any possible clues. A diary on Patterson's desk yielded some rather cryptic entries, which she painstakingly copied.

Feeling that there was nothing more to find, they left the house and went back to their HQ.

When they entered the briefing room, the Director and two men they hadn't seen before were waiting for them. They were introduced as Bill and Ben, the researchers that had been brought in from Toronto to deal with the data they had collected.

After they had passed over their latest haul, and Li Ann had pointed out the cryptic diary entries to the researchers, Bill and Ben had gone into another room to work.

The Director picked up a piece of paper, and said, "While you were out, I had someone go through Victor's file at Excalibur. According to a note dated today, Victor had phoned in to request emergency compassionate leave because his mother was ill. So we now have no doubts as to what happened to him." She paused and gave a tight smile, then said, "Now all we can do is wait until our analysts come up with the answer to where he is being held."

Victor was feeling very tired. The drugs still in his system, combined with being chained to the pillar for what seemed like hours, made standing upright difficult, yet sleeping in this position was not an option either. Twice he had dozed, and each time he had been woken by the pain in his shoulder muscles as they were forced to bear his whole weight.

He was almost asleep again when someone he couldn't see started to switch on spotlights illuminating other pillars. Then, a short time later, the rattle of chains heralded the arrival of eight more people, naked except for their chains. They were tethered to the lit pillars in the same way he was.

Some doors opened nearby and a chattering crowd of people entered the room. They wandered around the pillars, touching and probing the people chained to them, and Victor had a sudden vision of the annual horse sales where prospective owners went round the stables inspecting the horses before the bidding started.

He snarled a string of oaths and struggled against his chains when one expensively dressed man got overly familiar with his genitals, which startled the man into stepping away from him.

Beck grabbed him by the hair, glared at him, and shoved a whip in front of his eyes. "Keep still and be quiet, or you'll get a taste of this."

Victor glared back at him, but refrained from making any comment.

A gong sounded and Beck let go of him and faded back into the darkness as a tall woman dressed in white, Grecian-style robes came on to the stage.

She waited until the buzz of conversation died, then said, "Good evening ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the Doulos Agora. You may have noticed we have an extra item not in your catalogue. In the past, many of you have asked us to include an agrios in our auctions. For those not familiar with the term, an agrios is a 'savage', or one who has not been subjected to any training. Which brings us to doulos number 62262. He was added to our collection on Friday night. If you would look at the screen to your left we have the usual style of promotional video of him being selected and tested."

Victor looked at the same screen as the audience and saw a video of his medical examination being shown. Enraged, he surged forward in his bonds, and shouted, "No-" He suddenly found the lash of the whip between his teeth, and he was pulled back to the pillar.

"Behave," Beck whispered in his ear.

His shout and the scuffle caused the audience to turn round to see the agrios fighting against the restraint.

Seething, but realizing that he was powerless to stop the show, Victor became still, and the audience turned back to the screen.

The second video clip showed the medical from a different angle; the third, obviously taken after his acquisition, showed him caught up in the rope web of a posing frame. His unconscious body was twisted this way and that to show off his muscles and other attributes.

Victor growled around the leather gag. No wonder his muscles had burned if that was what they had done to him while he'd been unconscious.

The screen then reverted to showing a live picture of Victor chained to the pillar, his nipple rings catching the light as he breathed.

"As you can see, he was kept sedated for the last part of the display. To fill in the last details missing from the catalogue, he is six foot one inch tall, has brown hair and green eyes. The bidding will start at the normal opening price of twenty-five thousand Canadian dollars,"

"I'll start the bidding," the man whom Victor had snarled at earlier, called out.

The woman on stage had already started to walk towards the opposite end of the line of pillars, obviously intending to start the auction from that end. She turned towards the speaker with a raised eyebrow. "I don't..."

"Thirty!" A voice from another part of the room interrupted her.

Recognizing that the buyers were obviously very interested in the agrios, she plastered a smile on her face and walked to the pillar where Victor was chained. "Any advance on thirty?" she asked as she stopped beside the angry man.

"Thirty-five," the first man spoke up again.

A flurry of bids came from all sides, pushing the price higher and higher. The pace finally slowed when price topped two-hundred thousand, and the number of bidders had dwindled when twice that was reached. The original bidder was still in, seemingly determined to buy the man who had sworn at him, and it was he who had the winning bid of seven-hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

As soon as he had been declared the winner, the man, called Mr. Black by the auctioneer, walked up to the desk at the front of the stage to pay for his purchase. Taking out a palm pilot, he transferred the money from one Swiss bank account to another. A few minutes later the transfer of money was confirmed on the auctioneer's laptop.

When the transaction had been completed, Mr. Black was given a key tag, with a set of keys dangling from it.

Beck's two assistants helped get Victor ready. They put pads over his eyes, held in place by a loop of elasticised material. The whip was removed from his mouth and a ball gag was inserted in its place, then they released the locks which had held him fast to the pillar.

Rendered completely helpless by the blindfold, and unable to register any vocal protest, Victor was forced to allow himself to be manhandled off the stage and led out of the auction room.

As they approached the elevator, Beck broke the silence. "Do you want to take him straight to your car, Mr. Black?" he asked, glowering at the captive.

Black looked speculatively at him, then at his new acquisition. "Perhaps a little chastisement first. It will give him something to think about on the journey to his new home."

Beck took them up one floor, and into one of the bedrooms. He expertly tied Victor to what look like a low vaulting horse, removed the blindfold and gag, then went to one of the closets and took out a suede cat-o'-nine-tails. He trailed the suede strips across the closed eyes, then down the exposed back and muscular legs. Then he struck a hard blow across Victor's shoulders. Satisfied with his aim, Beck rained further blows down on the tanned body, working his way down the back to the tops of the thighs, then turned his attention back to the ass. His concentration on the task was suddenly shattered when a cold, round object was pressed into his neck.

"Enough," a cold, female voice stated, and the whip was taken from his grasp.

The two men turned and found themselves facing a tall red-headed woman, accompanied by four men dressed in black from head to toe, training automatic pistols at them. The four black dressed men efficiently searched and cuffed their two prisoners, reading them their rights as they did so. Then, after giving the set of keys to the woman, they hustled the two captives away.

The Director looked admiringly at the body laid out before her, stroking her hand up from his ass to his shoulder, then, starting from his ankles, she used the keys to release him from his bonds.

Victor stood up and stretched, working the kinks out of his back, arms and legs, trying to ignore the appraising looks he was receiving from the Director.

"We found Victor's things..." Jackie, carrying a clear plastic bag, bounced into the room, then stopped. "Oh my..." she breathed, catching sight of Victor mid-stretch.

The Director took the bag from Jackie, handed it over to Victor, and led the ex-mob queen back out of the room.

Victor took the nipple rings off, grabbed a quick shower to rid himself of the oil, and got dressed. When he left the room he found the Director leaning against the corridor's wall beside the door.

"Where did all the men with guns come from?" he asked.

"Mostly from the RCMP. Captain Taylor was only too pleased to provide a strike force. Kidnapping people is frowned on; selling them into slavery... Well, they are looking at some very, very long prison sentences." She tucked her arm through Victor's and guided him out of the building to where his partners were waiting in the van. They both climbed inside and Mac drove them all back to the HQ.

Back in the briefing room, the Director smiled at her best team seated across the table from her. "Well done boys and girls, I'm very pleased that we managed to solve this case so quickly. You'll be pleased to

know that Christian Fawcett was amongst those we rescued tonight. We have found masses of documentary evidence that will put the slave ring out of business, permanently.

"Victor, your car has been recovered from the warehouse it was taken too, and is being delivered directly to your house.

"Now, so that you are not identified as being part of the investigation team, we are going to practice a strategic withdrawal. All record of Victor as doulos number 62262 has been erased. "Mr. Black" and Lawrence Beck, the only ones who really know that Victor isn't on his way to the Middle East, are in the Agency's care and will be dealt with by us. Victor will return to work on Wednesday, and I have arranged for him to be 'recruited' by the Government department which temporarily employed the two Excalibur contractors. His secondment will become permanent, and Excalibur will be compensated.

"Li Ann will tell the employment agency that she has found a permanent job, and will be moving away. Jackie, your contract at the leisure centre doesn't expire until the end of October; you will rejoin us in Toronto then. Mac will give his notice in, giving the excuse that he wants to move back to Toronto. They may let you leave this week, or you may have to wait until the end of next. Either way, you can move in with Victor until you have both been released by your respective employers. The surveillance teams we had in place are being withdrawn tonight."

Victor tried to smother a yawn.

"Mac, take Victor home." she ordered.

Mac nodded, and led the older man out of the briefing room and back to his car. On the drive to his house Victor remained silent, leaning back in his seat, trying to ignore the discomfort he was experiencing.

When they arrived outside the house, Victor said, "I don't want to be alone tonight."

Mac got out of the car and followed his partner into the house and upstairs to the main bedroom. He watched as Victor started to undress, and got his first look at the marks left on Victor's skin by the whipping he'd received. He went over to stand beside Vic as he divested himself of the last of his clothes. "Are you all right?"

Victor shrugged. "Yeah, I'll survive. My back is a bit uncomfortable at the moment, that's all."

Mac thought about that statement for a moment. Then, after quickly stripping himself, he laid down on his back in bed and held his arms out to the other man.

Victor needed no further invitation, he crawled under the bedclothes and snuggled into Mac's arms. Resting his cheek on his lover's shoulder, he sighed contentedly and drifted off to sleep.

—

Alone in her office, the Director sat watching the surveillance tapes of Victor, which had been confiscated from the offices next to the auction room. There was quite a pile, each with #62262 written on the label. The originals of the medical, and the final version where they had been edited together; videos of after he had been captured, and his body being displayed.

There was also a nice one of both Vic and Mac in a hotel room. The lighting was a bit low, but they seemed to be enjoying it; this was no cold-hearted exhibition for the camera, and she couldn't help wondering if that was what they were doing right at this minute. She made a mental note to get a camera installed.

When it came to an end, she replayed the one she had enjoyed most. Victor getting his ass spanked by a woman, in a private room somewhere. She gave a predatory smile as she watched the woman's hand descend on to the reddened ass, and murmured "Oh Victor, how cute, if only I'd known before..."

It was late when they woke again, for neither of them had given any thought to setting the alarm. Mac looked at the time and decided to phone in sick. He told them that he had been up all night, and that he would be back the following day.

Meanwhile, Victor had stiffly got out of bed and gone into the bathroom, hoping that a hot shower would loosen his muscles and make him feel better. He was still standing under the hot spray when Mac joined him.

Mac picked up the sponge, liberally coated it with shower soap, and started to wash the still figure. He was pleased to note that Victor's back was looking almost normal, no longer the angry red it had been when they had gone to bed. When he was done, he took Victor into his arms and kissed him. Victor melted into his arms, but then his stomach grumbled. He pulled back and laughed.

"I guess I'd better get something to eat," Vic murmured softly, "I can't remember when I last had a proper meal."

"Didn't they feed you?"

"Sort of. I had an IV line in my arm for most of the time."

Feeling very angry on Victor's behalf, Mac pulled his partner out of the shower cubicle and wrapped him in a warm towel, then grabbed one from the cupboard for himself.

Dressed in jeans and T-shirts, they went downstairs to the kitchen. Victor got Mac to make the coffee and cut some thick slices of bread. While Mac was doing that, Victor took a lasagne out of the freezer and popped it in the microwave. He took the bread and made garlic toast, got some prepared salad out of the fridge, and by the time the lasagne was ready, they had everything else laid out on the table.

After brunch, and after he'd finished putting away the last of the dishes, Victor went over to stand in front of Mac. Pulling the other man's arms around him he said, "Now where were we?"

Mac grinned and kissed him wetly on the nose. "I believe I was going to take you to bed..."

Vic wiped his wet nose on the side of Mac's neck. "In that case, perhaps we'd better go back upstairs..."

Mac needed no further encouragement. He peeled himself away, then grasped one of Vic's hands and made his way into the bedroom with his lover following close on his heels.

Vic went into the adjoining bathroom, saying, "I'll get the supplies." Once he was hidden from view, he lifted his T-shirt to put the nipple rings back in, then retrieved a small pouch from his washbag. Back in the bedroom he emptied the contents of the pouch onto the night table on the right hand side of the bed. Then, his eyes sparkling with anticipation, he shed his clothes and lay down in the centre of the bed, ignoring the slight discomfort that was a carry-over from the whipping he had received the night before.

The erotic sight of Victor splayed across the bed halted Mac in his tracks. His eyes feasted on the long, narrow feet, then travelled up the muscled legs to the already half-erect cock in its nest of curls. Unconsciously he licked his lips. Tearing his eyes away, his gaze moved up the broad chest so fetchingly adorned with gold rings, past the partly open, moist, pink lips, until finally meeting sparkling green eyes.

Victor smiled and held out a hand to him.

Mac responded the only way he could. He growled deep in his throat, scrambled on to the bed, and fastened his lips over Vic's while his hands roamed over the tanned skin. Encountering one of the rings, he pulled back slightly, then gave each nipple a swipe with his tongue.

"I like these, Vic." He tugged gently on one with his teeth and felt Vic's cock twitch against his thigh in return. "I like these very much."

"I bought them just for you," Vic replied, his husky voice sending a rush of blood to Mac's groin to join that already filling his erection.

Mac lifted himself away from the other man. Every little thing about Vic turned him on, and he had really wanted to be deep inside him before he came. Reaching over, he picked up the lube and a condom. Preparing Vic was the work of moments, his anus, still slack from wearing the butt plug for hours the night before, needed little persuasion to open up for Mac's lubricated fingers to slide inside. He ran his fingers over Vic's prostate and watched, fascinated, as his body arched up off the bed, and some pearly drops of pre-come leaked from the tip of the now fully erect cock. He leaned forward and caught the liquid on his tongue before it could reach the nest of curls. Then he pulled back, rolled a condom on himself, lifted Vic's legs on to his shoulders and thrust himself deep inside his lover, unable to contain his need any longer. Setting a steady rhythm, he jerked Vic off in time with his thrusts, and as Victor's seed sprayed across them both, he came deep inside his lover.

Panting, he somehow found the strength to withdraw and discard the condom, before rolling on his back and pulling Vic into his arms.

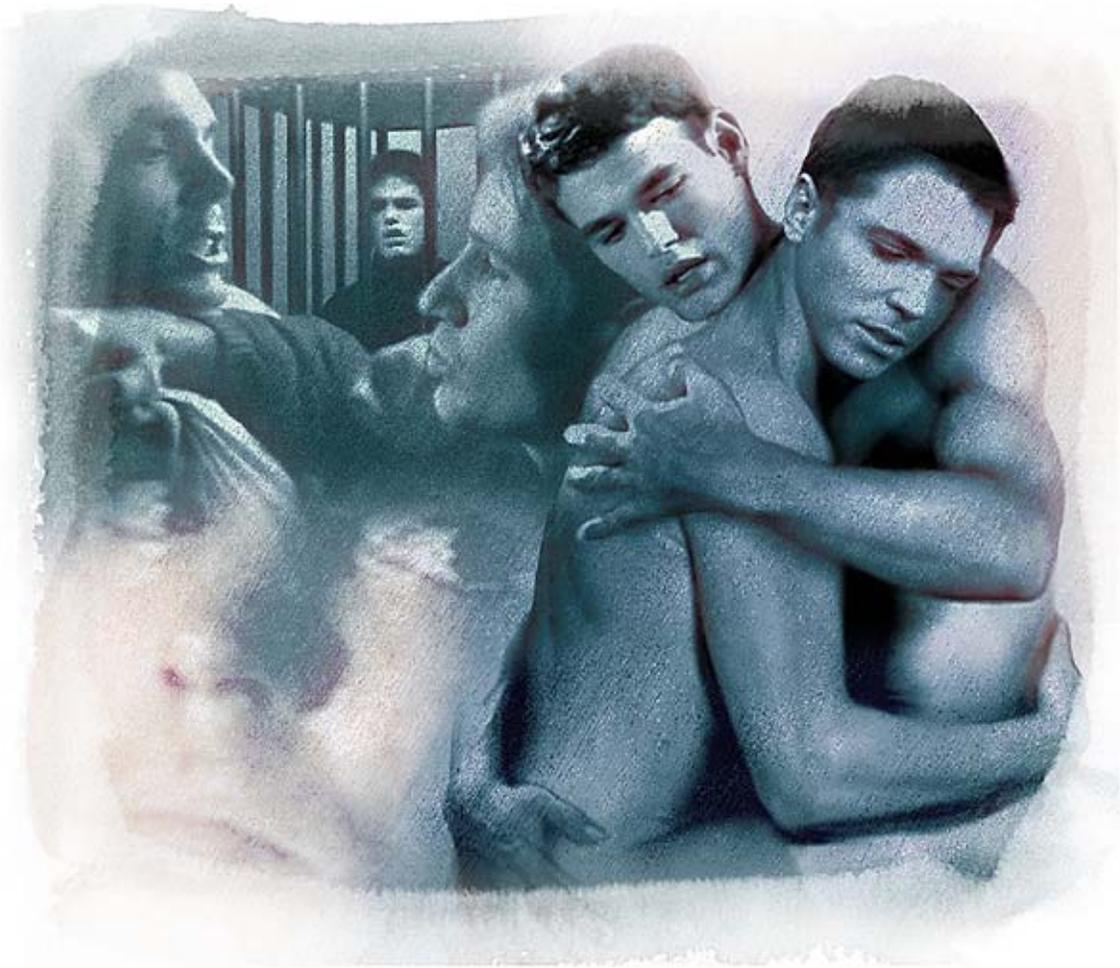
Sometime later, Mac murmured sadly, "I'm going to miss this when we go back to Toronto."

Vic sighed, then replied, "Don't worry about it, I'll find some way for us to be together..."

"Mmmm, good..."

Content and sated, they slept.





Blood, Sweat and Tears *by Cuffs*

An X-Files/Once a Thief Crossover.

Okay, this would NEVER happen in the OaT universe, but in Mulder's twisted mind it could, maybe...

Somewhere in a dark alley a red truck waited. The sound of blues rang through the night, making the few people that passed by wonder what was going on in there. Inside the truck sat a man. His hands moving with the rhythm of the music, tapping on his steering wheel, he was seemingly enjoying himself immensely. Sure, Vic Mansfield liked Eric Clapton and BB King, but for him, blues was the art of the obscure musician. It was the unknowns that held his heart. Some years ago he had visited some small towns in the Midwest and the South, starting out in Dakota. He had encountered lots of natural talents there. Sitting in smoky bars, tables littered with empty glasses and cigarette buds, he had taped all those immortal, raw sounds. Closing his eyes, he let himself wash away on the rhythm of his music...

"Hey, Vic! Turn that crap down, will you!"

The truck door opened noisily, and the shouting of his annoying partner shook him out of his reverie.

"Go to hell, Mac. You've already gotten me out of my bed in the middle of the night, not to mention the fact that I've been waiting for you for almost an hour."

"Yeah well, traffic was a bitch."

Vic just glared. Mac hoisted himself into the truck and leaned over to turn down the volume. Vic pushed his hand away.

"Don't even think about it, Ramsey. First I want to have a nice coffee and a doughnut from the deli on 45th, and *then* you can tell me what is going on. Since you took your time to get here, whatever it is can wait ten minutes more. Before I have had my coffee, I do not want to talk to you or hear as much as a squeak."

Of course, the dickhead couldn't resist.

"Still frustrated because of your lousy sex life, huh?" Pretended sympathy sounded in his voice.

Vic turned his head to look in his face. Yep, the smug smile was plastered all over his face.

He started the truck and muttered just loud enough so Mac could hear it, "Dick."

It didn't take long before they arrived at 'The Wacky Deli'. It was a typical cop deli only five minutes away from the precinct and open 24 hours a day. Vic didn't think the owner even slept since he was always there. Vic turned off the engine and the music and got out of the car. Mac stayed inside.

"What's wrong, Ramsey? Don't like coffee? They've got milkshakes too with little coloured sprinkles on the top for the kids. Want one?"

No answer, just a glare, then Mac started to smile. "I can actually talk now? O wow, what generous offer, o ye mighty white knight. Are you buying?"

"Did I say it was a generous offer? I'm not inviting you, you moron. Buy your own damn drinks."

Mac got out of the car and slammed the door shut, all the time his eyes fixed on Vic's, smile lavishly hugging his face.

"You mean this isn't a date? Or are you going feminist on me?"

Vic rolled his eyes and shook his head. Together they started to walk towards the shop, continuing their friendly banter.

"You invited me. Besides, I live on the same salary as you do, Mac. So even if I wanted to take you out, I wouldn't be able to afford it."

"Why, Vic, I believe that was a flirtatious compliment."

"And as usual you only hear what you want to hear. The day I would want to take you out would be the day I'd start to wear leather outfits and give up on Li Ann. Precisely the things I plan on doing, well, never." Vic smiled at Mac while he smiled back. They entered the deli, delicious aromas meeting them, surrounding them. Fat Willie stood at the counter greeting his loyal customer. Vic came in every week for one thing or another.

"Hey, Vic, what brings you here in the dead of the night?"

"Your delicious baking skills of course, Willie, what else?"

"Couldn't sleep, huh?"

"What, with a partner like this?" He gestured to Mac. Willie smiled knowingly and went to get a pot of fresh coffee.

"Vic, I don't think Willie took that the way you meant it."

"What is it now, Mac?" Vic let out an exaggerated sigh.

"Come on, will you, that look on his face, he thinks we're lovers." Mac smiled smugly, probably really happy with himself now that he had found another thing to tease Vic with.

Vic almost fell off his barstool. "What?! Are you nuts? Willie knows I'm straight."

"I knew it, you're homophobic."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are."

"Shut up, Ramsey."

Willie returned with two cups of steaming coffee. He put a plate of doughnuts in front of them accompanied by a large bowl of whipped cream.

"Enjoy yourselves, fellas. I'm going into the back for a leak. Could you watch the store for a moment, Vic?"

"No problem, Willie, take your time."

Vic grabbed a doughnut and nibbled in delight while savouring his coffee. Mac studied him.

It got on Vic's nerves.

"Will you cut that out."

"What?" Mac asked as innocently as he could.

"Eat, drink, dance the polka, do something, but stop staring the food out of my mouth."

"This isn't food, Vic; this is instant grease."

"Yeah well, sorry if it isn't lobster; get used to it."

"And here I was hoping you would take me out to a nice, decent restaurant one day."

"For crying out loud." Vic dumped his half-eaten doughnut on the plate. "Can't you even let me eat in peace?"

Mac raised his head and appeared to be thinking. "Nope, you're too much fun to bash."

Coffee only halfway down his throat, Vic coughed. "What?"

"You make it so easy, Vic. You're fun to tease."

"Gee, thanks. I'll remember that one for my resume."

Vic took another doughnut from the plate, and an evil thought crept into his mind. He cast a sideways glance at Mac and then back at the doughnut in his hand. Mac caught his idea.

"Oh no you don't. Vic, Vic?" He started nervously. In the blink of an eye, Vic jumped off his seat and pounced on Mac, who in turn fell on the floor. Vic went down with him, shoving the doughnut in Mac's mouth, laughing in triumph.

"Now this is what I call poetic justice." He crossed his arms in front of his chest, while Mac wiped the chocolate mess from his face, not saying a word.

"Lighten up, Ramsey; you're as easy as I supposedly am. You made me eat that Chinese slush, now you get your encounter with real food." Vic let go of his partner and returned to his seat, calmly going back to eating his doughnut and drinking his coffee in peace. Mac was still lying on the floor, staring back in a mix of disbelief, anger, but mostly amusement. A glint appeared in his eye and spread to his entire face. Mac started to laugh out loud.

"Why, Vic, if only the Director could see you now. I always knew you had a devious streak. Maybe I should tell her. She might leave me alone and move on to you!"

Vic almost choked again.

"Are you trying to give me a heart attack? I'm trying to enjoy my coffee here."

Willie came back and did a quick survey of the situation. Realising what had happened, he started to laugh with Mac.

"It seems that coffee isn't the only thing you guys are enjoying here. You're keeping the place in one piece?"

Willie offered a hand to Mac, who took it and got on his feet.

"I think you have to ask Vic that question, Willie; he is a little bit more aggressive than usual. But I don't mind, you won't believe the things he can do with a beer bottle, carrots and garlic sauce."

Vic nearly choked again during his coughing attack. Willie winked at Mac.

"That much imagination, huh. Vic, I never thought that of all people, you had such hidden depths. But, I have to say, you two look cute together."

Vic finally got his voice back. "Cute? We are not cute, Willie. Mac is nothing short of a demon from hell."

"And you are my little devil, honey." Mac purred. "That is why I love you so much."

Oh, Mac was getting back at him all right. "Willie, would you be so kind as to give me coffee to go? We're in a hurry." His face was reddening with the speed of light.

Willie got some take away cups and kept his huge grin plastered over his face.

"Hormones playing up, Vic? I don't blame you; when you're as happy as the two of you obviously are, I would spend every free minute in bed."

Mac leaned over the counter and whispered in a husky tone, "You've got a dirty mind, Willie."

"I'm sure it's not as dirty as yours." They exchanged winks again. Vic bolted towards the door, taking his cup with him and throwing some bills to cover the cost on the counter.

Mac leisurely walked out, with his hands in his pockets.

"Thanks, Willie, you're a prince."

"Have fun tonight, kiddo."

"Don't worry, I'm sure this will be a night to remember."

—

Back at the truck, Vic climbed into his seat without a word to Mac.

"What is it, Vic? Mad at me again?"

"As a matter a fact, yes! How could you do that to me? I won't be able to show my face at Fat Willie's ever again!"

"Why? Because now he thinks you're gay? Somehow that doesn't strike me as such a big problem for eating doughnuts. Unless of course you were using the place as a pickup for woman, but I doubt that even you are that desperate... You aren't, are you?" Mac sounded unsure.

Vic was irritated. "No! Of course not. It's just that, Mac, now he thinks I'm some thrilling sex bomb."

Mac blinked and started to spasm. It caught Vic off guard; what the hell was going on?

"Mac? Are you okay?"

That did it. Mac blurted out the biggest salvo of laughter he had ever heard. He stared at Mac for a couple of seconds more before he came out of his reverie. The Vic also started to laugh a bit.

"Well, I guess, it is kind of funny. But just a little."

Mac did not stop.

"I can... see it now, Vic... you in some... leather outfit... trying to look cool and dangerous... the male version of the Director." Just when Vic thought Mac had calmed down, he started to laugh again.

"Shut up, Ramsey. It wasn't that funny."

Getting no answer, he just shook his head and started the car again.

"Where to? Ramsey, where are we supposed to go?"

Mac still could not answer because of his laughing streak, but he did give him a note with an address. *And to think I could be in my bed, listening to some nice jazz and enjoying myself. If only I hadn't picked up the damn phone.*

It took them exactly 20 minutes to reach the given location. Mac had needed half of it to get through his fit of hysterical laughter. At least it was over now. Vic sighed.

The neighbourhood looked dark and menacing, not a good place to hang out during the day and certainly not at 3 o'clock in the morning. What could be going on here that would catch the interest of the Agency?

"Are you sure this is the right address?"

"Yes, Vic, give me some credit here, all right. Besides, this looks like the perfect place for a psycho and his shady dealings."

"You're expecting to find a psycho and shady dealings?" Vic asked sceptically.

Mac threw his arms in the air.

"Vic, can't you at least try to understand a joke when it is made? Lighten up, stop being so boring and walk on the wild side."

"Since when do you enjoy Lou Reed?"

"I give up." He shook his head in mock despair.

Mac got out of the car and moved closer to the abandoned house further down the street. Vic did the same after locking his truck very carefully. It would just be his luck if it was dismantled or stolen when they came back. He could just imagine the look on Mac's face if that happened. The house seemed to be made of wood, but a closer look revealed concrete behind the wood that had fallen off. They crouched a little bit nearer.

"Do you see anything, Mac?"

"No, do you?"

"Not really. Perhaps we should stay here for a while to see if there are any comings and goings. Maybe your psycho will turn up."

"Do you actually want to sit here and wait around?" Mac sounded amazed.

"It would be the sensible thing to do."

Mac grinned and a very disturbing gleam appeared in his eye. "Well, you *do* keep telling me that I am not sensible."

Suddenly he got up and ran to the house. Vic inwardly cursed and went after him. He was not that far behind, but he couldn't see Mac anymore since he had disappeared around the corner. When Vic followed and peeked down the way Mac had gone, a dark garden was revealed. It looked like some scene out of a horror movie. Almost every bush, tree and plant was dead. The branches of the trees slumped down as if they were reaching out for something to grab.

Careful not to step on any dead twigs, Vic manoeuvred through the garden. The shadows were playing tricks on his mind.

"Mac! Where are you?" Vic whispered and was pissed, again. The night being darker than usually, new moon and all, no way they could see each other, and Mac didn't answer. *Damn! Where did that loud mouthed idiot go this time?* Vic kept on peering through the dark, hoping to get a glimpse of something that remotely looked like his partner. The only thing that greeted him was a white cat that ran after a bird or a mouse Vic couldn't see. *That kind of vision would come in handy right now.* He had reached the end of the garden. There was nowhere to go but into the house. Damn! It was too dangerous. Mac had most likely just gone into the house, but if he went after him, he would be going in blind. After all, he had no way of knowing just where in the house the kid had gone. Hearing some rustling behind him, he turned around with his guns in his hand. Even if it was the cat again, he didn't want to take any chances. He felt like shooting first and asking questions later. Then he felt a sharp pain, and everything went black.

A soft voice in the distance. "Vic, Vic, can you hear me?"

"Mac?"

"Yeah, open your eyes and behold our glorious new accommodations."

Doing as Mac told him to, he saw that they were sitting in a cage. He got up to check the surroundings—bars, concrete walls, and a TV hanging outside the cage that displayed the inside of the cage. Vic tested the strength of the bars, pulling as if he could stretch them.

"Don't bother, Vic. It's solid steel, but at least we have our own TV, although one of the actors is a little bit boring," Mac stated dryly.

"You mean the young, tall, moron who got us into this mess?"

"Me? Hey, man, you're the one who dropped your guard and got himself captured! The least you could have done was get me out."

Vic rolled his eyes. This was so like Mac. "Yeah, that does sound like my full time job. I take it somebody banded you on the head? Have you figured out what this place is?" Vic changed the subject.

"No, the Director told me to get you and go to this address at night because of some strange business that was conducted here."

"Well, it is strange..." Mac made his 'Duh' expression at Vic.

"Thanks, Vic, I hadn't noticed... At least we can get inside information."

"Smart thinking, Mac. Especially since we can't tell anybody what we find."

"That could change. I *am* a thief you know."

"One that gets caught time and time again," Vic answered in a low tone of voice.

"What was that, Vic? Anyway, I haven't seen anybody since I woke up."

"And when was that?"

Mac shrugged. "About five minutes ago."

"Wow, so that means you've spent a whole five minutes awake and nobody came in? You must feel so neglected," Vic replied in his best sarcastic tone.

"Shut up, Mansfield." Further away a door could be heard opening. Footsteps approached them. Eagerly Mac looked at Vic and pointed at the door.

"Vic! You've got your wish. They were waiting for you to wake up!" Mac made his comeback.

"Cut it out, Ramsey." Every time he thought he had the kid down, he made a comeback. There was the sound of scratching metal, and the door opened. A tall man with brown hair and eyes came through, wearing a trench coat.

"What's this?" Mac whispered. "Diller's twin?" Before Vic could answer, the guy turned around as he shook the trench coat. "Hello, gentlemen. I knew I would find you in some shadowy project, 'Victor'. It must run in your black, treacherous veins."

"What? What the hell are you talking about. Who are you anyway?!" Vic almost yelled, losing his temper again, confusion written all over his face. The guy stalked to the cage, a maniacal glint in his eye, and stopped inches away from Vic, separated only by the bars.

"Who I am is not important to your 'partner'. However, who you are is."

Mac shuffled around and tried to be attract his attention. He never did like to be ignored. "Hey! What about me? Cue me in all right! Are you an angry Jehovah's witness or something?" All Mac got was a derisive look. Then the man turned and went to sit down and started looking at them while eating sunflower seeds. Vic stayed in his spot, locked in a staring contest with the big nosed guy.

It was bound to frustrate the hell out of Mac. "Could we at least do something that's useful? You know; yelling, trading insults, escaping... playing monopoly?"

Finally he got some attention from the guy, although he kept his focus on Vic. "You want some entertainment?" The kind of tone the man used wasn't what Mac had hoped for. He looked uneasily over to Vic, who still looked as pissed as hell and red as his truck, seemingly oblivious to the guy's intentions. Not that he knew what they were himself, but he somehow knew they weren't good.

"Get your backs to the cell." A gun came out, a Glock as far as Mac could see. Government issue. Was this some test from the Agency? No, it wasn't their style. The man opened the cage door. "Well, 'Victor', come out, come out." He bared his teeth in a very psychotic manner. Vic was obviously getting tired of the entire thing too. This was a very good time for Mac to say one word... Shit. He had a bad feeling about this. The guy looked as unstable as Dobrinsky had after Mac had put sugar in the gasoline tank of one of his cars. Once Vic was out of the cage, he was slammed against the wall and the cage was closed before Mac had a chance to do something about it. He knew he couldn't do anything, but somehow he felt he had to contribute something. "If you hurt my partner in any way, I'll make you pay, bastard!" He tried to look impressive and nearly attacked the bars of the cage.

The man hit Vic with the back of his Glock, square on his face. He didn't faint, but blood came sprinkling down his jaw. "You mean like this, hot shot? And what are you going to do about it, scum?"

The only thing Mac could do was watch, helplessly.

In no time Vic was chained to the wall. The man acted like he knew what he was doing. "Remember Tunguska, Krycek?" He ripped off Vic's shirt, revealing a smooth back, marked with a couple of scars. *Probably from his time as a cop.* "Yeah, I guess you do." Trailing his fingers over Vic's muscles and left arm.

Mac clenched his jaw and fists; that guy really had no right to touch Vic like that. "I figured you'd get your arm back. A mutation perhaps? Some trade off with the rebels? Or was it the Consortium again? Do you even remember which side you play on, or do you keep a little black book: which side I'm on this week." A punch to Vic's lower abdomen followed. Vic wheezed, his head pulled back by the hair. Mac could see that Vic tried to talk with some dignity, but the tremor came through his voice, betraying his pain. "I don't know what you're talking about. I don't know a Krycek or any rebels. I..." He was interrupted by a second punch that must have broken a rib because a definite crack was heard in the small room. That really did it. This was just too much.

"Oh come on, man! He doesn't know any of those people! Get away from him, you creep."

The man crooked his head to look at Mac. "Can't stand it? The feeling of being helpless while your partner is hurting? Seeing her in pain and then when you're on the verge of helping, seeing a bullet run through her head, splattering her brains all over your couch and clothes?" The last words came out in short sobs. "Don't know how that feels? No? Well, kid, I promise you that you'll be wishing for that experience because what I'm going to do to her murderer," pointing his Glock casually at Vic, "is going to be a work of bloody art. I'm sure you'll appreciate it. I'll make sure it will be very 'entertaining'..."

Shit, Vic, what have you gotten into this time. "He's not a murderer, man. He's incapable of doing anything immoral, and murder ranks high on his not to do list!"

Vic groaned, in his typical, obvious way, but the psycho fell for it. Vic was goading the man to walk towards him again. "Hurting, Krycek? Good. After all, I've only just begun."

Without warning, Vic bucked his head back, slamming it into the man's face. Blood spurted out of his nose and mouth, and he raved, letting loose with a tirade of curses. *Bad move, Vic.* At least Mac thought it was... The man cleaned up his face and was his psychopathic, calm and collected self again.

He shot a cold glare at Vic and Mac. He was definitely up to something. "First we're going to get acquainted again... Krycek."

Vic shook his head. Although he was facing the wall, he tried to turn around to look the man in the eyes. "I don't know who this Krycek guy is, but I have nothing to do with him. My name is Victor

Mans..." He was cut off by another blow to his ribcage.

"You can't fool me with this clean guy routine of yours. This is your cover, isn't it? You needed a new identity and this is it. I know how you operate. How you function. This comes in handy, a job that pays and protects you. But I know who you are. You lie your way into everything. From jobs to lovers..."

"I'm an ex-cop. Son of Gerard and Mary Mansfield. I never had another identity in my life." Vic sounded confused.

The man leaned and whispered in Vic's ear, loudly enough for Mac to hear. "Why sell yourself short? You're not a cop. You're the real thing... a 'G-man'... my ex-partner who sold me out to the Consortium, remember... Why just an ex-cop while you're a murdering, triple spy, Ratbastard who sells himself to the highest bidder!"

Mac couldn't believe his ears. "Are you nuts? Vic wouldn't be able to spy on boy scouts, let alone be a triple agent! Now I *know* you're insane."

The man started to laugh and moved to Mac. "He has really gotten to you, hasn't he? I know the feeling. Thinking you can trust him, depending on him, until one day he stabs you in the back. And let me tell you, it doesn't feel that great." He giggled insanely and skipped a little. *God that guy's unstable.* "And because of that, I am going back to what I wanted to do." He actually looked psychopathically happy when he got to the corner of the room, leaving Vic still hopelessly hanging against the wall. Blood had dripped down his chest, and his head was rubbing against his shoulder as he tried to wipe the blood from his face with a lot of effort.

Mac was scared for him. He couldn't pick the lock, beat that guy up or offer comfort. He hated situations like this. Well, Vic probably hated it even more, but that was beside the point.

The man opened a metal door in the wall, which showed a burning furnace. *What the hell...* Then it dawned on him what the guy was planning to do. "Oh God! Are you freaking nuts!"

The man didn't bother with a reply, busy retrieving a hot poker with thick gloves. Smiling unpleasantly, he walked over to the cage, whistling *Stairway to Heaven*, and taunted Mac with the torture device. Vic started to tremble in obvious distress. The psychopath waved the poker in front of Mac. "Is this entertaining enough for you... hot shot?" He let out a freaky laugh again and stalked over to Vic. He lifted the poker and let it hover over Vic's face, just inches away from his skin. Vic was sweating heavily and showed signs of fear. Mac had never seen him scared before. He was the trusted pillar of their little triangle. Even the Director knew that. *Damn it!* The guy made his move, shoving the thing squarely onto Vic's back. Vic screamed heartbreakingly. Skin sizzled, leaving an awful smell of burned flesh. *Almost like a really disturbing barbecue.* The man laughed out loud the entire time, occasionally singing the annoying tune, and the burning continued.

It seemed ages to Mac as he dug his nails into the palms of his hands. He didn't think that anything could get to him anymore. Not since the things he had seen in Hong Kong and prison, but now he realized he knew nothing. He felt like crying. Crying like Vic was. God, his steady, trustworthy rock was crying. The guy went back to the furnace, putting the poker back, only to retrieve a second one. It was differently shaped, but the effect was the same. Vic was making heaving sounds now, almost like he wanted to throw up but couldn't. The poker came down on his back again, leaving Vic to scream for the second time. The torture had already taken so much out of him that the sound was raw and earth shattering. If Mac had thought the first one was bad, this was hell. *O God, what if there is a third?!* As if the guy had heard his thoughts, he went back to the furnace, leaving a barely conscious Vic behind. He put down the poker and grabbed a cup of water, throwing it in Vic's face.

"Stay conscious, Krycek, or I might take a liking to your partner. Not that you would mind, of course, but you need him to take care of you, for now." The maniacal smile was back.

Vic blinked his eyes, as if trying to hold back tears of pain. His face covered in sweat, he tried to stand up against the wall, bracing for the next brutal assault. Then Mac's worst fears came to life. There was indeed a third. The man took the third poker from the furnace and made a show of it while stalking towards his victim, winking at Mac.

"Like the entertainment so far, slick?"

Mac swallowed his rising tears and fear away and tried to sound as casual as he could manage.

"Not really, the host is a real disappointment."

"Well, we can't have everything." The guy looked at Mac and smiled unnervingly as he put the poker on Vic's back. This time he barely screamed, as if all the life had been drained from him. Mac looked away, no longer able to watch the display before him.

Finally the man backed off, and Vic slumped as far down as the shackles would let him. The psycho stood still and stared greedily, mesmerized, at Vic's back, smiling with satisfaction. The stench in the small room was almost unbearable, and the sight of Vic's scarred back was sickening, but the psychopathic maniac didn't seem to care. He positively beamed with pride.

"Now you're branded for life, Krycek. Quite a work of art if I may say so." Still eyeing his work, he threw a bucket of water over Vic's back. Vic let out a muffled whimper, but without any conviction or resistance left in it. "Oh, I'm sorry. Did that hurt? After all the trouble I went through to get you real salt water."

Mac winced at the reddening skin and realized what the man had done. The burning had a pattern. It spelled a word, 'Rat'.

"Get back to the wall again, hot shot." Releasing Vic from his chains, the man dragged his limp body to the cage and started to open the door. Mac tensed his muscles. This was it, his chance, or so he thought.

"Don't try anything, hot shot. If you do, I'll kill your 'partner' before you can kill me."

And that was it. No chance at all. After the door had closed again, Mac rushed over to Vic's side. Eyeing the bruised and beaten body, he decided on the best course of action. He quickly took off his shirt, a very expensive blue silk one, and used it as a washcloth. He began wiping the sweat from Vic's face and using his shirt to blot the swollen skin on his body. His partner appeared to be barely conscious.

"Vic, Vic, can you hear me? Come on, man, don't do this to me."

"I'm the one who is blessed by his attention, Ramsey. Stop complaining," Vic snapped, obviously hurting, but awake and still with it. Mac let out a sigh of relief and quickly returned to his old self. Letting Vic see how scared he was wouldn't help in the least.

"I was worried; sorry if that offends you."

Vic tried to get up but obviously lacked the strength.

"Here, let me help." Mac helped him, unconsciously letting his hand trail over the battered body, but careful to avoid the brand marks themselves. Even with the wounds on his back, he had the muscles of a Greek hero. *God, he is beautiful.* No, he wouldn't mind a date with Vic at all. Mac was happy to notice that Vic moved closer to him, letting Mac offer him comfort while grabbing his hand to squeeze, shuddering with the first signs of shock. Suddenly Mac began to have very disturbing, unwelcome thoughts, and reactions, to Vic. He had never seen him with his defences down. It was compelling, attractive and erotic as hell. He started to stroke Vic's hair and slowly put his head in his lap, carefully avoiding his groin; Vic had enough to deal with right now.

Careful not to startle Vic, he whispered, "Do you have any idea who this maniac is?... Vic?" Vic didn't answer. He seemed to be sleeping. Mac let his hand trail over Vic's face, his thumb making circles over his cheek. Vic did respond subtly, whether he was consciously aware of it or not, fluttering his eyelashes and quivering his perfectly curved mouth intently.

Vic let out a shaky sigh. "Don't leave me."

Mac couldn't determine if Vic was dreaming or not.

"Don't worry, Mansfield. I wouldn't leave even if you forced me to listen to your crappy music all day long. Besides, it's kind of hard with those bars."

A slight smile tugged at Vic's lips. Mac did the same.

"I thought you said you were a good thief."

The bright green eyes opened to send a shock through Mac's body. Vic pushed himself up, letting Mac's hand fall down his back. Their faces were close, not touching. Vic looked at him intently as if he was trying to probe his mind. Then he spoke again, his breath flowing into Mac's parted mouth.

"How long have you wanted me? Don't worry, I'm really not homophobic, you know."

Mac froze and was stunned for a moment before he could speak. Vic was behaving very... unlike Vic. He was actually perceptive for once and not acting like the naive ex-cop he knew. And well, interested in men was the total opposite of how he had always pictured beautiful but boring Vic.

"I, Vic, I..."

Vic put his finger on Mac's lips, silencing him.

"Sssh, it's okay, don't worry, I understand. It happens, but I need somebody right now, Mac. I can't do this alone. I need my partner. Please try to keep your anger at this guy under control. You're the one who has to be cool now. I... I think I'll lose it when that guy comes back again..."

The misery on Vic's face made Mac's heart leap as he acted on this leap of faith. He caught Vic's face between his hands. "You would never lose it, Vic. If it hadn't been for your heroic and calculated acts, I would be dead or still a street punk on the run from the Director. I'm the hot head, remember. I liked you at first. Now... You and Li Ann are the only reasons I stayed. Now I've only one reason. You've shown me a lot. You both have."

"Don't get sappy on me, Ramsey. It isn't like you."

Mac let his hands drop like as if he had been burned until he saw the glint in Vic's eye. He smiled. "Well, you were the one that had to go all 'opening up guy' on me."

Vic smiled back. "Thanks." And he leaned in to plant a soft kiss on Mac's lips. It was sweet and masculine at the same time. It turned Mac to mush in no time. *Damn, this man can kiss.*

Mac moaned and then Vic's tongue slipped into his mouth. Tasting him, lapping lazily at the insides of his lips, his mouth and stroking his tongue. Vic's hands stroked his face and ears and petted his hair lovingly. *Li Ann, why did you let him go?! At the moment Mac thought he would burst, Vic broke the kiss smiling angelically. Mac tried to get his breathing under control, while Vic seemed to be having no trouble with that part at all. Mac shook his head and took Vic's hand again, settling him against his chest.*

"You're a son of a bitch, Vic."

"You can do better than that; I've been called far worse."

"Do I even want to know about your sordid past?" Mac chuckled, thinking of Vic's Ivy.

"What could be worse than the present? I'm owned, stamped and checked by the Director and her weirdo squad, remember. Besides, every time my past catches up with me, it gets down and dirty. Come to think of it. Now, even the past of other guys catches up on me." He wiggled his fingers through Mac's hair, and planted another kiss on his forehead.

"You're a good kisser Ramsey." *So this is what they meant by 'it's always the quiet types.'* Vic closed his eyes, hands lying in his lap, leaning against the wall. Mac caught his shoulders and dragged him against his chest, wrapping his arms around Vic in a friendly, comforting manner, still not touching his wounds. They sat like that for hours, all the while unaware of the trench coat man who secretly watched them.

Mac realized he had fallen asleep when he heard the door open again. "Waky, waky!" a familiar someone said. Mac stirred, forgetting he was holding Vic against his chest. His reaction caused Vic some pain, and he grunted, their private little world shattered. Mac realized how this looked like to the psycho and understood the implications. The guy would use this new-found knowledge against them. He quickly helped Vic to sit up, all the while trying to keep the wounds from starting to bleed again. Vic was back in angry mode again, staring, eyes full of hatred, at the man standing in front of their cage.

"Come to beat me again?"

"Why? Do you want me to?" the man asked with a malicious smile.

"I don't think you care that much what I want. You seem to do whatever you want anyway."

The man stood in front of the bars. "And here I thought you weren't smart, Krycek." Mac rolled his eyes. The maniac's 'friendly' bantering was becoming irritating. The man made a show of going to the big rocking chair, sitting down and opening another bag of sunflower seeds. He let out an audible sigh as if trying to let them know he was bored and about to do something about it. "As you probably know, Krycek, I have this fondness for watching special events. So I'm going to present your partner Mac with a golden opportunity, which I'm sure he has dreamed of for a long time. A. I could go back to torturing you again or B. He fucks you."

The casual remark made Vic choke on the water he was drinking, leaving Mac to hurry to his side and try to help him. He frantically started to think about their options. He couldn't possibly let Vic be tortured like that again. He looked like a wreck now, not to mention his mental state, and after a second session there would be nothing left. But he also would never comply with option 'B'. If the Director ever found out or God forbid, Li Ann... Besides, Vic was the romantic, private type. At least that's what he had always thought. If he did this, he would have to do it right, and right now Vic wasn't thinking clearly. The kiss, that was still vivid in his mind, proved that. He acted very unlike Vic. Which was, of course, logical since he was under strain from his torture, shock and fear. A battle raged inside Mac. *What would Vic do if he was in his right mind?* Fortunately for Mac, Vic had already made his decision.

He whispered in Mac's ear, "Mac, if you could, if you are able, I would like to take option B. Do you think you're up to it?" Desperate green eyes and husky voice went straight to Mac's groin again. *Definitely not homophobic then.* This was not the kind of reaction he wanted to have towards Vic. However, somehow, now it was convenient. Vic probably wasn't thinking about the consequences, and it was Mac's job now to think for both of them. If they ever got out of this mess, Vic would probably kill Mac for this, but then again, it was for his own good. *And mine.* Without any further reply he nodded and slowly closed his mouth on Vic's, kissing his mouth with the love and caring he knew Vic needed so much. Hell, he never let a free fuck get away, but this was different, not to mention perverse. Vic would not be a free fuck. This

one would be life threatening. A mistake waiting to happen. But what choice was there anyway? His mind and body urged him back to his task again. Kissing, he was actually kissing Vic. His male partner. He took Vic's head between his hands, careful not to hurt him in any way. He started to plant butterfly kisses all over his face, trying to make him feel at ease.

"Hey! No romantic ventures here. This is my time. I want to see it rough and fast. Hurt him or I will, and that will be a lot worse, believe me, buddy."

A tube of some kind of lube was thrown in the cage. Judging by the weight and size of the tube, it wouldn't be enough to do it without hurting Vic. Most likely, that was what that guy had in mind. Seedy prick.

"You don't have much of a sex life, have you? I mean, this is fairly desperate. Are you one of those guys who jerks off on his couch alone at night?"

"Seedy" threw half a bag of sunflowers against the bar and barked with his mouth full of them. "Start stripping. Both of you," he ordered while chewing on his seeds.

Stealing a quick glance at his partner, Mac started to undress. Vic was having problems and stood against the wall, chest heaving. He was still fumbling with his pants when Mac was ready. He didn't know what worried him more. The fact that Vic could see how hard he already was at the thought of screwing his partner or that Vic didn't even have the strength left to get out of his pants. Ignoring his body, he crouched in front of Vic and brushed his hands away. He obliged and let his head sink back against the wall, eyes closed, giving himself to Mac. It took a moment to get him as stark naked as Mac was, but it was worth it. How he had wanted to be someplace else and right here at the same time. The only trouble was that Vic was not aroused. A small voice inside Mac said hurtful things. He knew he couldn't expect anything from Vic, but still. This would be... What exactly? When he stood up, he stole a glance at the psycho guy. He was still grinning. *Probably drools all over the carpet when watching porn videos.*

Vic opened his eyes to look straight at Seedy. Somehow the guy knew where to look. He acted as if he enjoyed seeing Vic in distress, more than seeing him in pain.

"You think I am this Krycek guy, but now you want to see this... Vulgar display. What's this all about? You want to re-enact something? You were lovers?"

Furiously the man got up. "Shut up, Krycek! Lovers? Like hell, we're more than that. You know that, damn you!" In seconds he was in front of the cage again. He hesitated, looking at them both with lust and something else. "Get on with it." It was the end of the conversation.

Mac put his hand on Vic's back and pushed him to his knees, talking quietly in his ear. "Listen, Vic, we've got to make this look good if we want to get out of this. I'm going to hurt you and I'm sorry, but that's just the only way."

"Just do it, Mac, fast and rough like he wants it."

Mac used the lube to spread on his own dick, but just as he had thought, there was nothing left for Vic's preparation. He started to think about using pre come but a look at the guy with the seeds told him that that would only get Vic another beating or worse. The guy could be thinking of doing it himself and something told him that that would not be any better than the torture. Positioning his dick in front of Vic's ass, he spread the ass-cheeks and put his cock head at the entrance. Carefully he started to push in until the seedy man shouted, "One shove! Don't be such a sissy, he can take it. One shove!" His face was as flushed and hot as Mac felt.

He waited one moment to let Vic prepare for the onslaught and shoved all the way in. Vic went rigid but didn't let a sound escape from his throat. Strangely, it disturbed Mac a bit, so he started to whisper in Vic's ear, fighting to keep still inside him.

"Come on, Mansfield, work with me here, grunt or yell, he has got to be convinced. Vic?"

Mac didn't dare stop too long, but he couldn't just 'do Vic' without some sign of life from him. A sign of surrender to his passion. Mac shuddered with pleasure and had a hard time keeping his mind on the matter at hand. He was sinking and not only on a mental level. Seedy made a strange sound and spit out a sunflower seed at them. With that gesture and signal, Mac pulled almost all the way out and shoved back into Vic's body, hard. He moved his right hand to Vic's face to caress his cheek, while starting a steady rhythm, only to discover blood on Vic's mouth. Quit likely, he was biting on his lip or tongue to keep from screaming. *Damn, I am hurting him.* Mac tried to urge him and keep his own desires under control.

"Scream, damn you! Let go, Vic."

One look at Seedy told Mac that he was right; Vic had to scream some bit. He decided to take matters into his own hands, so to speak. He moved his right hand to Vic's cock and squeezed, not that gently, while at the same time plunging extremely roughly into his body. That was what it took to make Vic finally release a soft sob and anguished cry.

Mac hoped that that was enough. Vic's cock was still as limp as it was at the beginning, but Mac didn't dare pleasure his partner in any way, for that would annoy the trenchcoat guy to no end. So he let his hand creep back to Vic's face and held his left hand in a bruising grip on Vic's hip. The whole time it lasted Mac felt like the sick fuck he knew Seedy had to be. He was putting Vic through hell, but he felt like

he was in heaven. His case with the transsexuals was satisfying, but this, this was electrifying and hot. He had never realized he had this kinky, perverse side, and he hated and loved it at the same time.

Maybe the psycho had known this about him, studied him with Vic earlier and wanted to break him like this. He didn't care for the motives or reasons, not while he was fucking the most gorgeous man he had ever met. *And he is mine for the moment. Eat your heart out, Li Ann*, he thought with a happy bitterness. Mac felt his pleasure build up to new heights, and he exploded inside Vic, screaming his name. He came while his partner cursed and screamed because of the final harsh treatment he had gotten from Mac. He broke down on the floor, seemingly unconscious, letting Mac slip out of his body while still spurting his seed.

The man with the seeds applauded slowly while rising to stand and smiled a psychopathic smile.

"You've got one hour to get yourselves together. Then I want another show."

Mac couldn't believe his ears. Vic didn't stir from the ground.

"What? You said..."

"I said nothing. I said it was this or the torture. It's still your choice. I'm going to... take care of my own... business."

"Yeah, thanks for the information... psycho."

Laughing harshly, the man walked away, leaving Vic and Mac alone again. Getting his act together again, Mac turned to Vic. He was bleeding from his ass, and the wounds on his back had opened up again. Mac cringed at the sight of it. He walked over to the other side of the cage to get his torn shirt and soaked it in the water bowl that Seedy had put in the cage earlier. Vic still didn't acknowledge him. It wasn't clear to Mac if Vic was conscious or not, but he closed the distance between them as he would approach a wounded animal. He put his hand on Vic's left shoulder with all the softness and love he could muster. Vic stirred and shook it off. Finally he showed some sign of life. Backing off, Mac waited for him to turn around. When it didn't happen, it got on his nerves and made him feel guilty. It looked like he had to take the first step.

"Look, Vic, it's not my fault; you asked for it."

Vic spun around, almost falling against the wall, his face as white as death, looking vehemently in Mac's eyes.

"No, I didn't. I didn't ask to be kidnapped by a crazy psychopath who has a bizarre sex life and hates a guy he thinks is me. I didn't ask to be branded, hit or spit on!"

Mac put up his hands defensively. "Okay, okay, I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings, but I'm in this too and I'm dealing as well as I can. Don't blame me for this guy's actions."

"That's not it, Mac. You liked it. You actually liked it!" Vic spat at him, sounding angry and desperate at the same time.

"What do you want me to say? I can't help my bodily reactions, Vic. I want to help you, but there isn't any other way." Mac tried to be as soothing as he could.

Vic closed his eyes and calmed his erratic breathing. "Well, at least we found a new way to spend time together."

"What?" He opened his eyes again, letting Mac stare into a sea of green.

"I'd like to enjoy it too, you know." And there they were, sitting naked in a cage. One man holding a torn, wet shirt, the other one branded and covered in bruises. The situation was so insane Mac couldn't help but smile. Vic followed his example, though more mildly due to his injuries. Incredible but true, Vic's cock started to rise. *What had set that off?*

"I don't know if this is a good idea, Vic. You should be resting. I want to be your friend but..."

Vic cut him off. "Don't say it's too complicated, Ramsey, or I swear I'll kill you where you stand."

It amazed Mac every time just how passionate Vic really was.

"That's not what I wanted to say, Vic. It's just, well, I don't think you're with the program here. You're acting irrationally and to be frank, very unstable."

"Unstable? Have you got any idea how difficult it is to act rationally in a situation like this? How am I supposed to act?"

Mac moved closer to sit next to Vic, his hand creeping up his thigh.

"I don't know how you're supposed to act. You're the expert at what is and isn't done in the moral world."

"I hate to break it to you, Mac, but we're not in Kansas anymore."

Mac closed his hand around Vic's cock. He gasped.

"What does that make me? Dorothy?"

Vic moaned and thrust into Mac's hand. His voice sounded strangled. "More like Toto. Always at my heels when I least expect it."

That sounded like an invitation if he had ever heard one. Mac leaned down and delicately licked the area around the beautiful, erect cock.

"But what beautiful heels they are." He engulfed the cock head and lightly pushed his tongue under the foreskin. Vic shuddered in seeming delight. He brought in his hands to give Vic maximum delight. He

usually used his fingers to stroke his partner's prostate, but right now pushing his fingers into Vic's already sore ass wouldn't be wise. The heaven Mac had experienced earlier came crashing back down on him. Vic tasted like he thought he would and was as responsive as hell. He idly wondered what it would be like to be screwed by him. Having those hands stroke his hips, his nipples. Having him bite his shoulder in passion, crying out his name as he spilled his essence inside Mac's body. It excited him to no end, and he grew hard rapidly. Ignoring it, Mac continued his task with sheer devotion. Now and then he shot a glance at Vic, whose eyes fluttered, not opening. His mouth was slightly open, panting and letting out gasps of pleasure. One of his long legs had come around to stroke Mac's ass, his heel digging into the crack. His hands were on Mac's head, not pushing him, but lovingly stroking and tangling his fingers through the unruly curls. It didn't last long enough for Mac, but when Vic came, it felt like thunder roaring down a tidal wave of emotions. He didn't scream out Mac's name but mumbled unintelligible words while his semen was spurting into Mac's mouth. It was almost too much for him to swallow. It had been a while since he had done this for another man, but it was sweet nonetheless.

When he had drunk every drop Vic had to offer, he let the limp cock slip out of his mouth and sighed. This had been heaven, welcome back to hell.

Then the door burst open, and Dobrinsky came in. He had a stern look on his face, which started to lighten up as soon as he saw Vic and Mac. Behind him Camier and Murphy followed, making a more dramatic entrance, which always seemed so important to the Cleaners. Dobrinsky ignored them, put his gun away and walked over to the bars. Seeing Vic, his face cringed a bit. Then the smile came back, and his gaze settled on Mac. "Well, Ace, gotten yourself and your partner in trouble again? You seem to be having fun."

Mac couldn't think of a time he was more relieved at seeing someone than now. "Dobie! I never thought I would say this, but it's actually good to see you."

"Would you mind saying that again on tape? I would love to have a reminder of this occasion."

"Not a chance, man. Can you get us out? Vic needs medical attention, bad."

"You captor refused to tell us the location of the key. We can't find it either."

Dobrinsky started to let his eyes wonder over Vic's body. He showed genuine concern. Mac had never seen that kind of look on his face. The Cleaners moved up beside him, eyeing Vic with interest.

"Medieval torture. One of the classics," Murphy remarked.

"Yes, but notice the outer region. Very sloppily done. Obviously not an artist." Camier snorted in contempt.

"Obviously," Murphy agreed.

Dobrinsky had found the iron that had been used on Vic's back and put it between the lock and the cage. With leverage it might be enough to crack the lock open. Dobrinsky grunted as he strained his big body against the cage.

"Hey, Dobie, not that I'm complaining, but why don't you just shoot the lock off?" Mac asked.

Murphy and Camier stood still, side by side, like the blood brothers they were, although Mac suspected there was more going on than simply the camaraderie between two assassins.

"If I tried to shoot the lock off, the bullet could bounce off the metal, Ace. So if you wouldn't mind, I'd rather try this method."

"Or you could give me a key?"

That stopped the big black man. "You think you can open this thing?"

"Hey, I am a thief." He shrugged and smiled.

"Yes, Ace, that's what got you into our little family in the first place." Dobrinsky grinned back. He dropped the makeshift crowbar and looked around for something small. When he didn't find anything and started to grunt in frustration, Camier and Murphy shared a very suspicious look. Then, Murphy reached into his vest pocket to get a small, metal device. It shimmered in the dim light of the light bulb that was hanging from the ceiling.

"Would this suffice, Mr. Ramsey?" Murphy moved from his place to give the item to Mac and went back to stand beside his partner.

"Please be careful with it. It was a gift from dear Camier and is quite irreplaceable."

Mac eyed it with interest. It looked like a tiepin, solid gold with a diamond handle, but if it was, one wouldn't hide it inside a vest pocket. Somehow his hands did something to it and a very sharp, long pin whooshed out, grazing his hand.

"Damn! You could have warned me."

Camier spoke in his famous casual tone. "You have found its purpose. Why should we elaborate the obvious?"

"Right," Mac muttered and raised his eyebrow while his lips tightened. He cast one look at Vic, who was still lying on the floor, unconscious. That image alone made him work harder, and he shoved the pin into the lock. The angle was a little bit off and caused him some discomfort, but it was worth it. Before long the lock sprang open, and a sigh of relief escaped his lips.

"Dobie, can you get me some water? I have to try and get Vic to wake up before the medics come in. He wouldn't want to lie here helpless. You know how he gets."

"No problem, Ace, there is a water supply around the corner. Give me the bowl."

The man left, not showing any sign of knowing what had transpired between Vic and Mac, but he wasn't stupid. He had to suspect something; Vic's body and Mac's reactions said enough. Mac sat on his heels beside his partner. Vic looked so vulnerable and sweet. Mac pushed a stray hair from Vic's eyes, not really caring if the Cleaners saw him do it or not. He eased his partner on his lap, not letting his eyes leave his face. Dobrinsky came back with the bowl filled with water.

"Listen, Ace, maybe it would be smarter to call the medics. He really looks bad."

"No! He can't take that. He needs to have some time to adjust."

Dobrinsky put his hands up in a defensive manner.

"All right, he is your partner, so you probably know best. Do you need any help?"

"No, just, could you leave us alone for a minute? I'm sure I can bring him around. We will walk out of here. He will not be going on a stretcher."

Dobrinsky nodded his consent and left. The Cleaners followed him with grace.

Mac reached for the bowl that Dobrinsky had left next to him. The man had found some sort of cloth. It looked a lot cleaner than his overly used shirt, so he used that. Lovingly, he wiped the sweat from Vic's face, bringing coolness to the hot, fevered face. *I will make sure that you're okay, Vic. No one will hurt you again.*

"Vic? If you can hear me, try to open your eyes."

Slowly the long eyelashes stirred. With obvious difficulty, Vic opened his eyes. Upon seeing Mac, he smiled.

"What happened?"

"You passed out on me. You really had me worried, lover boy."

"Well, you did give one hell of a blow job. My body can take only so much. After all, I am an older guy... sweet cheeks."

"Okay, now that is a disgusting nickname. Could you do any worse?"

"Should I?"

"Come to think of it, no. Vic, listen, the rescue squad has come. They caught the psycho and are waiting outside. Do you think you can walk?"

Vic struggled to sit upright, and Mac eased his hold on the man.

"I'm sore as hell and I feel like shit, but walking will be better than being removed from a cell by the goon squad."

Mac grinned. "That's what I told Dobie."

Vic looked startled. "Dobrinsky is here? I mean, he has been in here?" He pointed to their surroundings.

Mac understood. "Yes, but I am sure he will keep his mouth shut, Vic. He left with the Cleaners as soon as they had helped me open the door."

Now he looked absolutely horrified. "The Cleaners were here too?!"

Mac started to rub Vic's tense shoulders and back.

"Calm down, Vic. It's not that bad."

"How can you say that, Mac!" Vic hissed. "I am going to be a laughing stock to half the Agency and pitied by the other half. I don't want that! I just want to forget." His eyes looked so damn vulnerable again, as if Mac could clean up the mess Seedy had made.

"I am sorry, Vic, but you know this won't just disappear. I for one can't just live with this as if nothing had happened and go back to the way things were. I'm not really like that, Vic. Sure I have casual sexual affairs, but this is not one of them. You're not only my partner; you're also my friend, and this is not a normal situation. It's pretty freaky. If somebody else finds out, we can't change that. It sucks but it happens. We do have a say in this; we can change our relationship."

Something in Vic's eyes shifted for a moment. He looked dead serious.

"There is no us, Mac. I just can't make any promises right now. I am sorry too, but that's the way it is. I have too much to deal with right now, and I can't deal with you too. Just give me some room and time, and maybe we'll talk about this later."

He stood up with some difficulty and started to drag himself towards the exit, leaving a hurt and baffled Mac behind. He whispered before he got up.

"Oh, we will talk about it, Vic. You can clam up as much as you want to, but I'll get you to open up. I'm not going to be dumped. Not after this." He quickly caught up with Vic and supported him without a further word.

Outside the building, Dobrinsky seemed to be waiting for them as he hurried to Vic's side to take his other arm. Together they walked towards the group of people and the ambulance that was probably waiting to take Vic to the Agency's facilities. The Director was standing near a black, shady looking car with smoke swirling out of the tinted window. She was talking to the occupant and turned her head as

soon as Mac and Vic came into her line of sight. One more word was directed into the car, and her serious expression lightened up a little bit as she approached the two lost agents. She put a hand on Vic's shoulder.

"Are you all right, Victor? We wouldn't want you damaged after all the effort we have put into your rehabilitation." Vic didn't say a word, so Mac cut in.

"Gee, thanks for the concern. What took you so long?"

"Somehow you forgot to tell us you were going in, Mac. I seem to remember saying something about not going in there but just investigate and report back to me?"

Mac nervously shot a look at Vic, but he showed a faint smile; good, he wasn't angry.

"You remember saying that? Funny, because I really don't remember hearing it."

That made her laugh.

"Just try to remember it the next time an assignment like this comes up. The Director always knows best."

"Yes, mom."

She smiled and turned her back to them to walk away, leaving Dobrinsky to handle the matter at hand.

While still having his eyes locked on the Director, Mac felt Vic stiffen in his grip. He wanted to ask him what was going on until he saw the reason for his distress. Li Ann and Jackie were bringing out the maniac.

Vic rasped in a shaky voice, "What is he doing here? I thought he would gone by now."

The three of them watched as Seedy came closer but was kept at a safe distance.

"Don't worry, Vic, I'm sure it will be all right."

"Shut up, Mac, I'm tired of hearing that sorry excuse for comfort. It will not be all right until I deal with this, and that is exactly what I am going to do." Vic's voice had grown determined, and he started to walk towards Seedy, roughly shaking himself free of Mac's grip. Fortunately Dobrinsky was stronger.

"Hold it, man. You are obviously agitated, and this is not the way to go and make house calls don't you think?"

Vic actually looked furious. His eyes were very dark, almost black, but it certainly wasn't from passion this time.

"Dobrinsky, if you have an understanding bone in your body, you will let me go and put this behind me. If I don't, I will wonder every night where he is and why he did it. I want to finish it!"

The tall dark man seemed to be contemplating his options and let go of Vic with an understanding nod.

"Okay, but don't push it. I'm not going to pick up the pieces this time."

Vic looked at Mac and petted his shoulder. "Wait here."

"But can you walk on your own, Vic?"

He shrugged. "I'll manage, I always do."

With that Mac let him go towards the man. After all, he knew better than to stop Vic when he was angry.

Li Ann and Jackie had already halted, seeing the debate that was going on. Seedy seemed to have said something because Jackie gave him one of her famous right hooks, while Li Ann made it very clear that she was ignoring him. After Seedy recovered from the blow, Jackie cocked her gun and held it to his right temple. Li Ann met Vic halfway and carefully gave him a hug. "I heard your wounds were extensive, Vic. You should be in the ambulance instead of on your feet talking to that maniac."

She smiled. "But I'm glad you're okay."

"Thanks, Li Ann, you're bringing this guy in?" Vic asked, eyes never leaving Seedy's face. It seemed he had become the predator now. The change was incredible. Like a chameleon from children's stories, the bogeyman that Mac had always been afraid of. The killer dressed in black. Li Ann seemed to be ignoring the change, although Mac was sure she had noticed it too. He hoped Vic wouldn't lose it completely. Li Ann put a friendly arm around Vic's shoulder when they started to walk again.

"Yeah, Jackie and I got the wonderful and exciting job of escorting him... to that car. It seems that there are some people who want him pretty bad. Can you believe he actually is a FBI agent? Went psycho on them some time ago. They say he killed his partner in his own apartment and then claimed that some mysterious guy murdered her. When his boss tried to protect him, he put him in the hospital. Brain dead now. He left a trail of corpses, always blaming that same mysterious guy. Heartless bastard," she spit out.

"Sounds like a sad story." Vic didn't sound like he really cared, and he left Li Ann standing a couple of meters away from Seedy, while he walked slowly towards the man. He looked angry all right, but he was silent, for now, studying Vic with a wary, defiant look.

"Jackie, would you give me a gun? I'll keep an eye on him, and you can do it from a distance too. I need to talk to him alone."

The guy was still quiet.

"Are you sure that's a good idea, Vic? I mean, he's pretty nuts, right?" Her bubble gum popped from her mouth.

"It's okay, Jackie, it's not like he needs a backrub or something, right." That made Jackie laugh, thinking back to the King.

"Fine, but don't take too long; that car is really freaking me out. We have to get him in there fast." Vic nodded.

After Jackie was far enough for Vic to be alone with Seedy, he closed in on him until his mouth was near his ear. He whispered so no one but the man could hear him, "Moy toi shi bien, tovarish," and walked away without turning back, leaving a raving man behind.





The View From Purgatory by Lefey

The heat seared his back. Mac felt the brunt of the explosion even through his jacket as he and Vic and Li Ann were flattened to the ground.

He rose slowly. The sound drew his attention, like water crashing over rocks. He glanced back. The old warehouse was engulfed in flames. A few feet ahead of him Li Ann appeared dazed, and Vic was at her side helping her to stand. Mac managed to rise to his knees. He planned to help Li Ann himself, but found his legs had turned to jelly. Vic reached him in a few long, rushed strides. He lifted Mac, levering him up with one arm under his.

Mac nearly laughed at Vic's worried expression. He felt a giddy fatigue take control of him and all he could think of as Vic held him up was the guy's young sister calling him 'Moose'. It was true: he was a moose compared to Mac. Not as tall as Mac, but with a much more substantial body that could, as he'd just proved, lift him easily from the ground. It wasn't just the strength, or the big boned frame that made the name so apt. There was a working class valour to him that made Mac imagine him on a construction site, a logging camp, or wiping his hands off as he rolled from under a car he was repairing. The name would be deserved and worn like a badge of honour.

"Thanks Moose," Mac said with an exhausted giggle.

Vic gave him a puzzled frown, but then flinched as part of the building behind them collapsed, sending a gust of heated air rushing past them. The night sky lit up with the implosion like a fireworks display.

Vic reached out his hand to Li Ann. "We have to get away from here!" he yelled above the sounds of the burning building.

She grabbed Vic's hand, and they ran as best as they could with Mac in tow.

Mac saw a figure running towards them. Well, not really running, more like stumbling. His tired brain finally made the connection and realized it was the Director. A stain darkened the front of her coat and he remembered that she had been shot.

Vic reached across Mac and motioned to Li Ann. "Go on," he insisted and pointed at the Director.

Li Ann nodded and sprinted towards the staggering woman.

"I'm okay," Mac said, with no real attempt to move out of Vic's grasp.

"Sure you are," Vic answered, but tightened his hold on Mac.

Mac heard sirens wailing in the distance as the building blazed behind them. He knew the first group to arrive would be Agency personnel. Their own EMT's would treat and transport them. A handful of Agency police would direct the evacuation, and in the confusion of a fire this size the real emergency services people would be too busy to notice a few ringers.

They caught up with Li Ann who was kneeling beside their boss. The Director reached out and Vic took her hand for a moment. The contact seemed to reassure her, and she settled with her back resting against the car as Li Ann held her own jacket against the other woman's wound.

Vic turned Mac around and held his arms as he tried to guide him to sit. Mac resisted for a moment but it was just that, a moment. Vic's firm grip—Moose's bulky strength—had him sitting with his own back against the car in no time.

Again, Mac wanted to laugh. A short smirking scoff to tell the other man that he'd *allowed* himself to be overpowered. Mac knew he had the skill and finesse to make kindling out of Vic in a couple of swift moves. Vic possessed limited fighting skills relying, instead, on his strength and a few dozen guns. Vic only had his Moose moves. The thought drew a smile from Mac.

"You in a lot of pain?" Vic asked, and began to feel around Mac's ribs and abdomen for any signs of injury.

Mac changed his smile into the grimace Vic took it for. "Nothing serious," he answered, dismissing the few bruises he did feel.

It was an odd sensation to let Vic touch him like this. Even when they were in the thick of things there was a barrier between them. They never touched beyond the occasional helping hand up. They never even stood close to one another if they could help it. Now, in the middle of hell with flames roaring behind them, a building crashing to its death and sirens blaring towards them, Mac *allowed* Victor Mansfield, his rival for everything, to press his hands gingerly over his torso and down his legs.

Vic's breath was warm on Mac's cheek as the other man kneaded and explored his shoulders. The scent of cinnamon wafted around him. Through all this Vic still had a wad of that damn cinnamon gum in his mouth. Mac could never smell the spicy aroma of cinnamon anymore, and not think of Vic Mansfield. He never wore red, but that was Vic's colour as far as Mac was concerned. Vic Mansfield, walking red-hot. Moose, red hot Moose, he corrected himself, and laughed at the twisted image the words evoked.

"Does that hurt?" Vic stopped at the sudden noise, but when Mac didn't respond he continued to work down Mac's arms, feeling for any damage.

Mac was mildly surprised that Vic didn't find any. It almost felt good as Vic gently manipulated his neck. Mac looked past him at the ever-increasing fire and wondered if Michael had made it out alive. If he hadn't, how would they find his brother's ashes after the building stopped burning? Mac thought about who would keep the urn. Would Li Ann want it? Should they send him back to Hong Kong? How much of Michael would be in the container and how much would just be the remains of the old warehouse? Was there some household god who would object to the mixing of mediums? Would there be karma to pay for having more burnt wood than cremated Michael? Mac wondered, in the haze of shock that surrounded him, if a penalty had already been exacted from him tonight for some other cosmic debt. Is that why Michael played him for a fool? Why did he have to make him trust, open up that door of hope that they could be a family again, and then betray him so profoundly? Why did he have to give him a reason to believe? He'd felt the emotion open him, a glimmer of faith when he and Michael had reconciled in the warehouse. Some vengeful god had looked down on him, though, and proclaimed, "*Trust is not for you, Mac Ramsey.*"

"Mac?"

His face was wet. He could feel the chill on his cheeks in the cold night air, but he was too tired to wipe it away. He wondered what caused the dampness on his skin. The firemen were beginning to spray the building. He thought it might be the mist floating from the great arches of water that played against the fire.

"Mac?"

The Agency's people were running towards them. They reminded him of the opening of that old American TV show M.A.S.H., right down to the concerned face of the EMT as he examined the Director. Maybe they were spritzing her with something and it was drifting over and wetting his face.

"Mac?"

Then, he felt the touch and it jerked him back to reality. The noise from the fire, sirens and concerned voices grew loud and urgent. The cold felt like it seeped into his bones, and he began to shake. The anguish of everything that had happened gasped from his lips as Vic wiped the tears from his face with a couple of fingers.

"Mac?"

"I believed him." Mac rocked and sobbed as Vic wrapped an arm around his shoulder. "In the end, I believed him. Why did he make me believe him? Why?"

Mac awoke slowly, drifting up from the fragmented images of the disaster in the warehouse. He became aware that he was lying in a bed, surrounded by the muted scent of antiseptic. He blinked and his eyes adjusted to the darkness. He could see the digital readout of the monitor that tracked his vitals.

He was able to move one hand from under the blankets and ran his fingers over his dry mouth. His other hand wouldn't budge. Something was holding the blankets down and keeping his right arm snug against his body.

That something was actually somebody. Vic lay with his head cradled in his arms on the bed, asleep.

Mac quickly covered his mouth with his free hand. He would have expected Li Ann to be at his side, but not Moose. He was able to stifle the unbidden laugh that bubbled up at the thought of that name. He must be drugged, he decided, to laugh this easily with Vic Mansfield in the same room.

Vic was such a judgmental bastard. It didn't help that he knew all about Mac's past, and wasn't shy about throwing it in his face. Mac knew he was unarmed when the fight came down to this. What could he say when Vic started in on him? *'You were too trusting, loyal and honourable to turn your partners in while they set you up.'* He remembered the look of admiration on Li Ann's face when she described Vic as a Boy Scout. He'd countered by telling her honesty was highly overrated. Especially, because it was so difficult to produce when you were Mac Ramsey

He felt a familiar spike of anger as he thought about the personal war he and Vic always waged. It was too easy for Vic. Moose could go plodding along with his principles intact. He'd never had to live on the *anythingforapound* streets of Hong Kong before he'd hit puberty, and find his worth in what he could steal. Life was easy for Vic. Making the right decision was second nature to him. Damn Vic's integrity! Damn himself for not having any.

Mac continued to watch Vic sleep. His features looked soft and young in the faint ambient light that came from the hallway. He was nearly pretty. Long lashes fringed his closed eyes, and his almost full lips were parted as he breathed. Mac had never seen his face relaxed like this. There had always been some conflict between them to set their jaws and narrow their eyes.

As Vic slept Mac could even see why Li Ann had become infatuated with him. He saw the attraction that made Vic the Director's favourite. It must be some powerful drug they'd given him to see the man behind the Moose. He didn't laugh this time as the name came to him again. It wasn't funny or even fitting for the man who slept next to him. This wasn't just a man, Mac decided. This was again some cosmic justice for his own past sins. Mac Ramsey was condemned to live among the pure and blessed and never measure up.

Mac moved, just a little, in order to give the blankets enough slack so he could lift his arm out. He looked over at Vic, but he never stirred. He was dressed in his usual pair of workman's jeans, but he had on a pale green surgical top. Mac suspected he'd been examined as well, and that cheap white sweater of his was judged too dirty to put back on. The guy had absolutely no taste in clothes, but Mac knew he was clean to a fault.

Vic's breathing was even and slow. His eyes were still under closed lids. Mac could only imagine the responsibilities he had taken on tonight. Next to the dictionary definition of *'Take charge guy'* it would state: See Victor Mansfield. Mac stifled another laugh at the thought.

Vic continued to sleep, and Mac realized he was a little disappointed by this. He wanted to wake him and have those big green eyes fill with concern and focus on him. Maybe if he turned over a little Vic would feel the mattress shift and that would wake him. Then they could talk. Mac could ask about the Director and Li Ann, and make some wisecrack that he'd survived despite Vic's help. Vic would be concerned at first, speaking softly, glancing down as he told Mac it had been touch and go with the Director for awhile, but she was resting comfortably now. He would explain that Li Ann was taking care of some Agency business, and would look in on him as soon as she could. Then he'd gradually grow defensive as Mac smarted off and poked at the emotional wounds between them. Finally, Vic would stand

and all trace of the serene, fine-looking man that lay slumbering next to Mac would vanish. After that their conversation would end the way it always did: Vic would leave.

Mac wanted to talk, but more than that he wanted the comfort of Moose resting beside him. Gingerly, he threaded the fingers of his right hand through Vic's hair. The other man remained asleep. Mac let his hand rest lightly on Vic's bowed head. It was as good as talk and maybe even better. At least this way Vic wouldn't leave.

Mac walked down the long, stark corridor to the conference room that had been his team's headquarters for the last two years. A disgusted grunt escaped his lips at the thought

"Some team," he growled.

He'd awakened in the Agency medical facility the morning after the fire wondering if Vic had really been asleep on his bed, or if it had just been some fever dream. He didn't have an opportunity to find out because he never saw Vic, Li Ann or the Director after that. By the time he was released a week later, after observation for a mild concussion and internal injuries, he would have welcomed a visit from the Cleaners or, God help him, even Dobrinsky.

He spent three days at home before anger, resentment and boredom sent him out on today's mission. He stopped in the middle of the corridor and started to turn around and leave. Instead, he caught himself and shuffled into a hesitant two-step as he tried to come up with a better plan than his original idea *'I'm going down there, damn it!'*

Well, he was here and he was armed with an irate opening line, *'What the hell's the deal!'*, that sounded lamer every time he thought about it. The main thing was the Director would be just beyond that door. While not a perfect plan, it was better than watching one more dysfunctional idiot spill their perversions on yet another talk show.

Mac's pace picked up as he neared the door. He was in full barging in, give me some answers mode when he reached for the doorknob. Flinging the door open he drew up short on the small landing when Vic looked up from the stack of papers he was working on as he sat alone at the long black conference table.

"Mac," he called out to him. "I heard they released you from the Health Centre a couple days ago."

Mac let the door swing shut behind him. "Thanks for checking on me, partner." Sarcasm rang in the name. He descended the few stairs, and strode towards Vic. "I really appreciated all the calls and visits and just *the concern* you've all showed for me."

Vic put down the folder he had been studying when Mac appeared. "Your doctor told me you needed to rest, so I didn't bother you. If I'd known..."

Mac didn't hear the rest of the sentence. He was too busy trying to fight the growing embarrassment he was certain tinted his cheeks. Leave it to Mr. Perfect here to be able to show total concern by showing none at all.

"So that's why Li Ann didn't visit me?" he asked as he sat down.

Vic blinked, and then gave a surprised smile. "You mean you don't know?"

Mac sat forward, his stomach knotting at the thought that something could have happened to Li Ann.

"Don't know what? She's all right isn't she? She was a little battered, but fine at the warehouse."

"Calm down." Vic raised his hands in a gesture meant to quiet, but it just spiked anger in Mac.

"Don't tell me to calm down! I want to know what happened to Li Ann."

Vic settled back in his chair. He folded his arms across his chest. "Nothing happened to Li Ann." The first words were angry, but he took a deep breath after saying her name, and his tone grew nearly apologetic. "I thought she would have told you herself. It's been in the works for awhile." He hesitated. "You know, maybe she just thought it was too much for you to handle being hurt and..."

"Enough with the damn set-up Victor. Cut to the chase! Where the hell is Li Ann?"

"She's gone, Mac. She's been made a Director and sent to another section. You know there's little or no contact between sections at our level, so she couldn't tell me where she was going."

"But she could tell you that she *was* going."

Vic shifted uneasily in the high-backed office chair.

"I think she just found it easier to talk to me, that's all."

"She couldn't talk to me?" Mac's voice rose as he gripped the edge of the table. "We've been together since we were teenagers. We lived together for a year. She could talk to *me*." He thumped one finger into his chest.

Vic leaned forward. "Maybe she would have talked to you if you weren't such a hot-headed jerk." Vic mimicked Mac's gesture and pointed at himself. "I listened to her. Instead of trying to get in her pants!"

Mac barked out a derisive laugh. "That's a good one, Vic. When did you stop doing that?"

Vic looked away. "When you came back," he answered softly. He sank back into the chair. "The truth is, Mac, she didn't want me for much else once you showed up."

The adrenaline was still rumbling through him but once again Vic had managed to make him feel like toxic waste. There was no denying that Vic had, and probably still did, love Li Ann. The guy had a

pathetic track record with woman. When Mac wasn't congratulating himself that he was the reason Li Ann ended the engagement, he had a few lucid moments when he realized how much the loss hurt Vic.

He settled back in his own chair and studied his hands.

"I wish she would have told me."

Vic nodded his agreement. "No one wishes that more than I do right now."

"It's not your fault, man." He tried to make it sound like an apology because that was as close as he could come to one with Vic. "At least not this time," he added with a sarcastic lilt.

"Gee, thanks," Vic threw back.

Mac sat forward and began to paw through the papers on the desk, trying to distract himself. "What is this, our next assignment? Speaking of assignments, where is her bitch highness, the Director?"

Vic was trying to restack the papers as Mac rummaged through them.

"Mac, stop it," he said after a moment. "This isn't your assignment. It's the paperwork from the Tang family case." He snatched a page Mac was reading out of his hands. "I have these in a certain order, so leave them alone."

"Why are you doing all this?" He watched Vic's face crease into a concerned frown. "And don't even think about using that *'didn't you know,'* line again."

Vic's frown turned into an annoyed grimace. He leaned back in the chair. "The bullet the Director took did a lot of damage. Nothing irreparable, but she has a punctured lung and some nerve damage to her left arm. It's going to be a while before she's back one hundred percent. She's out of intensive care, but has a lot of physical therapy ahead." He waved his hand at the files lined up on the table. "I never realized she had to do all this paperwork."

Mac laughed and leaned forward, snagging the file closest to him. "She never does paperwork." He shook the file at Vic who tried to grab it back from him. "What do you think Dobrinsky does? Where is he, anyway? Why isn't he doing all this crap?"

Vic finally managed to take the file away from him. He placed it on a stack out of reach.

"Dobrinsky is with the Director."

"You sure?" Mac teased. He was rewarded with a momentary flash of doubt that crossed Vic's features.

"Yes, I'm sure!" he answered, but didn't really sound that way. "Besides, some of us have responsibilities and take them seriously."

"Now, that sounded like a shot." Mac smiled. He always got off on how fast he could get to Victor.

"All I'm saying is," Vic leaned forward, totally serious, "this is the only place I have. My life is here or the Agency sends me back to prison. Now, you may think that you'll leave here someday." Vic shrugged. "That may be the case for you, but it won't be for me. So, I'm going to try and make the best out of this next life I've been given."

"Oh, Victor Mansfield, walking inspirational greeting card. Grow where you're planted, eh? Personally, I'm not into mushroom farming; and you, partner, are definitely being fed shit while they keep you in the dark."

Vic leaned back in his chair and tilted his head to one side.

"I'm not the one in the dark, Mac."

His voice was eerily cool and condescending. Any thought of a glib reply left Mac. This wasn't Moose. This wasn't even Vic. The man across the table from him was some version of the Director filtered through a hard edged and sophisticated rendering of Victor Mansfield who Mac never imagined could exist.

Finally, he gave a forced smile. "Is this the part where I ask, who are you and what have you done with Vic?"

"I've stopped fighting the inevitable. It's an idea you should try."

"That's your new philosophy, grow up and sell out?"

"No!" Vic was defensive again and thank God he was Vic again. "But that's a place for you to start. Grow up!"

"Jeez, like you? Come on, Vic, you were boring enough when there was a little life left in you. I'm afraid now, if you sit still too long somebody will call the mortuary." Vic tried to interrupt but Mac kept talking. "And tell me, my work-shirted friend—what is that you have on, a polo shirt? Some retiree die and will you his wardrobe? Did it just arrive from Florida?"

"Not that it's any of your fucking business," Vic leaned towards him, "but I've been so busy here, and I'm exhausted when and if I do get home, that I haven't done any laundry. I had to buy this on the way in this morning."

"Sorry, man." Mac raised his hands in surrender. "I wish I'd known. I didn't want to miss your fiftieth birthday. It's a very important milestone..."

"Are you here for a reason," Vic interrupted, "or should I just get the bug spray?"

Satisfied that he had stirred Vic up to a nice frothy boil, Mac rocked back in his chair. "I'm just checking in."

Vic turned and opened a briefcase on a chair beside him. He pulled out a file and slapped it down on the table in front of Mac.

"That's an assignment the Director saved for you. A little present for when you got back."

Mac looked quickly thought the file. It was a simple breaking and entering robbery. Files were to be taken from a safe.

"Insultingly simple. This is a nothing assignment. A trained monkey could do this."

"I think that's why she gave it to you." Vic flashed a mocking smile.

"Vic," Mac returned the smile, "even you could pull off this one."

"And don't think I wouldn't like to. Read on a little further. The papers are documents that outline a proposed takeover of a large U.S. based conglomerate. This move will destabilize a certain friendly African nation. Insider trading is illegal in the States. We pass this information on, and the merger stops."

"What's the big deal? It's still the equivalent of thief grunt work."

Vic put a hand to his forehead for a second and then leaned towards Mac. "God! Just how damn slow do you read? The guy is a diamond merchant! It's on page three. There'll be a lot more in his safe than just the papers you're sent after."

"And..."

"And we don't care about anything else you take. I need the papers back here by Tuesday. Can you do it?" The last words were an undisguised challenge.

"In my sleep." Mac bristled.

"Yeah? Well, try to stay awake long enough to get the job done." Vic picked up a folder and returned to his work.

"So that's it?" Mac asked, when it became obvious that Vic was ignoring him.

Vic looked up from the file and gave an exasperated sigh.

"You know how to get any supplies you need. You have the assignment file with all the information. What else do you want, a kiss goodbye?"

Mac raised his hands and grimaced in mock horror. "I'm going, man! Jeez, you don't have to threaten me."

He stopped at the landing again, his hand on the doorknob. He looked back at Vic, lost once again in the details of the Tang case.

"You know she's got you doing grunt work, too. There's just no diamonds in it for you."

Vic looked up, but it wasn't Vic. It was the cool, almost frightening spirit that had possessed him earlier.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that." He smiled knowingly.

—

The conference room was empty when Mac returned on Tuesday. It annoyed him to have to hunt Vic down, it took the edge off his fun. He was eager to gloat over the killing he'd made with the stolen diamonds. He'd show poor, paper shuffling Vic that he was more than just a brilliant thief. He was a shrewd businessman as well. He'd even bought a couple of shirts so he could share the wealth with Vic. That was the story he'd tell him when he presented the clothes. Then he'd get in his digs about allowing Vic even more time to be a clerical drone.

He finally found Vic in the research archives. At least the guy standing by the stacks with a book in his hand resembled Victor Mansfield. But he had on an outfit that Moose would never wear.

Mac walked up and grabbed the belt loop on Vic's khaki pants, and gave it a shake. Vic jumped, but then turned on him with an angry frown.

"Don't do that!"

"What are these?" Mac turned him slightly in order to read the label on his back pocket, while Vic tried to slap his hand away. "Dockers? My God, Vic! *You* are wearing Dockers?"

Vic twisted away from him and raised the book. His stance promised he would use it to strike.

"And that's a nice little button down shirt. Très middle management."

"Do you have the information?"

"Of course." Mac pulled a manila envelope from under the gift-wrapped box of shirts and slapped it down on the table next to him. "I told you it was a waste of my talents. But I made a pretty good haul..."

"Nathan!" Vic interrupted as he picked up the envelope.

Nathan appeared almost immediately, startling Mac.

"Copies for the usual distribution," he said, handing over the envelope to the sweaty researcher. "Arrange a courier to take it to our contact in the U.S. Senate. Tell me when it has left the building, and when it arrives in Washington."

Nathan nodded in that stoop-shouldered, near worshipful manner he had around Vic, and turned to go.

"And Nathan..." Vic stopped him. "Bring me some coffee." He turned and pointed at Mac. "You want anything?"

"Yeah, a dose of reality."

Vic stared at him for a moment, and Mac thought he saw a twinge of embarrassment for trying to play boss in front of him. Vic quickly waved Nathan away.

"What was that crack supposed to mean?" Vic asked, as he turned back to the stacks, and reached for another book.

"Oh, you know, 'Chief Vice-Deputy in-charge of the whole world, Mansfield.'" Mac propped himself on the corner of the table. "I just got the 'we're not in Kansas' willies watching you order your slave around."

"Then why don't you click your ruby slippers together, and go home?" Vic turned and laid a large book open on the table beside Mac. "I have a lot of work to do."

"You still cleaning up our last case? You'd think she'd get you some help."

Vic didn't look up. "I finished. This is something new."

"New? So when do we start?"

"We don't." He turned a page in the book.

Mac could feel a tense heat prickle up his neck. This new *superior* Vic was starting to piss him off. Just because the Director was using the poor sap, he thought he was special.

"So, Mr. Fashion, I brought you a present." He held the wrapped package out to Vic.

Vic looked up and gave him a suspicious frown. After a moment he reached for the box, but Mac jerked it away. Mac smiled at the angry snort the gesture elicited.

"First you have to tell me what's up with the threads. Tired of looking like a farm-hand, want to take a fashion risk?" Mac looked him up and down. "Well, a riskette in this case."

Vic sat down, and folded his arms across his chest. He was glaring, and Mac was satisfied that once again he had poked Moose to the point that he was ready to turn and charge.

"You know, if it will get rid of you I'll tell you." His voice was tight and exasperated. "It's nothing earth shattering, and probably not enough to get you off my back. Anyway, I've been working at the Agency so much lately..."

"Jeez, Vic there is such a thing as a laundry service. Get your slave Nathan to do your laundry." Mac began to laugh. "Or are you afraid he'll start stealing your shorts as souvenirs?"

"Get out of here!" Vic exploded out of the chair. He stepped to the bookcase, but then spun around on Mac. "This has nothing to do with laundry. It has to do with something you'll never understand: appropriate behaviour. I spend all my time here. I'm not out on the street, anymore. I don't have to wear something that I could hit the ground and roll in when someone's shooting at me. I'm wearing this," he pulled at the hunter green shirt, "because it's appropriate for the job I've been assigned."

A clammy fear engulfed Mac. This sounded permanent. Li Ann was gone, the Director was recuperating, and now Vic may have been reassigned. Where did this leave him? Maybe Vic was right; *he* was the one in the dark.

Vic threw up his hands. "But look who I'm talking to, a guy who won't carry a gun because it ruins the line of his jacket. Yeah, I'm talking to the man who knows what's right in any situation."

Nathan appeared in the doorway. "What's wrong?" he demanded weakly. He worried his hands as if he were washing them. His face gleamed more than usual, and a wild fear replaced the usual craziness that lurked in his eyes. Mac saw him glance his way before he asked, "Do you want me to call security?"

Mac was ready to tell him who he could fucking call when Vic put out his hand to stop Nathan.

"No. Everything is fine. Mac and I were just discussing something." Vic leaned back against the bookcase and let out a deep sigh. He raised his head and looked at Nathan. "Is the package gone?"

"It left approximately seven minutes ago. I was on my way down here to tell you when..." He broke off suddenly at the sight of the box on the table. "It's not your birthday," he stated. "Your birthday is on November..."

"It's from Mac," Vic interrupted. "There's no special occasion."

"You forgot to say it's '*just*' from Mac," Mac added.

The acerbic remark had scored a hit. Mac watched the colour rise in Vic's face.

"You can go Nathan."

"But..."

Vic gave him a scathing look. "Just get my coffee," he barked, and Nathan skulked away.

Mac slid the package across the table and Vic stepped forward to catch it just before it sailed off the other side.

"These probably won't be *appropriate* now," Mac told him. "I got them for this guy I used to know. We were partners. But I don't see him around much anymore."

Vic held the package against his chest, crushing the rich satin ribbon. "This is difficult for me, too." He hesitated as if he were mentally editing what he was about to say. "You... you... you don't understand everything about this situation."

"Everything?" Mac gave a helpless laugh. "I don't understand anything about it. One day, I have two partners and a shadowy Government Agency runs my life. The next day I wake up, everything is changed, and I'm the last to know. I'm pretty much on my own."

"I thought that's what you wanted?" All the anger and challenge was gone from Vic's tone, leaving a note of sincere confusion ringing in his words.

Mac wasn't sure what to make of the situation. Was this Vic's way of telling him he was free to go? Or maybe the Agency finally trusted him enough to make him a solo Agent? This had test written all over it, though. Still, good old Moose was standing there looking so genuinely concerned.

"I want to be back in the loop," he answered, finally.

"Okay," Vic agreed. He put the gift on the table and began to unwrap it. "You know that Li Ann is gone, and has been made a Director." He looked up and shrugged. "As far as that goes, you now know as much as I do." He looked back at the package, and set the ribbon aside as he pulled the tape away from the paper. "The Director is trying to get well faster than is humanly possible, and I'm doing the prep work on an assignment for another team."

"Another team?" Mac asked. Vic wasn't just reassigned. He must have been promoted, as well. That's what all that bullshit about new life, next life must be about. Vic had been made a team leader.

Vic pulled the paper aside revealing the pricey men's store box.

"She has more than one team, you know."

"What?"

"The Director. She has another team besides us. I have to get them ready for this assignment to stop an Orangutan poaching ring in Sumatra."

Vic opened the box and pulled out the first shirt. Urban rural chic, the shirt was light denim with long sleeves. It was Ralph Lauren, and a little more stylish than Moose would have worn, but Vic smiled as he held it at arms length.

"This is great. Thanks."

"In this incarnation you could probably wear it on casual Fridays."

Vic laughed softly, and took out the next shirt.

It was a deep red Pendleton plaid with a bright turquoise pane woven through. The shirt had drawn Mac's attention immediately. It was Moose: big, red-hot Moose.

"Man, this is terrific," Vic whispered as he ran his hand over the soft wool.

"Yeah, well if you ever get any time off you can wear it."

A startled laugh erupted from Vic when he found the package of white t-shirts in the bottom of the box.

"What's this for?" he asked, as he came around the table and perched on the edge in front of Mac.

The move was intimate and unexpected. Mac felt uncomfortable with the sudden closeness, but held his ground. He didn't want to be obvious, and step away from the other man.

"The last time we talked you said you didn't have time to do your laundry. I just thought this would keep you going for a few more days."

Vic smiled up at him, amusement lighting his eyes. He shook the plastic wrapped package of t-shirts at Mac.

"I'll have to get one of these printed up with, *My partner scored big-time with the diamonds he stole, and all I got was this crummy T-shirt.*"

The remark surprised Mac. Caught off-guard, he took a step back.

"You know about that?" He tried to stop himself, but he gulped anyway. He had looked forward to rubbing Vic's nose in his new found wealth, but the fact that he already knew about it scared the hell out of him.

"I know about the large deposit made in the Swiss account you keep under another name."

Mac could feel the blood drain from his body. His legs were lead, and his fingers began to tingle from the cold that encased them.

Vic studied the t-shirts for a moment. He tapped on the label through the plastic. "But these are one hundred percent cotton, so I did get the best possible t-shirts out of this deal."

He looked up again, and the icy gaze of the stranger who masqueraded as Vic studied Mac. Vic smiled that big pearl white smile that belonged on a movie star not a street cop. Above it his eyes were green steel and calculating. Mac felt like a bird being hypnotized by a snake.

"You know about that?" Mac muttered again, unable to get past the idea that something he'd planned out so carefully was common knowledge within twenty-four hours.

Vic reached up with his free hand and placed it against Mac's cheek. The flesh was soft and warm against the chill of his surprise. Vic patted him gently.

"I know everything, now."

Mac stayed away from the Agency for nearly a month. No one tried to contact him. He took a trip to Vancouver to visit a friend who had emigrated there from Hong Kong when the Communists took over. Mac's travels were more a test than a vacation. He knew he was monitored, and was certain he'd never make it to the airport before Dobrinsky, or Victor, or someone stopped him, and demanded to know what he was doing.

He stayed in Vancouver a week longer than he had planned, and still no one from the Agency contacted him. He even made a weekend side trip to an expensive spa in Banff before he returned to Toronto. Nothing happened before, during or after the trip. He wasn't delayed, approached, or even followed at any time. His credit card limits were the same, so the Agency was still paying his bills. When he arrived back at the airport he found his car had been taken from long-term parking, and returned washed and detailed.

The whole thing made him nuts.

He spent a day getting over a mild case of jet lag and went into the Agency the next afternoon, thinking that if he arrived around three he was bound to find someone there. He walked down the long corridor to the conference room, his solitary footsteps echoing around him. The conference room was empty. The elevators were locked off from going to the upper and lower floors. Mac had hoped he could find Vic below in the archives or maybe up in the cafeteria. After taking his frustration out by overturning a few chairs in the conference room Mac realized he was stuck. No matter what door he tried or stairwell he explored he only had access to the one floor, and the level of the garage he'd parked in. Mac tried to figure out what was going on. He'd never seen the building locked down like this. Was this some hightech pink slip? That didn't make sense. If he was being kicked out of the Agency, why was he allowed in this far?

"Why do any of the lunatics in this place do anything that they do?" he yelled aloud. He started walking towards the one elevator that would take him back to his car. "And why the hell should I care?"

While he waited for the elevator to arrive he wondered why he *did* care. When the idea entered his mind that he might actually be expelled from the Agency, it shook him. All he'd wanted, from the moment he'd been shanghaied into this shadowy Government Agency, was to get away from it. Now, he'd spent his afternoon trying to find the people who made his life miserable.

"I need a drink."

Mac pulled out of the garage as the security wall closed behind him. He drove around the block and parked in the back of the lounge that had been his team's hangout for the last two years.

The place was surprisingly busy for being... Mac looked at his watch. It was four-thirty already. He'd spent longer running through that maze of dead-end corridors than he'd realized.

"Mac!" It was Vic.

Mac looked around him as he stood by the bar. He didn't see Vic anywhere. He did catch movement out of the corner of his eye. A man, dressed in a very sharp suit, rose from a table he shared with another man and a woman. Mac had always been able to spot the competition, the one who could give him a run for the title of hottest guy in the place. It was a sort of sixth sense he'd acquired in his many years of clubbing. The man approaching the bar was competition, and most definitely not Moose. So Mac continued to scan the room. The guy was heading straight for him. The rest of the space at the bar was vacant, and Mac decided that if this idiot was going to pick the two square feet he occupied to place his drink order then the guy could just pick someplace else. When he reached the bar Mac turned to ask if he had a problem, and to his utter amazement he looked at Victor Mansfield.

"You look surprised to see me," Vic noted.

"I didn't see your car in the parking lot."

"My car is out there." He looked puzzled for a moment but then smiled. "Oh, you must mean the truck. The bronze Jaguar is mine. I don't have the truck anymore."

"But you love that truck!" Mac blurted out.

Vic raised his eyebrows and gave a knowing smile. "Well, I don't exactly hate that Jaguar." Vic slid onto the high bar stool next to Mac. "Where have you been?"

"In the twilight zone, apparently," Mac said, as he sat down.

Vic laughed, and motioned with the glass he held. "Let me buy you a drink."

"That's wine." Mac pointed at the long stemmed glass.

"It's Vouvray, to be precise." He swirled the gold tinted wine in his glass. "You want some?"

"You don't drink wine."

"I did some wine tasting when I took those cooking classes last year. Past couple of months I don't drink anything else."

Vic didn't dress like this, either. He had on an Italian cut midnight blue suit. The generic hoop he wore in his left ear was replaced with a small emerald stud. At least the finely woven pearl grey shirt was open at the collar. There was still that much of Moose left in whoever this demon was. Mac couldn't help himself, and reached for one narrow lapel.

"Is this Armani?" The cloth felt silken between his fingers.

Vic smiled appreciatively. "No, it's Versace. I think Armani is too plain, don't you?"

Mac couldn't answer. The guy sitting across from him in the tailored suit and hundred dollar haircut was the same *hick* who, only a few months before, had told him, while drinking his third beer, that real men aren't interested in clothes. Mac no longer knew what was real.

His silence didn't seem to bother Vic. He called over the bartender, and ordered a bottle of Mac's favourite Chinese beer, for him. After the bartender left Vic leaned on the bar, and looked at Mac.

"I wanted a chance to talk to you alone before I introduce you to my team.

He reached out and put his hand on Mac's knee. It was a casual gesture. Mac doubted that many of the bar's patrons would even notice. The act was disturbingly intimate. The physical barrier between them seemed to grow thinner each time they met. His leg felt like it was pulsing under Vic's touch. He wanted to jerk away, or very deliberately remove the other man's hand. He was going to win this one, though. He'd reacted too much already. Let Vic play his head games as he touched him. Mac was determined to act like he didn't notice.

He looked over at the young man and woman who waited for Vic to return. Maybe if he suggested they join them Vic would keep his hands to himself. Both in their midtwenties, the guy was handsome and blonde with an air of quiet confidence. The young woman was small with long dark hair. She was the type to pass unnoticed in a crowd. Mac thought she did have a certain elfin quality, but on second thought she was more hobbit.

Vic was actually stroking the inside of his leg, now, as his splayed fingers rested on top. His thumb worked back and forth on his thigh, just past the knee. Left hand on Mac's right leg, the action was shielded from view. The sensation was maddening, but Mac refused to acknowledge it, and was able to keep his voice steady as he asked, "Are those two the Director's other team?"

"No." Vic drew out the word. "They're my team. That's why I wanted to talk to you before you met them. I'd appreciate it if you didn't use my name in front of them. They only know me as the Director."

Mac grabbed Vic's wrist, and thrust his hand away. They stared at each other. Vic seemed amused by the whole thing. Mac felt angry and lost. The earth just slipped away from under him. The universe was a giant chasm, and Mac was on a luge ride to hell. He actually jerked as the bartender surprised him by setting the bottle and glass down on the bar next to him.

He let go of Vic's wrist. "Why didn't you tell me?" The words came from a place of confusion and hurt, but all Mac could hear as he uttered them was the whine of a pathetic child who hadn't been allowed to play.

"You haven't been around much lately." Vic took a sip of his wine.

"Yeah, I guess I missed the transformation. You have a picture of yourself locked away in a closet somewhere?"

Vic laughed, and swirled the wine in his glass, sniffing at the bouquet that arose. His eyes were narrow and challenging when he looked up. "Haven't you screwed off long enough, Mac?"

Mac bristled immediately. "What? You jealous?"

"No, I'm worried. I'm worried that you're going to waste the few opportunities you have left. I can see your life becoming a series of women who only want your money, and you chasing after stupid thrills to get rid of your boredom. Is that the life you want?"

"What difference does it make?" Mac gripped the beer glass. It was all he could do to stop himself from yelling, making a scene. Li Ann was a Director, Vic was a Director, and he was just a glorified errand boy.

"You know what I think?" His voice shook despite the control he tried to exercise. "I think I never made it out of that warehouse. I think I died. I'm in the hell of the ever changing Vic Mansfield, and you're the fucking devil."

Vic laughed. "You've been watching too much Sci-Fi channel.

He motioned to the bartender to refill his glass. Then he leaned in towards Mac, and fixed him with a steel green stare.

"I know something, too. I was raised Catholic, and we know that you don't have to wait in purgatory forever." He reached over, picked up his fresh glass of wine, and raised it towards Mac. "How's the view from purgatory, Mac? Are you bored with it yet? You ready to see what your next life will look like?"

Mac stared at him. This was the guy he could trick out of his lunch. He was good, loyal and brave but he wasn't the man with the answers. Mac felt incredibly tired and drained. He was in some perverted world, and this was a funhouse mirror image of the Vic he'd known.

"Why are you doing this to me?" he whispered.

"You should be asking yourself that, Mac." Vic looked over at his team, and gave them a short wave and a nod that said he'd be right back. "Why don't you come in tomorrow and I'll work up an assignment for you. Something exciting that will blow the cobwebs out." When Mac didn't answer he added. "Come on. You can miss your soaps for one day."

A current of anger straightened Mac's spine. "That's what you think I do all day?"

Once again Vic reached out but this time his hand was cool against Mac's heated face.

"I know that's what you do," he answered, as he patted his cheek once. "Let's go." He snagged Mac's half-empty beer bottle and stood. "I want you to meet the kids."

The sensation of Vic's touch lingered as Mac reluctantly followed him across the room.

From the beginning the scene was surreal. He was introduced as *The Mac Ramsey*, whatever that meant. Vic's *kids*, and Vic used the term with the same irritating condescension the Director had used *children*, seemed to know. They treated Mac with a mixture of curiosity and respect.

Mac gave Vic what he wanted. He never used his name as he spoke with the team. He didn't call him *Director*, either. That was just something he couldn't bring himself to do. Though he wouldn't let it show, this new discovery about Vic devastated him. It was an effort to even produce the smug Mac Ramsey smirk, and nod as the team prompted him with questions.

Jeanine, the little hobbit, was insistent that he give-up some dirt on Vic. She was testing her Director. Mac watched her glance at Vic just before she asked her questions. Most of the time Vic ignored her, but occasionally the inquiry would be personal enough to stir a disgusted frown and snort in response. Mac gave a derisive laugh at each attempt she made to rile Vic.

"Doll, you're an amateur when it comes to baiting Directors."

Her eyes blinked once as the remark caught her off guard.

Vic raised his glass in a salute to Mac.

"Thank you. I've been telling her to stop wasting her time."

At that moment Mac wanted to turn on Vic, show these kids how easily, and how quickly he could have their boss stammering with anger and frustration. Then he looked over at his partner, and there was the seduction of the secret they shared. Only *he* knew who this Director really was, and the power in that was worth his silence.

"You tell me something about him," Jeanine challenged. "Since you think you're so smart."

Vic's hand came down trapping her wrist. "You test me, and that's dangerous" he said in a voice calm yet laced with threat. "But you'll live to regret testing him."

"It's okay." Mac raised his hand to calm Vic. "Don't sweat it, man. The Hobbit Princess, here, thinks I don't know the inside stuff on you. I'll just have to prove myself."

"Mac," Vic warned as he released her wrist.

"I'm only going to tell her what she deserves to know."

"Mac!"

He leaned towards her, and she met him half way across the small table. She was grinning in anticipation of something she could use over her boss. Mac was smiling at how eager she was to be set up.

"When I worked with this guy." He pointed at Vic. "He was fashion impaired. He wore the same cheap jeans everyday. Shirt, jeans and boots, it was your basic unemployment office chic."

He watched her, and waited for the anger to rise as she realized he'd given her nothing. Instead, she wrinkled her pug nose, and shook her head in disbelief.

"You don't know him at all." She sat back, and folded her arms across her chest.

Her partner, Paul, who had sat quietly through her interrogation looked over at Vic and laughed. "The Director in jeans? I can't even imagine that."

Mac couldn't imagine Moose in anything else.

"Let me get you another drink," Vic offered, and reached for Mac's glass.

Mac tried to pull it away, as he said no. Vic's hand wrapped around his. They held each other's gaze for a long moment. Mac wanted to tell the *kids* just how well he did know this man. Vic squeezed his hand, and it felt like he was trying to say, *'thanks, we're in this together'*.

Paul stood. "I'll get us all another round."

"Not me. I have to get going." Mac gently pulled his hand from under Vic's.

"Stay." Vic said, as Mac stood.

Mac shook his head no and he looked over at the 'kids' who were still laughing about his misconception of their Director. He didn't have the energy, now, to even fake a smile.

"You don't need me."

—

Mac arrived at the Agency a little before three again, still arguing with himself about whether he should come in at all. The memories of the time he spent with Vic and his team still haunted him. They were right, he didn't know the Director that Vic had become, but neither of them would ever know Moose. He still hadn't decided if that was enough to keep him around.

The hallway was deserted. Mac tested a few doors, almost surprised when they all opened. Still, he hesitated at the conference room door.

His bags were already in the car. He'd been made a fool of by this so-called Agency for the last time. He was going to give Vic one more chance to make things right. He had a list of demands he'd spent most of

the night composing. He was going to be a solo Agent or walk. He had spent a sleepless night thinking about what he was going to say. If Vic wasn't here to listen to him he was going straight to the airport, catch a plane to someplace warm, and start his *own* new life.

But what if Vic *was* here? That kept him outside the door a little longer. If he went in and accepted the assignment did that mean he was working for Vic? It was bad enough when the Director ordered him around. He was absolutely certain he couldn't take that from Moose.

Finally, Mac turned the knob, and pushed his way past the door.

Vic was standing at the conference table, straightening piles of papers, putting some things in marked boxes, other folders he slid into his briefcase. He wore the red plaid shirt that Mac had given him. He had on jeans and brown snakeskin boots. Mac silently let out the breath he was holding. Except for the anomaly of the expensive footwear, and the designer label on his jeans, this was *his* Moose.

"You decided to show up." Vic said without turning around. "You know they make VCRs so you don't have to stay home to watch your programs."

"Yeah?" Mac ignored the dig. It didn't hurt to make Vic wait. Mac descended the short set of stairs, and walked towards him. "I thought I'd drop in, and see what you had for me."

"Well, Mac." Vic continued to clear the long black conference table. "I would have had something for you if you'd *dropped in* between nine o'clock and," he looked at his watch, "about a half hour ago."

"You told me to come in." Surprise turned to anger, and Mac balled his fists. He was one word away from turning Vic around, and smacking him back to reality. Vic was playing him, and he'd walked right into it.

"I told you to come in today and..." Vic broke off and turned around. He leaned against the conference table, and folded his arms. "Mac, I expected you this morning. I actually have this weekend off, and I'm getting out of here early to drive up to the mountains. I want to leave soon, and beat the traffic. I'm sorry this didn't work out today, but let's make an appointment for Monday." He reached for an oxblood leather bound daytimer, and flipped it open. "That way I'll know when you're..."

Mac slapped the book out of his hand, and planted his feet as he waited for Vic to strike back.

Vic tensed, but then lowered his head, and seemed to be trying not to react. In a moment he raised his head, and smiled.

"Fine," he said slowly. "Take your money, and buy yourself a satellite dish. We'll get together whenever. Have a nice life."

Vic began to stand, but Mac pushed him back down. Blood pounded in Mac's temples as he took a step forward. Vic's legs straddled his, and at this angle the man wasn't going anywhere unless Mac allowed it.

"You'll talk to me now!" Mac shouted. "I'm here now!"

Vic shook his head. "Mac I don't have the time or energy to do this, now. I have a cabin, three inch thick steaks, and a few bottles of good wine waiting for me."

"Good wine?" Mac nearly laughed as he shoved him again. "What do you know about wine, or clothes, or bronze Jaguars? Who is this sophisticated act supposed to impress?"

"Nobody." Vic shrugged. "You, maybe." He looked up and gave Mac a mischievous grin that sent anger pumping through him. "That's it. That's the purpose in my new life: be like Mac."

Mac fought the tremble in his arms. It was a supreme act of self-control not to lash out and knock that smirk off Vic's face.

"Don't mock me, Victor," he warned. "It'll cost you."

"I'm not mocking you." Vic continued with the same teasing tone. "You're a hip, sharp guy. Who wouldn't want to be you? You've got that international Male model look going on. And you always wear the coolest clothes."

He waited for the punch line. Mac had been on the game all his life. He had shilled for his dad as soon as he could talk. Vic was a rank amateur. *Go on, Vic. Play games with me. I was born to play games.*

"Styling. Isn't that what people say about you?"

"Yeah, people who are ten years out of date." Mac threw back at him. He planted his palm on Vic's shoulder as he attempted to stand again. Vic's hands slipped inside Mac's jacket before he could be stopped. Mac tensed as he felt the first touch.

"I like this shirt." Vic's fingers slid over the soft fabric. "Is it silk?"

Embarrassment and rage, curiosity and horror kept Mac frozen as Vic teased at his ribs through the shirt. All pretence of a barrier between them was gone. How far was Vic going to go with this? Mac didn't want to find out. Yet he felt caught in a challenge to prove he could withstand the intimate caress of this man's hands. He dug his fingers into Vic's shoulder.

Vic frowned, but when he looked up Mac saw a sadistic mirth light his eyes.

"Did I tickle?" he asked, his fingers still moving gingerly over Mac's body. "I didn't mean to tickle you. You wouldn't think a hip, cool guy like you would be ticklish."

Mac ground his teeth as Vic's fingers traced over his abs.

"Nice fabric, very soft," Vic commented lazily as his hands made another pass.

Mac slacked his grip. *Stay loose*, he admonished himself. He wasn't going to give Vic the satisfaction of knowing that this was really getting to him. The sensation was tingling through his entire body. Even his cock started to respond from the light touch on his stomach. The unexpected arousal made Mac even angrier.

"You're real close to getting hurt," Mac warned, but his voice cracked on the last word as Vic scratched his fingernails along Mac's sides.

"Oh you sound so tough." Vic mocked, then laughed at him.

That's when Mac saw it. He knew the scent was different but it hadn't registered until now. He saw the half-dissolved ring of breath mint on Vic's tongue when he laughed. Moose hated mints.

Mac knocked Vic's hands away and grabbed his head. He covered the other man's mouth with his own. His tongue probed as he pressed himself against the struggling body. He wanted to taste the hot spice of the cinnamon gum Moose had always chewed. Instead, he was met with the bite of mint. Vic's tongue snaked around his, and in a moment he forgot what he'd wanted, as the sensuality of their kiss rattled through him. He held Vic by the hair sucking and exploring his mouth until he felt him relax.

Mac pushed away. Still holding Vic by the hair Mac studied the confusion of emotions on the other man's face that mirrored his own. Mac turned his head, and spit out the mint he had captured during the kiss.

Vic stood up, forcing Mac to step back. "What took you so damn long," he growled. He snagged Mac by the back of the neck, and jerked him close.

They slammed against each other, grappling and struggling as they kissed. Mac felt a caress of cool air as Vic pulled his shirt out of his pants. He squirmed while Vic's warm hands brushed over the skin he'd sensitized moments before.

Mac shrugged out of his jacket. He was insane with lust and anger. They slapped each other's hands away as each tried to be the first to get the other's clothes off. Mac had Vic's shirt open and feasted on the other man's heated skin, causing him to arch and then push away as the pleasure thrilled through him.

Vic opened Mac's pants. Mac shivered as strong hands seized him. He jerked as the electricity of Vic's touch jolted through him.

Mac grappled and teased as their arousal grew. Vic matched him on every move, just as hungry, needing his enmity and yearning fed just as much. Neither of them gave an inch as each tried to dominate the other. They taunted as involuntary reactions were drawn, *a moan—first blood*, an exchange of bites that made them shiver—*score*, a long soulful kiss that made their cocks twitch against each other—*the bout was nearly lost*.

When there was no other way left to torment each other, Mac broke away, and pushed the carefully packed boxes onto the floor. Vic helped with a few hurried sweeps of his arms.

Mac grabbed him by the back of the head as he leaned forward, and threw Vic face down onto the table. He pulled off Vic's boots and socks while he toed off his own. Mac undid his belt with one hand while he held Vic down on the table by the back of his tight jeans. Mac's pants and shorts were quickly puddled around his feet.

Then, he tugged down the tight designer jeans, bringing Vic's shorts with them. He bit the firm round ass that was revealed. Vic yelped and tried to turn over, but Mac climbed on the table and kept him in place. He worked the jeans off, and spread them on the cool marble of the conference table. He lay on the denim protecting him from the chill of the tabletop. Vic's shorts joined their shirts on the floor.

Vic was on his elbows, tensed and turning backward to try and see what Mac would do next. Mac swatted him hard on the butt. "Turn over!" he ordered.

"Make me." Vic challenged, and grabbed the end of the conference table.

"No problem."

Vic grunted as Mac dug his fingers into the sensitive flesh just below his armpits. His arms came down to protect himself, and Mac turned him over on the slick table surface.

Mac tried to pull away when Vic seized his head, pulling him into another heated kiss, but Moose was too strong for him. "Fucking cheat," Vic seethed when they broke away.

"There are no rules, Moose," Mac told him between licks as he teased at his nipples.

"That's not fair." Vic jerked and squirmed on the table as Mac tormented him.

"There were no rules," Mac panted between words, "while you fucked with me for the last two months."

"It got you here didn't it?" Vic gloated.

Mac sat up suddenly and took hold of Vic's wrists, pinning him to the table. He pushed himself forward, spreading Vic's legs, and taking away any chance he could sit up. Vic was caught in his grasp.

"You think you won? Your ass is mine! So, you like to tickle?" Mac stuck his tongue out making it pointed and stiff. He feathered it under the head of Vic's cock. Vic struggled under the torment. Mac teased him until Vic's breath came in desperate gasps, and his cock twitched from the endless sensation. When he tasted the first salt of Vic's pre-cum Mac slipped his mouth over the rigid member.

Vic arched up against him and let out a low guttural moan. Mac gave him more. He executed a long, slow series of erotic plays. He stopped periodically and floated his tongue against the sweet spot as Vic ground his hips trying to get more stimulation. Then Mac attached him, sucking and pumping until Vic was on the verge. He brought him close, and backed off several times.

"Stop showing-off, and let me come!" Vic moaned, and tossed his head

Finally, Mac increased the intensity of his rhythm.

While he sucked, Mac rubbed himself against the ridges of the double seam on Vic's jeans. It lay like a finger under his rock hard cock. He could feel Vic tense, ready to shoot, and he strained not to be the first to come.

"Mac... Mac... Mac..." Vic stammered and shook with pleasure as his orgasm was forced from him. In seconds Mac was moaning as the friction of his rub against the jeans gave him an incredible, intense release.

He felt Vic soften in his mouth, and pulled away. He rested his head on the other man's stomach. They both lay in silence.

Mac felt Vic's fingers thread through his hair. The touch sent a pleasant tingle down his back, and reminded him of that night in the hospital when he had done the same to a sleeping Vic. That memory seemed like a scene from some other life.

When he spoke Mac had expected Vic's tone to be thick and sated. Instead his words were a tense plea.

"Mac, I *do* need you." His finger's tightened in Mac's hair.

An insatiable Vic. Not what Mac had imagined but that could be fun. "Give me a minute," he answered without looking up.

"Not that!" Vic said, surprised. "You said I fucked with you. I had to. It's different when you're the Director. I understand now why she did some of those things to us. I don't forgive her for it, but I understand."

Mac shifted his weight, and propped himself on one elbow. He looked up, and it was Moose talking, sincere and troubled by the ethics of what he'd had to do.

"I can't do this by myself. No Director can."

Mac wasn't sure what Vic was talking about, but he was certain there had been some other way to get him here today besides subjecting him to the uncertainties he'd endured for the past couple of months.

"Why didn't you just ask me, Vic?" he challenged.

"I couldn't, Mac. You had to come to me on your own or you'd never stay."

Mac gave a harsh laugh and shook his head. "I think I had a little *direction* from your amazing, ever changing Vic act."



Vic touched Mac's hair again. "You had to see me as a Director. You had to see the person I have to be with my team. You know, you came here today despite that."

"All I know is that guy isn't you." He pointed away as if marking those moments in the bar. "That guy was... well he was... scary."

Vic sat up, Mac still propped across his lap. "You think I want to be like that? Those two, the kids on my team are just like we were. They're here because we've trapped them. They have special skills we can utilize, but all they want is to get away. They're not going to listen to me talk about duty, honour and world peace."

He stopped for a moment, and took a deep breath. Mac could see the frustration in the frown he wore. He wondered how many times Vic had talked this through by himself. How many drives in that cool Jag had come down to nothing more than time alone to mentally argue both sides.

"It's my job to make them into a productive and cohesive team," he shrugged hopelessly, "but I can't do that by myself."

Mac sat up. He folded his legs under him, and glanced away for a moment. When he looked back he was almost afraid to say what he was thinking.

"So, you want what? You want me to be Dobrinsky?"

Vic grabbed his arms. "Mac I don't want you to be anybody but you. You wrote the book on being a disgruntled Agency employee. Those two are no match for you." Vic let go, and smiled. He rocked back, and propped himself on one hand. "When we're up and running people are going to say Dobrinsky who? The only name anyone will remember is *The Mac Ramsey*."

"You mean I get to fuck with those punks for a living?"

Vic nodded. "If you want. I need you, Mac, but only if you want it. That's why things came down the way they did. I had to give you the opportunity, and the money to walk away. This will only work if you want to be here."

"What about us... this?" he added quickly, and ran his hand up the inside of Vic's leg.

Vic leaned forward to kiss him softly on the lips. "I think this was inevitable." He covered Mac's hand with his own.

Mac kissed him back. When they broke, Mac pressed his forehead against Vic's.

"I want one thing."

"What?" Vic whispered. "Anything, Mac. Anything."

"When we're together, just you and me, I don't want any boss or Director I just want... Moose."

Vic pushed away, and grabbed Mac's face with both hands. "Mac that's the whole point."

"Because he's the only one I can..." Mac started.

"You're the only one I can..." Vic spoke at the same time.

"Trust," they both said together.

Mac knew his own pleased surprise was mirrored by Vic's reaction.

Vic ran one finger down Mac's cheek. "I'll try to undo Michael's betrayal, if you give me the chance. I want to make it safe for you to believe, again. If you believe in us, I promise no one will ever take that away from you."

"I just want my partner back." Mac grasped Vic's hand, and held it against his chest.

"I'm here, man. I'm always going to be here. How about you?"

Mac smiled. It seemed like the first time in months that it was an act of pleasure instead of derision. "Screw with the kids, for a living? Maybe have more smoky hot sex..."

"A lot more," Vic interrupted. They grinned at each other for a moment like goofy teenagers who had just discovered sex.

"And I finally got you out of those cheap jeans and motorcycle boots. I'm not going anywhere."

Vic gave a teasing smile. "I wouldn't be so sure about that. You like the Caribbean, Mac?"

"I've never been there."

"That's my sector. Our sector," Vic corrected himself. "It was assigned to me last week. I'm spending the weekend up in the mountains, for the last time. Tuesday I fly out to Antigua. If that's not enough time for you to be ready I can put it off a few days."

"My clothes are in the car. I wasn't going to stay if you weren't here."

Vic pulled him into a hug, and Mac found himself embracing him back. It was becoming so easy, so quickly, to touch this man. He realized as soon as the thought crossed his mind, that it had actually taken him years to find safety in Moose's arms.

"You have plans for the weekend?" Vic whispered into his neck.

"I guess I do now." Mac pushed away, and fixed Vic with a serious frown. "When we get to Antigua, no matter how busy you get, I'm not doing your laundry."

Vic laughed. "We'll take Nathan along for that."

Mac shook his head at the prospect of overseeing Nathan along with everything else. Then he looked into the intelligent, caring green eyes of the man who had been beside him through everything. He

reached out tentatively and touched Vic's soft, dark hair in the same gesture that had given him so much comfort that night in the hospital. "I never congratulated you. Welcome to the Director biz."

Vic leaned into his touch, and closed his eyes.

"Welcome to your next life, Mac."





Recoveries

by Lianne Burrell

Victor Mansfield had never been a religious man, but he now knew what hell must be like. The first blast knocked him off his feet, although the concrete floor of the derelict warehouse was softer under him than he'd expected. Ahead, he could see the door out, the one they'd almost reached, and he started to struggle to his feet, trying to ignore the blinding pain from his shoulder and the ringing in his ears.

The ringing made the second blast almost silent, but it certainly had enough force to knock him down again. Li Ann was under him, he realized, and he curled around her, trying to shield her from the debris that was raining down on them in larger and larger chunks. He couldn't tell where Mac was.

Then the third blast hit and as everything went black, he was grateful.

Unconscious, he wouldn't feel the flames that were starting to rise around them.

—

The first thing that Vic was aware of was the lack of awareness. He was floating, nothing touching him, in a sea of black.

Then there was a light. A quick flash of colour. Followed by another. Like the tentative start of a fireworks display, slowly increasing in speed until it was a near-blinding display of psychedelic designs.

Then, gradually, a sound appeared out of the silence; a steady beep-beep-beep that seemed to echo the beating of his heart. It reminded him of something, but he couldn't remember what. He reached for the thought, the memory, but it shimmered just out of reach, teasing him like a dancer behind a plate of glass.

Ivy. The name surged to the front of his mind to go with the image. He could see her, dressed in white. The flashing lights were back, providing a backdrop as she danced, seductive, sensuous. Not many strippers could do that. They just wiggled their hips and let their measurements make up for the lack of ability. Not Ivy. She *danced*.

She danced for Vic, but she was talking about something at the same time. He wasn't there to watch, he was there to listen. He just couldn't remember what he was listening for, though. But there was something important that he needed to know. It was the first moment when he realized that there was something wrong.

His memory was still on the fritz, but he knew wasn't supposed to be there alone. In fact, he *wasn't* alone. Someone was sitting next to him. Someone. Li Ann.

Suddenly, the image of the dancer in white was replaced by a slender oriental woman, a soft smile on her lips. Li Ann. He loved her. She loved him. She left him. He flinched as he remembered her telling him that she was postponing the engagement. A polite fiction, covering up the fact that she was dumping him. Dumping him like everyone else had.

Li Ann was there. That meant someone should be there. Mac. Mac should be there. They were a team, the three of them. Teams should be together.

There he was. Tall, slim and dignified, dressed in a designer suit and silk shirt. He was smirking about something, and Vic fought the urge to wipe the expression from his face. But then the smirk turned to a genuine smile. One that lit up warm brown eyes in a youthful face. Mac was annoying, irreverent, always in his face. Mac was always there when he needed him, when he needed a friend.

Mac. Something tugged at his memory. Mac was in danger, it said. But how?

Ivy was back again. She was talking about the Janczyks. Another blonde appeared, short and feisty and not very stable. Jackie. Ivy was talking about her and something else. The Tangs.

Michael!

Suddenly, everything snapped into focus. The fight with Pucci. Michael Tang suckering them, only to try to kill Mac. Mac, inside an abandoned warehouse rigged to blow. He'd gone running in, finding Mac unconscious, a huge light fixture dropped on top of him. He'd moved the light fixture and pulled Mac up. Then Li Ann was there too, and they were running.

Running. And running. And running.

And the world exploded in flames.

He had to wake up! His partners needed him!

There were voices now, but he couldn't understand them. He tried to open his eyes, but the bright lights stabbed at them, forcing them shut again. He felt touches, recognizing the pressure more than anything else. A pinch. A prick.

And the gentle haze rose up to take him away again, and Ivy was dancing behind his eyelids.

He was so tired.

—

Victor woke in stages. He vaguely remembered people waking him up and asking him questions, but it seemed like some sort of a strange dream. He'd had some very strange dreams too, of dancing women. Ivy and Antonella and Li Ann and others. An endless line of his failures in the realm of romance.

He opened his eyes cautiously, and winced at the bright lights, but this time it was bearable. He vaguely remembered doing this before, but the lights had been too painful to keep his eyes open. He shifted slightly, and groaned as bruises and other physical aches and pains made themselves known. He almost wanted the drug haze back. He wanted to go back to sleep. But he needed to know what had happened.

There was a soft scrape of a chair being pushed back, followed by a gentle touch to his hand. Squinting, he was just barely able to make out the elegant features of Li Ann Tsei, his former fiancée and one of his partners, through watering eyes.

"Vic, can you hear me?"

Vic groaned, his voice sounding very loud in the room. The only other sound in the room besides them was the monotonous beeping of the medical monitors.

"Bright," he croaked, his throat feeling like it had been sandblasted.

"Just a second," she said. The touch and face disappeared, but after a moment, the lights dimmed until he could open his eyes without pain.

Li Ann was back at his side. Now that he could see better, he could see the lines of strain on her face. Her eyes were red and puffy, and a large bruise spread across one side of her face, making it look unbalanced. He could see bandages on her arms and neck. The way her clothes bulged in places suggested that there were more that he couldn't see.

"Y'okay?" he said, not able to speak any louder than a hoarse whisper. It still hurt though.

"Yeah," she whispered. "What do you remember?"

"We killed Pucci. Michael betrayed us. Mac. Explosion." He gasped, the effort of saying so much straining his throat. He wondered why his throat was so sore.

Li Ann reached past him for something he couldn't see. Her hand returned to his field of view holding a glass of clear liquid, a straw stuck in it. She held the long straw angled so that he could sip.

The water was room-temperature, but he was certain he'd never tasted anything sweeter. He held the first sip in his mouth, allowing the water to soak into fluid-starved tissues. Then he sucked at the straw greedily.

He'd only taken several gulps before she took the straw away. He wanted to protest, but knew she was right. Too much, too soon, would just make him sick.

"Mac?" he asked again, his voice stronger this time. Li Ann nodded to the side, and he carefully turned his head in the same direction.

There was a second hospital bed in the room, Mac lying on it, still as death to Vic's eyes. The only indication that he was still alive was the activity of the monitors and the slight rise and fall of the young man's chest. Mac looked even paler than normal, except for those places covered in colourful bruising. His handsome features were completely slack.

"How long?" he asked, turning back to Li Ann. His voice was almost normal now.

"Nearly a day. We were almost to the door when the bombs started going off. I was just ahead of the two of you, and when the explosion threw us to the ground, the two of you landed on top of me. Broke four of my ribs."

"Sorry."

"Don't be. The two of you shielded me from a lot of the stuff that was flying around. The two of you took the worst of it. Burns, lacerations and torn muscles. You're going to be a while recovering, both of you. Still, we're lucky we survived. The only thing that *did* save us was how close we were to the doors. The rescuers were able to get to us before the flames did."

"Mac?"

"He's a little worse off. He was already injured when you found him, and the explosion just made it worse. They've been waking him every couple hours because of his concussion, but he doesn't stay awake long."

Vic nodded, glancing over again to reassure himself that his other partner was still breathing. "Michael?" he asked, his expression hardening. If not for him, none of them would be hurt. Mac and Li Ann's foster brother and former partner as thieves for the Tang Family had shown up, claiming to be reformed and wanting to reunite with his long-lost siblings, more than two years after his apparent death. They'd all been taken in by the act, except for Mac. Mac was the only one who'd been suspicious and in the end, he had been right. It had all been a trick, a ruse designed to make the two trust him again. Then he would destroy that trust. Kill them.

He'd almost succeeded.

A single tear ran down Li Ann's cheek. "He's dead. I shot him. The car crashed, and exploded. The body was so badly burned that they had to use dental records to confirm it was him."

"They're absolutely certain?" Vic asked. Dental records could always have been falsified.

"Yes," she whispered, and Vic remembered belatedly just *how* much she had wanted to believe.

She slipped her hand into his, and he tightened his grip as much as he could. "I'm sorry," he said honestly. Sorry that she had to kill him, not that Tang was dead. If anyone deserved to die, it had been Michael Tang.

She brushed the tear away. "Don't be. I'm not. I... I'm just glad that Father wasn't here to see it."

She stepped back, obviously trying to regain her composure. Vic gave her a moment before asking, "Where are we? A hospital?"

Li Ann shook her head. "No. The ambulances took us and the Director to the hospital, but she got us transferred. We're back at the Agency, in the medical facilities. She said that Agency doctors know a few tricks that the regular doctors don't. Besides, we'd be safer here."

Vic wasn't sure he believed that last bit, but there was little he could say. Besides...

"Tired," he mumbled, losing energy fast. He knew what he needed to know. Now he wanted to sleep again. Maybe everything would turn out to be a bad dream if he just went back to sleep.

Li Ann patted his hand. "I'll be here when you wake up," she promised, then bent and planted a gentle kiss on his forehead.

Vic sighed. So long since he'd been comforted that way. He missed it. So long alone. He didn't want to be alone anymore. He slipped back to sleep.

When Vic woke again, he had the feeling it was day again. It was hard to tell, since they were several levels below ground, and there were no windows in the room as a result, but it felt like day. There were noises in the hallways that hadn't been there when he'd woken up before. Soft voices, footsteps, the clatter of a push cart with a loose wheel. Normal noises.

And there was a sound missing. The medical monitors. Turning his head, he saw that Mac was still sleeping, but this time it looked like a more natural slumber. The monitors that had been hooked up to him were gone.

Vic reached for the bed controls and carefully raised the head of the bed so that he was in an almost upright position. The sound of the motor whirring woke Li Ann, who was sleeping in a comfortable armchair in the corner of the room.

Immediately, she was at his side, pressing the call button. "How do you feel?" she asked, grinning at him. He grinned right back, then winced.

"Like a herd of elephants practised tap-dancing on my body. How long was I out?"

"Nine hours. It's nearly lunchtime. They let you sleep through, since it had been a full day without any problems."

Vic felt absurdly pleased about being right that it was day. It wasn't like the odds were big against it. Daylight filled a good chunk of the day, even in the early winter.

The door opened and a man stepped through, obviously summoned by the button Li Ann and pressed. The white coat, stethoscope and clipboard screamed 'doctor', even though he looked awfully young. He couldn't have been more than twenty-five. Of course, being oriental, it wasn't really easy to judge his age. They always look far too young until the day they suddenly aged to senior citizen overnight, or so it had seemed to Vic.

The man's face lit up in a smile. "Good morning, Mr. Mansfield. Welcome back to the land of the living. I'm sure that the Director will be pleased to have you back with us. I'm Doctor Chang."

The man proceeded to do the usual doctor-type things: Checking blood-pressure, pupil dilation, hearing, heart-rate and all the other bits and pieces. He checked off items on his pad, humming to himself as he did so. Finally, Vic couldn't stand the suspense any longer.

"So what's the verdict, Doc?"

"The concussion looks to be just about gone, and everything else is doing about as well as can be expected."

"Which means?" Vic asked, biting back his impatience. Why did doctors always beat around the bush?

"Well, to be blunt, it's going to be months before you're back to full fitness, but you will recover. Miss Tsei came out light with just broken ribs and bumps and scrapes. You dislocated your shoulder badly, which is why it's immobilized, and nearly collapsed one lung. Pneumonia is a possibility we'll be watching you for. As for Mr. Ramsey, he had the worst of the burns. The light fixture he was hit with before the explosion broke one of his ribs and the fall nearly tore out his knee, although not quite bad enough to require surgery. You should all be able to head home in a few days. After that, both you and Mr. Ramsey will need physiotherapy to rebuild the muscles, but in the end, you should both be back to about the same condition you were before you got in the way of a bomb."

Next to him, Li Ann breathed a sigh of relief, and Vic echoed it whole-heartedly.

"That's good to hear, Doctor," drawled a voice in the doorway. When Vic looked up, he found the Director watching him, a faint smile hovering on her lips. She looked as immaculate as usual. The only thing that interfered with the image of perfection was the right arm up in a sling.

"How about you?" Vic asked, nodding towards the sling.

"A mere flesh wound," she said with a wave of her free hand. Vic remembered it as having been a little more serious than that, but the Director wasn't the type to admit that, at least not to her agents. "And I am glad to hear that the two of you will be back to... normal. After all, I would hate to have to shoot you."

"Shoot them?" Li Ann squawked in outrage. Vic wasn't so upset. He could see the glint in the woman's eyes.

"Of course. That's what you do with horses after they break a leg, isn't it?"

Li Ann's jaw dropped as she tried to find the words. Vic couldn't hold back any longer. He snickered, then moved into a full laugh for a moment until his chest started hurting. The Director beamed at him for getting the joke.

"Relax, Li Ann," she said. "If they weren't going to recover enough for field operations, we would find some other job for them. If you weren't so tired, you would have realized that. I suggest that you go home and get some sleep."

"But..."

"No buts. Go home, Li Ann."

Vic squeezed her hand. "She's right. You looked wiped. Go get some sleep. We'll be fine."

Li Ann looked down at him, obviously torn. "All right, but I'll be back tonight."

"Tomorrow," Vic said.

"Tonight."

"Tomorrow," the Director broke in. "Your passkey will not work until eight a.m. Tomorrow. The guards will have orders not to let you in. Now *go*, before I decide to have you sedated. It's the only way you're going to be staying in this facility."

Li Ann's expression stayed stubborn for a moment longer, but then she sighed and nodded. She bent down and kissed Vic's forehead. "I'll see you tomorrow," she said.

She stopped briefly to brush her fingers through Mac's hair, and gave him the same sort of kiss. Mac stirred and mumbled something in his sleep, then settled down again. Li Ann paused at the doorway for a last look back, then left. Dr. Chang left right behind her, leaving the Director alone in the room with them.

The older woman moved to sit on the edge of his bed, the sling not changing the deadly grace of her movements. She just sat there for a moment, looking at him. Vic fought the urge to squirm under the penetrating gaze. The Director scared him. She had, since the day she'd appeared in his jail cell offering him a choice: Work for her, or spend a long time in jail, probably playing 'pick up the soap' every day for every bigger convict who wanted a piece of ex-cop ass. He'd taken the first choice, but sometimes he wondered if he might not have been safer in prison.

"The three of you saved my life," she said, looking at him thoughtfully. "If you hadn't come after me, Pucci probably would have killed me. I didn't expect him to bring back-up." Vic opened his mouth to say something, but she silenced him with a glance.

"However, you disobeyed a direct order," she continued, and reached out with her uninjured arm and pinched his earlobe between two long and very sharp fingernails. He gasped at the shooting pain that it caused. "And if you *ever* do that again, I will make you regret it."

She released him, and he gasped. "Now, I expect you to work very hard at getting better. You won't go back on duty until the doctors say you can, but I don't want to hear that you aren't doing as much as you could. So get some rest. I'll send someone with lunch."

Vic watched her leave the room, rubbing his ear with the hand that he could move. His other arm had been carefully strapped to his side. The sharp pains when he moved told him that the muscle in his shoulder was probably damaged. Dr. Chang hadn't been kidding when he said that it would need physio.

"She gone?"

Vic blinked in surprise at the soft voice. Looking over, he found Mac with his eyes barely open. "Yeah," he said, frowning. "How long have you been awake?"

"Since someone kissed me. Li Ann?"

Vic nodded. "The Director ordered her home for some rest. How do you feel?"

"Like crap. You?"

"About the same. At least we're alive to feel that way."

"Yeah. I suppose. Michael?"

"Dead."

"That's what we thought last time," Mac pointed out.

"Yeah, well this time they have the body to prove it."

"You're sure?" Mac sounded like an insecure child looking for reassurance.

"Li Ann said so."

Mac closed his eyes and sighed. "Then it must be true," he said sadly.

Vic frowned at the tone. "You don't sound very happy about it," he said, more question than statement.

"I am," Mac said. "It's just..." He paused. "I grew up with Michael. The Tang took me in when my dad disappeared. I was only twelve at the time. They gave me a home and a sister and a brother. They taught me and trained me and now they're all gone, except for Li Ann." Mac closed his eyes, and Vic could see one small tear winding its way down the younger man's face until it was caught by Mac's beard stubble. Mac opened his eyes again, and if they were a little brighter than usual, Vic wasn't going to call attention to it.

"Michael and I were best friends, you know. We did everything together. It wasn't until I was about eighteen that the problems started. We both fell in love with Li Ann, and she chose me."

Mac stopped for a moment. He was staring at the ceiling, but Vic didn't think that he was seeing it. Mac was deep in the past. "Michael was always kind of high-strung growing up," Mac finally continued. "He was always trying to prove himself, to prove that Li Ann and I weren't there because he wasn't enough to keep Father happy. He probably would have snapped sooner or later. It just happened that it was Li Ann getting involved with me that set him off."

"He started throwing himself into Tang business, trying to prove that he was willing to go further, do more than the two of us combined. Trying to prove himself to Father, trying to prove himself to the Tang organization. He started taking more risks, to prove to *us* that he was better than us. He was even willing to kill. Finally, the last straw, he arranged his marriage to Li Ann with Father and only told us after it was all set."

Mac looked over at Vic, who was listening intently. He'd heard all of it before from Li Ann, long before he'd even met Mac, but he'd never heard Mac's side of the story until now. At least, not the whole story. Months of sharing drinks at the bar had resulted in him hearing bits and pieces on those rare occasions where Mac actually got drunk, but never the whole.

"But," Mac said, his voice starting to crack under the strain, "it never changed the fact that he was my brother. No matter what he did, I still loved him, and I wanted him to love me. I didn't believe he'd changed, but..." Mac choked up, more tears running down his face. He managed to lift one arm to scrub the tears away, and he sniffed, a loud, moist sound in the small room.

"But you wanted to believe," Vic finally finished for him. "You wanted him to be the brother you remembered from the past again."

Mac managed a weak grin. "Yeah. Pretty stupid, huh?"

"No," Vic said firmly, remembering the fellow cops who'd been *his* brothers only to betray him. "Not stupid. Just human."

"Human," Mac echoed.

They fell into a comfortable silence after that. After more than a year as partners, they'd become comfortable enough with each other that words weren't necessary. They were usually there, though, filling the air with a banter that had been hostile at first, then later turning amicable as they became friends, almost against their will.

Vic was starting to drift asleep again. He knew that if he was this tired then Mac had to be even more so. He didn't much like this constant urge to sleep, but it was to be expected. He'd been in a car accident when he was seventeen, and he'd spent a lot of time sleeping while he healed. After all, the energy to repair the body had to come from somewhere.

Naturally, that was the moment that the door slammed open and a petite blonde bombshell came through, pushing a wheeled cart with covered trays on it.

"Hey guys! Like, you really did a number on yourselves this time. Maybe you shouldn't have ditched me like that. I mean, hey! I did good with the bomb at the Elephant whatsit, didn't I? Ick," she added, lifting the lid off one tray and making a face. "Like, I am *so* glad I'm not the one who has to eat this."

Vic groaned, and he could see Mac close his eyes with a wince at the blonde's volume. "Not so loud please, Jackie?" the younger man said plaintively.

"Oops," she said, not much quieter. "Sorry guys. So how are you two feeling?"

"Well," Vic said as Jackie swung the small bed table around on its swivel arm to in front of him and dropped his lunch tray on it. "It's better than being dead."

"Oh, yeah, I am *so* with that. Being dead would be a real bummer," Jackie said, setting up Mac's lunch.

Vic lifted the tray lid and winced. "What is this?"

"I do *not* want to know," Mac said with an almost identical look of distaste.

"It's your lunch, so eat hearty!" Jackie said, plopping down in a chair. "But man, I am *so* amazed that you guys even alive. I got there just after the place went kablooie, and let me tell you, that guy Pucci didn't mess around when he planted those bombs. There is *nothing* left of that warehouse. Unless you want to count a few piles of ashes and rubble, I mean," she added with a shake of her head.

Suddenly, Vic's lunch looked even less appealing, if that were possible. Up until that moment, he'd been avoiding the thought of how close they'd come to death. Death was not something he'd faced before. Sure, he'd been shot and beaten up and threatened, but none of it seemed quite... real. Even being locked in a truck rigged to blow with a non-violent Irish terrorist hadn't quite seemed real. Besides, Mac and Li Ann had been on the outside, coming to the rescue. But this time, they'd all been inside. A hair slower, and they *all* would have died. That scared him.

"What?"

Vic looked up at the sound of Mac's voice. His partner was staring at him, worry written on his face.

"Nothing."

"That is not a 'nothing' expression. What's wrong?"

Vic shook his head. "Just morbid thoughts. Like who would have come to my funeral if the three of us had died in that warehouse."

"I woulda," Jackie piped up. "So would the Director and Dobie."

Mac broke into a delighted grin. "Dobie? You call Dobrinsky 'Dobie'?"

Vic just sighed. "Exactly. Let's face it, the Director would just be upset about having to create a new team, Dobrinsky would come because he was supposed to, and you don't really know any of us well enough to *really* care. No offence, Jackie."

"Hey, no problem. I care, but I'm not quite family yet. I'm cool with that. It'll change."

Vic shrugged one-sided, but Mac was looking solemn. "I know what you mean. But wouldn't your parents..."

Vic snorted. "If my father came, it would be to dance a jig of joy. It always seemed like he hated my guts, but I never knew why. As for my mom, she wasn't even home half the time. Why do you think Alice and I left so young?"

"What about Alice?"

Vic sighed again. "She'd come, if she found out in time. Last I heard from her, she was off in Indonesia building bridges or something like that. Not much in the way of fast communication out that way."

Mac nodded. "In other words, we'd be in the same boat. I mean, in the last umpteen years, I've heard from my dad once. And all I know about where *he's* going is that he said he'd be in Aldabra, sooner or later. My mom's dead, and except for Li Ann, my adopted family is dead too. All I've really got is

Li Ann... and you."

Vic looked up in surprise. "Me?"

"Sure. You're family. Have been for a while. So try to stay alive, would you? I don't want to lose any more family if I can help it."

"This is like *so* depressing, guys. Can we change subjects?"

Vic fell silent, staring at his lunch. It was all forms of mush, intended for tender systems, but at least it was sort of solid food. He took a bite of the white mush, and found that it was mashed potatoes. Reconstituted, of course. But not bad. He liked mashed potatoes. Of course, they would have been better with some garlic or something in them, but still, they were better than he'd expected.

"So what's happened with the Tangs?" Mac asked from the other bed, starting into the other stuff. It was some sort of gravy like sauce with what looked like shredded cooked chicken in it. Vic took a taste and decided that it wasn't bad either, even if it was a little bland. Nothing to upset sensitive tummies here.

Jackie shrugged. "There's like a *big* war going on. Several guys are trying to take over the Family, but they aren't getting much support. The bosses that the old man was selling local control to are all claiming that control, free of charge. If anything survives, it's probably going to be small, just Hong Kong and maybe part of Asia. They'll be *years* trying to rebuild."

As she spoke, the valley girl, dumb blonde voice disappeared, replaced instead with a cold business-like tone. Vic and Mac both stared at her in surprise.

"What?" she demanded. "Hey, I was supposed to head the Janczyk Family. Papa Janczyk may have been nuts, but he made sure I got all the training I needed."

Vic shook his head. "Yeah. Just, sometimes we forget that."

Jackie hmphed, shaking back her long hair. "Yeah, well it means people underestimate me, which isn't bad, I guess. But you guys shouldn't," she added sternly. For a moment, she almost sounded like the Director, scary as that thought was.

"Anyway," she said, bouncing to her feet. "I have got like a *ton* of work to do. Dobie and I are doing your jobs while you three are out of it. It's kinda fun, working with him. He's not bad, if you know how to handle him. See ya!"

Vic stared, slack-jawed, as she headed out the door, wiggling her curvy backside as she went. She was a woman who was obviously comfortable with her sexuality, and happy to use it. Almost a complete opposite to Li Ann. Li Ann might dress in ways that complimented her boyish figure, but she rarely ever used her femininity if she could at all avoid it.

"Um, is it just me or does she remind you of the Director?"

Vic glanced over at Mac and shuddered. "Yeah, and that scares the heck out of me."

"Me too. I mean, it's bad enough having the Director showing up to torment me at all hours of the day and night. If Jackie starts doing that, I may explode."

Vic grinned. The Director had delighted in teasing Mac, right from day one. "What, she's never followed through?" he asked in a joking tone.

Mac's expression turned horrified. "No, thank God."

That surprised Vic. "Why 'thank God?' I mean, she's an attractive, very sensual woman." And how. Even if she was more than a little scary in terms of personality.

"And about as safe as a black widow spider. No thanks. Besides, she slept with my dad. Sleeping with her would be like... incest, or something."

Vic blinked. He hadn't heard about that one; just that she'd sent him in to help Vic and Mac with the organ smuggling case and that he'd lied to Mac about it. But yeah, he could see what Mac meant.

He went back to his multi-flavoured dishes of mush. With green Jell-O for dessert. Yummy.

The next few weeks were just as painful as Vic had expected. Twenty-four hours after the explosion, Dr. Chang had allowed him to go home. Mac went home a couple of days later once he was able to move around on crutches competently.

Going home was a revelation. Vic had never realized just how much of everyday actions required two functioning hands. The first time he'd tried to open a jar had been a challenge, and he wasn't even going to think about trying to open a can with only one hand.

And he hadn't just dislocated the shoulder. The first time he'd seen his arm unwrapped of the bandages he'd nearly been sick. It was bruised and scraped, and a nurse had confided that they were surprised that it wasn't more badly damaged. Late in the night he'd wondered what he would have done if they'd needed to amputate. He wasn't sure that he'd be able to survive with only one arm. But still, some of the cuts were deep enough that he was going to have permanent scars.

Being home was nice. He could sleep in his own bed, which was a lot more comfortable than the hospital bed, not to mention wider. No voices in the hallway to disturb him. No unexpected visits from whoever was passing by. He shook his head, remembering a visit from the Cleaners. They'd brought playing cards, and he'd ended up partnered with Mac in a game of bridge with the two assassins.

The only thing he *did* miss was having Mac around. It was comforting to have someone there when he had the inevitable nightmares. At home, he woke to the dark, shivering and wet with a hoarse throat. No complaints from the neighbours yet though.

And then there was the true hell that was physical therapy. Even just the gentle stretching as his shoulder healed, intended to maintain the flexibility he'd had, was excruciating in the beginning. Once the stretching was no longer painful, then came the strength building exercises.

Through it all, Li Ann had been by his side, encouraging him on. He knew she did the same for Mac, who had a different physio schedule, but he couldn't help thinking there was something more there when she was with him. Something that hadn't been there in a while.

"All right, ten more. We can do it."

Vic groaned and glared at the petite redhead. "How about *we* don't and just say *we* did."

She snorted inelegantly. All of five foot three, she was unyielding, asking for everything that Vic could give her, and then demanding ten percent more. The only thing that saved him after a session with the drill-sergeant wannabe was the full-body massage the medical staff masseuse gave him. He just wished he'd known that there was a masseuse in-house earlier. He could remember plenty of times in the past when he could have used that service.

Soft voices caught his attention, and he looked up just in time to see Li Ann wave to Dr. Chang before coming over to join him. Her eyes were glowing and he couldn't help smiling in answer to her expression. This was the Li Ann he remembered so well from when he'd courted her, years ago. He missed seeing that expression on her face, that glow that seemed to surround her.

"Ah, Ms. Tsei. Victor was about to give up on his exercise with ten curls to go."

Vic glared at the tiny woman again. It was an obvious ploy, making him look bad in front of his woman so that he would do the ten curls that he didn't want to. It was petty and manipulative.

And damnit, it worked, too. He grabbed the handle and started to pull, ignoring the aches. "One. Two. Three," he counted through gritted teeth.

By the time he reached ten, Li Ann and his torturer were counting with him, and both cheered as he let go of the handle. "There, I told you, you could do it," his therapist said cheerfully, slapping him on his uninjured shoulder.

"So how are you doing?" Li Ann asked. She was dressed casually with no makeup, her hair loose and lightly curled around her face. She took Vic's breath away.

He rolled his left shoulder and felt the aches and twinges, but none of the shooting pains that the same motion would have caused only a few weeks earlier. "Pretty good," he admitted.

"Extremely good," his therapist countered. "In fact, it's time for you to report to Dobrinsky for the field-training refresher course."

"Really?" Vic asked, perking up. The refresher course was the last stop before he could go back on full duty. He was already on light duty, but that was mostly paperwork.

He *hated* paperwork.

The therapist headed off, leaving them alone, and Vic had to fight to keep from fidgeting. He felt like a teenager all over again. "Hey, Li Ann. Got any plans tonight?"

Her eyebrows went up. "Well, I do, but not until late."

Vic sat up a little straighter. "Great," he said cheerfully. "How about drinks about five?"

She opened her mouth, then shut it again. "I don't know," she said slowly.

"Come on," Vic wheedled. "It's been a while. Just a drink, like we used to." It was true. The three of them had used to meet just about every day at the bar down the street after work to gripe about their day. Although, in retrospect it did seem like after their break-up, the drinking had been more him and Mac than the three of them together.

"All right," she said a little dubiously.

"Great! I'll even buy."

"Okay. I've got to go." She still sounded a little reluctant, but she smiled and kissed him on the forehead before leaving. She'd been doing that a lot since the explosion. One more reason why Vic had high hopes

"Sure. See you later."

Vic watched her until she disappeared from view, smiling a no-doubt goofy grin. She might not have the bounce and wiggle that Jackie did, but he loved to watch her move. She seemed to almost glide across the floor. She was the most graceful person he'd ever met. He sighed a happy sigh, then winced as the aches from his session started to catch up with him.

A dip in the hot tub before his massage sounded like just the ticket to him, so he headed for the locker room and changed into a bathing suit. The Agency hot tub was clothing optional, but you never knew who might show up, so Vic liked to preserve his dignity at least a little.

And sure enough, the tub wasn't empty. Mac was there. His arms were stretched to the side, along the sides of the tub, and he was letting himself float gently on top of the water. His knee still looked like a mess and he was still using a brace as well as a cane, but he was a lot better than he had been after being let out of medical.

"How was your session?" Vic asked, slipping into the steaming water with a sigh. The instant relaxation was a relief after the tension of the exercise. Other than the massage, this was his favourite way to relax.

"Brutal as usual," Mac said, not bothering to open his eyes. His head was resting on the edge of the tub with a folded towel as a pillow. His hair was plastered to his head with sweat that wasn't just from the heat of the room, Vic was sure. The swirling movement of the water brought his legs to rest again Vic's arm, and Vic couldn't find the energy to push him away. Mac looked to be in the same shape.

They drifted in the water for a while, enjoying the quiet. Then Mac opened one eye and looked at Vic. "What you doing later?" he asked sleepily. Vic snorted. It was almost exactly the same question he'd asked Li Ann.

"Got a date with the masseuse," he said with a grin. "Then a date with Li Ann."

Mac's eyes both opened, then narrowed suspiciously. "Vic..."

Vic leaned back and grinned at the ceiling. "Hmm?"

"You aren't about to do something stupid, are you?"

That wiped his smile away. He kicked a little in the water, not meeting Mac's eyes. "What would you consider stupid?" he asked. "Getting back together with Li Ann? It's not like you haven't tried."

"Getting back together with her wouldn't be stupid, it would be a miracle. It's the trying that's stupid."

That brought up a flash of anger. "And why is that?" he asked, his jaw muscles aching ever so slightly.

"Because she's going to say no, just like she did to me. She doesn't go back."

"I'm not thinking of going back, I'm thinking of going forward."

"It's not how she'll see it." Mac was looking at him with a sad expression that just made him angrier.

Vic climbed out of the hot tub and stood glaring at Mac for a moment, dripping water onto the floor and shivering as the cooler air hit him. "Just because she turned *you* down doesn't mean she's going to turn me down." He turned and headed for the locker room, no longer so relaxed.

Behind him, he heard Mac say softly, "You really don't know her, Vic. Be careful."

He ignored the comment and kept going.

Vic grinned up at Li Ann as she slid into the booth next to him. She'd changed and was now dressed simply in black slacks and a peach blouse. She was beautiful. Of course, as far as he was concerned, she would look gorgeous in sackcloth.

"Hi, how are you feeling?" she asked before waving the waitress over and ordering a glass of white wine.

"Not bad," Vic said, rotating his shoulder, then wincing slightly. "The therapist may be out to kill me, but at least I get great massages afterwards."

"Good, cause I really want you guys back in the field soon."

"Miss us that much?" Vic asked. She did sound anxious to have them back.

"Not really," she said, sticking out her tongue at him, then smiling. "But having you back means I won't have to spend five hours in a car with Jackie doing surveillance again. You would not believe how much that girl babbles."

"Worse than Mac?" Vic leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. Li Ann's eyes were sparkling, and he was more certain than ever that this was the right time.

"Oh, much worse. At least he babbles about things I'm vaguely interested in. She babbles about clothes and nail polish and weightlifting! Even Dobrinsky would be better, even if he does comment on every car that drives by."

Vic shook his head, chuckling.

"And the worst was when I had to work with *both* of them on the Standish case. Watching those two coo over each other is sickening. Talk about sugar shock."

"Now, Li Ann. I seem to recall Agent Myers saying the same thing about us a few years back."

Li Ann's smile turned soft. "We were pretty sappy, weren't we?" she said fondly. Vic ducked his head, echoing the smile. Sometimes it amazed him that after all this time she still affected him that way.

Which reminded him of why he'd asked her to meet him after work. "Say, what are you doing tomorrow night?"

The question seemed to catch her off-guard. "Tomorrow? Why?"

"Well, there's a new show on at the Princess of Wales theatre and I just happen to know how to lay my hands on a couple of tickets." Which had taken some doing since it was sold out for the next month. "We could have dinner, make an evening of it." And maybe more, he thought hopefully.

"Vic..." Li Ann paused and Vic felt a sudden sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. This was not the reaction he'd been hoping for. "I have plans tomorrow," she finally said.

Well, that wasn't *too* bad. "We could always do it another night, then," he said, cheering up.

But Li Ann was shaking her head. "I don't think this is a good idea," she said, shifting in her seat. She was looking everywhere except at him. Vic's spirits fell once more: he'd seen this behaviour before, when Mac had tried to convince her to give him a second try. But he found that he couldn't just give up. In the back of his mind he could hear Mac telling him that this wasn't going to happen the way he wanted, but he did his best to ignore it.

"Why not?" he pressed. "It's been a year since you postponed our engagement. Don't you think we could give it another chance?"

"Vic..." She looked into her wineglass, then squared her shoulders and met his eyes firmly. "I'm seeing someone."

Vic wanted to slump in his seat, but covered it carefully. "Is it Mac?" he asked. It would make sense, her going back to her first love. But still, if they *were* going to get back together, wouldn't it have happened after the accident with Murphy's little bag of death and the Drake Oliver case. Mac certainly had been pursuing Li Ann with everything he had. On the other hand, if she was seeing him, wouldn't he have just told Vic that afternoon rather than just telling him that *he* shouldn't try to get back with Li Ann again?

"No! Of course not."

Vic blinked, confused. "Well, if it's not Mac, who is it?"

"Thomas."

"Who?" Vic searched his memory, but the name didn't ring any bells.

"Thomas Chang," she said. "From medical," she added when he was obviously still not making the connection.

Vic felt his jaw drop. "Dr. Chang?" Somehow, this conversation was just getting worse and worse.

Li Ann's expression went dreamy and it seemed like she was barely even aware of his existence anymore. "He had the gentlest hands when he was checking my ribs."

Then she came back to the here-and-now with a shake. She glanced at her watch, then stood up quickly. "I have to go. I'm meeting him for dinner." She kissed him on the cheek. "I really can't wait until you guys are back at work. See you later!" And she was gone.

Vic stared at her half-empty wine glass, wondering where he'd gone wrong. Maybe he'd waited too long. Maybe if he'd just said something a little sooner...

The soft chime of glass on glass pulled him out of his haze. Mac was sliding awkwardly into the seat Li Ann had just vacated, to empty beer glasses carefully held in one hand, a pitcher of beer in the other and his cane tucked under his arm. "Here to gloat?" Vic asked, not really feeling up to this. Not now.

Mac shook his head. "Me, gloat? Nah." He filled one of the glasses and pushed in Vic's direction before filling the other. Vic picked it up and took a long swallow. The cool, malt liquid was soothing as it slid down his throat, easing the tightness there, so he took another swallow and was surprised to find that the glass was nearly empty already. He wasn't much of one for getting drunk, but tonight seemed to be a good night for it. He drained the glass.

But Mac was still talking. "Tried to tell you it wouldn't work," the younger man was saying into his own beer. He didn't *sound* like he was gloating. If anything, he sounded sympathetic. Sad, even.

"Cause I'm not the right one for her," Vic supplied, deciding that drunk, morose and self-pitying was an even better plan.

Mac snorted, then emptied his own glass before refilling both. "**No** one is right for Li Ann," he said sarcastically and, Vic thought, a touch bitterly. "It took me a while to figure that one out. Li Ann," he waved his glass in the air, slopping beer over the side in a way that made Vic wonder how much beer his partner had already consumed. "Li Ann," he repeated, "is in love with *being* in love. The whole courtship thing. Commitment, though, is a different matter altogether. I mean, look at her and me. How long were you engaged before I showed up?" he suddenly asked, catching Vic off-guard.

"Um... nearly eight months, I think," Vic said, thinking back.

"Right! So, how many women do you know who can go from seeing their fiancée *apparently* die in a fiery explosion, escape from an angry crime family, move half-way around the world, get recruited by a secret agency, meet someone, fall in love and get engaged in a mere ten months?"

Vic thought about it, then sighed, his emotions sinking even lower than they already were. "None," he finally admitted. "Unless she was never in love in the first place."

Mac refilled both their glasses again and they drank in silence for a while. "Bet you," he said suddenly, jolting Vic out of the sea of self-pity he was slowly sinking into. "Bet you she's engaged to him in... oh, three months. And she breaks it off less than a year later."

Vic stared at him for a moment. "Pretty cold, don't you think? Betting on your former love's current love life, I mean."

The only answer was a shrug. Vic found himself remembering their first meeting, in Li Ann's apartment. They'd been fighting, him thinking that Mac was some sort of thief—which he was, of course—and Mac thinking he was a Tang assassin. When Li Ann had walked in, Mac's expression had been one of delight, despite his situation, while Li Ann's... Vic winced. He hadn't thought anything of it at the time, but hers had been one of shock, understandably, mixed with... dismay.

And the more he thought about it, the more he saw the little ways she'd put Mac down: Forgetting his birthday, choosing to save Vic even though Mac was in more immediate danger, rebuffing every attempt the young man had made to renew their relationship. Even worse, he didn't think she was even aware of what she was doing. Yet at the same time, she reacted with instant jealousy and possessiveness any time he showed any interest in another woman.

For that matter, she did the same to *him* too.

Well, he knew why he put up with it: He'd thought they still had a chance together. But why... "Why do you let her do that to you?" he blurted out, then drained his glass again. He refilled it himself this time, noting that the pitcher was almost empty. Oh yeah, he was definitely getting drunk.

Mac slumped a little in his seat. He ran his fingers through the condensation collecting on the table, pushing it into abstract patterns. "Because," he said softly, "she was my sister long before he was my lover and I still love her, in spite of everything." He looked up and met Vic's eyes in an expression of complete understanding. "You?"

"Well, I can't exactly say the same, but she's very easy to love."

"And to keep loving, even after she moves on."

"Right."

Mac grinned. "The first meeting of the Ex-Lovers of Li Ann is called to order," he said, raising his glass. Vic lifted his own and they solemnly tapped rims together with a bright chime.

"Solidarity. In a club of two."

"I still say that it will be three in a year and a bit," Mac said. "Bet you."

Vic's eyes narrowed. "What stakes?" he asked. Suddenly, the idea of betting on Li Ann's love life wasn't as upsetting as before.

"Oh, I don't know." Mac frowned thoughtfully, then laughed. "You and me at the club of my choice for the night."

Vic winced, having a pretty good idea of what sort of club Mac would chose. As far as he was concerned, Mac had the worst taste in music. On the other hand... "Deal. And if I win, the same."

"A night of antique blues?" Mac shuddered theatrically. "Deal, since there is no way I'm losing. I know Li Ann too well."

"We shall see," Vic said in his best deep, ominous voice as they shook on it. "In the meantime, I'm going to get thoroughly plastered tonight. Care to join me?"

"Don't mind if I do," Mac grinned.

"Good. Go get us another pitcher, then."

Mac stared at him for a moment, a surprised expression on his face, then burst into laughter so infectious that Vic had to join in.

Suddenly, things weren't quite so bleak.

Seven weeks later, Vic had been cleared for full duty and Mac's knee had healed enough for limited duty beyond the records room, Li Ann showed up one day wearing an engagement ring. The Director gave it a rather pointed look but said nothing. Vic and Mac exchanged glances behind Li Ann's back: Vic's rueful and Mac's... almost apologetic. Vic resigned himself to a night at a club where the music was too loud and had no melody before the year was out.

And yet, in spite of having nearly two months to adjust to the fact that Li Ann was seeing someone else, Vic still felt depressed. He finally had to admit to himself that Mac was right about her, and that there was no chance of the two of them getting back together again.

Instead of heading to their usual after-work watering hole, he managed to calmly congratulate Li Ann, then went home. Unfortunately, there was no alcohol in the apartment, but before he could work up the ambition to head out to the LCBO, there was a knock at the door.

Somehow, he wasn't very surprised to find Mac on his doorstep, a bottle of scotch in one hand and a large take-out bag in the other. He brushed past Vic and headed straight for the kitchen.

Vic followed along, a little bemused, and watched as Mac emptied the bag of an endless array of containers. "There isn't anything gross in there, is there?" he asked, recognizing the logo of Mac's favourite Chinese food take-out. *Real* Chinese food, with nary a sweet-and-sour chicken ball to be seen.

"Define 'gross.'"

"Something that had tentacles, for one," Vic said, remembering some of the things he'd seen Mac eat on stakeouts.

"Do you see any tentacles here?" Mac said, sounding insincerely hurt, and waved a hand towards the open containers. Vic didn't, but knowing Mac, that didn't mean much. Oh well, it was food and it *did* smell good.

"So what's the occasion?" he asked, pulling cutlery from a drawer, ignoring the lacquered chopsticks Mac was waving at him.

"Your birthday?"

"Three months ago," Vic reminded him. "You sent me a strip-o-gram. At work. The Director nearly killed you."

"Yeah, but she laughed too, didn't she? Um... my birthday?"

"Not until August seventeenth."

Mac stopped, and a slow grin spread over his face. "You remember?" he said, sounding a little shocked and a lot pleased.

Vic shrugged. "How could I forget after that scene with Li Ann?" he complained. From his expression, Mac didn't buy the tone.

"Thanks," he said softly.

"Whatever. I promise to forget by the time it rolls around. So, try again."

Mac paused, chopsticks halfway to his mouth. "Thought you might want some company after Li Ann's little announcement today," he finally said, then grimaced. "I know *I* do."

Vic stared at him for a moment, but Mac refused to meet his eyes. "Good enough," he said, and reached for a container of something that *looked* okay.

An hour later, the containers were mostly empty, the few dishes they'd used were washed and they headed for the living room with the bottle of scotch and two glasses. The sun was setting spectacularly outside the windows, so Vic pulled the drapes shut. Ever since the showdown with Pucci and Michael, the colours of sunset reminded him painfully of the explosion that had nearly killed them all.

So, instead of admiring nature's light show, he sipped his scotch—a particularly good, not to mention expensive, brand, he noticed—and watched his partner instead. The young man looked completely at home, sprawled comfortably on Vic's couch. In fact, he looked like he belonged there. Li Ann, Vic remembered with a pang, had always perched daintily on the edge, as if she expected to stand up covered in something unpleasant. Vic sat down next to him, almost close enough to touch. It was comfortable, spending time like that.

"So, how do you feel about Li Ann getting engaged?" he asked as the silence stretched out.

Mac blew a gusty sigh. "I still say she'll dump him within a year," he said.

"That doesn't answer my question."

Mac glanced at him, then looked back into his glass, looking for the right answer, Vic thought. "Disappointed," he finally said. "And hopeful."

"Of what?" Vic asked with a frown.

"That maybe, just maybe, this time she's not playing her usual games. That maybe she's really found someone she can settle down with, someone she can be happy with."

"Even if it's not you?"

Mac smiled. "Hey, like I told you that night; she was my sister and my friend before she was ever my lover. Of course I want to see her happy. You know about her past, don't you?"

Vic nodded. "Her parents sold her to a brothel when she was twelve. Tang bought it and was sending the girls home, but she lifted his wallet so he adopted her instead."

Mac lifted an eyebrow. "That's pretty much true, except that Father didn't buy the place until she was fourteen. I'm sure you can fill in the two years between. She deals with men on a sexual level fine, but emotional? I don't think she even really believes in love."

"Oh." Vic glanced around the room, not ready to see Mac's expression. "I thought it was more like a week. She never said..."

"She wouldn't have," Mac said, when he couldn't find anything to complete the sentence. "I think she considers herself a failure. After all, if she wasn't, her parents wouldn't have rejected her like that."

Vic winced, then let it go. He'd seen enough during his days in Vice to fill in the blanks, and he really didn't want to. "And what about you?" he asked instead. "Don't you want to be happy? Ever since Claire, I haven't seen any sign that you're even trying."

"Like you have? The closest *you've* come to a relationship was that Mafia chick."

"Antonella," Vic said softly.

"Yeah, her. As I recall, you also turned her down flat."

Vic winced at the memory. He didn't like remembering the period that had almost got him killed. At least both Li Ann and Mac had understood his thinking in the whole thing, even if *he* hadn't. "I thought Li Ann and I could still get back together," he said defensively.

"And now that you know you won't, you're going to go looking again?"

Vic thought about it. Going out looking for a woman who would accept the strange hours and not question when he disappeared for several days then reappeared with injuries, refusing to say anything about what he'd been up to. No, not much chance in finding someone like that. And despite Mac's assertions when he'd gotten engaged to Claire, there was no way any of them was going to be able to leave the Agency unless they somehow became completely useless to their boss, and he didn't really want to find out just how bad off he'd have to be for that to happen.

Basically, the best he could hope for was an endless stream of one-night stands, like some of the ones he'd had before Li Ann had come into his life, or a relationship with someone inside the Agency. Even there, his choices were limited. The more he thought back over the years, the more he realized just how isolated the Director kept her agents from the rank and file, not to mention the other agents that she claimed didn't exist. He could count on his fingers the number of Agency employees he knew by name, with fingers left over. After all, it had taken a nearly fatal incident for Li Ann to find someone new. So, unless he was willing to consider Jackie, or worse, the Director...

Suddenly, he realized that Mac was waiting for an answer and sighed, even more depressed than he'd been before his partner's arrival. "No. Not much point, is there?"

Mac's expression was unusually sober. "You're just going to give up?" he asked softly. "You deserve better than that. You certainly can't expect me to believe that you're happy alone. I know you better than that."

"It's not like I've got a lot of choice in the matter," Vic shot back. "Not unless I start going to strip joints looking for someone." He felt guilty almost immediately for throwing that in Mac's face, but the younger man didn't seem upset.

"Hey, Viv's a good friend. We've slept together a few times, when the pressure gets to be too much, but it's a friend thing. But I still say you're giving up too easy. You stop looking and you might miss what's right in front of you."

There was something in Mac's tone that caught Vic's attention. "Like what?" he asked.

Mac smiles a slow, serene smile and moved closer to him on the couch. "Like me," he said softly, then lifted a hand to stroke the side of Vic's face. When Vic's mouth dropped open in surprise, Mac's hand slipped around to cradle the back of his head, then deliberately pulled him forward until their lips met.

The sweetness of Mac's mouth, flavoured slightly by the spice of dinner and the taste of the scotch they'd been drinking, registered in Vic's brain before the realization that he was kissing his partner, his very *male* partner, and he pulled away. Mac let him go easily, watching him.

"I'm not a pressure valve," Vic said, his voice slightly unsteady, rocked by the intensity of the feelings.

Mac snorted. "No, you're the cause of the pressure for me, and I'm tired of substitutes."

"I'm not gay." Of course, that didn't explain why he was aroused, Vic noted.

Mac shrugged. "Who needs labels? Can you honestly say that you've never even thought about having sex with a guy?"

Images flashed through Vic's mind: circle jerks as a boy, a furtive groping in the bushes with a high school friend, suggestive looks from Stan, his old partner in the force, that had made him think, but things in the department had been too stressed to think of taking him up on the implied offer. "I've never..." he started to say, then stopped.

"We could be good together," Mac said intensely, not moving away, but thankfully not moving any closer. Vic wasn't sure what he'd do if Mac touched him just then. Shatter, maybe. "I thought you were

gorgeous the moment we met, even if we were trying to beat the crap out of each other," Mac continued. "And later, swinging from that chandelier, trying to steal the Rembrandt, I knew I wanted you."

"So, this is an itch you want to scratch?" Vic tensed, but Mac ignored the accusation.

"Then, when Li Ann dumped you, I was surprised to find that I was more interested in being there for you than going after Li Ann to try and get her back. By the time you ran into that warehouse to find me, I would have done anything for you."

"What are you saying?" Vic whispered, remembering. Mac *had* been there for him after Li Ann's little bombshell. Nights he could have spent putting Vic down or making his move, he'd spent with Vic at the local pub, drinking with him, listening to him. Vic was getting more and more disoriented.

"That I want you. As a friend, a partner, and if you'll have me, a lover. Casual if that's all that you want, permanent and exclusive if I can get it."

Unexpectedly, Mac got to his feet and headed for the door. Vic found himself following, watching silently as Mac slipped on his jacket. Then Mac turned back to him. Vic was surprised at how vulnerable the confident young man suddenly looked. "I know you haven't always thought much of me, but I'm very serious. Think about it for a few days. If you decide you're not interested, then we can pretend that this conversation never happened, just go on the way we were."

"Mac..."

In an instant, Vic found himself yanked into Mac's arms and kissed again. But while the last kiss had been short and sweet, this one was pure passion, and somehow, Vic didn't pull away this time.

Finally, it was Mac who ended the kiss. He was flushed, breathing hard and his lips were shiny and swollen. Mac lifted his hand and brushed his forefinger over Vic's lips. They felt just as large and sensitive.

"Think about it," Mac said huskily, then was gone.

Thinking about it was easy. Getting it out of his mind so that he could concentrate on his job was anything but. For the next few days it was *all* he could think of. Luckily, things stayed quiet, and the Director assigned them to various tasks that didn't require too much attention. Vic spent his time in records with Nathan doing information searches, while Mac and Li Ann were put on stakeout, so he saw little of them. Jackie seemed to be spending all her time closeted with the Director doing God only knew what. All in all, he had plenty of time to think.

His first reaction had been one of anger. While everything else in his life had changed, Mac had always been the one constant, ever since the day they'd first met. Sarcastic, witty, contentious and somehow his most supportive friend. Finding out that his "friend" was harbouring a deep, secret desire to jump his bones all that time... But the anger quickly faded, replaced by a flattered feeling.

Next came dismissal. It was just a phase Mac was going through, he told himself. In a few days or weeks, some pretty blonde would wriggle her hips at him and he would be gone. But that thought was also quickly gone. While Mac *did* tend towards one night stands, he also showed a desire for more. Li Ann, Cathy Chow, the Hong Kong thief he had so much in common with, Claire, the woman he'd nearly married, Angie, the innocent jewel thief he'd dragged Vic into helping. If anything, Mac showed more *real* interest in commitment than Li Ann ever had.

Commitment was also what Vic wanted, dreamed of at night. The comfort of knowing that someone would be there for him. Someone he could be there for. A warm body to just cuddle when he had a bad day. The teasing, the little gifts, even the fights. The knowledge that he wasn't alone. Oh yeah, he wanted the same thing Mac did.

So the only question was: was he interested in that sort of a commitment with *Mac*?

A week after Mac had dropped his little bombshell, Vic came off another day with Nathan, the paranoid little researcher in records, feeling a desperate need for a drink. He headed for the usual bar, the same one where Li Ann had originally dumped him and where he'd made a fool of himself over her just two months ago. The place was nearly empty, the happy hour crowd gone and the night crowd not yet arrived. "Scotch, no ice," he told the bartender, pulling out one of the stools at the bar. "In fact, make it a double."

The drink was delivered with commendable speed and Vic took a long sip to clear the taste of dust from his mouth. Then he put the glass down and groaned at his mistake. Like Pavlov's dogs at the sound of a bell, the taste of scotch had his cock leaping to attention in his pants. After a week, the taste of scotch still brought the memory of Mac kissing him into clear focus. His mind might not be sure about what to do, but his body seemed to be.

"Drinking alone again? Not a good habit."

Vic winced and looked up into Mac's grinning face. The younger man swung a leg over the stool next to Vic's and sat down. The bartender didn't even have to ask; he just handed over a bottle of that Chinese brand of beer that Mac loved so much. They probably kept a case in the fridge just for him.

Vic watched Mac out of the corner of his eye, wondering if this was when his partner was going to ask him for an answer to his proposition, but Mac's dark eyes stayed focused on the shelves of bottles behind the bar. He took a swig of his beer and Vic found that he couldn't pull his eyes away from the long line of neck, Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed. Vic's mouth went dry and he took a quick swig of his scotch to wet it.

"Yes, I've thought of it," he blurted out. "But I've never actually done it."

Mac smiled softly. "It doesn't have to be complicated, you know."

"Emotionally or physically?" Vic shot back.

"Either."

Vic took another swallow of his scotch. "We work together for a woman who gives us no privacy. Our other partner was engaged to both of us at different times, and while she's moved on, she also isn't very good at letting go. Complicated doesn't even begin to describe it." He was dodging the physical part, he knew. He might be curious, but up until now, all of his sex partners had been female. He wasn't really sure what it would involve, despite the dreams of the last week. But while he wasn't against the idea, what if it didn't work out? Could they continue working together after that?

On the other hand, he was still working with Li Ann, more than a year after she decided to end their relationship, so it was possible.

"Well? I'm willing to take the chance. Are you?"

Vic met Mac's eyes, reading the challenge there easily. Everything had been a contest between them, and this was no different, it seemed. "One time, no strings. If I don't like it, then no harm, no foul, okay?" His mouth snapped shut when he realized that he'd just committed himself.

Mac's smile was almost blinding. "Don't worry," he said. "I'll make it so good for you that you'll never want anyone else again."

That made Vic snort. "Confident, aren't you?"

Mac shrugged. "Hey, I've got the training."

Vic's blood ran cold at the statement. "Training? Why?" he asked, not sure he wanted to know the answer. Li Ann's background he now knew more about, but there were a lot of blanks in Mac's history for him.

Mac's smile faded a little as he looked away. "I lived on the streets for a while before the Tangs took me in. Nasty things happen there," he said simply. "Father didn't allow past fears to create weaknesses, so when I was sixteen, he hired trainers to show me the good side of sex." He met Vic's eyes again. "And believe me, those trainers knew *exactly* what they were doing. He did the same thing for Li Ann, otherwise I doubt she would have let *any* guy touch her again."

Vic shuddered, realizing just what Mac was saying. As a cop, he'd seen street kids who'd been raped, but they had been strangers. Mac was anything but. He reached over and rested a comforting hand on Mac's thigh, but otherwise didn't do anything that could be read as pity. "So now what?" he asked.

Mac drained his beer and stood, pulling a couple of bills from his pocket and tossing them on the counter. "My place," he suggested. "That way, if you *really* don't like it, you can just go home and forget that it ever happened."

Vic's palms started to sweat as he realized that he was actually going to this. He had to be insane. "All right," he said, none too steadily. "My truck's outside."

"Okay, you know the way."

Mac headed out the door. Vic looked down at his half-empty glass and considered finishing it—Dutch courage—then decided that he was shaky enough that it wouldn't be a good idea. He paid the bartender and headed out to the parking lot. Mac's sports car was already gone. Vic climbed into his own vehicle and started it.

For a moment, he had a flash of cold feet, and seriously considered just going home. Then he squared his shoulders and put the pickup into drive: He'd given his answer and he wasn't about to back out on it, if for no other reason than that Mac would never let him live it down. Besides, the last week had left him horny as hell after nearly a year of self-imposed celibacy.

He pointed the truck in the same direction that Mac had gone and prayed that he wasn't about to make a big mistake.

—

He arrived at Mac's apartment twenty minutes later with his stomach churning, but his mind strangely calm and clear. When he reached Mac's door, he didn't even hesitate before knocking.

The door swung open almost immediately, and he was a little relieved to see the flash of uncertainty on Mac's face before it was carefully covered up: Despite his confident act, Mac was just as unsure about this as he was.

Silently, he moved past the younger man into the apartment that he knew almost as well as his own; they spent so much time at each other's place. He stopped in the living room, next to the stereo set against one wall, then fidgeted a little, his uncertainty making itself felt again.

Mac came up behind him and reached over his shoulder to draw him around to face him. "If you really don't want to do this, I won't press," he said, but now that he was looking for it, Vic could see the vulnerability in the younger man's velvety brown eyes.

"Do you really think this can work?" he asked.

"I do," Mac said—or was that a promise?—then carefully kissed him.

This kiss was as sweet as the one he'd been replaying in his mind for the last week, but strange at the same time. After a long day of work, Mac's five o'clock stubble was rasping against his own still-smooth cheek, adding a slight burn to the whole sensation. It wasn't an *unpleasant* feeling, mind you. Just strange.

It had also been a long time since he'd kissed someone properly, and he found that he'd missed it. He pressed closer to Mac, wrapping his arms around him, feeling the solid, muscular strength of the younger man. This was new to him as well. Just as new was Mac's height. Every woman he'd ever been with had been shorter and lighter than himself.

And yet, despite all the strangeness, he couldn't deny how good, how *right* it felt.

Vic deepened the kiss, probing for the half-remembered taste of Mac under the malty taste of beer. It was there, and very, very intoxicating. He pressed closer to the source until he couldn't move any closer.

Driven apart by the need for breath, Vic realized that he'd somehow managed to pin Mac against a wall, and the only way he was going to get any closer was by crawling right inside the other man's skin. A little shocked at his reaction, Vic backed away.

Mac slumped back against the wall, a dazed expression on his face. His lips were swollen to an even more lush size than normal, and Vic flashed back to when Harry O'Boyle had called Li Ann "an exotic beauty whose lips can affect weather systems." At that moment, Vic felt the description was more appropriate for Mac.

Then a slow smile spread across those lips, lighting up his entire face. "Well," he said breathlessly. "You certainly don't have anything to learn in the kissing department."

Vic stepped forward, intent on seeing if he could make him even more breathless, but Mac lifted a hand to stop him. Immediately, Vic came back to his senses, as if a very large bucket of ice water had been dumped over his head.

But Mac was still smiling. "Bedroom?" he suggested. "The bed's a lot softer than the wall. Or floor."

Vic breathed a sigh of relief. For a moment he'd been sure that this was when a large crowd of people would jump out of hiding, all yelling "Surprise!" Either that or Mac would laugh in his face for falling for his act. Instead, Mac was leading him into the one part of the apartment he'd never been: The bedroom.

The room was fairly plain and very modern, like the rest of the apartment. The bed had no headboard and the linens were a geometric pattern in dark jewel tones. A simple table sat next to the bed with a single lamp on it. In the corner, a small shrine sat on top of the chest of drawers. Old Man Tang's picture was there, Vic noted, but there wasn't one of Michael Tang. There was also an old black and white picture of a young woman with dark hair. He wanted to ask about her, but Mac didn't give him the chance.

The room spun around him, then came to a stop as he landed flat on his back on the bed. Mac followed, a little slower and a little more careful, but was stretched out on top of him before he could move. He struggled a little, more from instinct than any real desire to get away. Mac just grinned and rode him out, hands locked around his wrists, pressing them into the duvet. "No way," he said, grinning down at Vic. "I've waited too long to get you here to let you get away that easily."

If it had been anyone else, he might have worried at that, but this was Mac, so he just grinned. "You're going to have to let me up if you want to get naked," he said. "Otherwise, we aren't going to be able to do much."

"You think so?" Mac purred back at him. "You might be surprised." He rubbed himself against Vic in a way that quickly had him gasping for air. Who knew that simple friction, through several layers of clothing, no less, could be so exciting?

Then he realized just how on-edge he was and bucked, hard. "Stop!" he shouted, and Mac rolled off him immediately.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to press too hard." Mac looked very contrite.

Vic shook his head. "No, it's not that. I just don't have a change of clothes handy."

Mac blinked, then grinned. "You nearly came in your pants? Just how long *has* it been for you?" Then he apologized again, obviously picking up on Vic's embarrassment. "Sorry, forget I asked. It's none of my business."

"Don't worry about it," Vic said with a sigh. "Let's just say that it's been a little too long and leave it that. Can we get naked now?"

"Naked is good." Mac rolled off the edge of the bed, easily landing on his feet. He must have had a lot of practice in stripping quickly, because he was completely nude before Vic had the chance to do more than get his shirt off and his pants undone.

"I can undress myself," Vic said, swatting away hands that were trying to help him.

"Then move faster," was the impatient reply.

Vic removed the rest of his clothes as quickly as he could, then leaned back to wait for Mac's verdict.

"Not bad for an old guy," the younger man said, but his eyes said much more.

"Old?" Vic said in disbelief. "I'll show you old." He grabbed Mac's arm and tossed him onto the bed, then rolled over on top of him. Unfortunately, the sound Mac made had nothing to do with pleasure of fun. Vic quickly rolled off him again. "Shit! Are you okay?"

Mac hissed, then relaxed. "Yeah. Just be careful with the knee, okay? It doesn't work the way it used to yet."

Vic smiled, relieved. "So who's moving like an old man now?" he teased.

"Don't think it's going to get you out of your bet," Mac said with a snort. "By the time that comes around, I'll be ready to dance all night."

"Or spend a relaxing night listening to some *real* music," Vic shot back.

"I still say she'll dump him in less than a year."

Vic shut his eyes. "Do we have to talk about Li Ann's love life right now?" he complained. "It doesn't exactly help the mood."

Mac's expression turned rueful. "Point taken. I promise, no more talk about anyone or anything outside this room."

"Good."

That taken care of, Vic eyed his partner considering his options. This was all pretty new to him and he wasn't really sure what to do next, but kissing had worked before, so he tried that again. Besides, he'd always enjoyed kissing, and Mac had the mouth for it. He sucked on that lush mouth, nibbling and licking until the already swollen lips were even more so. Mac groaned and wrapped his arms around him, pulling him even closer. Vic gasped at the unfamiliar feeling of their erections being almost crushed between them, then went back to the kiss. Mac was responding enthusiastically, and he liked it.

He was learning even more about the differences of being with a man instead of woman, other than the stubble and dick. The chest pressed against his was flat and firm instead of soft and rounded. Not to mention that Mac's chest was covered with a thick mat of curly hair, unlike his own nearly hairless one. Mac's skin, while not exactly coarse, was nowhere as smooth to the touch as Li Ann's, and the hands running up and down his back were broad and callused. All of these things he catalogued while enjoying the feeling of having someone touch him again. It had been far too long and like Mac had reminded him a week earlier, he never had enjoyed being alone.

Then a muscular thigh slipped between his legs to rub against his balls and he broke the kiss again.

Mac looked thoroughly debauched, his lips on their way to being bruised and his face flushed. He moved his leg deliberately and grinned when Vic couldn't hold back his moan. "So, what do you want, Vic? What do you want me to do?"

Vic couldn't stop himself from thrusting, humping Mac's leg like a horny mutt. "Shit!"

"Tell me, Vic."

Panting softly, Vic shook his head. "I don't know," he finally admitted. "I told you I've never done this before."

"Do you want to fuck me?"

Vic froze, his mind shrinking away from the idea. He was definitely not ready for *that* quite yet. From either side. "I don't think so," he said uncertainly.

Mac stared at him for a moment, then smiled. "Okay. Simple and uncomplicated this time. Come here."

Mac rolled onto his back and tugged and manoeuvred Vic until he was straddling his chest. Mac reached up and Vic hissed as a set of very warm hands wrapped around his dick and cradled his balls. His balls were rolled around in their sack like a pair of ben wa balls, while his dick was stroked in a firm tempo that was both very new and completely familiar. A woman's hand was smaller and she always seemed to be either too gentle or too rough. Mac's hands were experienced the way only a guy could be experienced.

Then his balls were released to the tug of gravity and his hips were pulled forward. He opened his unexpectedly eyes and looked down just in time to see the head of his cock vanish between Mac's lips. Vic didn't even have the breath to gasp as the tip of a tongue ran along the underside of the crown, then swept over the slit, removing the fluid about to spill over from it.

Vic made a sound suspiciously like a whimper and his hips tried to thrust forward almost without his control. Luckily, Mac seemed to be expecting that and kept a firm grasp on his hips, keeping him from

thrusting too hard or too far. Vic leaned forward, his hands on either side of Mac's head and let his partner guide his movements. He trusted Mac, he realized. Trusted him to make him feel good. Trusted him not to let him hurt Mac. Trusted him...

Vic was gasping for breath now, thrusting mindlessly. If Mac hadn't been controlling those thrusts he could have ended up choking him in his mindless quest for completion. He wanted to come in the worst way, and was grateful that for the first time in many months he wasn't alone when he did.

And that thought was the clincher. His eyes squeezed shut as his hips twitched and his stomach clenched. It felt so good that it was almost painful. It was all he could do to keep from collapsing and squashing Mac's head like an overripe tomato, a mental image that suddenly had him snickering. Instead, he rolled to the side while Mac scooted up next to him, still chuckling softly to himself. "Laughter was not exactly the reaction I expected," Mac said with an over the top mock pout.

Suddenly feeling lighter than he could remember being in months, if not years, Vic wrapped an arm around Mac's hairy chest and pulled him near. "I don't know. I think laughter is the *best* reaction," he said in a rough voice, then kissed Mac again.

This time, Mac tasted different. It took him a moment to realize that what he was tasting was himself. He went still for a moment, considering whether that was too weird for words, then decided that he really liked it. Mac was the first person he'd been with who actually swallowed. He dove back into the kiss with gusto.

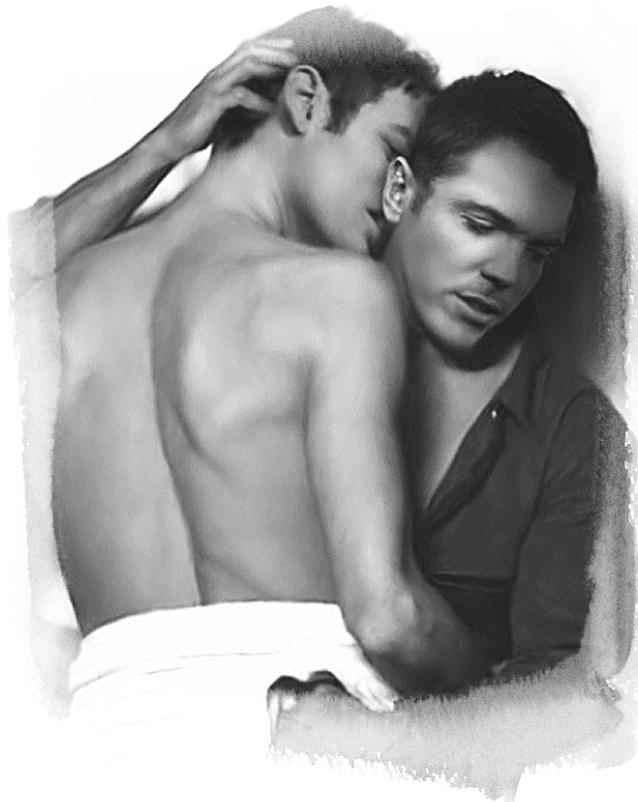
"Vic," Mac gasped, pulling away. Vic wanted to protest, but then he noticed the pained tone. Glancing down, he could see Mac's erection, an almost angry red. Mac was uncut, he noticed, and wondered where he'd been born. Mac certainly wasn't Jewish, and most North Americans had their kids snipped at birth. It made an interesting contrast to his own circumcised organ.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked. He wasn't sure that he was ready to reciprocate Mac's incredible blowjob, but if that was what Mac wanted, he would do his best. He wanted to make his partner feel as good as he did.

"Something," Mac moaned. "Anything. Whatever you want! Just touch me, please."

Touching, he could do. In fact, he was already touching Mac, although it wasn't by plan. He was running his hand up and down Mac's chest, like he was stroking a large cat. Then one of his strokes bumped against an erect nipple and Mac nearly shot into the air.

Intrigued, Vic repeated the motion, then pinched the nipple between his fingers lightly. Mac gasped and did a sinuous movement against the mattress. Just to see what would happen, Vic did the same to Mac's other nipple and was rewarded by both a keening sound and the sight of Mac's cock doing a jerk. If anything, it seemed to be getting both darker and larger.



Fascinated, Vic let go of the rock hard nipple he was pinching and reached down to wrap his fingers around Mac's cock and gave it an experimental tug. It seemed to pulse in his hand and a small stream of clear fluid spurting from the head. A little more confident now, Vic started to pump Mac's erection, using a stroke that he enjoyed himself. The angle wasn't quite right, but he was too fascinated by the feel of the loose bit of extra skin to be bothered. It was interesting, feeling that skin under his hand, sliding as he stroked.

Mac must have been really close to the edge, because before Vic knew it, milky semen was spurting onto Mac's chest, as well as running down his own hand. He kept stroking until the cock started to wilt in his hand. He let go and watched in fascination as the head was completely covered by the foreskin. Then he lifted his hand to his face and sniffed. It didn't smell any different from his own semen and he gave it a cautious lick. The flavour was the same too.

But before he could do anything more, Mac grabbed his wrist and pulled his hand down. Vic watched in disbelief as Mac licked his hand clean, running his tongue between and around his fingers, finishing up by sucking in his index and middle finger and giving them the same treatment he'd given Vic's cock not to long ago.

Then his hand was released and he collapsed next to Mac, gasping for breath, hard and aching again. Mac looked down his body and grinned. "Well, someone liked that," he commented.

Vic laughed again. "And you damned well know it."

"So, are going to want to do this again?"

Vic rubbed his renewed erection against Mac's hip. "What do you think?"

Mac turned so that their cocks were nestled together. "That goes without saying. But how about tomorrow night?"

Vic kissed him lightly. "And the night after and the night after that," he said happily. He was almost shocked at how good he felt. Maybe he'd freak out tomorrow, but right then, the thought of years of this was very attractive.

"Great!" Mac said, then pulled away. Vic grabbed for him, but Mac had already rolled out of bed and was headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" he asked in disbelief, propping himself up on his elbows.

Mac paused in the doorway, posing sexily in a way that *had* to be deliberate. "I'm going to take a shower."

"What!?"

"Do you *know* what it's like trying to get dried semen out of chest hair? Never mind," he said, glancing at Vic's smooth chest. "Let's just say that rubber cement can be easier." Then he disappeared from view.

Vic flopped back against the pillows, groaning in near pain. "Great," he told his disappointed cock. "Just great."

"Well, aren't you coming?" Mac's voice wafted from the bathroom.

Vic grinned, no longer disappointed, and hopped out of the bed. He wasn't sure just what Mac had in mind for the shower, but he couldn't wait to find out. One thing he was sure of, though: It was going to blow his mind.

When Vic woke the next morning, he was alone in the bed, although he could still smell Mac on the pillow next to him, not to mention the stale smell of sex. He rolled onto this back and looked at the ceiling, wondering if this was when he was going to freak out.

A minute later, he realized that the expected freak out just wasn't going to happen. He'd had fun, and he thought Mac had also enjoyed himself, so maybe his sexuality was a little more... flexible than he'd thought. Certainly, before the first time Mac had kissed him, he'd always thought that he was straight enough to be used as a ruler. Even the Director was a little too unusual for him. But now, after one night with Mac, all he could think of was a repeat performance. He might even try sucking *Mac* next time. He was curious to see what it was like from that end, so to speak.

So, since he *wasn't* going to have a heterosexual panic attack, Vic got out of bed and went looking for his partner.

The apartment was depressingly empty, other than him, but the note taped to the mirror in the bathroom told him that Mac had left for work early, since he and Jackie were supposed to go talk to a suspect before breakfast. A razor and a toothbrush, both still in their wrappers, sat on the edge of the sink, ready for him. Vic shook his head at the supreme confidence that those objects indicated. Obviously, Mac had considered the night before to be an inevitability. Maybe it had been, sooner or later. After all, more than a year of history had led to it.

Once he'd showered, he dressed in his own clothes, then headed out the door, setting it to lock behind him. He decided to swing past his apartment for a quick change of clothing before heading to work. Even

though he would bet money that the Director knew exactly what had happened, he didn't really want to advertise it. Not yet at least. He just was *not* ready for Dobrinsky's sarcasm, Jackie's leers or... whatever Li Ann's reaction was going to be when she found out.

On his arrival at Headquarters, he headed for the main briefing room, praying equally that the Director wouldn't engage in any innuendo and that she *would* have something interesting for him to do for once.

"Mr. Mansfield!"

Vic turned at the sound of his name being called out and found Dr. Chang hurry down the usually lifeless hallway after him. He stopped and waited for the younger man to catch up with him. "What's up, Doc?" he asked, wincing when he realized who he was quoting.

"I..." Dr. Chang stopped. He was shifting his weight back and forth in a way that was dampening Vic's good mood.

"Yes?" he prompted. A week ago he probably would have snapped, but now he just wanted the man to say whatever it was he wanted to say so that he could get on with his job.

"It's about Li Ann."

Vic straightened up. "What? Is she okay?" He looked past Chang, down the side hall that led to the med centre.

"No, no, she's fine," Chang said quickly. "It's just... I know that you two were... together, before. I just—" He stopped again and Vic had to resist the urge to snicker.

"Let me put your worries to rest. Yes, Li Ann and I were engaged. Yes, I guess you could say I still love her. No, I am not upset that she's now engaged to you. Yes, I do wish you both the best. And yes, I have moved on too." He grinned, the night before flashing through his mind for only the tenth time so far that morning. Yep, he'd definitely moved on, he thought cheerfully.

Immediately, all the tension seemed to drain from the young doctor. "Great, that's great," he said, then shook Vic's hand. "Thank you very much!"

Vic watched the man disappear down the hallway, then looked at his hand and laughed. He felt like a father who'd just been asked for his daughter's hand in marriage. Of course, if Li Ann were his daughter then he would have been in big trouble for the time they'd been lovers. Still, he found he liked Thomas Chang, especially when he wasn't being an Agency doctor, and hoped that for once Mac was wrong.

And if summoned by that thought, Mac appeared, trotting to keep up with the much smaller blonde. "Hi, Vic!" Jackie called cheerfully as she passed him.

Mac slowed down as she disappeared from sight. "Hey," he said, smiling cheerfully at Vic. Only someone who knew him very well would be able to see the question behind the smile.

"Hey," Vic shot back, expressionless. Slowly, Mac's smile faded. His eyes twitched away. Finally, Vic stopped holding back his pleased grin. "You free tonight?"

"Sure," Mac said, letting out a deep gusting sigh. "My place again?"

"Nah," Vic said. "I was thinking mine. I'll even make sure they haven't replaced the camera in the light fixture above the bed again."

The wide-eyed gaze made him laugh. "You're joking, right?" Vic shook his head. "Shit, maybe I should check my place."

"You don't already?" Vic asked in surprise. "How do you think she knows just when to show up?"

"Luck?" Mac said hopefully. Vic rolled his eyes. "You know, sometimes I really *really* hate working here."

"Maaaaac! You coming?"

They both winced at the piercing shout that could probably be heard two levels down. "Like now," Mac added, already heading down the hallway at top speed. "Later!"

Vic grinned and headed on his way again. A private briefing from the Director on a case he was being assigned to. He prayed again that she wasn't going to tease him *too* much.

Epilogue

Ten months, three weeks later, Li Ann showed up for a team meeting—a post-mission briefing—both hands bare of any jewellery.

"You want to talk about it?" Vic offered softly.

"Hmm?" He looked at her left hand pointedly. "Oh, that. It just wasn't working. I guess I'm just not meant for marriage."

Vic was a little taken back by how casually she commented on the fact that she'd just ended her third engagement. You would think that she would be a little more upset. On the other hand, he hadn't been in any shape to notice her reaction after she'd broken off *their* engagement, and by the time he had, they'd settled into a comfortable friendship.

Her reaction didn't upset him now, though. It just made him sad.

However, it had been less than a year. He met his lover's eyes behind Li Ann's back and nodded ruefully. They'd had a bet and he was going to live with it. It wasn't going to be too bad, though. In the last year, Mac had managed to drag him out clubbing more and more often. He was even learning to enjoy the dancing, even if he had yet to hear anything that he was willing to call *music*. Besides, a night of dancing just got Mac hyped up, leading to wild sex when they got home, and he found wild sex with Mac incredibly satisfying. He found it hard to believe that he'd ever hesitated to get involved with the younger man. Mac had broken past first his barriers, then his inhibitions. He couldn't imagine going back to his old life anymore.

At the end of the meeting, they'd headed to the door, only to realize that Li Ann wasn't with them. Puzzled, they turned. She was still sitting at the table.

"Hey, Li Ann," Mac called out. "Vic and I are going clubbing tonight," he said, shooting a wicked grin at Vic. "Wanna come?"

"Actually," the Director said, "Miss Tsei has plans."

"Plans?"

"Yes, plans. So shoo, boys. I'm sure you two want to... settle up."

Seeing the order for what it was, they shooed.

"Um, you don't think..."

"What?" Mac said. "That the Director has... plans for Li Ann? It wouldn't surprise me. After all, does she strike you as the type to let a little thing like gender get in her way?"

"It doesn't bother you?"

Mac stopped dead in the middle of the hall, staring at him in disbelief. Then he shook his head and chuckled, heading for the exit again. "Considering *our* relationship, why should it? Hell, who knows. Maybe the reason Li Ann can't hold down a relationship with a guy is because she really wants a good woman. Besides, the Director certainly won't put up with her usual tricks." Put that way, it almost made sense, but Vic wasn't sure he was willing to go there yet.

Outside, they headed for Mac's car. While they still had separate apartments, they pretty much lived at Mac's place and used his car. They had no illusions about whether or not the Director knew; the comment about 'settling up' said that she knew about their bet, so she definitely knew about their living arrangements. However, she seemed willing to ignore their relationship as long as it didn't cause *her* any problems, so they made sure it didn't. Jackie had figured it out quickly and had delighted in teasing them. Dobrinsky just rolled his eyes. As for the Cleaners, who knew what *they* thought.

Li Ann, on the other hand, seemed completely clueless and they hadn't bothered clueing her in. Maybe someday, when they were sure that she wouldn't freak on them.

They were almost to the car when Vic noticed Tom Chang heading towards another car, a completely shell-shocked expression on his face. He nudged Mac with his elbow, then pointed in Tom's direction. He'd gotten to know the Asian doctor over the last year and had found him a really nice guy. He'd thought of warning the man, but knew that Tom wouldn't believe him any more than he'd believed Mac's warnings. "New member for the club," he said softly.

Mac sighed, but the sound was more sympathetic than exasperated. "Let me guess, let's distract him from his woes?" Vic nodded. "I suppose it couldn't hurt. But you owe me big time when I get you to bed."

"Like that's a hardship."

"Oh, it will be 'hard.' I promise. Hey, doc!" he called out, and waited until the man turned to face them. "We're going out for the evening. Wanna come along?"

"I don't know..." Tom said a little shakily.

"Why not?" Vic said, throwing in his own two cents. "We've both been there, done that. Besides, it's better than going home and moping or getting drunk. Believe me. I've been there, done *that* too."

"Well..." He still sounded hesitant, but he was drifting in their direction.

As soon as he was close enough, Vic slung an arm around his shoulders. "C'mon. Dance your cares away. If nothing else, you'll be too tired to brood when you get home."

After one last look back, Tom squared his shoulders and said, "Why not?"

And the organization of the Ex-Lovers of Li Ann grew by one. Vic just hoped that Tom would eventually find someone to help him get over Li Ann the way Mac had helped him.





ROSES

by Orithain

Light. Sound. Impact. PAIN!

Vic woke with a jolt, gasping when he felt the pain throughout his body. He felt like he'd been worked over by a team of pros with baseball bats and brass knuckles. He dragged his eyes open and immediately shut them again, moaning, when the light stabbed into his brain.

"Welcome back to the land of the living, Victor." It was the Director, and if he hadn't known better, he would have sworn that there was relief in her voice.

He pried his eyes open the tiniest slit, and the impact of the light was less painful this time. "Wha—" he tried to ask, but his throat was too dry to talk. The Director leaned over and held a straw inserted into a plastic glass to his lips. Vic sucked gratefully and was rewarded with the cool, refreshing taste of water rehydrating his parched tissues.

"The warehouse exploded while you were still inside it. Fortunately you were thrown through a window by the blast, so you weren't fricasseed."

"Mac?" Vic asked desperately, afraid to hear the answer. "Li Ann?"

"Both alive," the Director replied, much to his relief. "Mac came off the best since he was between you and Li Ann, cushioned from both the blast and the landing. He had some nasty cuts, scrapes and bruises and a slight concussion, but that was all. He'll be released in the morning. You are in much the same condition. Li Ann, unfortunately, broke both her legs, so she's going to be laid up for some time to come."

"But they're all right; they're going to be fine?" Vic begged for confirmation.

"All three of you will," the Director reassured him almost kindly. "Get some sleep now, Mr. Mansfield. You've earned it." At the door she paused and glanced back. "If it's any comfort, Michael Tang is really dead this time. I saw the body myself. He won't be causing any more trouble." She left without giving Vic a chance to reply.

Michael's dead. "Michael Tang is dead," Vic repeated aloud, almost savouring the words. Michael Tang, the man who'd been responsible for him being teamed with Mac as well as Li Ann, was gone. He shut his eyes, and the memories started to replay in his mind.

Vic let himself into the apartment he shared with Li Ann, her apartment really, which she'd allowed him to share. He actually preferred his old one, but Li Ann liked the more open design here, so here was where they lived. He noticed the red roses he'd given her lying on the table beside a vase full of white ones and frowned.

He pulled the white roses out of the vase and replaced his in the water, frowning and wondering where the others had come from. Li Ann refused to even look at white roses, and she wouldn't tell him why, though an expression of deep sadness appeared in her eyes the one time he tried to find out.

He saw the second vase, also filled with white roses while his red ones lay beside it, and went over to fix those as well, wondering what the hell was going on. He found out moments later when he came face to face with a stranger holding a dripping bunch of red roses, a match to the white ones he himself held.

Even as they slowly crouched to place the flowers on the floor, Vic found a part of himself noticing the lithe figure and bee-stung mouth of the intruder. As they fought and he found himself pressed against that wiry body time and time again, seeing the tight ass and long legs as the other man rolled to his feet, Vic remembered how much he liked men. But he was going to marry Li Ann, and he wasn't the kind of guy to play around behind her back, not to mention that this guy was, at the very least, a burglar.

Vic shook his head. It had been a memorable first meeting. Almost as memorable as the night he'd helped Mac steal the Rembrandt from Michael. To this day he only had to close his eyes to feel Mac tangled up with him as they'd swung from that chandelier. He could still remember the feverish images of Mac fucking him as they swung in the air that had raced through his brain, making him even more abrupt with the younger man.

And the night they'd faced Michael, Li Ann between them, seemingly the centre point around which the three of them had gravitated. Though each of them had professed his love for her at different times, it had been Mac at his side during the ensuing firefight, Mac he'd trusted to watch his back despite all the harsh words between them up to that point.

He'd never forget the following day either.

The Director had told them they were free for the rest of the day after announcing that their partnership was permanent. Vic walked beside Li Ann, Mac on her other side, and he wondered how he could survive working with this man who wanted his fiancée, whom he wanted, every day.

Li Ann held out her hand, and finally, he and Mac each added one of theirs to the pile, only to be surprised when Li Ann yanked hers away. For a single instant that seemed to draw out, he and Mac had stood, hands pressed together, staring at each other before they'd each pulled their hands back. Vic knew that he'd seen a desire that matched his own in the brown eyes, and it was going to be harder than ever to ignore it.

They'd managed it though. They'd continued to ignore the heat between them for the next year. So many memories, so much time spent together, fighting, watching each other's backs, wanting each other.

Both of them had avowed their love for Li Ann over and over, nearly coming to blows so many times, never admitting, not even to themselves, that they really wanted something, someone else. Then when Li Ann made it clear that she was choosing neither of them, other women. Lots of other women for each of them. Vic still cringed inwardly when he remembered standing at Mac's side in the church as the younger man prepared to marry Claire. Never any men though. In their own peculiar way, they were faithful to each other despite never having acknowledged what lay between them. And somehow, in the end, the women always faded away, leaving the team intact.

Vic indulged himself with the memories of the moments with Mac, promising himself that this weakness would end when he got out of the hospital. Nothing had changed, after all.

He managed to convince himself of that until one day a week later when he, Mac and the Director all happened to visit Li Ann at the same time. Of course, with the Director, was anything ever coincidence?

Mac walked into her room holding a huge bouquet of white roses in a crystal vase and found that Vic had brought, what else, red roses. A strange smile played over his lips as he moved the red ones to the window ledge and placed his on the small table beside the bed. While Li Ann and the Director watched in bemusement, the two men spent the next hour switching the flowers back and forth, neither of them acknowledging their actions by the slightest word or glance after Mac's initial smirk. In fact, they carried on a conversation with the women as if nothing was happening.

Finally Li Ann couldn't stand it anymore. "What are you two doing?" she burst out.

Vic, who was currently over by the window putting down the vase of white roses, paused briefly. He glanced innocently back at Li Ann, then at Mac. "Nothing," he shrugged. "Why?"

The Director was sitting in the chair in the corner, so she was able to see the men's expressions when their eyes met. Her gasp was covered by Li Ann's exclamation of exasperation.

"Well, stop whatever it is you're not doing. You're making me dizzy!"

Vic and Mac both regarded her mutinously, so the Director decided it was time intervene. She rose regally from her seat and strode over, knowing Vic would get out of her way. And he did.

She picked up the vase of red roses and set it down beside the white. Then she removed about half of each from the vases and exchanged them, taking a moment to arrange the mixed flowers into two attractive red and white displays.

"There," she announced. "They're much better together."

Both men's eyes shot to her face, then to each other, and again they paused.

"Visiting hours are over, boys. Go find somewhere else to play."

They left quietly, neither mentioning that the Director showed no signs of leaving. It would be an insane nurse who tried to force *her* out. They got on the elevator together, darting glances at each other, then looking away.

"Sounds like another team building exercise," Vic observed, staring at the lighted floor indicators with every evidence of fascination.

"So we *have* to stick together," Mac replied, studying the pattern in the carpet.

"Exactly. But I'm *not* going to another strip club with you! I vote we go back to my place and watch the game. I'll make dinner. And one word about my cooking and you can go back upstairs and explain to the Dragonlady why you're not following orders!" He glared at Mac, who raised his hands in surrender.

"Just tell me that you have 9-1-1 on speed dial."

Vic smacked the back of his head.

Mac laughed.

A couple of hours later, Mac had to admit that Vic wasn't such a bad cook after all. Considering that he'd eaten so much that all he could do was loll on the couch like a stuffed pig, he didn't have much choice. He groaned contentedly, then peeled one eye open when Vic kicked his foot.

Seeing the challenging expression on his partner's face, he groaned again. "Okay, okay, you're a good cook. Happy now?" He licked his lips reminiscently. "That duck was fantastic."

Vic smirked. "I *told* you the problem was the lack of ingredients and your poorly equipped kitchen." He shoved Mac's feet out of the way to flop down at the far end of the couch, ignoring the chair in favour of sprawling beside Mac. "I'll admit I still do better when I can follow a recipe," he added.

Mac snorted. "I'll say. The future Mrs. Mansfield better be prepared for you to lay claim to the kitchen."

"Or mister," Vic murmured, not quite under his breath.

Mac's eyes shot open, and he fixed an incredulous stare on the older man. "Since when? I've never seen you with a guy, and all the old flames have been women."

Vic shifted uncomfortably, not willing to admit that his experience with his own sex was extremely limited. It wasn't from lack of interest, but because unlike with women, when it came to men, he was attracted to the dominant type, someone who would take control and let him relax in their keeping. A relationship like that while on the force would have been the end of his career, and since then, well, he certainly didn't want to give the Director another hook into him.

"Since always," he finally replied.

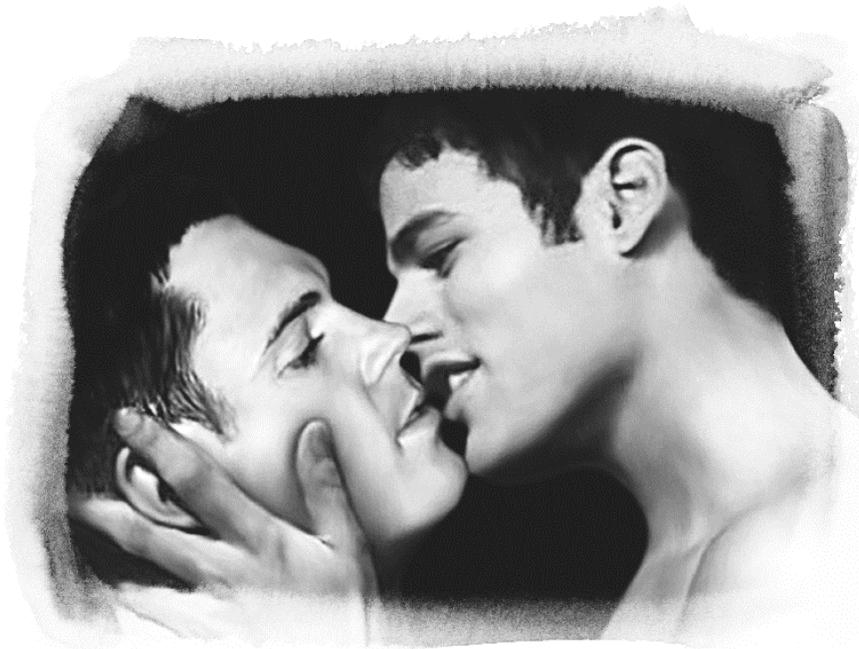
"Really?" Mac responded, sitting up, a speculative look on his face.

Vic eyed him warily. "Yeah, what of it? You don't know everything about me, you know."

"I'm beginning to realise that, Vic." Mac shifted so he was almost leaning over the other man, smiling into his eyes. "But I've wanted to, and I'm beginning to think you do too."

Not giving Vic a chance to respond, Mac covered his lips with his own. The kiss started out gentle and tentative and remained that way for all of a second. Passion, ignored and banked for a year, flared between them.

When they tore puffy lips apart to gasp in much needed air, Vic was flat on his back with Mac stretched out on top of him. Vic stared at his partner—lover?—in shock, a dazed look in the green eyes. He licked his lips nervously, seeing how Mac's eyes immediately focused on his mouth.



"What just happened here?"

Mac's shoulders shook with suppressed mirth. "If you don't know, Victor, it's been *way* too long for you."

Vic glared at him, but the effect was somewhat spoiled by the fact that his hips were still moving, rubbing against Mac, and he was panting for air in tiny, aroused gasps.

"You know what I mean. You and me?" Vic's tone was redolent of disbelief.

Mac shrugged, which produced an interesting sensation in the body pressed tightly beneath his, if Vic's choked whimper was any indication. "It's been there all along," he admitted. "Guess maybe it's time to do something about it."

"What?" Vic almost squeaked the word. "Are you nuts? We don't even like each other!" He tried to squirm away but only succeeded in arousing them both more. "I don't want this!"

Mac shifted and wormed a hand between them to stroke Vic's diamond-hard erection. "This says you do, Vic. Time to stop dancing around it and deal with it."

"This is a mistake." Vic tried to be rational, but all he could concentrate on was Mac's hand on him, Mac's weight over him, Mac's mouth on his. He moaned deep in his throat, and his legs spread involuntarily. His hands, which had been braced against Mac's shoulders, now delved under the younger man's shirt, having tugged it free of his pants, so he could touch the warm skin of Mac's back.

"That's it, Vic," Mac encouraged huskily. "Touch me. Let me touch you." Mac kissed him again, first brushing their lips together gently, teasingly, then settling against Vic's mouth as softly as a butterfly. The

bare tip of his tongue crept out to lick lightly, tasting himself on Vic. He repeated the action until Vic's lips parted with a despairing groan as he surrendered.

Mac's tongue swept in to claim what Vic yielded, exploring, tangling sensually with Vic's, then withdrawing to entice Vic's to follow. He sucked on Vic's tongue, loving the tiny whimpers that escaped the other man.

Their hands busily explored and stripped each other's body, and when Mac pinched an erect nipple, Vic yipped and nearly arched right off the couch. His legs wrapped around Mac's waist, and he moaned hungrily. Mac smiled, making note of how sensitive Vic's nipples were, and continued to explore the body that had figured in more than a few of his fantasies, slipping free of the grasp of Vic's legs. His sensitive thief's fingers stroked Vic's skin, learning it so he would be able to recognise his partner by touch alone. He found the scars that were a legacy of Vic's job and pressed his lips to each one. And being Mac, he had to comment.

"You need to learn how to duck, Vic."

Vic let out a strangled laugh, glazed eyes focused on the curly head at his hip. "I'll start hiding behind you." He moaned again when Mac bypassed his aching groin and concentrated on a leg instead. He shifted restlessly, his cock hard and leaking precum, and he reached down himself, desperate for any touch.

Mac caught his hand, returning it to its position clenched by Vic's hip. "Nope. Not till I say so," he breathed. A faint whine escaped the older man, and his cock jumped, but he left his hands where Mac placed them. Mac rewarded his patience by licking the ruddy head of his cock, cleaning it, though the liquid he lapped away was immediately replaced.

He returned his attention to Vic's legs and feet, ignoring his partner's whines of protest. He massaged the tense muscles and petted the light dusting of hair that covered them. He stroked Vic's feet, discovering that the ex-cop was extremely ticklish. He laughed softly and left them alone, retracing his path along the second leg.

This time when he reached the hip, he licked the length of Vic's pelvic bone and nuzzled the nest of hair at the base of his erection. Mac tugged gently with his teeth, drawing another moaning gasp from Vic. He explored the sensitive area thoroughly, still not touching his cock. He knelt between Vic's legs and raised them over his shoulders, helping to support Vic with his hands curved around his buttocks, parting them at the same time.

Mac feasted on the older man, tasting him, sucking first one ball then the other into his mouth, then slowly working back. The slight stubble on his chin made Vic yelp when it brushed against the sensitive skin behind his sac, then he wailed Mac's name when a clever tongue flicked lightly against his opening.

He arched up still more, nearly standing on his head as he tried to get closer. No one had ever done that to him before, and the sensation was indescribable. Mac licked him, making him quiver, then pushed the tip of his tongue inside him. Vic felt as if he'd received a jolt of electricity, and his fingers clawed desperately at the couch, trying to find something to hold on to.

One of Mac's hands had moved from its position beneath him and was running over his body again. When it reached his throat, Vic ducked his head and caught the fingers between his lips, sucking them into his mouth. He licked and sucked hungrily, whimpering around the digits as Mac's tongue continued to work its magic on his ass.

When Mac pulled his hand away, Vic whined a protest. He groaned in frustration when Mac's tongue disappeared as well, distressed green eyes opening and focussing hazily upon his lover.

"Don't stop," he pleaded.

Mac chuckled and lightly pressed a fingertip inside him. "Never," he said fervently. "You're mine now, all mine." He rose over Vic, settling between the widespread thighs, and lowered his head to steal another kiss. As his tongue probed inside Vic's mouth, he positioned himself and pushed inside the older man's ass, claiming him utterly. He groaned at the tight, hot grip around him, his entire body tensing as he fought back the overwhelming pleasure. Despite the incredible sensations, he noticed Vic's tension, and he froze.

"How long has it been for you, Vic?" he asked, staring down at the other man's rigid features. When a blush rose to Vic's cheeks, he groaned and pulled back, seeing Vic's wince even as the green eyes flew open and a protest formed, which he halted with another kiss.

"We need lube, babe," he said gutturally. "Got anything?"

Vic bit his lip and shook his head, his legs tightening around Mac's waist. "Don't care, please, Mac." He rubbed against the younger man, pleading.

"Shhh, I'm not going to leave you, Vic, but we need, *you* need, lube, or you'll be too sore for anything more later." He nipped at Vic's lip. "Let go; I have an idea. I'll be right back. Promise." He stood up, then had to pause for a moment to admire the picture Vic made, sprawled wantonly over the couch, his hands touching himself as he waited for Mac to come back. Moving as quickly as he could with the raging erection between his legs, he made a quick trip to the kitchen, then came back to Vic's side.

The green eyes widened when he saw what Mac held, and both men chuckled.

"I figured anyone into cooking like you are *had* to have some olive oil around," Mac grinned. "Nice and slippery. And I even remembered a towel to save your sofa." He tucked the soft terrycloth beneath Vic's ass, then poured a small pool of the oil into his hand. He coated the fingers of his other hand in the slick liquid and stroked it into Vic, loving the other man's gasps and moans of arousal and the uncontrollable movements of his hips. He teased Vic for a very short time before coating his own cock, eager to get inside him again.

Once again, Mac settled between Vic's legs, and Vic opened himself to him. He wrapped his legs around Mac's waist again, quivering with impatience to be filled. Mac positioned himself and pressed forward, feeling the flared head of his cock easily slip past the tight ring of muscle, thanks to the oil. He pushed in, gradually gliding deeper, feeling Vic stretch around him and cling to him like a glove, until finally he couldn't go any deeper. A soft growl of pleasure, of possessiveness, forced its way between his clenched teeth, and Mac arched back, shudders of pleasure racing up and down his spine.

"Look at me," he rasped, and Vic raised heavy lids to reveal pleasure-dazed green eyes. "Keep looking at me," Mac ordered, starting to move. He wanted to see Vic's reactions, and judging by the ripple around him, Vic liked being told what to do. He reached between them, grasping Vic's cock, slowly pumping it in time with his languorous strokes into him.

"God, Mac, *fuck* me!" Vic groaned, twisting beneath him as Mac's gentle, easy motions kept him climbing, not letting him come.

Mac laughed. "I am fucking you, Vic." He pushed in to the root to prove his point.

Vic quivered, moaning. "Not enough, need more, *please!*" Wild green eyes remained fixed on brown, his increasing desperation showing clearly.

Mac stared into Vic's eyes, incredibly aroused by his partner's need, then began to move faster. He stroked into Vic rapidly, feeling himself get closer, seeing himself reflected in Vic's dilated pupils. "Come for me, Vic," he suddenly whispered. "Give it to me, let me see you."

The hot words seemed to go straight to Vic's cock, and he wailed softly as he came.

Mac watched avidly, nearly biting through his lip to hold back his own climax while Vic rippled around him. When Vic slowly relaxed again, Mac let himself go, driving into him, taking his own pleasure while Vic stroked his shoulders and chest, sighing when Mac's climax burst from him.

Vic lay quietly beneath Mac for a little while, holding him, enjoying his weight on him, until his mind began to work again. Inevitably, he started to consider the consequences of getting involved with Mac. Not only was there the Director's reaction to consider and Li Ann's, Mac had figured out far too easily which buttons to push to turn him into a panting slut.

Vic groaned, his body tensing.

He'd allowed Mac to take total control, to tell him what to do, to tell him when to *come*. Aftershocks of pleasure were still coursing through his body, and already he wanted more. If he let this continue, Mac would own him, and he'd know it. Vic shuddered with pleasure at the thought, but it was impossible. They couldn't be partners like that.

"Get off me," Vic said coldly, startling Mac.

The ex-thief raised his head, looking down at Vic in confusion. "What's wrong, Vic?" he asked, wanting nothing more than to hold his lover and doze off.

"This was a mistake. Get *off* me!" He shoved at Mac, succeeding in tipping the other man off him and onto the floor.

Mac stared up at Victor, shock slowly transforming to anger. "Wham, bam, not even thank you Mac?" he asked angrily, masking his hurt. Somehow, he'd thought Vic would be different, would want more than just his body. Apparently not.

"Just get out," Vic growled, not looking at him, knowing that if he did, he'd throw himself at the younger man and beg him never to leave.

"Don't worry," Mac snapped, yanking on his pants and sweater and cramming his feet into his loafers. "I'm leaving. And as far as I'm concerned, this never happened. I prefer not to dwell on mistakes." Not waiting for a reply, he strode to the door and out without a backward glance.

Vic stared after him for a moment before turning away, mindful of the likelihood of surveillance. Surveillance. He ground to a halt, imagining the Director's prurient interest in what had just happened, then groaned. There was nothing he could do about it if she did have his apartment bugged again. He slumped down on the sofa, still naked, able to smell Mac on himself.

It was dark when he moved again. He didn't bother to switch on a light as he moved to the bedroom and sprawled on his back in the middle of the bed. He knew he should shower, but if he couldn't have Mac, he could at least keep his scent till morning. Sleep was a long time coming that night.

After leaving Vic's apartment, Mac had driven around for hours. When his car finally forced him to halt by running out of gas, he had no idea where he was. He looked around blankly, seeing only pitch darkness. He was surrounded by dark fields in the middle of nowhere. Looking around, he spotted a light in the distance, on the other side of a field he just knew was full of cow patties. But it didn't look like he had any other choice since he couldn't see any lights anywhere else.

He sighed, retrieved the gas can from the trunk, and started toward the field. Fortunately for him, he spotted the dirt lane a few feet down and was able to avoid the perils of the field. He reached the house a few minutes later and knocked on the door, waiting patiently as a curtain twitched and a suspicious eye peered at him warily. He must have looked innocuous enough because after a moment, he heard the sound of a deadbolt being released, and the door opened to reveal an attractive woman, who kept one hand behind her back.

"Hi," he greeted with the smile that usually made women melt. "Sorry to bother you so late, but I ran out of gas over there, and I was hoping you might have some or could tell me where the nearest gas station is?"

The blonde still regarded him suspiciously, but she relaxed a fraction. "Kinda far off the beaten track, aren't you?" she asked with a wary glance at his obviously expensive clothes and loafers. They were a stark contrast to her own serviceable jeans and cotton shirt.

Mac shrugged. "I wasn't really paying attention to where I was going. Where *am* I, by the way?" he asked with an embarrassed grin.

"Bout halfway between Kingston and Ottawa," she replied, eyeing him strangely.

"Shit! Oh, sorry," he apologised. "It's just, well, I started out in Toronto. It's going to be a long drive home when I finally get some gas and head back." He groaned softly. "So, can you tell me where I can get some?"

The woman finally relaxed fully and smiled. "Fraid not. We're out on our own here, and the kids are already in bed, so I can't leave them to drive you into town. Besides which, the gas station's closed for the night, and Dennis really wouldn't appreciate being dragged out for anything less than an emergency. You can stay here though, and I could give you a lift in the morning, Mr...?"

"Ramsey. But make it Mac, please." He raised an inquiring eyebrow, waiting for her name.

"Linda Howell," she responded grudgingly. "Mrs. Linda Howell."

"Mrs. Howell, if you're going to try to use a husband to intimidate strangers, you should do it before admitting that you're alone in the house with young children," Mac pointed out gently. The woman's eyes widened and she tensed, stepping away. Having a good idea that she had a gun or knife clutched in the hand still behind her back, Mac hastened to reassure her. "You're perfectly safe. I just thought you should know for the next time someone knocks on your door in the middle of the night."

She sighed and slumped against the wall, putting a kitchen knife on the hall table. "Guess if you were going to do anything, you'd already have done it. It is Mrs. Howell though. My husband Jack died almost two years ago."

"I'm sorry."

She looked at him oddly. "Why do people always say that? You didn't know him." She sighed, knowing she was being inhospitable. "Please, follow me. I'll show you to the spare room." Without waiting for a reply, she turned and started upstairs, expecting him to follow her.

Linda led Mac to a cheery bedroom, flicking on the light to reveal a double bed covered in a handmade quilt and sturdy oak furniture. After telling him where the bathroom was, she turned to go, brushing against him. She was stunned by the flash of heat generated by that brief touch, and she halted, raising shocked blue eyes to his. The next few minutes were a blur of kisses and fondling, two lonely people coming together briefly.

They found themselves naked in bed together, eagerly stroking and kissing, until she reached down and found Mac still limp. Linda pulled away, staring at him in humiliation, then saw the flush staining his cheeks.

"I'm sorry," Mac rasped. "I didn't mean... I wanted... oh shit!" He closed his eyes in frustration. "Guess I really am in love. Too bad it's not reciprocated." He couldn't bring himself to look at her. This had never happened to him before, not with anyone.

Linda nodded, still embarrassed, not to mention frustrated. "It's all right, Mac. Neither of us expected this. Get some sleep, and I'll drive you to the station in the morning. We'll never meet again, and we can just pretend this never happened." She slipped out of the room, leaving a wide-awake Mac to stare at the ceiling and wonder why Vic pushed him away.

—

Vic sat in the briefing room at the Agency for the first time since the accident. Though Li Ann was still hospitalised, he and Mac had been deemed fit to return to duty, according to the Director. He'd tried to

call Mac yesterday to remind him, but there had been no answer. Not the first time he tried, a few hours after Mac left his apartment, nor an hour later, nor an hour after that. Vic had continued to try to reach his partner till almost two in the morning, and there had been no answer. He'd been worried enough to drive over to Mac's apartment, but the car hadn't been in its spot. Clearly, Mac hadn't let what had happened between them keep him home that night.

He ignored Jackie completely, only looking up when the Director came into the room, wearing some skin-tight white leather dress that looked a little like a nurse's uniform. "It appears to be just the two of you today, children," she announced by way of greeting.

"Shouldn't Mac, like, be here?" Jackie asked, tossing her blond mane.

Vic was curious about the answer to that as well.

"Mr. Ramsey got himself stuck when he ran out of gas three quarters of the way between here and Ottawa. He had to wait till morning for a service station to open up, but he'll be back in a couple of hours, and he and I will discuss his range of movement," the Director replied, a faint snap to her words.

"In the meantime, the two of you will help Nathan. He's working on scanning in all the old paper copy records, and it's far too much for one person." She paced to the end of the table then looked back, seeming surprised to see them still there. "Go. Now." She made a shooping motion with her hands.

Vic groaned. The only thing worse than being stuck with Nathan was being stuck with Nathan and Jackie.

Things were even worse than he'd feared. Nathan latched onto him the moment they walked through the door, keeping Vic between him and the blonde ex-mobster. He babbled his usual nonsense about Vic's importance as a prince of the Illuminati, and Vic wondered again what the Illuminati might be; he thought he'd heard that term applied to a type of vampire in a book he'd read once. He was not going to encourage the lunatic by asking though. He sighed deeply.

"She *bongs*," Nathan hissed, drawing Vic's attention back to the present.

"Bongs? Who bongs? What *are* you talking about, Nathan?" he was goaded into asking.

"*Her*," Nathan hissed, bobbing his head at Jackie. "She bongs, like an old brass bell. She must be some new kind of alien. Not a very good human disguise though," he added, peering around Vic at the muscular blonde.

Vic groaned. "We're supposed to be helping you scan in some old files," he said desperately, mentally vowing vengeance on Li Ann and Mac for leaving him alone with this nut. Being blown up would have been better.

Mac finally reached the Agency around 11:00, and the Director let him know in no uncertain terms that she didn't approve of these little unannounced field trips. Still raw and miserable from the events of the last day, from Vic kicking him out with barely a word after the most amazing sex of his life to his... his performance problems with Linda, Mac didn't say a word. Eventually his silence penetrated the Director's ire, and she stopped berating him to watch him oddly.

"What, no quip? No convoluted explanations? No protestations of innocence? I'm surprised, Mac. Have I finally succeeded in training you?"

Mac regarded her from dull brown eyes. "I want a transfer. To another team at the very least but preferably to another city."

The Director was taken aback, for once taken completely by surprise, but she recovered quickly. "I don't think so. I went to a great deal of trouble to develop this team and its dynamic—"

"There *is* no dynamic!" Mac interrupted. "I'm not in love with Li Ann anymore, and I doubt Vic is either. All you've got left is three people with some messy past entanglements, and I'm tired of it. I want out. I won't work with them any more."

"You'll do what I tell you to do, Mr. Ramsey," the Director snapped automatically even as she regarded him probingly. "I told you once before that I own you. You work for me or you die."

"Then you'd better kill me," Mac replied calmly. "I won't work with them. Transfer me to another city, and I'll be a good little secret agent. Otherwise, I'm done." He sat quietly, apparently indifferent to which option she chose.

Vic was in hell. He was sure of it. He'd spent the entire day with Nathan and Jackie. The researcher kept scurrying to him for protection from Jackie and her bonging. He groaned.

When he got home and tried to call Mac, there was no answer, so he figured that the Director had been really pissed and handed him over to Dobrinsky again. He knew they needed to talk, but he'd wait until he saw Mac at work the next day.

When he entered the briefing room the next morning, Jackie was sitting in Li Ann's usual chair, but there was no sign of Mac. The Director began talking as if there was nothing wrong, and Vic felt like he'd fallen through the looking glass. "Where's Mac?" he demanded abruptly, a sinking feeling in his middle.

"Mr. Ramsey is no longer a member of this team."

Vic's jaw dropped, and even Jackie looked shocked. "What?" he bellowed, leaping to his feet, fists clenching. "What have you done to him, you bitch?"

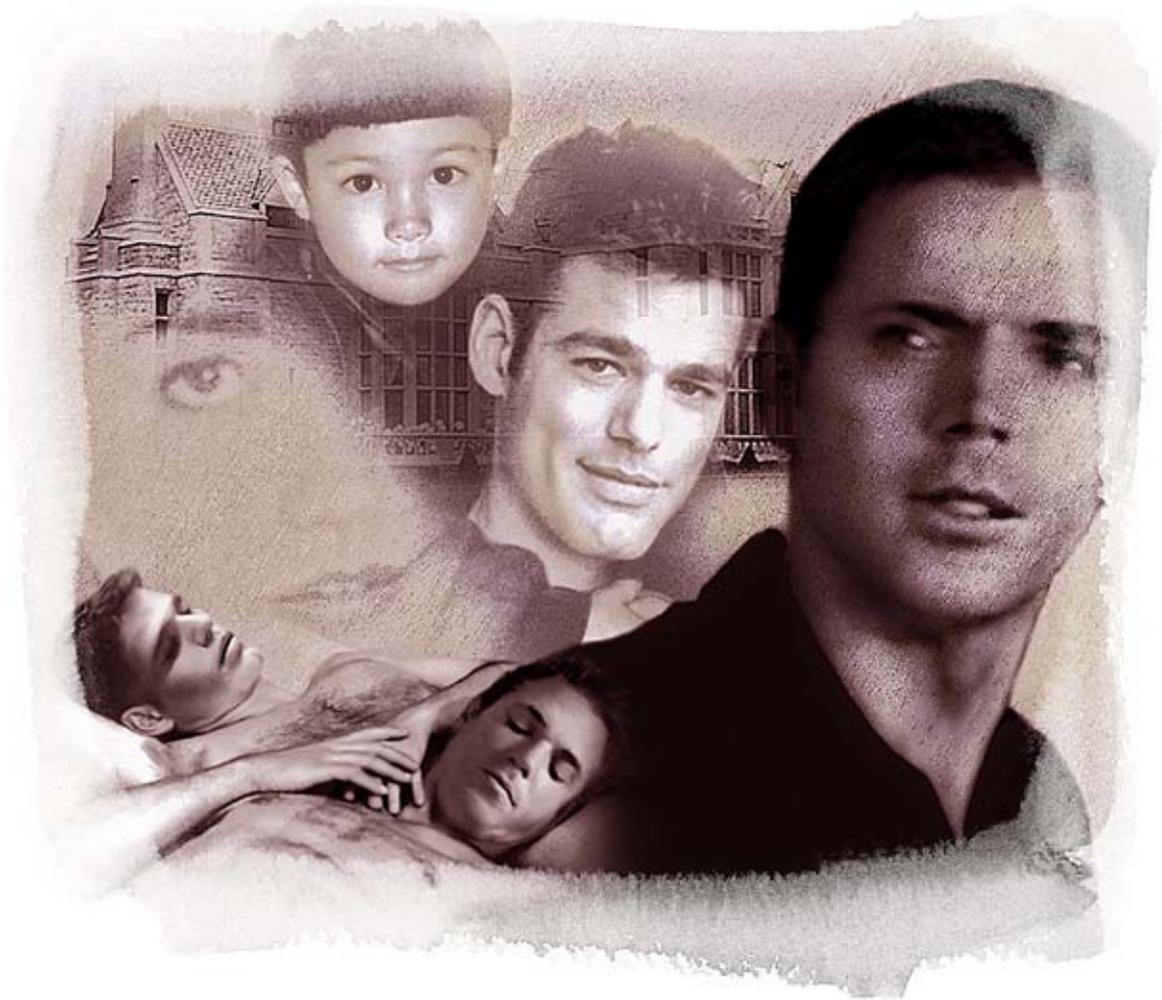
One auburn brow rose toward her hairline. "How charming, Mr. Mansfield. Well, I can see that we're not going to accomplish anything today, so class dismissed, kiddies." She turned to leave, then glanced back at Victor, her expression glacial. "Just remember, you only get one free pass, Victor."

Vic drove to Mac's apartment like a madman, fortunate that no police stopped him. He squealed to a halt in front of the building and ran inside. When he reached the door to Mac's apartment, he twisted the handle, and it opened easily. He stepped inside, every drop of blood seeming to flow from his head.

He stared in agony at the bare walls and empty rooms, only the grooves in the carpet showing that anything had ever been there.

"Mac."

To be continued...



The Chief and the Director

by Rina

*"Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden. My words echo
Thus, in your mind."
-T. S. Eliot, "Four Quartets"*

*Banff, Alberta
August, 2006*

"Any messages, Patty?"

"Just the one, Chief." Patty Martin, receptionist, radio operator and watch dog of the Banff, Alberta police department pulled a light blue rectangle of paper from the stack beside her phone and handed it over. "Are you going to the barbecue tomorrow? I'm making my potato salad, and I know Claire's bringing that peach pie of hers that you like so well."

"I wouldn't miss it for the world, and you know it. Someone has to keep you ladies in line when you get into Flo Wallace's special lemonade."

Patty laughed at that, her brown eyes vanishing in the web of 'character lines' that had been etched there by almost sixty years on the planet as well as the trials of bringing up a daughter by herself—a daughter who just happened to be the deputy chief of their hometown. Raising a hand to her curly hair, the receptionist patted the auburn strands into place and gave the chief her most winning smile. "Now, Chief, you know we girls never drink enough to cause trouble, just enough to liven up the day."

A husky chuckle answered that comment. "This year, try not to liven it up by leading a conga line to the pond, all right? We were fishing clothing out of there for a week."

"Now how is it *my* fault that Howard Jenkins took it into his head to go skinny dipping just then? Or that half the town joined in?" The Chief's laughter was muted by the closing of his office door. Patty took a moment to fuss with her hair before returning to her work, idly noting when the light by the Chief's phone line blinked on.

Probably some old friend, she thought, though she couldn't recall the Chief having received any personal calls from out of town since he had come to Banff. As a matter of fact, in the five years since he had taken over the department, she couldn't recall him saying more about the city or the people he knew there than was absolutely necessary. Well, that was fine with Patty in particular and Banff in general. A small town that blossomed into a tourist mecca during skiing season, Banff preferred to keep to itself, and, although he hadn't been born here, the Chief fit in well enough that he might have.

"Patty."

The receptionist looked up, then started to stand. "Chief? What's wrong?"

"It doesn't look like I'll be making it to that picnic after all. Get Stacey for me. I have to go out of town."

"What happened?"

"Someone... There's been a death; I've got to go to Toronto."

—

As the plane fled the setting sun, racing toward the encroaching darkness, Victor Mansfield rested his head against the cool glass of the window, watching but not really seeing the red-tinted clouds below him. He felt as if the whole situation was unreal, that the past few hours couldn't possibly have happened.

It was denial, plain and simple. He'd gone through much the same thing just after moving to Banff, so he recognized the symptoms. The only difference was that then his disbelief had settled around waking each morning to find his arms empty, and now—now part of him was irretrievably gone.

—

"Victor, thank you for returning my call."

"Jackie?" It sounded like the former mob boss, but the peppy valley girl intonations were gone, leaving only a smooth veneer of culture in their wake. For a moment, Victor felt as if the floor was sliding out from under him, threatening to send him tumbling back into his former life, the life he had sacrificed so much to escape from.

"Yes, it's been a long time. I hope things are going well for you out west."

"You didn't call to make small talk, Jackie. What's going on? The message said it was vital that I get in touch you. None of you were supposed to contact me again unless—"

"Unless it was a matter of life or death, I know the routine. And it is."

"Some psycho I put away heading out here looking for me?"

"Not you, Victor, and it's already happened."

"What?"

There was a soft sigh, then a bit of muffled conversation between Jackie and someone with a deeper voice. "It's about Li Ann..."

—

Li Ann. Dead. It didn't seem possible that the woman he had once loved, the only one he had kept in any kind of contact with after leaving the Agency, was dead. Murdered.

Victor clenched his hands until his knuckles whitened as a flash of fury shot through him. *How dare they not keep her safe?!* Jackie had been unwilling or unable to answer his questions over the phone, but Victor had plenty of them, and he knew that Jackie was not the one he was going to direct them to.

—

"C'mon Vic, what would I do out there? Man, it's hicksville, bet there isn't a decent tailor for miles!"

"Honestly, Victor, do you really think that I can force an agent to leave if they don't want to? You really must overestimate my influence."

"Sir? We'll be landing in ten minutes. I need to take your drink now." After waving off the stewardess by giving her his watery scotch, Vic turned his attention out the window again. The sunburnt backs of the clouds had been replaced by the diamond-strewn velvet of the Toronto metropolitan area. Faint red lights indicated downtown and its skyscrapers while a sharp delineation of ebony marked the shores of Lake Ontario.

Have to get Patty a shot glass while I'm here. The thought held a hint of hysteria to it, and Vic desperately wished that he had his drink back so that he could finish it. *God, Li Ann... How did this happen? Who did it? And who let them?* The lights grew closer, mesmerizing in their unwavering brilliance, and Victor stared at them until his vision blurred, not even noticing the slight bump as the jet touched down and rolled toward the gate.

"Plane's in."

"Gee thanks, Josh, I thought that was a big silver goose pulling up to the gate."

"Relax Chaz, we'll have our guest out to the Monastery soon enough, then he'll be off our hands." Joshua Roberts turned away from the wide, plate glass window that overlooked the taxiways and quirked a grin at his partner. "Or is that what's worrying you?"

Charles Kelso's light blue eyes narrowed as he scowled at the older man. Roberts had three inches on him in height and a good twenty pounds, but that hadn't stopped him from tossing the other man on his ass a few times. "Oh, and you aren't just a little concerned about going out there yourself? I don't recall it being one of your main haunts."

"Nah, it's the Monk's, and he can keep it. I do take special dates out there though..."

"Funny," Chaz murmured, looking away from his partner to watch the door to the gangway, "don't remember you taking me there."

"That's because I generally want to drag you back to my place—or your place—or behind the nearest tree, whatever's closest." As he spoke, Josh moved up behind Chaz and leaned in, his breath stirring the younger man's close-cropped blond curls as he spoke.

"Huh. Remind me to play hard to get next time, will you." Kelso sounded serious, but the sparkle in his eyes as he tilted his head just enough to meet Josh's dark gaze told another story entirely.

"How about we get this guy and drop him off, then we can go wherever you want?"

"I could learn to like that idea, as long as I'm driving."

"You?! No way! C'mon Chaz, I can't fit in that tiny thing you call a car, and you know it."

"Penance, Josh. Just like the Monk says, suffering is good for the soul."

"Yeah, well the Monk is a sadistic bastard."

"But he has a nice ass."

"True, very true."

"Speaking of nice—there's Mansfield." Kelso nodded his head toward the man who was just exiting the tunnel.

"You always were a sucker for a good bod, Chaz," Josh chuckled, sizing up their assignment and nodding to himself. The man was in his mid forties, his near-black hair cut short enough that the greying around the temples showed up in stark contrast to the rest of it. Research said that his eyes were green, but they were too shadowed to tell right now. He had a handsome face, cut body, and was wearing jeans, a plain white cotton shirt, and a brown leather jacket. Even without glancing at the photo they had, Roberts knew that Chaz was right; this was their man. "Let's go grab him before he vanishes like that princess from Morovia did."

"And may I remind you whose fault that was?" Kelso asked as they waited for the older man to walk past them.

"Hey!" Josh muttered, "We had just started working together. Was it my fault that we had miscommunications?"

Chaz grinned at that. "Just so long as we don't have any more 'miscommunications' like that," he said quickly before stepping out and placing a hand on their quarry's arm. "Chief Mansfield?" At the other man's tense nod, he continued, "I'm Charles Kelso, this is Joshua Roberts. We're here to take you to..."

"I know where we're going. What I want to know is if you can give me any more information on what happened and what's being done." As he spoke, Victor shook off Chaz's hand and started toward baggage claim. The other two men trailing after him, giving each other exasperated looks.

"... bad as the Monk..." was all Vic caught in the low-grade murmur of the crowd before the other agent spoke up.

"We don't know anything about the case, sir. I believe the Director will fill you in on what is known when we get there."

"Then let's get going." Ignoring the look the younger men exchanged, Victor shouldered his carry on, letting them escort him, more interested in tearing into the Director than listening to any of the small talk the men attempted to make.

Roberts glanced at Kelso who returned the look with a one shouldered shrug. They lengthened their strides to catch up with their charge—all they needed was the Director chewing their asses off because the guy took off on his own. Suddenly, what had seemed like an easy enough assignment at first, namely, keeping tabs on Chief Mansfield, was looking quite a bit more difficult than they had planned.

While Kelso waited with Victor for his remaining piece of luggage, Roberts went for the car. By the time Vic's hanging bag made it through the labyrinth that was baggage handling, claimed it and successfully navigated the security check at the door, the dark-haired agent was waiting at the curb, lounging against the side of a sleek, gunmetal grey sedan.

"The Director must like you," Josh chuckled, popping the trunk and waiting until the other men loaded the luggage into the deep cargo well. "I don't think we've ever been given the Mercedes to use before."

Chaz snorted so quietly that if Victor hadn't seen the curl of the young man's lip, he might have missed the expression completely. "That's because we all know how you drive. Remember what happened to the Jaguar?"

"Now wait a minute, that wasn't my fault! How was I to know..."

Victor dropped onto the rich, pearl grey leather of the contoured back seat, leaning his head against the support and rubbing at the bridge of his nose as the two agents got into the car, still bickering over some case in their past.

Almost reminds me of... Vic slammed off that thought before it could be completed. The coming days were going to be hard enough without consciously dredging up old memories. Memories that he had thought he would never have to exhume and examine again.

Roberts gunned the engine, threading the sedan through the heavy airport traffic. He made holes in the flow where there were none, blatantly ignoring Kelso's growled out curses and warnings as unimportant. After tucking the car between a van and a limo heading onto the exit ramp to the 401, Josh accelerated into traffic, picking up speed even as he wove through the other cars heading toward the city.

The lights of the cars around them washed over the sedan, casting complex designs of light and shadow over the occupants. The traffic was moderate, owing to the late hour, and Vic found himself fighting the darkness and the smooth hum of the engine to stay awake. In order to keep from dozing off, he turned his attention to the quiet conversation the two agents were having.

After listening for a few minutes, it became clear to Victor that his first opinions of the other men had been off kilter. While Kelso looked the pretty boy airhead part, he was plainly the more serious of the two. It was the dark-haired Roberts who was the joker, an attitude that reminded Victor far too much of his ex-partner's for his own comfort.

A chance comment by Chaz revealed the fact that Josh had been a cop once upon a time, and Vic couldn't stop his snort of incredulity. The older agent looked up from the road, grinning as his eyes met Vic's in the rear-view mirror. "Don't believe it? You aren't the only one, but I was. Worked narcotics on the Big Island."

"Hawaii," Chaz broke in for Victor's information.

Josh chuckled at the memories. "Best surfing you can imagine out there, man. It was a total bummer when my cover was blown and I had to take off. Not much surf here."

"He was about an hour away from getting taken out of the game totally when the Director found him," Kelso added. "Don't know quite what happened, but suddenly the cartel was more interested in getting themselves back to the Philippines then blowing his scrawny ass away."

"My ass is not scrawny," Roberts mumbled, shooting his partner a glare. "And shall we discuss how you got recruited, boy wonder?" He looked back at Victor again, ignoring the road, much to Chaz's consternation. "Charles here tried to con the Director. I'm sure you can guess that wasn't a smart idea."

"Hell, I'll admit that it wasn't," the younger man shrugged. "It also got me in the Agency and, eventually, you as a partner, so I'd say it ended up being a pretty good move."

Vic swore he could feel the temperature in the car escalate as the other two men looked at each other, only breaking eye contact when he cleared his throat loudly.

"What about you, man?" Josh asked, not appearing at all ashamed by the fact that a second ago he had looked as if he was ready to eat his partner whole.

"What about me, what?"

"How'd you get involved with the Agency?"

Victor's expression turned stony. "I don't see that it's any of your business."

"Easy now," Chaz counselled, half turning in the seat and laying a hand on Josh's shoulder. "It's a well known fact around the place now that Josh's brains soaked up a little too much sea water when he was younger. He tends to talk before he thinks a lot of the time."

"Sorry, man, didn't mean to offend you," Roberts added laconically.

"None taken," Vic said slowly, settling back into the seat and beginning to rub at the bridge of his nose again. If it weren't for the fact that it was Li Ann's funeral he was here to attend, he'd make these idiots turn the car around and take him back to the airport. This wasn't his home any longer, if it had ever been. The closest it had ever come to feeling that way was the three years... No. There was no way he was going to fall into that trap again. It had taken far too long to stop comparing everything to the time before he had left Toronto; he was not going to lose himself that way again.

The rest of the trip was quiet, the silence weighing heavily around the three men. Victor swallowed his questions when Roberts passed by the exit that led to the aqueduct, taking the 401 farther east, out of the city proper. By the time they drove through a massive set of electronic gates and up a private road that was shielded on both sides by rows of mature oak trees, Vic's brain had begun shutting down. The day had been long to begin with, and with the added stress of Jackie's phone call and the flight, he was exhausted. Whatever information the Director had for him, it could wait for the morning. Odds were that even if she told him exactly who had killed Li Ann and where they were, he wouldn't be able to remember it five minutes later.

The car rounded a bend in the drive, and Vic scrubbed at his gritty eyes, to clear his vision. When that didn't work, he leaned forward, resting his elbows on the front seats, staring in disbelief at the sight before them. "What the hell?" he began, earning a chuckle from Josh.

"I take it you've never been to the Monastery before?" Chaz asked, a bit of amusement showing in his voice.

"No," Vic murmured, his attention still on the massive building in front of them. The outside was lit from every angle by high intensity floods, though the beams didn't seem to pierce the darkened glass of the rows of windows. It looked like something out of a gothic horror novel; broad and squat, made entirely of dark grey granite, with only the wooden doors and the sills around the windows providing any relief from the stark, solemn exterior.

A darker shadow moved behind one of the second floor windows, then disappeared, cut off by the fall of a curtain. "Why do I feel like I'm arriving at Manderley?" Vic murmured to himself.

"Just be glad your name isn't Rebecca," Chaz answered, before telling Josh, "I'll explain later."

Roberts pulled to a stop outside the oaken double doors. Gravel crunched under the three men's feet as they exited the sedan. Chaz collected Vic's bags from the trunk while Josh kept watch, his right hand hovering close to his chest as if he was prepared to make a cross draw if trouble came up.

"C'mon, let's get inside." As they moved, Vic found himself sandwiched between the two agents, and for the first time he wondered if he should have brought his gun along. While the other men didn't appear spooked, they were definitely on edge, carrying themselves with a tension that hadn't been apparent at the airport.

Once they were inside, the door banged shut behind them with a hollow boom. The illumination was dim, as if in keeping with the gothic theme of the exterior, and the furnishings and panelling were dark, creating hidden corners and pools of shadow where rightfully there shouldn't be any.

"The Director's become a Goth?" Vic wondered aloud, scanning the room in search of anything familiar.

"You know the Director," Josh chuckled, though there was something slightly nervous in his tone.

"Does anyone really know the Director?" As Vic spoke, his gaze centred on the hulking stone fireplace and the painting centred over the fieldstone mantle. Even in the dark he recognized it as the Rembrandt he and Mac had recovered from Michael Tang. God, had it really been over ten years ago? The real question, though, was what was it doing here?

"No, that's the whole point of being the Director."

Vic's head snapped around, followed by his body, his expression changing from shock to a split second of happiness, then to pure fury as he focused on the man standing in the hallway—a hallway Victor would have sworn had been empty a second ago.

"Always one to make an entrance, aren't you?" he spat, studying the way the lamp in the hallway haloed Mac with light, giving the impression that he was simply an outline sliced from reality into whatever realm he'd emerged from—the realm that was Victor's personal hell.

Mac stepped into the light then, and Victor found himself unable to stop the comparison between how his ex-lover looked now and how he had appeared the last time they had seen each other. Mac's hair was somewhat longer, falling down onto his forehead rather than combed back as he had always worn it before. His eyes were hidden by mirrored sunglasses, but Vic could see the fact that the younger man had lost weight by the sharpness of his cheekbones under his pale skin.

His body was hidden by the long black duster and the cut of his dark clothing, but even, so Vic could tell that Mac had filled out some in the years since they had seen each other last.

Mac took another step forward, then paused, his hands folded behind his back. "Thank you for coming, Victor," he said quietly.

"It's for Li Ann," Vi replied harshly. "If I had been told that I was going to see you tonight, I would have booked a hotel."

Mac appeared unmoved by the older man's words, though Josh and Chaz both uttered near silent exclamations of shock.

"I'm sure you would have, but then we'd all have been attending a double funeral come morning. As distasteful as it may be, you're staying here. Jackie will get you settled. Chaz, Josh, you're spending the night as well. I'm not taking any chances."

Victor was gearing himself up to go off on his former partner when something about the set of Mac's jaw made him pause. The only other person he had seen use that expression that effectively was the Director, and speaking of her... "Just where is the Director?" he snapped, turning to look at Roberts.

"What are you talking about, man?" Josh asked, sharing a look with Chaz that plainly said they were wondering if Victor was off his rocker. "He just left."

Vic spun back around at that, staring at the now empty hallway where Mac had been—correction—where the Director had been, and felt his world spin off its axis once again.

"I imagine you have quite a few questions, Victor."

Wondering if this place had hidden passageways and secret doors, Vic stared at the newcomer, wondering if it was possible to go insane due to too many shocks in one evening. The woman standing next to the doorway to the left side of the entryway *sounded* like Jackie Janzyk, but that was where the similarity ended. Yes, she was still blonde. Yes, she was still short and stacked, but while the Jackie of old wore her clothes as low and tight as possible, this incarnation of her was garbed in an haute couture suit. Her formerly teased out hair was pulled back into an elegant chignon, and her makeup was soft and neutral.

"Okay, now I really believe that someone slipped me something earlier today. Mac the Director and Jackie looking like a Junior League socialite. Something is seriously wrong with this picture."

"Go to bed, boys," Jackie sighed, dismissing the two agents with a flick of her fingers—another gesture that reminded Vic of the Director. Hell, if Mac was the Director, just what *was* the Director now?

"But..." Chaz began, only to be cut off by the repetition of the command, this time in a much sterner voice.

"Go to bed, and try not to shout the place down; there are those of us who want our sleep."

The blond man flushed a bit at that, but his partner only chuckled. "Hey, can I help it if Chaz here tends to get a little vocal?"

"I'll give you vocal..." Kelso growled out, grabbing the older man by the elbow and strong-arming him toward the right hand hallway.

"Hey, man, any way you want it," Josh got out before Chaz dragged him around the corner and out of earshot, leaving a bemused looking Jackie studying Victor as if waiting for a reaction.

"So, Vic, like, how've you been?" she asked, dropping the veneer of culture and falling back into her old 'valley girl' persona as easily as a snake shedding its skin. Come to think of it, Victor considered the analogy very apt considering who he was dealing with.

"Look, Jackie," he spoke slowly and clearly, as if dealing with a small child or a person of questionable intelligence. "I just flew across the country on no notice at all for one reason and one reason only. That did not include making small talk or catching up with any of you, understand? I want to know what you know about Li Ann's death and I want to know now, goddamn it, or I am walking out that door and searching for the answers myself!"

"Geeze, Vic, don't have a cow, okay?" In a flash, the glimpse of the old Jackie was gone, hidden away beneath the professional exterior and demeanor. "I'll tell you what I know, but it's not the full story. For that you'll have to talk to the Director or the Head."

"The Head?" Now Vic sounded incredulous as well as angry. "Come off it, Jackie, I'm not one of the rubes who get pulled in here on cases; I know as well as you do that no one talks to the Head."

"That was the last Head." With that mysterious comment, Jackie picked up Victor's bags and started down the hallway, forcing him to follow along or be left behind. "The new Head does things quite a bit differently."

And just when did this 'new Head' take over?"

"About four years ago, right about when Mac became the Director."

It was Jackie's frank gaze as well as what was implied in her words that caused Vic to come to a halt, staring at his guide. "You're telling me that she..."

She nodded at that, then continued on, taking seemingly random turns, leading Vic deeper into the warren of hallways in the interior of the mansion. "The old Head was killed. Unfortunately his killers

took Mr. Dobrinsky out with him so when the Agency elevated the new Head into place, there wasn't anyone to take her place."

"What about Li Ann? I would have thought that she would be perfect for the position."

"A year can make a big difference in many people's lives," Jackie said sagely. "Li Ann had another project at the time and Mac... He was the best person for the spot."

Vic snorted at that idea. "And your place in all this?"

"I'm his muscle," she smiled. "Cross either of us, and you'll think Dobrinsky was Mary Poppins in comparison."

"Somehow I can believe that..." Vic sighed to himself.

"As for Li Ann's murderer, it was revenge. We've got people out tracking down leads; they should come up with something soon."

"How do you know it was revenge?" Vic asked as they stopped in front of a heavily panelled door, which Jackie then pushed open.

"That," she answered, setting his bags down next to the sleek leather sofa that was part of the conversation grouping in the outer room, "you will have to ask the Director tomorrow."

"And if I don't want to ask him?"

"Then you'll never find out what you want to know, will you?" With that, Jackie breezed out of the suite, leaving Vic feeling as if she had been talking about more than just the facts about the case at the last.

It's late.

Everyone is finally settled in their rooms for the night. They may not sleep much, God knows I won't, but at least I know where they are. Well, all except for her and she has the resources to take care of herself far better than I can.

Or so we're led to believe.

All of her resources didn't keep Li Ann safe. Not that she would have ever wanted to lead the life of a protected hothouse flower. She told me as much when I contacted her about the first threat. They came in all the time; it was nothing to be taken too seriously until... Until it was too late.

If I feel like it, I can press a button and check on them all, assure myself that all of my guests, willing and unwilling alike, are well and whole, but I doubt any of them would appreciate that. Joshua and Charles are probably wrapped around each other, Nathan's more than likely reading his e-mail or checking out his web sites. Jackie—I'm sure she's asleep; nothing rattles her much. And Victor. Knowing Chief Mansfield, he's brooding, planning ways to find Li Ann's killer so that he can get out of here as soon as possible.

I don't blame him really. The past is dead; it's better to let it lie. If you don't, it opens you up to too much hurt and we're all past that stage—or we should be. I mean, five years, that's long enough to distance yourself from things that have happened to you, that you've caused to happen.

He looks good. Fuck, who am I kidding? He looks gorgeous as always. Small town life obviously agrees with him, as does the touch of silver in his hair. Other than that small change, physically he's the same; it's just that look of cool disdain in his eyes that's different.

Oh yeah, much better to keep my distance while he's here. Let him mourn in peace, then ship him back out to Banff to get on with his life so I can get on with mine.

There goes the night security on his rounds. He doesn't even notice me out here; he's supposed to be more alert than that. I'll talk to Jackie in the morning. She enjoys dealing with problems like that. Other than that, it's quiet. The night birds have settled down; dawn is only a few hours away. I should sleep. Even the few hours I've been getting lately is better than nothing and I can't afford to let my concentration slip, especially not now.

One more look before I turn in. I have to know, have to be certain that he's all right. He hasn't been sleeping well, which is part of why I haven't either.

Just as I suspected, he's tangled in the sheets, the pillow clutched in his arms looking weary and defenceless. He stirs even as I approach, small whimpers escaping from his lips, tearing at my heart, or what little of one the job has left me with. It's a simple thing to lean in and brush the sweat-dampened hair from his brow, to soothe him with touch and voice, to calm him with promises of love.

Simple, yes, but is it enough? Will he seek my bed later tonight looking down at me through those too solemn green eyes, asking silently for permission to join me? If he does, I won't refuse him. I can't, not now, not ever.

Morning brought with it a continuation of the night's surreal goings on. Jackie knocked on Vic's door to escort him to breakfast at almost the exact moment he was done shaving and dressing, something that confirmed his belief that these rooms were monitored. Big surprise that was. Even last night as he had been getting changed for bed, Vic felt the old sensations creeping in; the constant itch between his shoulder-blades that told him he was under surveillance, the rush of anger at the fact that, once again, his life was not his own.

Ignoring Jackie's greeting and inane pleasantries, Vic followed behind her silently as the section's second in command led him down another series of hallways, this time crossing some invisible dividing line into another area of the mansion. Where before the décor had been stolid and dignified gloom, this area seemed more lived in, more human.

"Coffee?" she asked, pushing open the door to a massive eat-in kitchen. The recessed lighting illuminated the open space brilliantly, reflecting off the array of pots, pans and utensils hung neatly on the walls. Gleaming chrome and tile were softened by the blond oak cabinets, table and chairs. Victor had to stop himself from doing a classic double take at the incongruity of it all.

The scent of freshly brewed coffee wove a seductive lure around his head, one that Vic noticed had already pulled in the two young agents he had met the night before.

Roberts and Kelso, dressed much more casually than they had been the evening before, lounged at the table with partially eaten meals in front of them, coffee mugs never far from hand. From the looks of it, Josh had been eating a fruit, yogurt, and granola mixture while Chaz made his way through a large stack of pancakes.

Vic smiled wryly, remembering the days when he could eat like that and not worry about his uniform fitting the next day. They were gone now, and he wondered if the two kids appreciated their youth. Probably not; no one ever did until it was gone.

"Mornin', man," Josh smiled, raising his mug in greeting.

"Care for some coffee?" Chaz added, already half out of his seat to pour it out.

"Get Victor settled, boys," Jackie commanded. "I'll be back shortly. There's something I have to take care of first."

Something about the woman's tone of voice sent a chill running down Vic's spine to lodge in the base of his balls, drawing them up tightly to his body. From the look of the other men, they felt the same way, and probably with better reason.

"Yeah, coffee would be fine," he answered, waving off the plate of muffins and breads that was passed his way. "Black. Nothing else for now."

Thanking Chaz when the blond handed him the steaming mug, Vic settled into one of the empty chairs at the table, downing the entire cup and gratefully accepting a second before curiosity got the best of the other men.

"So, man, you've never been here before?" Josh asked, spearing a bite of pancake from Chaz's plate and giving his partner a sweet smile when he complained. "Here as in the Monastery," he continued before forking the wedges into his mouth.

"No." Vic drank half of his coffee, then rose and carried the carafe over to the table, filling his mug, then the other two men's as well. "Things were based out of somewhere else when I was involved."

"The aqueduct, right?" Chaz asked, ignoring Josh as the larger man gave up trying to steal his food and simply commandeered his plate. "Things moved out here just before I was recruited—about three and a half years ago. There was a big turnover in personnel around then too; I don't know if you're going to know many of the people here."

Vic digested that information silently. He wasn't here for a reunion, so what did it matter who was still around that he knew?

Josh waved his fork around, at the same time managing to keep Chaz from stealing his food back. "But you know the Director, right? And Jackie J." The tall agent ate the remainder of his partner's breakfast while thinking. "You've been around longer, Chaz, who else was here when you joined?"

"Joined?" Kelso's eyes rolled upward and he shook his head, expressing his opinion of how one 'joined' the Agency. "Lets see there's Nathan in Records..."

"Nathan Muckle?" Vic was unable to keep the surprise from his voice or his expression. Of course it shouldn't have shocked him; that crackpot was too strange to work anywhere else.

Roberts nodded vigorously. "That's him. One weird dude, that's for sure. Always talking about aliens and shit like that. Keeps asking both of us when some prince is coming back." He stopped and snickered at that.

"Joshua told him that Prince had already made his comeback about five years ago," Chaz sighed by way of explanation, "and that even as retro music, his stuff was out now."

"He didn't get it," Josh added mournfully.

Fascinated against his will by the two agents' banter, Vic took a muffin from the plate near him and absently began eating it between sips of coffee. The easy camaraderie and obvious attraction between them tugged at scars deep within him, ones he had thought long healed over.

"What about Murphy and Camier?"

"Those crazy fucks? You actually know them?" Josh asked, staring at Victor as if he was going to pull out an Uzi and spray the kitchen with bullets on the basis of his knowledge of the two assassins alone.

"Knew them. They still have their weekly poker games?"

Chaz held up a hand to calm his agitated partner. "They do; Josh just gets a little uptight around them. There was a little mix-up about a year ago, and they came after him on what they thought was an assignment. Luckily the Director got to the Big Kahuna here before the psychos did and was able to convince them the whole thing had been a misunderstanding."

"Teach me never to try to pull one over on Double J again," Roberts muttered.

"Jackie," Chaz clarified at Vic's questioning look.

"Not a smart thing to do," the older man commented. "She was unbalanced when I knew her, and it seems that hasn't changed."

"Can't change a tiger's stripes," Josh shrugged. "What about the Director? What was he like..."

The ex-cop's question was drowned out by the slap of running feet, then a small, dark-haired figure pounced on Roberts. "Josh! Chaz! You're here!"

"Danny! My main man!" the older agent laughed, shifting his hold on the boy when he shifted positions, settling him on his lap before ruffling the child's short black hair.

The child squirmed around to get a look at the stranger in the kitchen, and his slightly slanted eyes narrowed in consideration. "My momma has a picture of you at her house."

"And who's your mother?" Victor asked, a queasy feeling roiling in his stomach as he studied the little boy's features, guessing the answer from the set of his high cheekbones and vaguely Oriental look.

"Daniel is Li Ann's son," Chaz explained quietly, when the youth didn't answer Victor's question. "Danny, this is Chief Mansfield; he was a friend of your mother's."

Daniel slid down from Josh's lap and walked around the table to stop in front of Victor. The a flash of light caught the young boy's dark eyes, and Vic realized that they weren't brown, as he had assumed, but a deep green, leading him to the obvious question of who the boy's father was.

"My momma died," he said quietly, staring up at Victor solemnly. "Daddy says I can't see her any more because of that."

Vic's throat tightened at that, and he nodded. "I know that if your momma could have done anything about it, she wouldn't have left you."

"She was always leaving," Daniel continued, switching emotional gears with the mercurial speed of the young. "That's why I live with Daddy."

"And your daddy lives where?"

Daniel looked at him as if he was crazy, and Vic could hear Josh and Chaz shifting in their chairs. "Here of course!"

"Daniel." The quiet word broke Victor out of his confusion, and he could only stare in helpless shock when the boy beamed and raced toward the man standing in the doorway. *Mac and Li Ann had a son?*

"You want to know about Daniel."

Vic contemplated taking a seat in one of the dark burgundy wing back chairs across from the massive mahogany desk, then decided against it, preferring to stand. "I want to know the truth about Daniel," he answered, looking at Mac, daring him to tell it.

"He's Li Ann's son," the younger man began, choosing his words with meticulous care. The mirrored sunglasses Mac still wore concealed his eyes and Vic longed to slap the frames from his face in order to better read his former partner.

"I know that; I want to hear the rest of it."

Victor watched as Mac leaned his elbows on the desk in front of him, rubbing at the bridge of his nose before continuing. "Daniel is her son. He's four years old, and I've raised him almost since he was born. She thought he would be safer here than where she was." He paused, then continued, straightening up once again, the muscles in his jaw tightening as he clenched his teeth for a split second. "And, no, I am not his biological father as you seem to believe. She never told me who was, and I didn't go looking."

"And if I say I don't believe you?" Vic crossed his arms over his chest, the soft cotton of his shirt rubbing against the bare skin of his arms like a memory of another touch from long ago.

"That's your choice in the matter, but it *is* the truth—as much of it as I know anyway."

Vic snorted softly at that and turned to study the view from the windows, the view lending a false sense of peace and serenity to the scene. "The Agency seems to make people to twist the truth around whichever way benefits them."

"Believe what you want, Victor," Mac finally answered. "The only thing I ask you is not to take how you feel about me out on Daniel. He doesn't deserve that and neither does Li Ann."

A small cavalcade of cars was moving up the driveway from the gate, and Victor waited until they disappeared from view in front of the house to answer. "I don't feel anything for you, so that shouldn't be a problem at all." The other man's soft sigh of defeat was music to Vic's ears. He glanced over his shoulder, hoping to see a change of expression on Mac's face, but the set of the other man's features remained as cool and distant as ever.

"The Head is here," Mac said, pushing back from his desk and rising from the chair. "You can come with me if you like, or I'll have someone take you back your room."

"Oh, I wouldn't miss this for anything," Vic shot back, suddenly morbidly curious to see the woman who had controlled his life for so many years.

By the time they reached the front of the mansion, the fleet of limos had disgorged their contents and vanished. The small crowd was scattered near the entryway, centred around a single person shielded by the bulk of the dark suited men surrounding her.

On some unheard signal, the men parted and Vic found himself with an unobstructed view of the woman who had saved his life at the cost of his freedom so long ago.

She looked smaller somehow—but perhaps it was simply that the force of her personality had caused her to seem larger in his memories. Otherwise she was much the same as he remembered; her toned and curved figure poured into a clinging designer creation, her auburn hair brushing her shoulders and her deep brown eyes holding no sign of life or emotion.

"Well, well." The husky words grated across Victor's already frayed nerves, but he held his ground. "Here's a sight I never thought I'd see again."

Vic heard Mac exhale sharply but, to his surprise, the younger man held his tongue.

"Welcome back, Victor. I do hope that we'll have time to catch up while we're here. I'm sure you can understand that there are other priorities at the moment."

"I understand," Vic replied coolly. "Though I doubt there will be time for that talk. I intend to be out of here as soon as possible."

The Head's gaze flicked from Vic to Mac then back again. She nodded to herself. "Of course you will. Now, Mac, update me on the situation."

—

The cemetery was small and private, located at the foot of a small hill and bordered on three sides by trees. A paved road closed the square, and it was up this trail that the hearse, limousine, and accompanying cars rolled, before pulling to a stop opposite the tent that sheltered the gravesite.

The ride from the church had been strained and silent, each of the car's occupants lost in their own thoughts, even little Daniel. The chauffeur turned off the engine, and Vic stepped out of the long, dark car, noting that there were several people who must be in the employ of the Agency scattered around the area, waiting for trouble.

Ingrained politeness made him wait for the Head and Jackie to leave the car. To his discomfort, the auburn-haired woman placed her hand on his arm as they navigated the well-tended grass to the tent. A mound of dirt covered by a length of artificial grass was off to the right of the shaded area, blocking the view in that direction. The sun baked down, the heat unseasonable for this time of the year, but not entirely unknown. There was barely a breath of a breeze to move the canvas above them.

Vic felt the first trickle of sweat roll down his back, but remained still, looking at the coffin, trying to ignore the fact that Mac was standing on his other side and the way that Daniel was clinging to his father.

The service was short but still passed by in a blur for Victor. The soft sounds of Daniel's tears and Mac's quiet reassurances kept distracting him from what the minister was saying. Finally it was over, the platitudes said, the condolences offered; all that remained was to lay a flower on the coffin and that would be goodbye.

A rose was placed in his hand, and Victor glanced down at it, not even noticing the colour until he saw the ones that Mac and Daniel held. White and yellow, to go with the red bloom he held in his hand. Coincidence? Hardly, not with the people he was dealing with. That didn't stop the sight from making him blink furiously before the tears could fall or keep his throat from closing as he held back the desire to vent his grief in a very loud and public manner.

Red roses and white. How many times, starting with that first, ill-fated meeting at Li Ann's apartment, had he seen the two together? And how ironic that the same flowers would be her last tribute.

After the Head had placed her peach coloured rose on the coffin, Daniel his yellow bud and Mac, his white flower, Vic stepped forward to lay his on the burnished metal lid. He barely had time to set the blossom in place when a shout from one of the observers caught his attention. There was a flash of light up the hill, like sunlight striking a mirror, then Vic found himself slammed to the ground next to the Head, Daniel wedged between them.

"Daddy!" the young boy wailed, fighting against their hold to get up and actually sinking his teeth into Vic's hand when he wouldn't release him. The sharp bark of gunfire sounded in the distance, followed quickly by a muffled thud as bullets impacted with the coffin.

Vic heard Mac grunt and forced himself to keep his head down, shielding the child who had given up trying to get free and was now sobbing. For long, tense moments they lay there, then Vic found himself looking at a pair of alligator pumps and a long expanse of tanned legs.

"They're gone," Jackie reported brusquely, helping the Head to her feet, her hands seeming, in Vic's opinion, to linger on the older woman as she brushed her suit clean.

"Up on the hill, single shooter," Mac added, striding up to them and scooping Daniel up from the ground, stroking the boy's back as he clung and hid his face in his father's neck. "They got away, but there are some good tire tracks up there.

Vic stared at the others incredulously. Someone had just tried to kill them; didn't they care? And Daniel... If the little boy wasn't traumatized by this event, Vic would eat his badge. He had opened his mouth to lay into Mac, when he noticed the stiff way the younger man was holding his left arm and the dark, wet appearance of the fabric.

"You've been shot." The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them—something Vic cursed himself for when Mac merely glanced down at the wound and shrugged. "It'll keep, this won't." Whether Mac meant his son's emotional state or the situation at hand, Vic didn't know, but he ranted silently the whole drive back to the mansion, avoiding looking at the younger man or the child curled up asleep in his lap.

Victor—

If you're reading this—well, you know what's happened as well as I do—and you know about Daniel. You probably don't understand why I did what I did in this matter, but trust me; I had my reasons.

I'm not going to rehash how it happened, I believe you remember that as well as I do. I'm not going to tell you why either; I know you're smart enough to figure it out in time—if you ask the right questions. All I ask you to remember is that while you're Daniel's biological father, Mac is the one who raised him, the one he sees as his father—the only one he has right now.

If you want a relationship with your son, you're going to have to learn to get along again.

It's funny, I always seem to be telling the two of you some version of that. I just never would have guessed how things would turn out all those years ago. It was all for the best, believe me.

So the choice is up to you for once. Think about it, but don't take too long; children have a way of growing up when you aren't looking, and the boy will quickly become a man.

You'll do what's right, Victor, I know it. Just remember to talk to Daniel about his mother every once in a while.

Love,

Li Ann

Vic rested his head in his hands, closing his eyes to block out the sight of the plain linen stationery before him on the desk. He'd read Li Ann's letter at least a dozen times since returning to his room, but the contents never changed. He'd had no idea why Li Ann's lawyer requested that he be present at the reading of her will, and, from the looks on the faces of those around him, neither did the others.

The video recording had been short and to the point. Li Ann had never been one for excess, and this was true even in her last words. Daniel was to get her entire estate, and Mac was to have full custody of her son—and then came the final, shocking part of the tape, the revelation that he was Daniel's father.

He remembered the time she spoke and wrote of well, too well considering the amount of alcohol he'd consumed that night. By the time his former fiancée suggested they retire for the evening, it seemed the most natural thing in the world that they end up in bed together. Looking back at it, Vic had to admit he felt a bit of a vindictive thrill during the act, gaining a measure of self-respect back as he banished the memories of Mac's body with the different but familiar contours of Li Ann's.

It had just been that one time. The next day she returned to Toronto, leaving Vic with a kiss and the promise to keep in touch, something she had done regularly.

"She just left out one small bit of news..." Victor breathed, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands as he tried to force his tired mind to come to a decision regarding this matter. No matter how he felt about anything else, he had a son, and nothing could take that knowledge away from him. No matter if he never came back east again, part of him would always wonder how Daniel was doing, if he was happy and safe.

There was one more question that Victor had—one he could get an answer to if he so chose. Opening his eyes, Vic looked from the letter before him to the suit hanging on the closet door and the now dried blood stains almost invisible against the black wool.

A distant clock sounded out the hour, and Vic slowly straightened up. Eleven o'clock; Mac would still be awake unless he'd given in and taken the pain medication the doctor offered. Somehow he doubted that this version of the younger man would do that though.

Glancing down a final time at the letter and his former lover's graceful signature, Victor closed his eyes and swallowed hard, fighting the knot in his throat that threatened to choke him. "I wish you'd told me, sweetheart," he whispered. Reaching out to touch the heavy paper before rising from his seat, Vic straightened his shoulders, schooled his expression into his hard ass chief-of-police look and headed out the door in search of information.

The hallways were dark and quiet, but he had no illusions that his movements through the huge mansion were unwatched. When Mac pulled open the door to his suite of rooms at his approach, Vic didn't even raise an eyebrow.

The two former lovers eyed each other like attack dogs in a new situation, on edge but not yet hostile, though the threat was there in the air. "Daniel is asleep," Mac stated flatly, barricading the doorway, his arms crossed across his chest.

Vic's gaze dropped to the white bandages around the younger man's upper arm, then moved to his face again, noting the fine lines of fatigue and strain around Mac's eyes. "I guessed as much. That wasn't why I came here."

The singular arched eyebrow tried Victor's patience sorely, but he held his temper, not wanting to show Mac how much he still affected him one way or another. "I want to talk to you about Daniel." Vic could have sworn he saw a fleeting glimpse of sorrow in Mac's dark eyes, then the other man stepped back out of the way, ushering him inside.

Mac waited until Vic was inside before shutting the door behind him. "Have a seat. Care for a drink?" The younger man picked up a snifter of brandy as he crossed back to the dark green leather furniture and the mission-style tables that flanked the chairs and sofa.

Vic was on the verge of declining when he thought better of it. Considering what they might discuss, a drink probably wouldn't hurt. "Yes. Scotch on the—"

"I know," Mac cut in, placing his own drink on one of the end tables before walking over to the bar to pour out the drink. Eyeing the placement of the other man's beverage, Vic took a seat as far away from it as possible in the seating group, nodding his thanks when Mac handed him the heavy crystal glass.

The two men stared at each other in a silence that deepened with each passing second until it was an almost visible barrier between them. Losing his patience with whatever game it was that Mac was playing, Vic downed half his Scotch in a gulp and leaned in. "Well?"

"Well what?" the Director replied, crossing one leg over the other, resting one wrist over his knee.

Damn, it was like the man was intentionally trying to bait him. "Did you know?"

Mac swirled the amber liquid in his snifter, then took a sip before shaking his head. "No. Li Ann never brought up the subject, so I never asked; there was no point."

"She gives you her child to raise, and you never bothered to ask who his father was?" the older man asked incredulously.

"No," Mac replied shortly. "Strange as it may seem to you, I had my own problems at that time, so investigating the parentage of her son wasn't high on my priority list. She knew who he was, and she made sure to keep that information to herself. I can see why, now."

Ignoring the hard look Victor gave him, Mac took another drink, then continued. "When she asked me to raise him..." The infinitesimal pause told Vic that Mac was mentally editing what he was going to say next. "It was the best thing for all of us at the time. I had a new position here; she was moving on and up. Of the two of us, my life was more secure." A pained expression twisted the younger man's face before being erased by the cool demeanour of the Agency employee once more.

"Why didn't she tell me?" Even as he asked the question, Victor knew that the other man wouldn't have any answers for him on that account.

"I don't know." Mac looked down at his glass, and for the first time Victor saw signs of his former partner; the man he had loved so much that losing him had almost killed him. "What are you going to do?"

Now it was Vic's turn to look away. He glanced toward the marble mantle over the cold fireplace and took in the collection of framed photographs there. Pictures that documented the life of a son he hadn't known existed twelve hours ago. "I do know that the Agency twists everyone in and around it, and I don't want that for him."

"Believe what you choose, Victor," Mac sighed, standing and crossing to the fireplace, looking down at the pictures Vic had been studying, and then back at the older man. "Just remember that he's been raised by twisted people thus far in his life, and he seems happy enough."

Vic stood as well, leaving his empty glass on the table beside his chair. He crossed to the door and placed his hand on the knob before looking back over his shoulder. "We both know how fast happiness can vanish, don't we?" Pulling the door open, he left, not knowing if Mac had anything to say in answer to that and not sure he wanted to hear it if he had.

Well. That was entertaining. Damn it, Li Ann, how could you do that to him—to me? Did you really think the truth would never come out? Obviously you were prepared for the eventuality, or you'd never have written that letter.

Now that I know, I can't believe that I didn't see it before. The shape of his eyes, the ivory skin; those are yours, little sister, but the rest... No wonder I have a hard time saying no to him when he looks up at me, tears gleaming but not yet falling. Maybe subconsciously I knew—or maybe not. It's immaterial now.

What matters is what action Victor is going to take. If he tries to take Daniel away from me, he's in for a hell of a fight. I lost him; I'm not losing my son.

Maybe he's right though; the Agency twists everyone and everything around it to some degree. Do I want that for my son? It never bothered Li Ann, and I certainly never thought about it before. He's happy, bright and healthy; that's all that matters, right?

Right?

Cursing quietly, Vic stopped at the intersection of two corridors, trying to pinpoint just where in the mansion he was. After leaving Mac's suite, he'd been too distracted to pay attention to the direction he had turned and, as a result, he was in a part of the building he didn't recognize.

Nothing looked familiar. Vic rubbed at the bridge of his nose in frustration. Hearing his name hissed from the shadows of one of the nearby rooms made him spin in place, every muscle tensed for a confrontation. Peering into the gloom, he groaned to himself, recognizing the speaker as he moved out into the hall.

"I know you'd come back." Try as he might, Vic couldn't detect any changes in Nathan's appearance. The researcher was still pale, thin, and paranoid looking as ever. In one hand he held an inhaler and in the other, a thick sheaf of papers. "Did the Council send you?"

"No, Nathan, I..." Oh, what was the point? If he disagreed, the other man would keep him here half the night trying to pry information out of him. But perhaps...

Raising a finger to his lips, feeling every bit as ridiculous as he had whenever he'd had to play this game before, Vic gestured Nathan closer. "Certain things have to be remedied. The situation is very delicate here. I'm sure you understand."

At Nathan's wide-eyed nod, Vic clapped him on the back, making the lanky researcher jump. "If—if there's anything I can do to help..."

Victor nodded sagely. "I know you're a loyal man, and there is one thing."

Nathan's face lit up like a Christmas tree, and Vic fought to keep from moaning. Who knew what the other man was going to make of this request?

"Show me where my rooms are."

Nathan's watery eyes narrowed, then he nodded, moving to grab Vic's arm before re-thinking the move. "I understand. The molecular reorganization can take a while to recover from; disorientation is a common side effect."

Vic managed a sickly smile and followed Nathan down the hallway, making non-committal replies to the questions he was asked and breathing out a sigh of relief when he had the door shut with Nathan on the other side.

"All right, talk to me."

From his seat at the far end of the long, mahogany table, Vic watched his former partner call the meeting to order. Jackie sat to her Director's right and the Head to his left. Josh and Chaz occupied the other chairs along the sides of the table, both agents looking as if they would rather be anywhere else other than this.

When no one spoke up, Jackie flipped open a palm top computer and pressed several keys. An overhead screen slid noiselessly from the ceiling. Once it was in place, a recessed video feed displayed two magnified photographs on it.

"The bullet on the left is from the first incident; the one on the right was recovered from yesterday's shooting." Her fingers flew over the keyboard and several areas of each casing were highlighted.

"They're a match," Josh murmured.

"Thank you, Mr. Roberts," Jackie said snidely, making him slump down into his chair and shoot an appealing look at his partner.

Vic glanced at the Head, who was taking in everything around her but remaining quiet. Too quiet.

"Same gun, same shooter, different targets," Jackie continued. "First Li Ann, then Victor."

"Wait a—" Vic began, only to fall silent when a new image appeared on the screen.

"Based on the angle of the shot where it entered the coffin and the location of the shell casings we found, it appears that you were the intended target, Chief Mansfield."

The view from the windows of his room was of the wide expanse of lawn behind the mansion, and Vic stared moodily at it, watching as Daniel's nanny tossed a ball back and forth to the little boy. He couldn't hear their laughter, but it was plain that they were both having a good time, a fact that squeezed a fist around his heart for some reason.

A few delicate questions had given him some information about Daniel's baby-sitter, ones he wasn't sure if he should be pleased or angry about. Anna was an Agency employee and a fully trained one at that, but considering her obvious affection for the boy, Vic supposed there still must be something human left in her.

He watched as the ball rolled past Daniel and, as he ran to get it, how the grey-haired woman's eyes scanned the area. Even though the compound was supposed to be secure, she wasn't taking anything for granted. He guessed he should be pleased about that.

"Victor darling, you seem a bit at loose ends. I'm surprised you haven't offered to aid in the investigation."

God, not this, not now.

Vic sighed and turned away from the window to find the Dir—the Head—lounging in the wing backed chair nearest the door. The sense of déjà vu that struck him then was the strongest yet, and for a split second he almost believed that things were as they had been, that any moment the door would open and Mac and Li Ann would walk in, that they would be a team again.

Unfortunately the feeling passed as quickly as it came, and a look of cool resignation filled Victor's eyes. "I did. I was told my assistance wasn't necessary, that things were under control."

One perfectly formed auburn eyebrow swept upward at that. "If that's the case, then why are you still here? The funeral is over; the will has been read; go home."

"I—" The fury that filled Vic's voice drained away and he collapsed into a seat, his head bowed. "I don't know; I wish I did." He straightened his back and lifted his eyes to meet her gaze. "I'm beginning to believe that things would have been better if I hadn't come back at all."

"Really?" The Head made a show of brushing a piece of invisible lint from her form-fitting suit, then examining her manicure. "And why would that be?"

Vic opened his mouth to let loose a tirade against everyone involved in the Agency but was cut off when the Head waved her hand and rose gracefully from her chair. "Never mind, dear. I'm sure the details would just bore me. I do have a little something for you; perhaps it will help you understand your dilemma a bit better."

Leaning over and, Victor was sure, purposefully flashing quite a view of her cleavage, the Head picked up a small package from the arm of the chair and placed it on the table between their chairs. "I doubt you'll have any questions once you've watched them all. If, however, you do, I'm sure you'll know who to take them to."

That said, the auburn-haired woman rose and made her way to the door, using a walk that would make any runway model jealous. Once she was out of the room, Vic leaned over and picked up the small package, recognizing the small disks within the cases as the type that stored video feed. The only question was, did he want to watch what was on them?

"What?"

Chaz shot his partner a glance, then stepped forward, offering his palmtop and its file of digital photos for the Director's inspection. "We traced the car to this woman," he began carefully. "Her name is..."

"Claire Holland," Mac rasped out, fighting to keep his expression blank as he looked down at various shots of the woman he once almost married going into and out of a warehouse address the SUV they had investigated was registered to.

It was too unreal to be a coincidence, but could the Claire he knew have done all this? Maybe not the woman he had thought he loved, Mac was forced to admit to himself, but he hadn't seen her in almost ten years. Time, as he well knew, changed people, and not always for the better.

"You want us to keep her under surveillance?" Josh asked. The older agent had moved up to stand by his partner while Mac had been lost in thought, and the way Kelso was looking at him had Mac thinking they both believed he was losing it.

"Yes, I want her under surveillance," he snapped before taking a deep breath, regaining his control. "I want to know where she is twenty-four hours a day, and do not let her know we're watching. I also want this kept between us for right now. If I hear of a leak, I know who to come looking for, understand?"

"Yessir," the two agents muttered as one before backing out of the office, looking patently relieved to have escaped from the Monk's clutches so easily.

Mac waited until the doorway was empty, then sat heavily at his desk, his face cradled in his hands. "Jesus, Claire, what are you doing? What *are* you doing—and why now?"

—

The small plastic cases felt heavy in Vic's hand, seeming to carry the weight of five long, lonely years with them. Did he want to do this? By all rights he shouldn't give a flying fuck what the Head wanted him to see. He'd done his time, paid his pound of flesh—straight from his heart—what did he care?

"I have a life, damnit!" he shouted. A life this shit wasn't a part of. Banff had been a chance to start clean again, to find the person he'd been before the corruption on the force and the Agency's machinations had twisted him. It would have been perfect too if Mac had wanted him more than the adrenaline rush of the job, but obviously that hadn't been the case.

Chin firming as he made his decision, Vic carried the disks over to the garbage, intending to throw them away. The only problem was that his hand refused to open. Glaring at the mutinous body part as if it had a mind of its own, he spat out a round of curses and stormed back to the television, grabbing the decanter of Scotch that had been left there and a glass. He slipped the disks into the slot and threw himself back on the couch, remote and drink at hand.

"Watch where you're pointing that thing!"

The laughing voice coming from the speakers startled Victor, making him jump, then wince as he recognized it as his own. The video came up and he found himself staring at a scene from eight years in the past. The camera must have been somewhere in the dining room, because half of the shot was blocked by the cabinets, but the audio was crystal clear.

"C'mon, don't tell me you're afraid of a little water!"

He couldn't remember the exact occasion, it had been someone's birthday or anniversary or something, and he'd been corralled into hosting a get together—one that lasted until the wee hours of the morning. Amazingly, Mac had offered to stay and help with the cleanup and then...

"Don't you even think about it!"

"Think about what?"

The sound of spraying water grew louder, then was drowned out by a howl of outrage. "I'm gonna get you for that, Ramsey!"

Turning away from the scene, Vic thumbed the remote, but not before he heard his partner's laughed out, "Promises, promises." And that had been the start of it.

"What is the point of this?" Vic muttered steeling himself against the pain that was making long, bloody inroads against his hard won peace of mind. "And why am I doing what she wants?"

His thumb slipped off the fast forward and the screen flickered before resolving into another scene from his life. All that was visible was two sets of sock clad feet, one hanging off the side of an over-stuffed armchair, one on the floor. The rustle of a newspaper was interspersed by the soft murmurs of conversation and, every so often, spans of silence that were followed by sighs of pleasure.

Sunday morning.

It didn't matter which one; that was the routine they'd developed. Grab the paper and curl up together, pointing bits of interesting news out until the closeness got the best of them and they tore back to the bedroom—or simply jumped one another right there.

Another stab at the remote lurched the scene into high speed, and Vic looked away, blinking away tears he refused to shed.

"Oh God, just like that. So good."

"Love you, baby. God..."

The moaned out words and wet slap of flesh was too much for Vic. He switched to the next disk, draining his tumbler and filling it again before the next act of the tragedy of his life started.

A distorted sound burst from the speakers and was followed by an annoyed muttering. "Who now? I don't have time for this!" Vic looked cautiously at the screen and saw Mac cross in front of the hidden camera, stepping around half-filled cartons to get to the door.

The apartment looked like a bomb had gone off in it, the contents of the shelves in disarray; the tables piled high with CDs, knickknacks and Vic's 8-track player. It had to be just before he moved, but also before Mac decided not to go; otherwise, the younger man wouldn't have been there.

"What?" Mac opened the door, then groaned. The reason became apparent when the person on the other side swung the door open wider and swayed inside.

"Love what you've done with the place," the Director purred, running a finger over what was visible of the dining room table and examining her skin for dust. "Post-modern Armageddon, very tasteful."

Curious, and against his better judgement, Vic leaned forward, wondering what this had to do with whatever point the she-devil was trying to make.

"Is this just a general torture session, or is there a purpose to this visit?" Mac sighed, standing behind the sofa, keeping the furniture between himself and the Director.

She laughed at that and picked up a tape, examining the label before tossing it back onto the pile. "I never do anything without a purpose, Malcolm, you should know that after all this time. I was just wondering if you had given this little move of yours and Victor's any serious thought?"

Mac looked incredulous at that. "Yes," he replied sarcastically, "I know more about Banff than I do about Toronto at this point. The decision is made; if you weren't going to let us leave, you should have thought of it a lot sooner. Colour us gone as of next week."

The Director tapped a fingernail against her chin, then pursed her lips. "I know you've looked at the place you're going, but what about the people? What do you think of them?"

"They seemed nice enough. Vic likes the people he's going to be working with, and they respect him. He's going to be a cop again—doing what he wants."

"But have you considered what those 'nice people' are going to think and do when they find out that their new chief of police has a man for a domestic partner—for a lover?"

"That shouldn't matter," Mac argued, but there was a bit of hesitation in his voice and Vic could see the uncertainty in his eyes before he turned away from the camera. "He's the best for the position; they know that."

"Dear boy, it *shouldn't* matter, but it does. Those same people who will welcome our Victor with open arms will begin finding reasons to snub him the minute your relationship comes to light. He'll quickly change from the hero of that town to the one the mothers warn their children about."

Vic could see the muscles bunching in Mac's shoulders through the fabric of his shirt as he struggled to hold his temper, but the Director continued on mercilessly. "How friendly a town will it be when people cross the street to get away from you when they see you coming? What will you do the first time someone eggs your house or spray paints 'faggot' on your cars? What will happen the first time one of the 'good old boys' picks a fight with either one of you when you're out to dinner?"

"Just... Just get out of here," Mac rasped, leaning heavily on the back of the sofa for support.

"It was just something I wanted you to think over; no need to change your mind about leaving." The Director smiled benignly, then glided out of the apartment, pulling the door shut behind her.

The now-silent video feed continued, but Vic wasn't seeing the television any longer. He was caught up in the memory of what had happened next. How his life had fallen apart when he came home that night to find out that his lover had suddenly decided that he didn't want to move out to the 'back end of nowhere'.

"You bitch..." he growled, bitter bile creeping up his throat because of the churning in his stomach. "Had to stick your nose in where it wasn't wanted. And you listened to her, you goddamn bastard!" If Mac had only talked to him, they could have figured out a way to handle the potential problem together, but no, the asshole had to go off on his martyr kick, turning both their lives to bloody messes.

The thought of that last horrific fight flashed across Vic's mind and he winced at the hateful things they had both said. "Goddamn it, Mac, we were supposed to trust each other..."

The television screen switched to a solid slate blue when Vic hit the power button for the video feed. After setting the remote on the coffee table, he sat staring at the blank screen with unseeing eyes.

"Damn you." Vic wasn't sure if he was cursing the Head, Mac, himself, or all three. What he did know was that he was good goddamn sick of the Agency and everything about it. It was the same reason that had burned him out and moved him to get out in the first place and now to find that the Director had a hand in Mac's reneging on his promise to go with him...

Once again furious at his former lover, Vic was on his feet and out the door before he realized it. He stormed down the hallway, knocking impatiently at the door to the younger man's suite. No one answered, so Vic banged again—slightly harder but not the full out pounding he wanted to indulge in as Daniel was asleep somewhere in there.

Cursing when his knocking went unanswered, Vic tried the knob. To his surprise it was unlocked, and the door swung open when he turned the handle.

The living room was dark and silent, the only illumination coming from the moonlight shining through the tall windows. After taking a second to orient himself, Vic crept toward the door on the left side of the room, sure that it had to lead to Mac's room. The one other time he had been in here, he had glimpsed children's toys through the other door, so it was probably Daniel's.

Telling himself that he was doing this only because he wanted to know the truth, Vic eased open the door, stepped forward, and found himself flat on his back with the barrel of a pistol shoved under his chin and Mac's long body weighing down his torso.

"Jesus, Victor." The other man's voice was filled with tension, and he sat up, clicking the safety on the gun and placing it on a nearby table. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

"I came," Victor grated, suddenly all too aware of the younger man's weight over him and of the fact that all Mac was wearing was a pair of soft, loose pants, "to talk to you. Is it my fault that you don't answer your goddamn door?"

"And is it my fault that you should know better than to go barging in where you aren't wanted?" Mac snarled back.

A slight shift in the other man's weight as well as the memory of what he had seen on the videos gave Victor the ammunition he needed to goad his former lover, and he barked out a harsh laugh. "Doesn't seem like you don't want me here, Ramsey. Not from where I am anyway."

"Don't fuck with me, Victor," Mac said ominously. "Not tonight."

"Why not? You've certainly fucked with me enough over the years. Maybe it's my turn to get some back."

What Vic wanted was to force Mac into a corner so that he could demand an explanation for what had happened between them. What he got was something else entirely.

"You want some back? Go ahead and take it—or maybe I'll just do it instead." Before Vic could respond to the growled out challenge, Mac was on him, kissing him with a passion and ferocity that sent every bit of blood in his body arrowing toward his groin and his now rock hard erection.

"Goddamn it, Mac," the older man gasped once his former partner took a break from trying to swallow his tonsils, "that's not what I meant."

Instantly, the cool, remote, mask slid down over Mac's expression. "Then just what did you mean?" he asked.

"That you... I... Fuck it." Giving up on rational thought, Victor grabbed Mac by the shoulders and pulled him downward to ravage the younger man's mouth just as fully as his had been taken moments before.

God, it had been so long... Mac tasted of mint and brandy and remembered nights spent exploring each other until they were both boneless. The rush of memories drew a moan from deep in Vic's chest, and he tightened his hold on the other man, determined that this time he wasn't going to get away.

Thankfully, Mac didn't seem to be trying to do that at all. On the contrary, he was now plastered flat on top of Vic's body, one of his hands buried in the older man's hair while the other one delved under his shirt to stroke and knead the muscles of his back.

"So long. So fucking long..." The words were a hoarse whisper against his skin, and Vic nodded blindly, arching upward against Mac's body to rub their erections together. The layers of cloth separating their flesh were a frustrating impediment, and Vic prepared to make mention of the fact when Mac suddenly pulled back.

The younger man growled out a curse as he stared down at Victor, the words barely audible over the rasping of their breath. His desire was clearly evident; both in the way his eyes had darkened to mahogany and by the hard length pressing against Vic's hip. But, even as Victor watched, it was as if a switch was flipped inside the other man, banking the fire raging within him.

In a sudden, supple, move, Mac rolled off Vic to sit with his back against the side of the bed. "You need to leave," he said flatly.

Vic slowly pushed himself to a seated position, his eyes never leaving the younger man's shadowed face. An icy chill settled inside him, bringing with it a strengthening of purpose even as it clutched his soul.

"Why?"

Mac flicked a glance in his direction at that, plainly not anticipating an argument on the matter. "Because it's late and neither one of us is thinking rationally. I would have thought that was rather obvious."

"Cut the shit. I'm not the one who was stuffing their tongue down someone else's throat not two minutes ago."

"Oh really?" Mac's expression was one of patent disbelief.

"Don't get wise with me, damnit. I want an explanation, and I want it now. You owe me this and you know it. Why did you stay here?"

The younger man ran his hand through his hair, a gesture that revealed more to Victor about his state of mind than he knew. "I told you. I wasn't up to moving to the west end of nowhere. Not for you or anyone."

Vic fought the old pain and anger that threatened to sweep over him. "Bullshit."

"Fine. Don't believe me, that's your prerogative, Chief Mansfield."

"I don't believe you, Director Ramsey. I know the truth."

Mac scoffed at that. "And just what is that? You seemed happy enough to believe the other five years ago."

"Things change," Vic replied flatly. "People change. I'm sure you of anyone understands that."

"You know why I didn't go?" At Victor's slight nod, Mac continued. "Then obviously you can understand why I made the choice I did. You had a fresh chance; I wasn't going to let you fuck it up."

Victor's whole body went still at that. "You weren't going to *let* me fuck it up? And just who gave you the right to decide who and what was best for me?"

The younger man sighed. "It was what you wanted. You're a cop, Victor; if you hadn't have gotten out when you did, it would have killed you."

"I wanted *you*, you asshole," Vic ranted quietly, glaring at Mac. "If the town couldn't handle it, we could have gone somewhere else."

"Again and again."

"Do you know that Banff has a good sized gay community?" Vic offered the question up as a challenge and was perversely pleased at the slight widening of Mac's eyes that told him he hadn't.

"It does and guess what, those people aren't harassed or tormented or shunned. Amazing, isn't it?"

"Those people aren't the chief of police."

"Yes, they are."

Mac's expression turned unbelieving. "What? Do you have a nice little rainbow sticker in the window of your cruiser?"

Vic rubbed his forehead, immensely tired of all the games. "No. I also don't date, not that it matters to you."

"Guess the ladies out there are smart." It was a brief flash of the old Mac, and Vic was stunned.

"They ask; I just haven't been interested. Our radio operator is constantly trying to fix me up with her daughter."

"So why don't you just accept?"

"She's my deputy chief, and I've learned not to mix my private and work lives."

"Ahh." Mac was quiet after that, seemingly lost in his own thoughts.

"Besides, I tell them that Margo takes up all my time."

"Margo?"

"My dog," Vic admitted with a small smile. "I couldn't—didn't want to be alone, couldn't sleep. She's been a life saver."

"Who's watching her now?"

"Stacy—my deputy."

Mac was silent again, then he managed a laugh. "Let me guess, you rescued her from the pound."

"Well..."

"What is it with you and wounded doves, Mansfield?"

Vic shrugged. "I can't change what I am."

"Sometimes you can, if you try hard enough."

"What? Like you deciding that you knew what's best for me?"

"It was for the best."

Vic bit back a caustic retort, waiting until he could reply calmly before answering. "That's a matter of opinion. I hated you, you know."

"I know."

"I wanted to make you hurt like I did; I hoped Li Ann went back and told you what happened."

"I know."

"And now..."

"Now?"

"Now I don't know what to think. I don't know what *you* think; I'm not even sure I know you any more."

"That makes two of us." Mac sighed when Vic simply nodded, then rested a hand on the older man's back, stopping when Victor tensed almost imperceptibly. "Sorry." This was added as he sat up, staring out into the room, his tone betraying nothing of what he was feeling.

"It's not..." Vic began, fighting the conflicting desires threatening to make him scream. "It's just hard to comprehend all this." In an effort to breach the walls that were rapidly reforming between them, Vic reached out and put his hand on Mac's shoulder, feeling the raised scar tissue he had noticed earlier.

"What happened?" the older man asked, unable to keep the concern from his voice. The lines of the scar were smooth, but oddly angled and connected so that they almost felt like...

"Told you I went a little crazy with you gone." Vic could feel the stretch in Mac's shoulder as he leaned over to the bedside table and flipped on the light. The small reading lamp provided enough light to illuminate a small circle around it, and Vic leaned in closer, his eyes narrowing as he stared at the intersecting lines.

"So you carved some letters in your arm?"

Mac actually chuckled at that, and twisted his arm to look at the pale markings on his shoulder. "No, I didn't do that." Seeing Victor waiting patiently for an explanation, Mac pulled a pillow off the bed, shoved it behind him and leaned back against it, noting that the other man hadn't moved his hand from his arm yet.

Shaking himself out of his reverie, Mac tried again. "To say I was taking crazy risks was an understatement. She finally got tired of it and loaned me out to another organization. I think she figured that the assignment would kill me or wake me up."

He stopped and rubbed at his forehead with his free hand, fearful that moving the other one would cause Victor to shift away again. "The first almost happened and that's what gave me a kick in the ass—well, that and the guy I was partnered with. Now he was psycho. Must have been pretty funny to watch, actually. The two of us out there semi-trying not to get killed because the men we—because of things that had happened in our lives. I think it was dumb luck we both survived."

Mac fell silent, and Vic waited quietly until he couldn't take it anymore. "And then?"

The younger man laughed mirthlessly. "And then we found a hotel room and fucked each other blind. Trust me, the psych guys would have had a field day with it—survival reaction, transference, all those lovely little catch phrases came into play."

"Then you let him slice your arm up?" Vic asked in disbelief.

Mac shook his head, glancing down at the scar again. "It wasn't anything I didn't do to him. Somewhere around four in the morning, after our second bottle of vodka, we came to a decision. Since we never were going to have the people we wanted, we were going to forget 'em and remember the ones who did—want us I mean." He took in Vic's shocked expression and chuckled softly. "It was late, we were drunk and still on an adrenaline rush—a bad combination as you well know."

"Things happen," Vic answered quietly, wondering if this evening fell under that category and knowing for him at least, it didn't. "Did you ever see him again?"

"No. His organization was even weirder than the Agency, if you can believe it. Once I had access, I did try to find out what had happened to him, but the whole thing seemed to have disbanded."

Victor felt a lead weight settle in his stomach, but gamely continued. "That's too bad."

"Yeah..." Mac nodded, "I would like to know if he ever got his man—though that's more of a line for the guy he was in love with than him, fit the job description better."

Vic nodded without really understanding what his former partner was talking about. Tearing his eyes away from the angular letters carved in the younger man's shoulder, he let his hand drop back to the floor, very conscious that he had left it there the whole time Mac had been talking. "So you came back here, and then what?"

"That all happened about nine months after—" Here Mac paused, his dark eyes cutting to Vic's face, then away. "Everything. When I came back, Li Ann had some news for me as well as the edict that I had better get my shit together because I was the one who was going to raise my niece or nephew." He looked at Victor's shocked expression and nodded. "That was exactly what I thought at the time."

"Trust Li Ann to know what was best for you," Vic mused, flashing back on the letter she had written him.

"It was. Scared the crap out of me, but it also made me wake up and face some things I hadn't been able to before. She was eight months pregnant when the Head and Dobie were killed and..."

"And you had a new job."

"Exactly—and five weeks after that I had a son."

My son, Victor thought, biting back the bitter words before they slipped off his tongue.

Mac must have caught something in the older man's expression, because the small bit of humour that had stayed in his eyes faded away. "If I had known..." Shaking his head, Mac sighed. "I don't know what I would have done."

"Told me, I hope," Vic said. He started to stand, holding up a hand when Mac moved to protest. "It's late, and a lot has happened tonight. I need—we both need time to think about this, and I don't think you want Daniel coming in to see his daddy like this, right?"

"Right." Mac got to his feet and walked Vic to the door, pausing before opening it fully. "I would have told you."

Vic gazed up at the taller man, then nodded. "I know," he said, before easing through the door and moving down the hall toward his own rooms.

After a nearly sleepless night, Vic was profoundly glad that there was a pot of fresh coffee in the kitchen and that everyone else seemed to be otherwise occupied when he made his way there. Taking a sip of the steaming beverage, he closed his eyes and leaned his head against the back of the wooden chair. Everything he had learned yesterday kept tumbling around in his head, filling his thoughts and derailing them when he should have been working on a way to make the Agency include him in whatever they were planning.

"Ummm, Victor? Are you all right?"

The quiet, hesitant question drew a groan from Vic and he sat up, opening his eyes to see Nathan peering at him nervously. "I'm fine, Nathan, just a little tired is all." Maybe, just maybe the other man would take the hint and leave him alone.

Wrong.

"Oh," Nathan replied, nodding seriously. "I can understand that. With what happened last night and all..." He paused, shifting from one foot to the other, darting quick looks toward Vic, then around the kitchen. "Things will be better. I mean, now that you and your consort have gotten back together..."

The researcher's voice died off at the disbelieving look in Victor's eyes, and he stammered out something unintelligible, blushing an unflattering shade of red. "I—I—you—I'd better get back to work."

Vic nodded, still unable to answer Nathan due to sheer shock and watched as the other man scurried out of the room, heading off to wherever he was working. *Consort?* Vic asked himself, banging his forehead with the heel of his hand, wondering where Nathan had come up with that one. He froze, frowning, when a more important question crossed his mind. Just how the hell had Nathan known what had happened last night?

Restless, Vic prowled the first level of the mansion, needing some kind of distraction to keep his mind occupied. He'd spent the morning working with Jackie of all people, going over old records to see if there was a pattern in any of the threats that somehow found their way to the Agency. As far as investigative work went, it wasn't much, but Vic kept at it, determined to find some link that would lead them to Li Ann's killer.

According to Jackie, Josh and Chaz were in the field checking on a possible informant, and Mac was closeted with the Head, discussing strategy. Anna had taken Daniel to the science museum to keep the young boy occupied and out of the way, so that left her to 'babysit the cop' as the former mob boss so quaintly put it.

Four hours of looking at old transcripts, letters and e-mails proved to be too much for her, however. With a disgusted snort that was at odds with her appearance, Jackie stood, gathering up the folders and telling Vic he was on his own for the afternoon. So here he was, wandering through the library, peering in the small offices outside the massive, high-ceilinged, room, growing more frustrated by the minute. He was on the verge of going in search of the room Mac and the Head were ensconced in when the sound of a disturbance in the main hall drew his attention.

"I told you that you aren't to leave." The Head's voice was harsh and commanding. A tone, Vic knew, that said she wasn't fooling.

"And I told you I am." Vic made it to the doorway in time to see Mac barrel by the petite woman, storming toward the door.

Spying Victor, the Head rested her fists on her hips, her eyes narrow, her lips a thin gash of red on her face. "This is just what she wants. If you leave, you're walking into her hands."

"Goddamn it," Mac roared, spinning around to glare at her. "My son is in the hospital! I don't care if she's sitting outside with a fucking bazooka; I'm going to him!"

That news galvanized Vic into action. "What are you talking about? What happened to Daniel?"

Faced with two antagonistic men, the Head merely sighed. "It seems that little Daniel and his nanny were in a car accident. He's fine, just a few bumps and bruises. Anna has a concussion so they want to keep her for observation. I was going to send agents to bring Daniel back here and watch over the nanny, but Mac, being the impulsive boy that he is, wants to go get him himself. Have you ever heard of something so foolish?"

Vic looked from the Head's benign expression to Mac's strained, seething one and made his decision. "You need backup, let's go."

Not noticing that the Head's protest died off before they had even made it out the door, the two men rushed for a car and sped toward the hospital, for the moment united by their concern for the young boy.

Knowing that Mac was too upset to drive, Vic slid behind the wheel, ignoring the younger man's protests. Once they were off the back streets and on the highway, he glanced over at Mac, who was brooding and unconsciously rubbing the small bulge his gun made under his jacket. "I have one question for you, and if you don't answer me straight, I'll put you out of this car right now, and you can walk the rest of the way to the hospital."

Mac looked up at that, his forehead creased with a frown. "What?"

"Who the fuck is 'she'?"

The younger man slumped against the seat and the lines of tension around his eyes deepened. Vic waited silently, his own sense of unease growing exponentially at each second that ticked by without an answer.

"Claire." Mac's voice was a broken rasp.

"Claire? As in that munitions dealer you almost married?" Mac grunted out an affirmative and Vic's fingers tightened in the leather-covered steering wheel so hard that they left indentations behind.

"How long have you known?"

"Since yesterday."

"And when were you planning on giving me this tidbit of information?"

"Once she was in custody."

"When were you going after her?"

"Day after tomorrow."

Vic let loose with a round of blistering curses. "Understand this, Ramsey. I'm going in with you, or I'll blow your plan out of the water, understand?"

"Fine." To Vic's ears, Mac sounded tired, defeated. "You're in."

"Damn right."

—

Feeling vaguely ill at ease, Vic settled himself into one of the comfortable chairs near the fireplace, still unsure as to why he was here at all. After he and Mac had retrieved Daniel from the hospital and returned to the mansion, the boy had refused to let either of them out of his sight, demanding that Victor stay with them. Shaken by the accident, Daniel refused to let Mac out of touching range except for the few moments he moved to Vic's side.

In one of those brief respites, Mac met with Jackie, speaking in hushed tones, finalizing the plans for the mission while Vic attempted to distract Daniel. The bandage on the little boy's forehead and the bruise on his cheek were luckily the worst of his injuries, but even so, Vic felt a rush of hatred for the woman who had attempted to harm his son.

All through dinner, Vic argued back and forth with himself as to what he was going to do about the situation when he went back to Banff. It would have been easier to walk away before, but now he'd been drawn in. He cared about the small child sitting curled up on Mac's lap, his dark head tucked under the other man's chin while he blinked and yawned, fighting sleep. Cared for Daniel, God help him, almost as much as he did for the man holding him.

"Bed time, Danny-boy," Mac said quietly, giving the child a tender smile that made Vic's heart clench.

"Read me a story?" Daniel asked, rubbing at his eyes.

"You've got it."

"Him too," Daniel added, peering over at Victor seriously.

At Mac's slight frown and questioning glance, Vic bit back his original answer. "I don't know if I'd be any good at reading stories."

"You will," Daniel said knowledgeably, "Daddy can teach you. You helped him, now he can help you." The boy looked from one man to the other, his forehead wrinkling when he took in their identical perplexed expressions. "When you came and got me. You kept Daddy safe, now he can help you."

"Oh." Vic's answer was echoed by Mac, who stood, scooping Daniel up in his arms.

"Looks like you've been drafted," the younger man said gruffly, motioning for Vic to follow, then walking toward Daniel's room.

In a short time the boy was changed, had brushed his teeth, washed his face and was curled up in his bed, clutching a large stuffed dog to his chest. "Momma gave me him," he said, his expression falling momentarily. "Because I can't have one yet. Do you have a dog?"

Vic nodded. "Her name is Margo; she's about as tall as you are."

"Can I see her?"

"What'll it be tonight, sir?" Mac cut in before sitting on the bed opposite to Victor, Daniel in between them.

"The cat book," Daniel replied promptly.

"The Cat in the Hat," Mac explained for Vic's information as he plucked a worn copy of the book off the bookshelf. "Want me to go first?"

Daniel nodded and Vic sat, listening, while his former lover read the children's book, giving each of the characters a different voice. When Mac stopped reading and held out the book, he hesitated a moment before accepting it, then launched into the rest of the tale, attempting to bring the characters to life as the other man had.

"You did good," Daniel smiled when Vic had finished, then cuddled deeper into his bed, yawning.

"Time to go to sleep." Mac ruffled the boy's dark hair, then tenderly stroked it into place and leaned in to kiss him. "Want the night light on?"

Daniel nodded, then looked over at Victor expectantly. Guessing what the boy wanted, he offered a wan smile and gave Daniel a quick peck on the cheek then stood.

"G'night, Chief Victor," he murmured. "G'night, Daddy. Love you."

"Love you too, Danny-boy," Vic heard from the doorway. "Always."

"And forever."

Vic waited until Mac let the room, pulling the door mostly shut behind him. "He's a good kid."

"Despite being raised by twisted people?" Mac asked, though the words didn't carry any venom.

"I'm sorry about that crack."

Mac half-smiled. "Don't worry, it's true. Want a drink?"

"I think I need one," Vic admitted, waiting until Mac handed him his tumbler before speaking again. "I'd like the chance to get to know him more."

A fleeting expression of pain crossed the younger man's face, then he turned away to lean against the hearth, his attention fixed on the photographs there. "I suppose that's your right."

His voice sounded dead, and Vic moved to the other end of the fireplace, disquieted by the bleak expression on Mac's face. "I don't mean that I want to take him away from you, just that..." Sighing in frustration at not being able to articulate what he wanted, Vic picked up the nearest picture, one of Daniel sitting on Mac's shoulders in the middle of a pool somewhere.

A soft noise as he moved the frame caught Vic's attention. Curious, he looked back at the mantle, spotting a jumble of gold that had been hidden by the photo. Setting the picture aside, he picked up the tangle, recognition coming like a blow as he stirred the oddly bent strands lying in his palm. He'd never been able to get the knack of putting the 36 strand puzzle ring together, something that had brought Mac no end of amusement when the other man had gifted him with it on their first anniversary.

After several fumbled attempts at getting all the individual parts into place only to have the ring dissolve into a mass of unrecognizable metal, he'd given it to Mac to put back together. That done, Vic placed it on his finger, saying that was the last time Mac was going to have to fix it. When Mac had asked why, Vic responded because I'm never going to take it off again.

Never had ended that evening in the apartment when he'd flung the damning reminder of their failed relationship at the door after Mac walked out. How the hell had the other man ended up with it?

"It's a reminder," Mac said, answering Vic's unspoken question. "That sometimes doing the right thing hurts a hell of a lot."

"Maybe that's because it wasn't the right thing to do," Vic answered, glancing up to meet the taller man's eyes. Heat flared and caught as they continued to look at each other, the distance between them only increasing the strength of the desire that was building.

Mac swallowed, the bump of his Adam's apple bobbing under the lightly stubbled skin of his throat. Vic had a flashback of feasting on that very spot and the way it made Mac writhe. "Do you ever wonder if you can go back and fix things that you fucked up in the past?" he asked, studying Victor seriously.

"I don't know. Maybe. If you know why things went wrong in the first place." The reasons were plain enough: misplaced honour, misunderstood motives, hot tempers stirred by the tension of the move.

"I should have gone."

"I shouldn't have let you convince me you wanted to stay."

"So, what do we do now?" Somehow they had moved closer to each other. Mac ran a finger over the golden bands in Victor's hand, and a frisson ghosted over the older man's nerves.

Vic knew the choice was his. He also knew that he wouldn't be able to live with himself if he walked away now. "This," he said, curving one hand behind Mac's head and pulling him down until their lips met, then gradually deepening the kiss until they were both moaning, clawing at each other with desperate hands, their bodies plastered together.

The ring fell to the brickwork in front of the fireplace but neither man noticed as they broke apart long enough to stare at each other and move of one accord to the bedroom. Before they left the main room, Mac took a deep breath. "Wait a minute."

"Don't walk away, please," Vic begged, his voice so harsh and broken that he hardly recognized it.

"God no!" the other man exclaimed, kissing Vic hard, bruising his lips. "I just need to check on Daniel and make sure he's asleep."

Victor nodded, past the point of words by now, unsure if he'd sob with frustration or burst into laughter at this point. *This must be what parents have to go through*, he thought wildly, oddly not minding the delay once he understood the cause.

"Fast asleep," was the verdict when Mac returned, before Vic dragged him through the door to the bedroom, waiting until the door was closed and locked before pinning the taller man against the wall.

"You owe me for five years, Ramsey," he growled, rocking his body hard against Mac's, pushing both of them even closer to the edge with each pass of their erections against each other. "Five fucking years, do you understand?"

Mac gave an almost incoherent moan in response and his fingers dug into Vic's back, pressing into the muscle through the soft cotton of his shirt. "Whatever you want."

"That would be you," Vic rasped, tangling his fingers in the other man's silky dark hair and pulling him in for another kiss. This time the feeling was of his own mouth mapped and re-learned by Mac's tongue, the rough velvety glide over his tongue and teeth bringing with it memories of countless other kisses.

"Yes," Mac whispered, tracing a line of kisses along Vic's jaw then back to his ear, nuzzling the lobe before tracing the delicate swirls of cartilage, his breath hot and humid against Vic's ear.

Rational thought deserted Victor then, and he moved his hands down, pulling at the buttons that held Mac's shirt closed, not caring that the move sent several of the discs flying to fall almost soundlessly to the floor. Spreading the material open, Vic dragged his hands back up, carding through Mac's soft, springy chest hair. Catching the tight peaks of his nipples between his fingers, he rolled them between his fingertips, loving the moans this action provoked.

"God, Victor, please." The words were groaned into Vic's ear, then his shirt was gone, sacrificed to the demands of Mac's hands as they tried to bare his upper body.

Good. It was good, but it still wasn't enough. "Need you, Mac. Have always needed you." Vic hissed in a breath when Mac's long fingers closed around his ass, grinding their crotches together so hard that it was a miracle that the fabric didn't burst into flames from the friction.

They moved toward the bed, stumbling over each other's feet in the half remembered dance of tandem movement, then fell to the thick comforter, arms and legs tangling in an attempt to get closer.

"Gotta get these off..." Several thumps followed the frantic kicking off of shoes then two sets of hands grappled for constricting trousers. Breathless moans accompanied the quick shedding of denim, linen and cotton, deepening to hoarse gasps at the first contact of skin against skin.

Vic found himself on his back, and he bit back a howl as Mac kissed, licked and sucked his way southward. He wanted to scream, bellow, whine, anything that would let him give voice to the massive overload his nervous system was undergoing, but he remained quiet, biting his lips to stay silent for fear of waking Daniel.

When Mac reached his cock and swallowed it whole, it was too much. Muffled cries spilled from Vic's lips, and the taste of blood ghosted across his tongue as his teeth broke through the thin skin of his bottom lip. He was on fire, and it was a blaze that threatened to consume him utterly unless he took control right now. Heaving breaths tearing at his chest, Vic pushed up on his elbows, momentarily entranced by the sight of Mac's head moving over his groin.

"Mac..." With urgent hands, Vic tugged at the younger man's shoulders, pulling him up and in for a kiss that tasted of the bitter salt of his precome. Nipping at Mac's lush mouth, Vic rolled him beneath his body, his saliva slick cock sliding urgently over Mac's erection. "Need..."

The absence of lube was glaringly evident at that point, and Victor cursed, the need to drive himself into Mac's body an all-consuming madness.

"What?" Mac's hands were everywhere, roaming the expanse of his back and ass, curving around the inside of his thighs, carding restlessly through his hair, touching, claiming.

"Do you have anything?"

"Fuuuck." The younger man's eyes cleared just enough to allow rational thought and he let go of Vic with one hand to scramble in the drawer of the nightstand. Vic accepted the bottle he was handed, then looked down at it incredulously, on the verge of laughter.

"Baby oil?"

Mac flushed, his lips thinning in the beginning of a defensive expression. "Forgive me. Using lube on Daniel's dry hands in the winter seems a little too twisted, even for me," he retorted. "And God knows I haven't had the need for any otherwise." The last was added in a low mutter.

Vic felt Mac beginning to tense up under him, and he flipped open the cap on the bottle, squirting some of the slippery fluid out into his palm. Feeling secretly pleased that it sounded like Mac had gone without for just as long as he had, he kissed the younger man, reaching down between them to run one finger over the thin skin of his perineum, then over the tight pucker farther back.

"Sorry, it just struck me as funny considering what we're about to use it for is all. Forgive me?" Vic searched Mac's dark eyes, his own deepened to midnight forest.

Mac grabbed the hand that held the baby oil and squirted some out into his own palm. His fingers closed over Vic's cock, stroking the lubricant over his flesh with sure motions. "Fuck me and I'll let you know."

Vic's eyes flew open when a grin slowly appeared on Mac's face, then a matching one blossomed on his lips. "You asked for it, Malcolm..." A bit more pressure and his finger slid inside Mac's body to be followed quickly by a second at Mac's strident demand for more.

By the time Vic felt that Mac was loose enough, both of them were biting back moans, and droplets of sweat splattered the comforter whenever one of them moved. At Mac's growled out "Now," Vic pulled his hand back and steadied his cock. Meeting Mac's eyes once again before pushing in, he felt the slow, hot glide as he pressed inward until they were fully joined.

"Jesus God, Vic," Mac gasped, arching upward, "move, will you!"

Deciding that this was a case of actions speaking louder than words, Vic began to do just that. Canting his hips back, he began to stroke into the younger man's body, closing his eyes and giving in to the rhythm that resurfaced so easily between them.

"Just... there... yessss..." Bracing his weight on one arm, Vic attacked Mac's mouth, devouring the other man's lips, muffling his whispered words. He squeezed his still oily hand between them and closed it around Mac's erection, pumping the solid length in time with his thrusts, his thumb teasing the flared head as he did so. The younger man exploded into action at that, bucking upwards, impaling himself on Vic's shaft even as he thrust his own cock into the older man's hand. Long fingers slid behind Vic's head, pulling him in for a feverish kiss that ended only when the rapid approaches of their orgasms demanded it.

Mac tightened around him and Vic rocked hard into his body, feeling the glide of his cock over Mac's prostate and the corresponding yelp that escaped the other man's lips. Vic recognized that sound and his balls drew up closer to his body in preparation for what was to come. Silken tremors encased his cock, and the world went white, dissolving into the mind shattering bliss of the one thing he thought he would never experience again—making love with Mac Ramsey.

By the time either man was able to move, Mac's seed had grown cool between them and Vic grimaced as he lifted his head from the other man's shoulder and felt the stickiness on his skin.

Mac opened his eyes and smiled before rolling them both to the side so he was the one looking down at Victor. "Stay here tonight?" he asked, his expression growing serious in the face of what he'd requested.

Vic was ready to jump at the offer, but one thing concerned him. "What about Daniel?"



Mac sobered, plainly torn between what he wanted and what was best for his son. "I don't..." Sighing, he rolled off Vic and sat up, resting his elbows on his knees, his head bowed. "I would never do anything to hurt him, but I also won't hide this. Unless it's a problem?" The last was asked with such deep-seated uncertainty that Vic felt compelled to take the other man into his arms.

"It's not a problem for me if you're sure it won't be a problem for you," Vic promised, resting his head against Mac's, then kissing him.

"It's not a..." Mac began before shaking his head slowly. "We could be at this all night. How about instead we clean up and get some clothes on. If Daniel comes in—well, it's better to be wearing something."

Vic nodded his agreement, and the two climbed out of bed, unlocking the door then taking turns in the shower. Mac pulled out a spare pair of the loose jersey sleep pants he now favoured and watched Vic pull them on before donning his own.

They had just settled onto the bed, taking a moment to rediscover the best way to curl up together before ending up with Mac flat on his back, Vic's head on his shoulder. "Missed this so much, missed you so much," Mac sighed, twining his fingers with Victor's over his stomach.

"I know, was the same with me, Vic murmured, his eyes closing. He had just drifted off when a quiet scuffling by the door brought him awake again.

"Daddy?" Opening his eyes, Vic found himself looking right at young Daniel Tsei.

"What is it, Daniel?" Vic had to give Mac credit; his voice was amazingly steady.

"I had a nightmare, can I get in bed with you?"

"Of course you can." After a quick squeeze, Mac pulled his hand away from Vic's, holding his arm open for Daniel to settle himself against that shoulder, the stuffed dog squeezed in alongside them.

Dark green eyes studied Victor seriously, then Daniel asked, "Are you scared too?"

Vic swallowed back the choking feeling in his throat. "Sometimes I am, Daniel."

"Everyone is scared sometimes," Mac added. "It helps to have someone to hold."

"Even Aunt Di?" the child asked incredulously.

The two men shared a look, struggling not to chuckle. "Even your Aunt Di. Now go to sleep, Danny-boy, so that we can."

Daniel mumbled his assent and cuddled closer, drifting back to sleep with an ease that made Vic envious—of course, the way he was feeling right now, it didn't seem that sleep was going to be too elusive tonight.

He felt Mac take a deep breath, then the younger man's hand stroked gently over his back. "Get some rest, Victor."

"You remember to do the same, Malcolm."

"Go to sleep, Victor."

"Yes, Malcolm." Vic grinned at Mac's exasperated huff, then kissed the side of his neck, closing his eyes and relaxing for the first time in what felt like forever.

You know that old saying 'don't get mad, get even'?

If that's what Victor has planned for me with this, it'll kill me. It was stupid to give in, but God, what could I do? So much hurt, so much guilt, so much love that it's a wonder either of us survived the years apart.

His way was definitely a lot more mentally healthy. He went on with his life, refusing to let any of us haunt him. Me, I simply locked off the bruised and bleeding parts of my psyche, killing as many of the hurtful emotions as I could and turning the rest of them to Daniel and his care.

Thank God for Li Ann's decision, otherwise I don't want to think about what a monster I would be now. There's a difference between driven and totally amoral, just like there's a difference between the Head and me. It's one I cursed at times, but now I'm grateful for. Maybe, between Daniel and Victor, I can salvage who I was. God, I hope so.

Look at the two of them, sleeping away, unaware that I'm watching them. Vic's on his back, one arm over his head, the other sprawled out across the empty space next to him. Daniel's curled up around my pillow, hugging it so hard that I know I'll be without it when I finally come back to bed. It's a rare night I don't come in here to find it missing. He says it smells like me, and I can't chide him for wanting that comfort. I can't count the times I've pulled out old videos and watched them, wishing for something physical to remember my past life with, not just the flat recordings of the years Vic and I shared.

It was bad enough having one hole in my defences, now there are two gaping areas where I can be compromised. I lost Li Ann; I'm not losing either of them, no matter what. I suppose that answers the question of what I'm going to do. There's no way to balance this life with what the Agency demands.

I have to find a way out, and, if Victor wants me, I will.

"Can't catch me!"

"That's what you think!" Giving a groaning laugh, Vic jogged after Daniel, chasing the boy without getting too close, maintaining the illusion that indeed, he couldn't catch him. While he'd been reluctant at first when asked to watch Daniel this afternoon, Vic finally agreed and found himself enjoying the experience.

Mac was involved in finalizing the plans for the raid on Claire's location, and, while Victor chafed to be included in the discussion, he understood the need for having him supervise Daniel—and he appreciated the chance to get to know the boy better as well. Somewhere over the course of the afternoon, between the cookies and juice and the marathon game of War, he'd changed from being Chief Victor to Uncle Victor, an event that sent a queer giddy feeling racing through him.

Maybe there was a chance this all would work out. *If* Mac could be convinced of that fact and *if* the Head could be persuaded to let him go. Those were two very big 'ifs', and Vic tried not to worry that he'd be going back to Banff in worse shape emotionally than when he had moved there initially.

Craning his neck to try to spot where Daniel concealed himself, Vic eased around a neatly manicured bush only to stumble when a small, solid weight crashed into the back of his knees. "Got ya!"

"I thought I was supposed to be the one catching you?" he laughed, swooping up the laughing youngster and hanging him over his shoulder. "What happened?"

"Daddy says the best time to spring something is when no one expects it," Daniel grinned, kicking his legs so that his sneaker-clad feet hit Victor in the small of his back. "And it works!"

"It does at that," Vic smiled, though his gaze strayed to the mansion as he wondered exactly what was going on in there. He hadn't seen anyone pass any of the windows in some time and...

"Anna!" Daniel twisted around, trying to squirm out of Victor's grasp. Once he'd been released, the boy tore across the lawn toward his nanny, who was moving carefully but surely toward them. "You're better!"

"Just a little shaky on my feet so don't come bashing into me, sweetie," the tall, grey-haired woman warned, as she bent over to hug her charge. "And now that I'm back, Chief Mansfield is going to lose his job if he doesn't mind."

Daniel looked torn between giving up his new playmate and having his regular care-giver back, but loyalty finally won out. "We can play more later, right?" he asked, looking from one adult to the other, his expression pleading.

"Of course you can, if it's alright with the Chief."

At Daniel's earnest gaze, Vic smiled and squatted down, ruffling the child's dark hair. "Anytime, kiddo. I still need to see if I can catch you, you know."

Daniel giggled at that, and the nanny gave Victor a kind look. "And now you need to come inside and get cleaned up for dinner then have your bath, young man. Your father said he had some things to do but that he'd come and see you when he got back."

The boy groaned in response, and Vic glanced up at the sky, shocked to see how late in the afternoon it was. Where had the day gone? And, where was Mac?

Trailing the other pair into the house, Victor turned down the hallway that led to the other man's office feeling more and more uneasy when it was empty, as was everywhere else he looked.

"Victor." Jackie's voice had him spinning around from his perusal of Mac's desk, cursing her ability to sneak up on him like that. "The Director said he'd be back later tonight. There was something he had to do."

Refusing to be intimidated by her expression, Vic countered her stare with one of his own. "And just where did he go?"

"Recon. There was something he had to check out."

"Bullshit. Why would he do that? That's what agents are for."

She shrugged, then turned on her heel, intending to leave before jerking to a halt, Vic's hand clamped around her arm.

"Where is he, Jackie?"

Her blue eyes didn't show a trace of discomfort though he knew his fingers were digging into her arm. "Out."

"Jackie..." Vic growled. "I don't give a fuck if he's out eating dinner with half of the assassins in the Eastern European block, tell me where he is!"

"Jesus, Victor, calm down." She pulled her arm out of his grasp and rubbed at the reddened patches on the bare skin. "He's gone after Holland. It's a small operation, in and out. Kelso and Roberts are back up."

Vic burst into a round of harsh profanity, wanting more than anything to pound someone or something into oblivion. "Where are they?"

Jackie sighed and shook her head then gave him the address.

"I need a couple of guns and a car. You have five minutes." Without waiting for her agreement, he stormed to his room, stripping out of his sweaty 'play clothes', pulling on jeans, a dark shirt and his leather jacket, determined to put an end to this for once and for all.

"I don't like this at all, man," Josh muttered to Chaz. The two agents were crouched outside the warehouse where Claire Holland was; the same place their Director had walked into ten minutes ago unarmed, but wearing a wire.

"I know what you mean," the younger man sighed, shifting slightly so that his legs didn't fall asleep while they were waiting. "That chick is nuts."

Listening to the ranting being picked up by the Director's microphone, Josh had to agree. She wanted the Monk, and she wanted everyone else who had taken part in her arrest to pay. Apparently, she knew all about the Director's past with Li Ann, and - "Chief Mansfield? No fucking way!"

"Shit, you're telling me that the two of them... Damn, no wonder he came down so hard on us at first."

"Think he was jealous?"

"No clue, but something really weird is going on here."

"Yeah, hope we don't get caught in the cross-fire."

"You'd better hope that nothing happens to him or Double J will be our boss."

Josh's eyes widened into horrified pools at that thought, then a small noise behind them had him reaching for his gun.

"What's the situation?" Vic rasped, brushing aside the questioning looks the two agents shared and squatting down next to them.

"We're waiting for the M—the Director's signal, man. He's been in about fifteen minutes; if we don't hear in half an hour, we go in."

Vic nodded brusquely and re-checked the placement of the guns in his shoulder holsters. "I'm going in with you."

"I don't know if that's a good idea, sir," Chaz began, before slapping his hand to his ear and cringing. "Shit! She found the wire."

"Forget a half an hour. We're going in now." Vic rose to his feet and started around the building, reluctantly giving up the lead when he was forced to admit the younger men knew the layout better than he did. After climbing up a fire escape ladder to a second story window, the three men slipped inside. Roberts broke left, while Kelso went right. Vic looked in both directions, then, with a small prayer, strode toward the open stairwell leading down from the catwalk.

The area below him was free of obstructions, leaving Vic with a clear view of the warehouse floor. Mac was facing him, his left cheek reddened, the eye above it rapidly swelling shut. Claire stood before him, a pistol held loosely in her right hand, her left hand resting on her hip. She said something, then apparently didn't like Mac's answer because the gun flashed out again, striking the same place and splitting open the corner of Mac's mouth.

"Where is he?" Now she was shouting, and the hysterical edge to her voice pushed Vic into action.

"Looking for me, Claire?"

Her smile, as she half turned to look his way, was predatory. "Well, well, well. The game finds me here, saves me from taking the time to track you down, I suppose." Waving her gun in his direction, she motioned Vic down the stairs and over in front of her. "Just one more to go, and then this will be over." Her expression turned tender as she looked at Mac. "Then it'll be just the two of us like it should have been."

"Claire, it's not going to work; give it up before someone gets hurt."

"Oh, no one is going to get hurt," she laughed, running a finger down Mac's uninjured cheek, "he's just going to die is all."

"Hmm," she continued, tilting the barrel of her gun up and down, "heart or head?"

"Hey lady, don't strain your brain choosing!"

Vic glanced up to see Chaz leaning over the safety lines surrounding the catwalk, his gun aimed at Claire.

"Yeah, you're blonde, we know that decisions like that are too hard for you," Josh added across the room.

Claire's complexion turned a mottled red, and, in the second her attention was diverted to the two younger men, Vic grabbed for his guns, tossing the left hand one to Mac, even as he aimed the other weapon at the maniac woman.

"Give it up, Claire," Mac said calmly, staring at her over the unwavering barrel of the pistol. "It's over."

"Oh no," she laughed, tossing back her hair. "There's one more thing left to do." In a swift move, she aimed and started to pull the trigger. The sound of two shots echoed off the walls and her expression

changed to one of confusion as she slowly crumpled to the ground, small, smoking holes in her forehead and chest.

"Looks like you two chose for her," Josh observed as he and Chaz clattered down the stairs and looked down at the madwoman's body.

"There wasn't a choice," Victor murmured, slowly holstering his gun, then looking over at Mac, who returned his gaze with a hard stare.

"Call in the cleanup team," the Director said, transferring his gaze to his two agents. "I'll talk to you when you get back." His gaze cut back toward Victor, "All of you." He then walked out, leaving the three men there.

"The man is *cold*," Josh murmured while Chaz called in the code over his cell. "What's with him?"

Chaz hung up and shrugged, then they both looked over at Victor as if for an answer. Where as before he might have agreed, now he knew better. "It's just the opposite in fact," he murmured.

"And what was with the blond crack?" Vic heard Chaz ask Josh before he headed out to the car he had driven over, leaving two baffled agents in his wake.

"So?"

"So." The words were the first they had spoken since leaving the mansion to walk in the gardens that flanked the eastern side of the building. The narrow gravel paths wound through the neatly laid out flowerbeds and cut through ornamental rows of shrubbery before finally converging on a small pond in the middle of the area. Moonlight shone off the still water, and the night wind was the only other sound audible.

"Let's get it out of the way, Mac," Vic sighed. He'd spent most of the evening waiting for Mac to blow up at him because of what he had done, had been waiting, in fact, to use that as a springboard for his own anger at being left behind, but so far the lecture hadn't appeared. They had eaten with Daniel, read the boy his story and put him to bed together, and all the while Vic's level of tension had risen until now he was fairly vibrating.

"Get what out of the way?" Mac tilted his head to the side to look at Vic, then nodded. "Ahh, you think I'm going to tear into you for coming to the warehouse. I'm not. You were right, and I was wrong. I'm sorry."

Vic stood there, mouth agape, until Mac reached out and used a fingertip to close his jaw. "Damnit," he muttered, "and I was ready to go off on you for leaving me here, too."

"You can still do it if you want."

Vic stooped and picked up a pebble, then tossed it into the lake. "No, no point in it now."

"Sorry if I ruined your rant." Mac scratched at the back of his neck, then folded his arms across his chest, waiting.

"Damnit, Mac, stop backing down like that! It's not—it's not normal!"

"What do you want me to do?" Mac hissed in frustration. "Lay into you for putting yourself in danger? Scream at you for helping to save my life? What do you want from me, Victor?"

"That's easy." Vic grabbed the younger man's arm and swung him around to face him. "You. All of you. With me, away from here."

"I—" Mac stopped and took a deep breath. "Say I get out. What then?"

Now it was Vic's turn to fall silent. "I've heard that Banff is a good place to raise kids," he offered hesitantly.

"And what if it becomes a problem with your job?"

"Then I'll find another one somewhere it won't be."

"All right."

Vic's mouth gaped open again, and this time Mac chuckled at the sight. "You're going to catch flies like that."

"You'll come?" The question was asked in a disbelieving voice. "You and Daniel?"

"I had already decided I needed to get out," Mac answered honestly. "If you think I'm going to turn down the chance to be free of this and to be with you... I may be twisted, Mansfield, but I'm not crazy."

"Do you still eat squid?"

Mac looked at Vic as if he'd gone insane. "Yes."

"Then you are crazy, Ramsey. So shut up and kiss me."

Mac's laughter was muffled as he pressed his lips against Victor's, wincing at the pressure on his injuries but refusing to give up a bit of contact with the other man. Their arms wound around each other and they became a single silhouette in the shadows of the garden.

Even when they finally made their way back inside, neither man noticed the slim figure watching from an upper level window. Letting the curtain fall back into place, the Head smiled to herself then turned away, pleased with the outcome of the day's events.

*Banff, Alberta
March, 2007*

"Morning, Chief."

Victor returned Patty's greeting with a cheery hello of his own and hung his hat and coat on the pegs near the door to his office. "Anything going on?"

"Well," she chuckled, taking a sip of her coffee before getting up to pour the chief his morning mug, "that fellow who bought the old Master's place was in to introduce himself. Brought us a gift too." She nodded at the large box of donuts on the desk, the box that had been plainly raided by the constables who had been on duty overnight. "Says he's starting a security firm in town—wants to do work for the resorts and the like. Seemed nice enough, handsome too. He must be a widower or divorced or something. I didn't see a wedding ring, but he has the cutest little boy. Maybe I should send Stacey out to meet him..."

Looking slightly perplexed at the chief's thoughtful expression, Patty dug around on her desk, fishing for something. "Oh! He left this for you by way of introduction. Guess he wants to get a good recommendation from the local law."

Nodding absently, Vic ripped the envelope with hands that were trembling slightly. Something heavier than a piece of paper slid inside but was obscured by a folded piece of stationary when he finally got the flap open. Pulling out the note, Vic scanned it, noting the security firm's name and a hand written address below it.

The other item fell into his palm when he tipped the envelope, and Vic took a shaky breath as he held up the reconstructed puzzle ring. To Patty's shock and amusement, he raced for the door, shouting that he was off duty, leaving the receptionist wondering just what was going on now.

Thankful that there hadn't been any snowfall the night before so the roads were clear of ice, Vic gunned his truck, speeding up the road out of town until he pulled up in front of a large Alpine style house. The tall front windows glowed with light from within, and small footprints criss-crossed the snow in the yard.

Not even noticing that he'd left his coat back at the station, Vic climbed out of his truck and started up the walk, his heart hammering wildly in his chest. The door started to open, and he stopped at the foot of the stairs, frozen, as two figures appeared in the entry.

"Uncle Vic! Daddy said we're staying here! Can I see your dog, can I?" The shout was accompanied by the force of a tiny body catapulting off the porch and into his arms, making Vic take a step back to avoid falling back onto the flagstone walkway.

"You bet, Daniel," he said, swallowing hard to keep the threatening tears from overwhelming him as he hugged the boy tightly.

Mac waited until Daniel squirmed back down to go tearing around in the snow before crossing the final distance between them. "I see you got my note."

"Yeah," Vic nodded, feeling suddenly tongue-tied. "Rembrandt Security?"

The younger man grinned a bit, looking over to where Daniel was playing before continuing "Well, it financed this venture so..."

"You *sold* the Rembrandt?" Vic asked incredulously. "But it was your father's!"

"I have him here," Mac placed his hand on his heart, flushing slightly. "I need you here." He pulled Vic into his arms, staring down at the older man seriously. "I fucked up before, Vic. I'm not going to do it again."

Vic placed one hand on Mac's shoulder, then raised the other into the other man's line of sight, showing him the ring he now wore on his finger. "This isn't coming off again. If we stay, it's together; if we go, it's the same. You and Daniel are what's important in my life, now and always."

"I love you, Chief Mansfield."

"I love you, Director Ramsey."

"That's Mr. Ramsey to you, bub."

Small hands tugged at both their trousers, and Mac bent to include Daniel in the embrace. "Does this mean Uncle Vic is going to stay with us now?"

Mac shot a questioning look at Victor, who just smiled, hugging both his son and his lover close. "That's exactly what it means."



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Dedicated to Angel and Orithain without whom I would have lost the first half of this story in the great laptop snatching. Ladies, you are the best!

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