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ILLUSTRATIONS BY THE THEBAN BAND

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the stories and not the actors who play them.



Remember me

by Angel

Victor Mansfield was exhausted.

Not just your average run-of-the-mill exhausted, but the kind of exhaustion that made your teeth and bones and hair ache with every movement, the kind of exhaustion where you start seeing lights dance before your eyes and when you lie down, you get the nauseating sense of vertigo—like your life was spinning out of control.

He was so tired that the normally alert to the point of paranoid cop didn't register the plain manila envelope that had been slid under his door until he practically tripped over it. "What the hell?" he mumbled as he braced himself against a wall in order to lean down and pick it up. That simple act made the room turn topsy-turvy for a second and forced him to heave in great gulps of air to re-establish his equilibrium.

Damn, he was tired. Two weeks of guarding some spoiled little daughter of a foreign dignitary who had divided her time between hissing and spitting at Li Ann and Jackie and sexually harassing him and Mac to the point where the Director's advances looked like a schoolgirl flirtation. Two weeks of unmitigated hell because the Director had felt the team needed to be reminded of just who was in charge. Like the dragon lady would ever let them forget it.

It had finally gotten to the point where he and Mac had slept in shifts and with one eye open. Neither of them had wanted daddy to walk in and find his little princess in bed with a big bad Agency man. She'd tried that on both of them a couple of times, slipping away from the girls, who had been forced to play lady's maids and sleep in the same room as the little darling. Mac and Victor had even tossed around the idea of pretending to be lovers just to make her back down. Not that Vic would mind sharing a bed with his younger male partner.

Then, to top the trip to hell off, the little bitch had gotten herself kidnapped, and the team had ended up in a major shoot-out, head-bashing free-for-all brawl that was their usual style. That on top of serious sleep deprivation. They'd recovered the girl, who got a tongue-lashing and immediate return trip home from daddy. The team had been thanked profusely, and Mac, who was a little fresher than Vic due to still being on an adrenaline high, had driven Vic home while the Director herself, who'd popped out of nowhere as per usual, saw to Jackie and Li Ann.

Vic wondered at his willingness to sleep with his younger male partner all of a sudden. When had he started having feelings beyond the usual pseudo animosity-respect-grudging friendship and the healthy 'whose dick is bigger' attitude that they both normally spouted? He was too damn tired to figure it out tonight, that was all he knew. And now some idiot had nearly tripped him with an envelope.

Slapping the thing down on the counter, Vic groaned as he shrugged out of his leather jacket and hung it up, then unsnapped his shoulder holster. Picking up the envelope as an afterthought, he swayed into the bedroom, sparing moments to put the envelope down and remove his shoulder holster and the back up he had strapped to his inner calf. Kicking off his boots, he was asleep before he hit the pillow.

"Mr. Mansfield has arrived home, sir... No, sir, there hasn't been... Yes, sir, I slid it under the door myself... No, sir, he was simply dropped off, and I was unable to see who the driver was... I believe he's asleep, sir. Yes, sir, I'll keep you informed."

Vic sighed and stretched luxuriously. Glancing over at the clock radio on his night table, he checked the time. Twelve whole hours of uninterrupted sleep. Heaven. Rolling out of bed, the former cop quickly stripped out of his clothes, throwing them into the laundry hamper, and padded naked into the shower. 'Hope you enjoy the show, dragon lady,' he thought unhappily, aware that the micro cameras and bugs had probably been replaced while he was away. It was one part of the job he'd never get used to—being watched 24/7 by his employer.

Taking a long, hot shower to work out all the kinks and ease some of his bruised muscles, Victor felt almost human when he emerged from the steam to dress in a pair of soft, faded jeans and an equally soft, faded black tee-shirt. Spying the envelope from the day before, he took it with him to the kitchen where it sat, ignored, while he indulged himself with coffee, Canadian bacon, eggs and toast.

It was only after he'd finished his second cup of coffee and the dishes were done that Victor finally got around to opening the envelope. "What the fuck?!" It was a picture of a much younger Victor Mansfield. Same short hair, same muscular physique, a slightly younger face and wearing nothing but a black leather g-string with a fake police badge attached, a pair of black leather motorcycle boots, a constable's hat, and black shades.

The Rainbow
Unrevealed location
Toronto 1989

"Ladies and Gentlemen, Kings and Queens, here he is, back by popular demand. The Vice-Man." The announcer's Barry White voiceover was drowned out by the catcalls from the audience members, male and female alike.

The Rainbow was one of those alternative scene clubs where any and everything went. It didn't matter if it was straight, bi, gay or lesbian—or any combination in between. The one thing they all agreed on was that the stripper known as 'The Vice-Man' was a sculpted work of art—and could make anyone cream with one of his pelvic thrusts.

The Vice-Man appealed to everyone of every proclivity. He had the leather boys and girls salivating over his leather encased package, had the doms wanting to make him their sub, the subs wanting him to dom them, the men wanting to convert him and the women wanting to have his baby. He was the best act the Rainbow had had in a long time, and the crowds grew nightly, even with staff and customers disappearing and cops nosing around.

The lights dimmed and the catcalls faded away until there was an almost reverent hush. The stage went black, and smoke from dry ice began to drift across the platform, ghostly and silent. From all around the club the throbbing back beat of the song vibrated, pounding like a heartbeat. All eyes were riveted to the stage, and anticipation pulsed.

The sweetest perfection

*To call my own
The slightest correction
Couldn't finely hone*

A lithe frame stalked through the pale mist, dressed all in black. Black leather jacket, tight black tear away pants and shirt, black motorcycle boots, black constable's hat and black shades. The only break in colour was the silver belt buckle, the silver cuffs dangling from them, and the diamond stud that refracted light from his left ear.

*The sweetest infection
Of body and mind
Sweetest injection
Of any kind*

The jacket slipped off with a sexy hitch of a shoulder, was tossed to the back of the stage, and the Vice-man began to prowl around the stage, not so much dancing as performing. Stopping in front of a group of ogling grannies, the tee shirt was ripped off, revealing a smooth chest, washboard abs, powerful arms and a lean waist.

Moving away, he gyrated to the music, thrusting his pelvis out in front of a young woman who practically fainted and her male companion, who drooled. His hands drifted over his satiny flesh, sheened lightly with oil, down to cup the badge hidden in the front of his pants.

*I stop and I stare too much
Afraid that I care too much
And I hardly dare to touch
For fear that the spell may be broken*

Dropping to one knee, the man on the stage did a combat roll and came up on his hands and knees. Crawling through the smoke to the opposite side of the stage, he allowed a vapid blonde to remove his shades, revealing electric green eyes, and shove a twenty dollar bill in his tight back pocket.

Others soon followed suit, and the stripper's waistband and pocket were full of fives, tens, twenties and a few fifties. One particularly bold man leaned in and stole a passionate kiss—one the Vice-Man happily returned, after which he shoved a hundred dollar bill down the front of the stripper's pants.

*When I need a drug in me
And it brings out the thug in me
Feel something tugging me
Then I want the real thing not tokens*

Rocking back on his hands until he was kneeling, the Vice-man teasingly undid his belt, twirling the cuffs suggestively before surging to his feet and whipping off his tear-aways. He revealed powerful legs and a black leather-posing pouch, full to overflowing, with a police badge dangling from one hip.

The crowd went wild, screaming and calling and begging him to come to their side of the stage. Hands reached out to touch him, to run hands down his Adonis-like body.

*The sweetest perfection
To call my own
The slightest correction
Couldn't finely hone
The sweetest infection
Of body and mind
Sweetest injection
Of any kind*

Pulling a young lady and a handsome young man up on stage, the Vice-Man positioned himself between them and began to writhe and grind between the two, the three of them making an erotic tableau that had every member of the crowd dying and wishing it was them on stage.

*Things you'd expect to be
Having effect on me
Pass undetectedly
But everyone knows what has got me*

Kissing the young woman, he handed her down then continued to grind and weave with the young man for a few more moments. With a whisper and a wink the man leapt down from the stage, an incredibly foolish grin on his face, as if the Vice-man just promised him the world—or something much more profound.

*Takes me completely
Touches so sweetly*

Reaches so deeply

I know that nothing can stop me

Whirling away from the end of the stage, the stripper made his way to the centre pole, and the music continued to pound its seductive beat. Grasping it high above his head, the Vice-man began to use the pole like a substitute lover, writhing and grinding against it like a cat in heat.

Sweetest perfection

An offer was made

An assorted collection

But I wouldn't trade

Sliding down the pole, back to the floor, the Vice-man once more crawled through the smoke, this time circuiting the tiny dance floor completely. Every ounce of bare flesh from shoulder to firm ass was touched and caressed, and the pouch string was stuffed with bills.

The sweetest perfection

To call my own

The slightest correction

Couldn't finely hone

The sweetest infection

Of body and mind

Sweetest injection

Of any kind

The song's pulsing rhythm began to die, and with it the Vice-man drifted towards the back of the stage.

Takes me completely

Touches so sweetly

Reaches so deeply

Nothing can stop me

The lights centred on him one last time then went black, and he was gone.

The room went dead silent, then the thunder of applause and cries for more filled the void with a cacophony of sound.

"And that, all you lucky boys and girls out there, was the Vice-man!"

—

Vic strode to his dressing room, disgusted with himself. Fuck, how much longer would he have to parade himself on stage until he got a nibble from the perp, whoever it was? Sighing, he let himself into his dressing room. No one had ever said Vice would be easy.

On the plus side, he had a ton of extra cash and his social calendar—if you could call it that—was overflowing. Victor, the Vice-man, did not lack for bed partners, female or male. It was one of the few perks of this assignment; he had been *ordered* to play a bi. Like he had to play being bi when he was, Vic chuckled to himself. Not that the department knew. What he did after clocking off was his own business and his own time. Vic meant to keep it that way, knowing full well that the thin blue line wouldn't protect his ass if his co-workers found out he bent over and spread 'em for another guy.

A knock on the door had Vic throwing on a dressing robe and belting it hastily. Opening the door, he saw a chauffeur with an elegant envelope in his hand. "My employer wishes to extend an invitation to you, Mr. Mason."

Vic took the invitation, read it, and accepted. 'Got you, you fucker!' he crowed silently. The perp had made his move at last.

—

"Sir? He's awake, sir. I saw the curtains being drawn in the living room window not too long ago. Yes, sir, I've traced his number. It's..."

—

"Jesus." Flipping the picture over, Victor quickly looked for identifying marks, a note, anything. The envelope got the same thorough examination. What the hell was this? There was no way. Who could have managed to get a shot of him when he was undercover at that strip club, God, was it ten years ago now? Back when he was Vice. Fuck.

The ringing phone had him reaching for his gun automatically and cursing at the fact that he was so spooked. Until a voice he'd never heard before rasped over the phone. A male voice. "Did you like my offering, pretty? I remember you. You were like a wild animal—a jungle cat—writhing against that pole. I wanted you then. I want you even more now. How dangerous you looked last night in black leather and guns. You made my mouth water. Soon, pretty. Very soon." The phone went dead, leaving Victor listening to a dial tone.

"Son of a... what the fuck is going on here?"

Victor stormed into the briefing room, ignoring Mac and Li Ann. "I need to talk to you—alone," he demanded of the Director, more visibly agitated than any of the people in the room had ever seen him.

Quirking an elegantly shaped red eyebrow, the Director motioned to the two seated agents. "If you'll give us a moment, my angels, and keep Jackie out as well when she deigns to show up."

Mac looked like he was ready to spout some half-assed comment when a beyond lethal glare from Vic shut him up. Shit, what was going on here? He thought to himself as he allowed Li Ann to herd him outside.

"Any idea?"

"Not a one. I've never seen Vic like this—even when his cop buddies came after him again," the lanky Asian replied, worry apparent in her voice.

"Yeah, he's acting weird... even for Vic," Mac mused. They both looked at each other at the same time. "Nathan," Mac suggested.

"Not now, we don't know when they'll be done, and she'd have our hides if we disappeared. Right now Jackie's the one in the hot seat, and I'd like to bask in it for a bit before I draw attention to myself again," Li Ann replied somewhat cattily.

"And you're sure you didn't recognise the voice?"

"Never heard it before. But they were there last night when we got her high-and-mightiness back. He made a comment about..." Victor swallowed visibly, "about me being in black leather and guns. He was there..." Vic trailed off, only the slightest darkening of his eyes and the white-knuckled grip on his chair giving the true measure of his agitation away.

The Director was worried. Not that she'd say anything, but no one was supposed to have been near the takedown site. Which meant that whoever Victor's mysterious caller was, he had to have had inside information. "We'll have you put under..."

"No!"

"Victor," she ground out dangerously. "You're valuable, you're needed, and you're mine. I don't like how this feels. I don't like how this sounds, and I sure as hell..."

"He waited ten years to get another crack at me, if his phone call and this picture are to be believed. What's to stop him from waiting a few more months? The son of a bitch is patient, methodical, and he's done his homework," the ex-cop pointed out almost dispassionately. It was the only way he could function at the moment, disassociate himself from the situation, pretend it wasn't him, just a case he was investigating.

"He's waited this long—planned this long. He's not going to stop. Hell, for all we know he could have masterminded the kidnapping just to... get a shot at me. You put me in a safe house, he's just gonna wait you out. What are you gonna do? Keep me locked up in the archives for the rest of my life with Nathan?"

He had a valid point, damn him. She needed him active and in the field. Victor was the glue that kept the other three together and functioning. He was the backbone, the anchor of the team. She, no, *they* needed him. "What do you suggest then?"

"Let him play his games—but keep me under surveillance. Sooner or later he's gonna make a move, then you'll have him."

"Not a chance, Mr. Mansfield. You are not doing this solo."

"I'm not going to endanger anyone else."

"You'll move in with Mac temporarily."

"Not a..."

"That's final, Victor."

"Fine. But he doesn't know the background; just that I've picked up a stalker. I don't... God, he finds out I was a stripper—even as a cover for Vice, he'll never let me hear the end of it," Victor groaned.

"Fair enough," she replied, hitting the intercom on her desk. "Mr. Dobrinsky, I'd like to see Mac, please; the girls can wait a few more minutes."

"So tell me, Vic, who do you think is stalking you—one of your ex-cop buddies? Ivy? I know... the little old lady on the corner. She's always in the window staring at you with hungry eyes," Mac teased, delighting at being able to torment the older agent full time. It was the only way he could get a rise out of the older man without 'getting a rise' out of him, even though Mac desperately wanted to.

Fuck, could Vic get any more gorgeous if he tried? Nothing turned Mac on more than watching Vic get pissed off. His eyes snapped green fire, and that jaw clenched and unclenched, emphasising its perfection. And his voice... Jesus fucking Christ, his voice became dangerous, hot sex vocalised when he was pissed off. It was enough to make Mac come... almost enough.

As it was, he'd gone to bed frustrated for the past week, needing the ex-cop more and more each night. Each night he'd given in to need and jacked off to an unsatisfying orgasm. And each night, when Vic's cell phone rang at precisely 11:05, he'd felt his jaw clench in unadulterated rage. Someone was fucking with Vic's mind; someone was intruding on Mac's territory.

Mac had the overwhelming urge to stalk out there, grab the phone and tell the son of a bitch that Vic was his and if he ever dared to come near what was his, Mac would gladly carve him another orifice. He wanted to hunt the son of a bitch down and use him for a practice dummy—or just pump him full of holes until whoever this dickweed was stopped breathing and stopped tormenting *his* Vic. Hopefully making sure the bastard died as painfully as possible in the process.

"That's it. I've had it," Vic snarled, grabbing up his jacket and heading for the door, bringing Mac out of his dark thoughts.

Shit! Racing to the door, Mac threw himself in front of it... just in time. "Going somewhere, Ace?" he asked with a sardonic smirk.

Victor's eyes became ice, and Mac could almost see the daggers being launched at him. Maybe he'd gone a little too far this... The ex-thief never saw the fist that cold-cocked him or felt himself begin to drop. He never felt himself picked up and dropped unceremoniously on his bed. He was out cold.

Vic knocked back the fourth whiskey and branch water in less than an hour with the steely determination of a man on a drunk. His cell phone was off, but he kept looking at the clock over the bar, watching the minutes tick by and get closer and closer to 11:05. This was driving him nuts. The idea that someone was out there *stalking* him, for Christ's sake.

This was probably his least bright move—taking off on Mac; fuck, he'd cold-cocked the guy. Trouble was, Vic was crawling the walls, and Mac... Mac was temptation itself. Those lush lips, the bedroom eyes and long, sweet body that made his mouth water every time the younger man moved. And that ass. Oh God, that ass was a work of art to rival anything Michelangelo could have carved in marble. Victor wanted that ass; he wanted to be buried so deep inside it that he'd never find his way out.

So here he was, alone, no one knowing where he was, drinking himself into oblivion in order to avoid jumping his partner's—his male partner's—bones. Fuck. Reaching into his jacket, he flipped on the cell phone and called the Director's line. Better face the music now.

"No sense hitting send, since I'm right here. What are you doing here, Victor?"

He shouldn't have been surprised, and yet she still managed to get the drop on him. "How...? Never mind, you're the Director, you know everything," Vic sighed dispiritedly and motioned for another drink.

"Vic. Victor, talk to me. You're beginning to worry me," the older woman husked softly, motioning for the bartender to bring her the same. "This isn't like you, Vic. You're my most professional agent. You do things by the book. I depend on that. This... aberration is beginning to concern me. If it makes it easier, think of me as your mother-confessor. Not a word to anyone else. I promise." She neglected to mention the number of agency muscle she had stationed around the bar, but their silence was guaranteed. No one wanted her unhappy, and right now if it threatened her senior agent's life, it made her *very* unhappy.

"I got your word, you won't mention this to anyone?" Vic finally asked, quiet desperation echoing in his voice. Her silent nod and half of his fifth whisky loosened his tongue. "It's Mac. He's driving me nuts," the ex-cop confessed almost inaudibly. "I... want him so bad it hurts."

The Director said nothing, just quirked an elegant red eyebrow. Now this was a new and unforeseen development. His profile had placed Vic as definitely heterosexual with a huge case of wounded dove syndrome. However, Victor Mansfield had hidden depths that she'd yet to see; this was obviously one of those deep pools.

"I don't know when it started; I don't know why either. Li Ann should have taught me that it was a mistake to get involved with a co-worker, but dammit, I can't keep him out of my head," or my heart, the agent thought with something akin to despair.

"Vic. I want you to listen to me. I know you know this, but you've got to keep your mind on the job, Victor. Someone is stalking you, and right now Mac is the only back-up you have. He's sarcastic, annoying, and absolutely adorable, but he's there to help keep you safe. Think of him as your baby brother or Nathan or whatever it takes, Vic. Just keep your mind on the job."

"Easier said than done. You try living and working with him 24/7 when he's in your face, in your space and walking around practically naked in front of you," Vic growled softly. "Why the hell do you think I've taken to wearing my shirts *outside* my jeans?"

Again the sculpted brow arched. Curiouser and curiouser, the Director mused to herself. It would seem that both her male agents were trying to attract the other and missing the signals entirely. If they ever got it together, the tapes would keep her warm many a cold winter night with the heat these two prime examples of manhood would generate.

"C'mon Vic, let's get you home."

Mac was sitting on the couch, in the dark waiting when he got home. "Vic, I... I'm sorry I pushed. No more cracks, okay?" the younger man spoke gruffly, forestalling anything the ex-cop might have to say.

Sighing heavily, Vic sank down next to him. "I am too. I shouldn't have... I didn't hurt you, did I?" the older man replied quietly.

"Nah—just another day at the office. You know how it is."

"I'm really sorry, Mac."

"So am I."

"Friends again?"

"Yeah. What say we get some sleep then treat ourselves to breakfast before work?"

Vic smiled at the younger man. Just like that—forgive, forget, and move on. Damn, if only everything else could be that simple. "Sounds good. Night, Mac."

"Night, Slugger."

Mac shook Vic awake a few hours later. "I gotta go downtown; Jackie's been arrested or something, and I was the contact person for bail. Sit tight, I'll be back as soon as I can."

Vic mumbled his assent and turned over and promptly fell back asleep. Mac looked down at the older man, his features softening, and taking a chance, bent down and brushed a gentle kiss on Victor's forehead. "See you soon, Slugger," he chuckled as he let himself out the door.

Vic never woke up. The team sent to extract him managed to circumvent security, sneaked in and administered a powerful sedative, knocking him out. He was swiftly carried out of the building and shoved in a car just in time for Mac, who'd gotten halfway to the precinct house and smelled a rat, to watch from a distance. He tried to follow but lost them in the downtown core.

Clutching the steering wheel until his fingers were white, Mac was still in that position when the Director showed up with forensics. "Vic, oh God..." he moaned softly at the woman's touch and buried his head in his hands, shaking.

He didn't wake up until he was on the ground again. The view from his prison room showed sand, palms and ocean for miles around. The buildings were vaguely Mediterranean, and Vic didn't have a clue where the hell he was. This worried him.

The one thing he did know was who'd grabbed him. The sleazebag flesh peddler that he'd tried to collar all those years ago in Vice. The one that got away due to diplomatic immunity. The sonofabitch who'd had ten years to plot and plan and wait for his revenge on Vic. And now he had it. Vic was on his island and awaiting a slave auction where he'd be sold as a toy to some rich pervert and disappear off the map forever. Or so he'd been told. He'd never see Mac again.

Vic was ready to kill, which was why no one ever came in; they were too damn afraid of him. Smart people. But not smart enough. Vic *would* get out, and when he did, God help that asshole, because this time he didn't have to play by the rules. He wasn't a cop anymore, and diplomatic immunity meant jack shit to the Agency. This time he'd finish the job.

"He's on an island called Constantos in the capital city of Eratos. He's being sold," the Director informed her team quietly, her dark eyes alight with unholy anger. They'd managed to catch one of the assailants, and she'd handled his interrogation personally. And enjoyed it.

"Sold? What the fuck do you mean sold?" Mac ground out. He looked like hell. His eyes had rings under rings, and the once normally fastidiously and fashionably dressed agent was rumpled and gaunt. The Director was concerned about sending him, but Mac would be the only one able to blend in in Eratos, unfortunately. Dobrinsky would be going with him as his 'assistant,' and the Cleaners would be his muscle. The women would be on the mainland country nearby, waiting. It was the only way.

"Out. Everyone shoo. Everyone but Mac," the red head declared suddenly, sending Li Ann, Jackie and Dobrinsky out the door.

"So. Now I talk, and you really listen. I need you on your game, Mac. Vic is depending on you. You're the only one who can pull this off," she told the ex-thief seriously, none of her usual banter apparent.

"I don't..."

"I'm not through, Mr. Ramsey. You will listen, you will learn, and you will forget this conversation ever took place. Do I make myself clear?" The slight nod from her agent appeased her.

"When Vic was first assigned to Toronto PD, he was in Vice. This you know. What you don't know is that he made quite a name for himself before switching to Narcotics. He was a *very* good undercover cop. His problem was that he was a little too wild. He took too many risks and got himself into one too many dangerous situations. He was basically ordered to transfer until he mellowed out a little.

"How does this relate to now, you ask? Vic is being stalked by one of the ones that got away during his Vice career. Someone who was intimately familiar with one of his undercover personas, a stripper called the Vice-Man. Corny but true. Vic worked as a stripper in an alternative club in order to break up a white slavery ring operating here in Toronto. He was very good at it from what I hear—brought the club packed houses every night he performed. Someone in that club took pictures and sent them to Vic. That same someone started calling him and stalking him. The same someone grabbed him.

"His name is Laurent. He was a low-grade attaché to a consulate here in the city. His diplomatic immunity protected him, but his ring was broken up, and he blamed Victor. He was also obsessed with the young vice cop who destroyed his career as both a flesh peddler and a diplomat. He's waited ten years to get to Vic. Now do you understand my concern?"

Mac was speechless. At any other time he'd laugh at the stripper shtick but right now. "And this is the fucker that has him?"

"Has him and is putting him up for auction. You will report to cosmetics where you will be fitted with a new appearance and wardrobe. You, along with Dobrinsky and the Cleaners, will be flown to Constantos, where you will pose as a spoiled young brat from a rich family whose money comes from Arabian oil. You will buy Vic back; money is not a problem as the GAC had decided that this man needs to be taken care of. Li Ann, Jackie and I will be waiting on the mainland to get the three of you out of there. The Cleaners will tie up loose ends.

"Dobrinsky will be your assistant. All financial transactions will be through him, and he will be the only one Laurent will have contact with, just in case you could be recognised. There is a house already set up for your use and a sizeable sailboat. You will take your new toy out sailing after a few days after the purchase is complete. You need to wait that long so as to avoid suspicion. The boat won't come back, Laurent will be... tidied up, and the rest of us will come home. Do you understand?"

Mac nodded silently.

"Good. Now forget you heard this. The rest of the team is on a need to know basis only. What you know is privileged. Vic won't thank me for telling you, but I made a judgement call. Don't make me regret it. Shoo. Go change and send everyone else back in as you go by."

Two weeks later

"Well, my pretty, you've fetched me quite a sum of money," Laurent's detested voice hissed through the room's hidden speaker.

"What? You son of a bitch, you sold me already?" Vic bellowed, shooting to his feet and twirling, trying to find where the voice was coming from since he couldn't get to the speaker. His hands clenched in impotent rage. Sold. Jesus, the bastard had really done it, had sold him like Vic was a piece of meat or... a slave.

"Did you expect me to *tell* you when?" the bastard had the gall to snicker. "If I had, you would have misbehaved instead of merely prowling around sullenly. Your buyer was most impressed with your 'brooding' good looks. He's quite looking forward to claiming his new toy.

"A word of warning, though, pretty. The only thing misbehaving will get you is dead and in an unmarked grave. Such is the life of a slave—your new life." The room went silent as Laurent left Vic to absorb his situation.

In a fit of raw fury the ex-cop sprang into motion, his temper giving him the strength to completely decimate the furnishings of his room. Furniture was picked up and tossed, shattering mirrors and the windows on the other side of the door. Pictures were ripped down from walls, anything that could be broken was, and heavy wooden chairs were reduced to kindling, as was the table. Nothing was left untouched or whole.

The chaos Vic caused masked the sound of the lock being turned and a dart gun loaded. What Vic didn't fail to miss was the sensation of the tranquilizer dart penetrating his thigh.

Ripping the offending object out, Vic spun and stalked towards the person responsible, giving an almost inhuman growl that reverberated through the room. The tiny, weasel-faced man holding the gun squeaked in terror as he back peddled away frantically while calling for the guards. Neither the weasel nor Laurent had considered that 190 pounds of enraged Agency man wouldn't just fall over and pass out cold.

Vic had his hands wrapped around the weasel's throat and was squeezing tighter and tighter when the guards finally appeared. Squeaks had turned into breathless croaks as the little man's face began to turn an interesting shade of red. Luckily for him, the drugs finally kicked in, and their effects, combined with the guards forcibly restraining the ex-cop, finally felled the infuriated man.

"Bastards... kill you all," Vic managed to spit out before once more slipping into forced unconsciousness.

—

For the second time in a month Victor woke up groggy, aching and royally pissed. The only difference was that this time he was firmly restrained, strapped down to what seemed to be a doctor's examining table, and completely naked.

"What the *fuck* is going on here?" he bellowed, not quite sure if he'd get an answer or not. Looking down his body, he couldn't help but notice the anomaly in the hollow where his hip and pelvis joined. "A tattoo?! You bastards gave me a fucking tattoo???"

"Pretty, isn't it?" Laurent smugly commented as he strolled into the room to observe Vic with eyes that glittered hotly. "Your new owner was very specific about what your ownership mark was to be. Oh, that's right, you can't see the design from your position; you can only see the ink. Shall I describe it to you?"

"How 'bout you just let me loose so I can see it for myself... after I strangle you, you asshole!" Vic snarled, struggling against his bonds.

"Such an uncouth word from such a very pretty man," Laurent sighed, almost regretfully, as he trailed a hand up Vic's restrained leg to run a finger around the edge of the tattoo. He let his hand drift right until he was gently petting Vic's painfully soft cock. "Oh, the things I'd like to do to you, my pretty little stripper," the ex-diplomat sighed. "But unfortunately for me, your buyer is waiting."

"Bastard, get your fucking hands off me! You're dead, Laurent. I don't care how long it takes; I'll find a way to make it happen. Even if it means making my 'purchaser,'" Vic spat the word out, "so blissfully happy that he can't say no to me, I'll do it just so I can fucking dance on your grave." Vic's eyes had gone glacial in their fury, and there was no doubt of his intent. Laurent was a marked man.

"Tsk, ts. An attitude like that will only get you in trouble," the former diplomat grinned, fully believing in his safety.

"Come, pretty, time to meet the man who loves roses." Vic saw the needle and struggled but to no avail. The world went black once more.

—

Laurent watched the sleek black limousine pull away with a sigh. If he'd only had another hour, he could have had the taste of Victor Mansfield that he'd been craving for the past ten years. But business was business. Picking up the phone, he dialed the number of Victor's new purchaser.

"Mr. El Saeyd? Your purchase is on its way. Yes, your assistant picked it up. The money has been wired to my account as per our agreement, thank you. I hope you have many happy years use of said purchase. Good day, sir."

Hanging up the phone, Laurent walked over to a locked door and slid the key card through the electronic lock. Behind the door was row after row of television monitors, all showing a variety of people in

various situations. The one that interested him most, however, was of a young middle eastern man in the process of hanging up a phone and calling for his servants.

The first things that registered were soft sheets. The second was the lack of restraint. Opening his eyes, Vic saw that he had yet another new 'home'. The home of the man who'd bought him. Well, if bending over and playing bitch let him get out of here, kill that fucker Laurent and get home to Mac, it may just be worth it... depending on if he could live with what he saw.

First, though, he needed to do a little reconnaissance. Vic needed to get an idea of what his environment was, the space he had to move in, possible weapons and escape routes. Sitting up, he groaned as his hip caught fire and reminded him of the mark. Fuck. "The tattoo. Well, may as well see what this fucker marked me with."

Padding naked into the bathroom, his clothing completely gone—compliments of Laurent and/or his purchaser no doubt—Vic stood before the full length mirror—and gasped in shock even as a kernel of hope bloomed in his chest.

"I had to think of something. The bastard insisted that you needed a permanent mark," came a quiet, recognised and much trusted voice from the doorway.

Tearing his eyes off the entwined red and white rosebuds on his hip, Vic looked up and met the eyes of his partner in the mirror. A subtle shake of Mac's dark head and a slight drift of his eyes to the left let Vic know that he was still under surveillance, that they both were.

"So why roses?" Vic managed to force out, fighting to stay still and not go over and haul the younger man into a firm embrace.

"They have a special meaning for me. I am Ahrmakhi El Saeyd. You may call me Mac. I apologise for your lack of clothing, but Monsieur Laurent was most insistent that you have nothing that could be traced back to him for his own security."

Vic waited where he was, staring at the younger man, looking for a sign of what to do, what to say, anything.

"There is a robe laid out for you. You will bathe and join me for dinner. If you dawdle, my assistant, Mr. Dobrins, will *assist* you. Believe me, Victor, you do not wish for that to happen. Dinner will be in the garden." With that Mac was gone.

Vic silently followed Dobrinsky down the cobblestone pathway to a tent set up in the centre of the garden. There was a table set with fine linens, crystal and china with a simple yet spectacular centrepiece of dozens of peacock feathers in an oversized crystal vase. Debussy played on a portable stereo, masking what Vic recognised to be a well-concealed white noise generator. Was security that much in question?

Mac was already seated, resplendent in full Arab garb, complete with the beard and moustache that Vic could almost feel against his skin. Fuck, the man was sex incarnate, no two ways about it.

Once Vic was within the perimeter of the tent, Dobrinsky let the damask side panels fall closed, ensconcing him and Mac in an elegant cocoon and hiding them from the prying eyes of the rest of the world.

Mac was out of the chair and around the table in a heartbeat, hugging the older man fiercely. "Vic, God, I... I mean we weren't sure if we'd ever see you again."

Vic heard the stutter and felt a fine tremor wrack the younger man. He also heard the dry desperation in the tone of Mac's voice. Hands automatically came up to hold the ex-thief as Vic whispered soothing nothings softly. "Shh, I'm here, Mac, right here. It's okay; you got me back in one piece. Just another day at the office, right?" the ex-cop joked lamely.

"I... had to. God, look at me. I'm falling apart. Some secret agency operative, hunh?" Mac laughed derisively, pulling away and returning to his seat in order to try and distance himself emotionally and physically from his partner, the man who had come to mean more than life to him.

"You've lost weight. Didn't the bastard feed you?"

"Yeah," Vic replied slowly, sitting down across from his partner. He didn't like the way Mac looked or was acting. Something was... off, but Vic couldn't quite put his finger on it.

"But the food made me feel just a little *too* complacent, so I ate the bare minimum and drank lots of water." The older man's eyes widened in shock as he watched his partner's jaw clench in rage and his eyes turn black. "Hey, Mac, I'm okay! Besides, I needed to lose a few pounds anyway; the Director was beginning to call me 'husky'," Vic tried to tease.

"Eat," Mac growled softly. "I'll talk."

Vic was about to protest, but Mac's silent glare warned him that the younger man was on edge and not about to take any crap. Looking down at the china, Vic was surprised to see an incredibly elegant dinner. Went with the role Mac was playing, he guessed. There was salad, consommé, lobster with clarified butter and fiddle head greens and, on the side board, what looked like a chocolate truffle cake for dessert.

Very rich, very posh and very likely to make him sick considering his meals of the past month. But Mac was watching so... Picking up a dinner roll, Vic broke into it and popped a morsel into his mouth. Chewing, he gave his partner a tiny grin and quirked an eyebrow in invitation.

Mac, on the other hand, was trying to delay the inevitable. He was too fucking emotionally involved in this not to have the end result hurt. The end result being Vic's unequivocal rejection of him. And with the Director and the girls suddenly having to hightail it back to Canada, he *was* gonna have to face the music, 'cause they were on their own for a while. Which meant...

"So here's the situation. We *were* supposed to be off this cesspool island by now. Dobie and I were supposed to get you here, the Cleaners were supposed to take care of the loose ends, and a boat should have been docked with the girls on it to get us the hell out of here. That was what *was* going to happen. Plans have changed." Mac winced as he thought of what he had to tell his partner next, not looking forward to Vic's reaction at all.

Vic swallowed the morsel of lobster he'd been chewing on and digested his partner's words. "I hear a major 'but' in that sentence, Mac. Just spit it out, will ya? Nothing can be as bad as what I just went through."

"The girls got recalled to Canada. We're on our own. The house and grounds are completely monitored by Laurent, and I bought you to be a sex toy," Mac rushed out, his words almost running together in his haste to get it all out and over with.

"Scuse me?"

"I. Bought you. To be my sex toy," Mac enunciated very clearly, his hands clenching the arms of the chair until they turned white as he waited for his partner to lunge at him and try to throttle the life out of him, which Mac thought he deserved. First he had Vic tattooed, and now he told his almost obsessively straight partner that Vic would have to bend over and take it for the sake of the cameras.

"That's what I thought you said," Vic replied much too calmly for Mac's peace of mind.

"Just wanted to make sure." Picking up the discarded roll, Vic waited for Mac's reaction to his placid acceptance.

"What?! That's it?!" Mac all but bellowed in the older man's face, wondering inanely if there really was such a thing as body snatchers or if Vic had been brainwashed.

"That didn't take too long at all," Vic chuckled at his partner.

"What, you want me to get upset? Sorry to disappoint you, Ramsey, but compared to what could have happened to me, this is a walk in the park. Besides," Vic paused to take a sip of a very good glass of wine, "You're easy on the eyes, sexy as hell, and I've been thinking about jumping you ever since the little princess made us seriously consider playing lovers to protect our respective virtues."

"You've been think..." Mac snagged his glass of wine and belted it back, then poured himself another and downed that. "Jesus!"

Vic watched the younger man try to cope with his revelation, a patient smile on his face. 'Gotcha, Macky boy,' he thought to himself as he calmly sipped his wine. These next few moments would tell him if there was even a chance that they could actually make this work. And Vic found himself desperately wanting to make it work. He'd had weeks to think about Mac and him—and it felt right. Now if only Mac was willing to play.

"You want me..." Mac managed to get out after long moments of silence. A smile began at the corners of his mouth and slowly turned into a full-fledged grin that seemed to light him from within. "You want me? Really? You mean it's not just me wanting to jump your bones so badly that I'm dreaming? Hot damn!"

"Yeah, I want you, have for a while now. No accounting for taste, but there it is," Vic smirked at the younger man, getting a dinner roll thrown at him for his efforts. "Hey! No abusing the P.O.W.!"

"But you're not a P.O.W., Vic-tor. You're a sex toy... *my* sex toy," Mac replied softly, his eyes taking on a predatory gleam. "Which means I get to have you... with that bastard watching," Mac trailed off, suddenly remembering the implications of their little act. "Vic, man... I can play paranoid and insist the house be swept for listening devices, or we can try and make it to the airport and get the hell out of..."

"We stay and play it out until the Director gets back, Mac. We've got other people to think about, Murphy, Camier and Dobrinsky. We can't risk them just because... and you know, I *want* him to watch! Perverse, I know, but I really wanna rub it in his face since he wanted to do the same to me—would've if you hadn't insisted I be delivered ASAP. The asshole even touched me..."

Mac's snarl reverberated around the tent. "Son of a bitch, I'm gonna kill him with my bare fucking hands!" Lunging to his feet, Mac headed towards one of the panels, only to be snagged by Vic and pulled into the older man's lap as he passed.

"Screw him, Mac. Better yet—screw me hard while he watches and pants and jacks himself raw knowing he can never touch me again," Vic demanded hotly, yanking Mac's head down for a passionate kiss full of testosterone and fire.

Mac threw himself into the kiss, devouring the older man almost desperately. "Vic, fuck, oh God, Vic. I thought I'd never see you again," the ex-thief almost sobbed as he came up for air at last.

"You're gonna get your chance to see a whole helluva a lot more of me, baby," Vic purred softly, lifting Mac up onto the table, sending china, crystal, food and drink crashing to the carpet laid out for the spoiled young Arab and his new plaything.

Catching the dish of clarified butter as it tottered on the edge of the table, Vic grinned down at Mac. "Can't let that go to waste now... I'm gonna need it in a minute."

Mac moaned, his breath catching in his throat as he watched Vic turn from his mild-mannered kinda dorky partner into this... god. "Vic, Jesus, you mean you kept this hidden from me all along? Christ," the ex-thief breathed in appreciation. His hands tore at the loose silk robe that Vic wore in deference to decency and had it open in seconds. Long, elegant fingers glided along a perfect chest and down to rock hard abs. Mac bit back another moan—this one of primal need. Fuck, Vic was... "You're beautiful," the younger man breathed out loud. "And *mine*."

"All yours, baby," Vic promised softly. "After all—you paid for me, right?" His lips tilted in a sensual smirk as he found the clasps to undo Mac's robe then grinned at the tank top and jersey shorts underneath it. "Interesting choice of clothing, lover," he chuckled as he yanked the shorts down and the shirt up.

"Hey, you try wearing this damn thing. It's a fucking sauna under it. Besides, I'm a spoiled brat who pretends to be Western but still buys himself sex slaves with daddy's money," Mac gasped and moaned as Vic bent to lick and suckle at the tiny nubbin of flesh that peeked out from beneath his dark curls. "Oh God..."

Vic chuckled around the flesh filling his mouth as he heard the soft utterance. 'If you think this is worthy of prayer, Ramsey, you ain't even begun to pray,' Vic thought to himself. His partner was about to find out just how 'alternative' Vic could be.

Working his way from nipple down the delineation between Mac's abdominal muscles, Vic dipped into his lover's navel for a few moments, enjoying the squirming body underneath him and the breathless laughter that escaped him. Smiling, he left off and worked farther down, nuzzling his nose through the dark curls that surrounded Mac's elegant erection, breathing in the heady musk that was his partner. Finally, his mouth watering for a taste, Vic raised his head and lapped at the weeping tip of Mac's cock, closing his eyes to better savour the younger man.

Mac's desperate moan made Vic open his eyes and look down the long length of the ex-thief with possessive need. "All mine," he husked appreciatively, squeezing Mac's hand with one of his own before he returned to mapping his lover's erection with his tongue and mouth.

"Jesus, fuck, Vic. Where did you learn to..." Mac trailed off, his head thrown back as the older man played his body like a savant played a Stradivarius. The younger man couldn't remember the last time he'd been taken so far, so fast. Feeling Vic's mouth work his desperate shaft was too much for the ex-thief.

He'd wanted for so long, had been worried and had needed Vic, and now his cock was jammed down the older man's throat as—Jesus fuck—as Vic began to deep throat him. Carding his fingers through Vic's dark hair, Mac held on for dear life as his heart was sucked out through his cock by way of a brain destroying orgasm.

All too soon for Vic's liking, Mac whined and bucked upwards, flooding his mouth with the bitter salt taste he'd missed so much over the past years. Drinking it down ecstatically, Vic finally released the now soft flesh with a final, loving lick and looked up at the wasted mess that was his lover. "Enjoyed that, did you, baby?" he chuckled as he pulled Mac up to a sitting position for a long, languid kiss.

While Vic gently gorged on Mac's mouth, his hands were busily dipping into the butter he'd rescued. Mac might be satisfied, but he sure as hell was still aching. Spreading Mac's legs wider, Vic gently worked an oily finger into the lush crevice of Mac's ass. The digit teased the tight ring of muscle there for long moments before sliding inside; the only acknowledgment from Mac was an increasing hunger to his kiss.

Another finger joined and scissored the sweet portal open, stretching Mac for Vic's thick erection. It was too much for Vic; he'd been too needy for too long. Slathering his cock with more of the butter, Vic positioned the flared head of his penis and gently pushed inside.

Mac groaned and bit down on the older man's lip hard enough to draw a bead of blood. "Christ, so full. You're inside me, Vic. You're really," a tiny gasp of breath of air and Mac was latching on to the first

piece of flesh he could reach—Vic's shoulder—and stuffing his mouth with the firm flesh as he was stuffed with Vic.

"That's it, baby, take me in. Take me all in," Vic coached as he pushed steadily inward, finally seating himself entirely in the snug, warm channel that felt like home. "Mac," he groaned, fire dancing behind closed eyes as he waited for the younger man to adjust to his presence.

"Vic, shuddup and fuck me, will ya?" Mac growled softly, biting down hard on the shoulder above him. Dammit, if he'd wanted gentle, he'd have said so; what he wanted was a good hard reaming, Mansfield style.

"You asked for it, Ramsey," Vic snarled softly, as he stopped trying to be a considerate lover and gave the younger man what he wanted. Drawing back until he was just barely held within Mac's tight ass, Vic slammed back in hard, drawing a high-pitched whine from the younger man. His fingers dug into Mac's hips, holding him still on the edge of the table as he powered in and out of the younger man's sweet body.

"Like this, baby?" he panted as he worked himself in and out of the clinging channel, revelling in the whines and soft begging noises the other man was making beneath him. "Is this how you want me to fuck you, Mac?" Vic persisted, biting down on the younger man's sensitive earlobe as he continued to slam into the ex-thief, sweat pouring off of both of them as they continued their erotic dance.

Mac couldn't form a coherent thought in order to respond, even if he tried. He was beyond thought of any form, having reverted to primal grunts and yowls of need. If he could think, he'd have known he'd never been this thoroughly fucked in his life, had never known this sort of bone deep pleasure. It cut him to the core; it shattered him and remade him into a new person. He was completely wrecked for anyone else ever again; he was Vic's now.

Although he'd been spent just a few moments before, Mac felt his erection slap against his stomach, already leaking precum as his body tightened each time the blunt tip of Vic's cock stabbed his prostate. The idiot who said that men couldn't be multi-orgasmic had obviously never been fucked by Vic Mansfield. And the sorry son of a bitch never would now 'cause Mac wasn't letting him get away.

Too much, Jesus, Vic was taking him harder, slamming into him hard enough to make the table shudder with each stroke. Mac's teeth clamped down harder and harder on the flesh beneath them, not even registering the coppery flavour that exploded on his taste buds, so lost was he in his passion. Releasing Vic's shoulder suddenly, Mac's head shot back, and he howled as ropes of pearlescent semen splattered both his and Vic's stomach with liquid heat.

Feeling Mac's teeth sink into him as well as the tight ring of muscle seize up in passion and bite down hard on his erection made Vic wild. That, combined with the sight of Mac and the feral scent of their lovemaking, drove him mad. Bucking harder and harder into his lover, Vic came with an animalistic snarl of release, inundating the younger man with his seed before slumping back down to his chair, dragging the still impaled Mac with him.

"Christ," he moaned softly. "Mac..." trailing off helplessly, Vic looked up at the younger man, not quite sure what to say next.

Mac, on the other hand, had no problems with words. "You do that with anyone else, Mansfield, and I make you a gelding. You got it?" the younger man snarled possessively, diving in to claim the sensuous lips of his lover. "You're mine now—all mine."

"Yes, sir, Master Ramsey, sir," Vic chuckled tiredly. Wincing slightly as the endorphins wore off, Vic bit back a curse as sweat and pressure caused fire to lick at the still fresh wound on his groin.

Mac saw the wince and immediately pulled off with a slight wince of his own. He felt ridden hard and put away wet. Fuck, what a great feeling. "C'mon, babe, let's put on our game faces and go back to the house. I can take care of that tattoo for you, and we can get some sleep," the younger man suggested quietly.

"Can we bring the cake?" Vic teased. "I have this overwhelming urge to smear it over you and lick it off."

"Jesus, Vic..."

Vic stepped under the hot spray of the shower and began to wash the exertions of dinner off of himself. He'd made himself pace his room for at least an hour, jumping at every noise, trying locks on doors and windows, examining the room for ways out. He had to make his audience think he was still fighting fate, so to speak. It was all part of the plan that he and Mac had come up with to make it look like Vic was willing and yet not. A simple illusion to fool Laurent through the eyes of the cameras and ears of the mikes.

Even as he showered, Mac was preparing him a glass of cognac into which he would slip a sugar pill. An hour earlier he'd sent Dobrinsky out with orders to purchase some Rohypnol tablets, which he'd done. The actual pills were stashed safely away, substituted with sugar pills on the drive back, but no one but Mac, Vic and Dobrinsky knew that.

So to all intents and purposes, it would look like the spoiled young man was doping his new toy up for a night of mind numbing sex. Vic could hardly wait.

After showering and shaving so that his face was once more smooth, Vic stepped out of the bathroom clad in yet another robe only to find his 'owner' waiting for him. "What do you want now?" he asked sullenly. "You think I'm going to play nice just because you've *almost* treated me like a human being?"

"Victor, oh my handsome Victor, did I ever say I wanted you to play 'nice'?" the young man chuckled softly. He watched as his new toy tensed, and he smiled. The hunt was on. "Relax, Victor. I'm sure that you're going to need some adjustment time to get used to your new life. All I want is for you to join me in a drink. Is that so hard? A simple glass of cognac," Mac held up the glass from where he sat in an overstuffed chair. "A drink and a little conversation. Please?"

Vic studied the man in front of him then shrugged. What harm could one drink do him? Walking over, he took the glass from the other man and sat in the chair opposite him. "So—I have my drink; what do you want to talk about?"

"Something mundane so as not to get either of us angry. Shall we talk about the weather?"

Vic had to laugh at that, though he tried hard not to. "Umm—I think I'll pass, thanks."

"Decisions, decisions," Mac mused softly as he watched Vic drink with a predatory glint in his eye. Very soon indeed he would have a willing and eager bed toy. He could have chosen a more addictive drug, one that would make his new acquisition dependent upon him, always craving his next hit, but those sorts of drugs wasted the body as well as the will. It would have been such a shame to ruin this one.

No, this drug would allow him to 'break' Victor in by increments. First a full dosage—for a month or so, but not every night, then a half dose so the memories would appear to be dreams. Then Victor would be his. He'd explained all of this to Dobrinsky, his friend and confidante. Inwardly both Mac and Dobrinsky were disgusted by the 'spoiled' young man's callous attitude towards his new acquisition, but then again the same young man was a piece of work to begin with—buying a man to be a sex slave... It maintained the illusion, however, and Laurent was none the wiser.

"Shall I tell you of my house, then? We won't be staying here longer than the ten days Laurent requires. Once they are up, we will be going home, to my house in the desert. It is a beautiful place, Victor, with palm trees and a walled courtyard full of fountains and exotic plants. Father said it used to belong to a Sheik who kept his eight wives there. Eight women, can you imagine? It was no wonder he didn't live there, that Sheik. The noise alone would deafen," Mac chuckled.

The young man continued to describe his house, his voice weaving a hypnotic web until he saw at last the other man's head droop and his eyes fall shut. At last the drug was taking effect. "Victor, can you hear me?" he husked softly.

For Victor's part, it was easy to pretend to fall under the sway of the so-called drug; it had been a month since he'd had anything alcoholic, and he was slightly undernourished and dehydrated. Those factors added to the glass of wine at dinner made him more than a little tipsy—allowing him to lose any inhibitions he may have had regardless of how badly he did in fact want Mac.

Victor struggled to lift his head up in order to look at the younger man, his eyes unfocused and dazed. He stared at Mac for long moments, blinking owlishly as he pretended to try and get his brain to work. "So pretty," he mumbled, watching Mac even as his hand strayed to his burgeoning cock. "You're so pretty. I'm hot," Vic licked his lips, eyes gone cloudy with desire, "and horny." He giggled slightly, an inebriated sound.

"Am I pretty? Well I think you're beautiful, Victor. I'm horny too; watching you has made me very horny indeed. I wish to fuck you, Victor," Ahrmakhi purred softly. "Go lie on the bed, but take the robe off first. Spread your legs for me, pretty Victor."

Victor's lower lip came out petulantly. "Don't wanna move," he pouted as one hand scabbled to free the tie on his robe, and the other moved to cup and stroke his straining erection. Mac was going to be in him soon; how could he not get hard at the thought?

Mac watched through hooded eyes as Vic continued to play with his cock. He wanted to taste it. Badly. He could see the tip glisten in the soft light, precum dotting its surface. However, crawling along the floor to give his partner the blowjob of his life just wasn't acceptable in the role he'd chosen to adopt, not with Laurent most likely glued to wherever it was he watched these things from

Surging out of his chair, Ahrmakhi stalked towards his toy and dragged him to his feet. "You are *my* play toy, pretty Victor, and if I want you on the bed, legs splayed like the whore you are, you'll do as you're told," the young man growled as he roughly moved Vic backwards to the bed, tearing the robe from the older man's body as he did so.

Shoving Vic down, Mac was on him in an instant, suddenly totally into his role. Rolling Vic onto his stomach, Mac yanked him backwards so that Vic's ass was canted high in the air, just level with Mac's

cock. "This is how I want you. This is where you belong now—under me, servicing me. Do you understand, Victor?"

At the older man's attempt at protest, Mac's hand cracked down hard on Vic's ass, causing him to yelp in pain. "*Mine*, Victor, you're *mine*," he growled, fully meaning it.

Vic tried to surge off the bed, pretending slowed reflexes, and Mac was ready for him. Using the sash from Vic's robe, he easily captured a hand as Vic tried to swing at him then grabbed the other. With quick movements he had Vic's wrists bound together and crowded the older man forward, using his body to lever Vic back down to the bed.

With what would appear to be a vicious yank to any spectators, Mac secured Vic to the wrought iron headboard of the bed. Continuing to use his weight and position to keep Vic pinned to the bed, Mac grabbed the bottle of lubricant on the bedside table and poured some down the crack of Vic's ass.

Vic yelped at the coldness, but not even that detracted from his arousal. He was so fucking hard he couldn't stand it. Vic would never have imagined that Mac could be such a dom, and he was adoring it. It was so good to have someone demand control, to wrest it away and assert his will over the normally dominant agent. And it was *Mac*.

Mac's free hand quickly worked his own trousers open, and more gel was slicked onto Mac's cock. Not even bothering to prepare or stretch Victor, Mac knifed inside the older man, causing him to cry out with sharply spiked arousal. "So tight, like a virginal woman," Mac gasped out, frantically clinging to his role in order to prevent any show of tenderness that he wanted so desperately to give. That would have to wait until later. But it didn't stop him from feeling as if he was raping the man he loved.

Vic bucked backwards, impaling himself more fully on the long spike of Mac's cock, looking for all intents and purposes as if he was struggling to pull himself off the younger man, when in fact he was trying to get Mac deeper. He cried out, a guttural sound that could be interpreted as protest but was in fact passion. *So good, so fucking good*, he moaned to himself, wanting the burning pleasure to go on forever. When Mac pulled out and slammed back in, he had to bite down on his arm to prevent himself from yowling like a cat in heat.

To Laurent it *would* look like rape. To Mac it was passion long denied, and from the feel of Vic's hard erection, that he now stroked in tandem to the thrusts of his hips, it was reciprocated. All too soon he felt himself lose what shredded remains of control he had left. Thrusting rapidly into Vic, his hand goading the older man to join him, Mac came hard, pumping Vic full of semen. The soft splash of hot come on his hand let him know that Vic had joined him in release.

Slumping over Vic, his weight forced the other man to collapse into the bed with a soft whimper. Mac was still embedded deep in the older man's ass. "*Mine*," he purred once more, sealing the promise with a bite strong enough to leave reddened impressions of his teeth in the creamy golden skin.

"Yours," came the practically silent whisper of agreement, so soft that no mike would have been able to pick it up as Vic relaxed underneath him. Mac hid his face in Vic's back in order to hide the full-fledged grin of happiness. Damn, he couldn't remember ever feeling this good.

Laurent raged. He hurled. A chair went into the bank of monitors that had shown him Victor's claiming. Victor was *his* pretty, and no one else's. It should have been he that had sweated and groaned and taken the Canadian like the hot young animal he was, not that whelp.

He had thought watching Victor be taken would have cured him of his obsession, his need. It would have burned the desire away. All it did was make him burn with rage. Victor should be *his*. Would be his!

Storming out of the monitoring room, the slave trader summoned his 'extraction' team. "I want him back. NOW!"

Mac untied Vic's wrists, running a finger across the marks with tender concern. A slight shake of Vic's head and a quickly hidden smile had him breathing in relief. Vic really wasn't upset with him. Oh man, he wanted to *talk* to Vic so badly, to tell the older man that he loved him, to assure himself that Vic really was okay, but Vic was supposed to be drugged to the gills. Dammit!

Then an idea sprang to mind. The bathroom. A shower—natural white noise and the frosted glass would keep the cameras out... now all he had to do was figure out how to make it dark enough that movement couldn't be discerned, and he could actually hold Vic and be held like he so wanted to.

Pulling off and out of Vic, Mac got to his feet and all but yanked Vic off the bed. They needed to be there now, right now.



Vic made an unintelligible sound of protest as he let Mac haul him to his feet and into the bathroom. He was sore, but pleasantly so. The ache in his ass would be a constant reminder of just how well he'd been claimed by his lover. Mac was his lover; God, there were no words that could come close to describing the thrilling rush that thought gave him. And Mac, Jesus, he'd have to get the younger man to do that again when they were safely back in Canada and he really could cut loose and be the total slutty bottom he so desperately wanted to be for his partner.

Leading Vic into the bathroom, Mac propped the older man on the bidet as he got the water running in the shower. The shower cubicle itself was mike and camera free, so the noise of the water and the frosted glass should give them a modicum of privacy. Now, how to go about making it harder to see...

He turned and lit a myriad of tiny candles scattered around the room then shut off the lights, throwing the area into shadow. They'd be able to see the light through the glass, but the camera wouldn't be able to pick up on them. Perfect.

"Come, sweet little putain, can't have you stinking in my bed," Mac husked softly, pulling the ex-cop up and into the shower. Once the glass door was closed, he drew Vic in for a heated kiss. "Are you okay? I didn't hurt you?"

"Baby, the only thing that's gonna hurt is if you tell me you'll never do it again," Vic purred softly, rubbing against Mac's lean frame. "You were so hot I thought you were gonna burn me alive. I loved it. I love you."

Mac sagged against Vic in relief. "God, I was so scared... and turned on at the same time. Sick, hunh? Part of me felt like I really was raping you, and dammit, I kept getting harder."

"We were role playing, baby; the sex shrinks always say those kind of fantasies are common. I, on the other hand, didn't think of it like that at all. I loved you dominant, loved bottoming for you—but only you, Mac. No one else could ever make me feel like that. Make me feel safe and loved and totally helpless and turned on. But next time—we use fur lined handcuffs, okay?" Vic teased, trying to shock the younger man out of his mood.

"Vic," Mac managed to get out in a strangled whisper. His staid and stoic partner was a closet bondage slut! Not that Mac minded but... "Only if you play with me the same way. I want us to share everything from now on, Vic," the younger man breathed, watching Vic carefully, hoping he wasn't pushing too far, too fast, but fuck, he'd nearly lost Vic forever. Mac wasn't about to wait around on the off chance it happened again. He wanted this settled now.

"I don't know about *everything*, Mac," Vic began, only to see the younger man's face fall. "I mean I wouldn't want you to share my pain for anything, or my family, God, wouldn't even want the Director to

share them. But share my life, definitely," the ex-cop swore passionately, taking Mac's succulent mouth in a soul searing kiss.

Finally the need for oxygen forced the two men to unseal their lips. Mac looked into verdant green eyes, gauging the truth of Vic's words. Seeing what he so desperately sought, the younger man smiled then dropped to his knees, surprising the hell out of Vic.

"I love you too, want to do the life thing with you, but right now... Right now I wanna do what I couldn't do earlier." With a cocky wink and a lascivious lick of his lips, Mac dove onto the thick girth of cock and began to swallow it down.

Vic's fingers threaded through Mac's hair, and a strangled gasp fought its way from a throat constricted by need. "Jesus, Mac!" he managed to moan as the younger man relaxed his throat muscles and took Vic in deeper, taking him to the root.

Laurent's men moved quietly and efficiently. The rich kid's security was almost airtight. Almost. It would take them a little longer than normal to bypass the protocols, but the boss wanted the cop back, and no one pissed off the boss willingly. So they were gonna get the cop back.

Misters Murphy and Camier were running through the dialogue of their next little private production when the alarm grid began to beep.

"It would appear that our brief sojourn is over, Mr. Murphy."

"Indeed, Mr. Camier. Company has decided to invite itself in. How very rude of them. But somewhat expected when one takes into account the vulgar lout that employs them."

"Too true, Mr. Murphy, and I must confess I was feeling a bit constrained by this current situation. It shall be rather nice to shed this insincere act and revert to our true form."

"Indeed. Let us inform Mr. Dobrinsky and then engage in the hunt."

Vic's breath was coming in gasping sobs as Mac played him like a... a... whatever that damn violin was. So close, he was so fucking close. Mac's nose was buried in his curls, the younger man's throat massaging his screaming flesh and his tongue whipping him so gently it hurt. And then Mac slid a finger in his ass and brushed his prostate.

Vic came apart at the seams. Literally. Biting down on his lip hard to keep the high pitched whine from escaping, Vic shot stream after stream of semen into the younger man's throat, more than he thought his overly tired, thirty-something body could have produced in round number three. Damn. No getting around it, Mac was a natural born cocksucker.

Sagging against the wet tile, Vic slid down it until he was sitting on the floor. Pulling Mac forward, he took those self-satisfied lips fast and hard, swiping a tongue around the interior of Mac's mouth in order to taste himself mingled with his lover's taste. "God damn, Mac."

"Liked that, hunh?"

"Hell yes!"

"Well, it would seem that we have a leak inside the Government Advisory Council. This disturbs me," the Director informed her two female agents as they waited tensely for the yacht to make land.

"Like, you think they got Vic okay?"

"Trust me, Jackie, Mac wasn't about to let Laurent keep our Victor. They'll all be waiting for us. Li Ann, be a dear and impress upon the captain that I want to be there *now*."

Dobrinsky snapped the cell phone shut. First the Cleaners had called to inform him of the security breach, and then the Director phoned to say that they were in sight of land. Bets were that either Mac and Vic's little show sent Laurent over the deep end or else their cover was blown. Either way it was time for the lovebirds to stop playing hide the sausage and get dressed and armed.

Pounding on the bathroom door, Dobie yelled. "Play time's over boys. We need to move!" Muffled curses made him smile and the door was thrown open after a few minutes, both men glaring daggers at him and clutching towels they had hastily wrapped around them.

"She's close, and security's been breached. Get dressed for 'play', and grab your favourite party toys. Let's go. Murphy and Camier are already taking care of business."

"Who?" Vic snapped out, eyes icing over as his mind did the mental leaps to get him in the mindset he needed to be in after a month of enforced retirement.

"Don't know who yet. My money's on Laurent. Bet your little show sent him loony tunes, and now he wants you back. Murphy and Camier are investigating, and we should know soon enough. Then we take 'em out—quick, clean and by the numbers. No mess, no witnesses. She wants no reminders left behind—but she does want Laurent. He's pissed her off."

"Fine, get outta here; we gotta dress. Meet you downstairs for our accessories."

"Oh no, Ace. You and the kid are to head to the docks; you only discharge if fired upon. It's you he's after, so it's you we gotta get out of the line of fire. Deal with it and hustle."

Dobrinsky threw off one of those damnably annoying grins and left, heading out to meet up with the Cleaners and buy the boys time to get to the boat.

"God dammit! I want a piece of those sons of bitches out there! They may be the assholes who grabbed me!" Vic growled as Mac calmly walked over to a closet containing their 'work clothes' and tossed the older man his black Agency fatigues.

"And basically walk right back into Laurent's little slave camp? Unh-unh, lover, we're getting the hell out of here. Let Dobie and the Cleaners be fucking heroes for once. I prefer my love slave breathing and with me," Mac retorted sarcastically as he slithered into his own black outfit. "However, I'll be happy to help dress you, babe," he continued with a waggle of his eyebrows.

"Fuck, Ramsey, you're such a prick," Vic laughed, joining the younger man and kissing him hard. "Okay, baby, you win. We head to the boat. Last thing I want is to be separated from you again. 'Sides, someone's gotta protect that sweet ass of yours—and who better than the guy who plans to crawl inside it first chance he gets."

"We've finally bypassed the security, sir; it took longer than expected due to the complexity of the alarm system the target had."

"I don't want excuses. I want Victor. Get him for me, and we'll forget your ineptness. Fail to retrieve him and..." Laurent slammed down the phone and barked at the terrified technicians scrambling to reconnect the video feed to a secondary bank of monitors to hurry up. The first bank he'd damaged beyond repair in his anger.

"You'll have to pay for that too, pretty. And for letting that pup fuck you without more protest. You were hard for him, Victor. I saw your straining cock. You dared to get hard for that... boy when you..." Laurent snarled softly as he remembered how soft Victor had stayed when he, Laurent, had played with him.

"Oh, there are many things I'm going to make you regret, my pretty little policeman. I'm going to break you this time, Victor, and make you all mine."

"It would seem that it is indeed young Victor they wish to recover," Murphy commented almost silently to his shadowy partner.

"That will never do. I rather enjoy our poker games and have missed them this preceding month. And Victor is a rather likeable chap. For an Agent."

Down at the docks a sleek looking pleasure craft with an engine powerful enough to outrun almost anything pulled into the pier. Li Ann, Jackie and the Director were on deck, almost invisible in the shadows due to their dark clothes. The motor purred silently, and the running lights were off. Once the boys were on board, they'd hightail it out of there. Dobrinsky, Murphy and Camier all had their own escape routes to follow.

"Hurry up, boys, let's get you out of here," the Director murmured softly, sharp eyes watching shadows for any hint of movement.

"A boat? Why is there a boat? And... merde!" Swivelling in his chair, Laurent picked up his headset to contact the extraction leader. "They know you're there, idiot! They're heading for the dock; there's a boat moored and waiting!!!"

"Damnation. It would seem that he's monitoring us once again. It looks as if they are moving to intercept the Agents."

"Indeed, Mr. Camier. It would seem that subtlety is no longer required. Shall we?"

"After you, Mr. Murphy, after you."

"Hey, what's up, fellas?" Dobrinsky jogged up to join the Cleaners.

"It would seem the boat has been seen. The hostiles are moving to intercept our Agents."

"Damn. Let's move."

Jogging quickly towards the rear of the estate, Mac and Vic kept up their usual at work banter to keep themselves amused. It had taken on a slightly more sensual edge though as they teased and taunted one another, eyes always moving, scanning their environment.

"So Vic, guess you were really serious about finding yourself a boyfriend in prison, hunh? And here I thought you would have been the butch instead of the bitch."

"Yeah—well I may have thought it, but damn, Ramsey—you spent a whole year in that Hong Kong hell... Bet you made a pretty Friday night date. Had 'em lined up around the cell block, did you?"

"Fuck you, Mansfield," Mac chuckled softly.

"With pleasure, baby. Mind if we wait till we get to the boat though?"

Mac stopped a moment to run a leather-gloved thumb across Vic's lips. "Can't wait, Vic. Love the way you felt inside me... like you belonged there, and I belonged to you."

"News flash, junior. You do." Vic replied softly, pulling Mac's head down for a brief taste of his lush mouth. "Let's motor, baby. We're almost home."

"Yeah, through that gate and down. There's only one berth, so that's where we head."

"I've got movement," Li Ann informed the other women from where she watched with night vision binoculars on the deck of the boat. "It's them!" the young Asian breathed a sigh of relief. This nightmare was almost over.

"Like, I've got movement too, and it's not the friendly kind," Jackie replied from her vantage point where her field glasses were trained on Laurent's extraction team.

"Come on, boys, come home to mama," the Director whispered, unsnapping the sniper case without looking and beginning to assemble the deadly weapon by touch alone. "Just keep coming to mama, and I'll take care of the bullies."

"It would appear our efforts were in vain. The assailants have reached the target first," Mr. Camier pointed out softly. They wouldn't be able to close the gap in time. Only the Agents' skill and divine intervention would help them now.

"Do not disregard their lovely counterparts on the boat, Mr. Camier," Murphy pointed out.

"Yeah, the Director ain't losing her people again. But we'd best cover the rear just in case," Dobrinsky added as he set up a rearguard position to contain the hostiles.

"Thank God. We have him. I don't even want to think of what the boss would do if we didn't bring the guy back. But we gotta secure him. Which means getting rid of the spoiled brat. All right, people, let's do some damage control."

"I can't wait to get off this fucking island. The further away from that..." Mac growled as he moved down the narrow path towards the boat. "I want hot water, beer and you. In me," he teased, shooting a look over his shoulder.

Moonlight played off a rifle barrel behind them.

"Down!" Mac yelled, pulling the older man down in a huddle. He sucked in a pained gasp as a bullet winged him. "Fuck!" Looking around for any avenue of escape, Mac realized there was only one unexpected one left open to them. "We gotta go down. Jump out as much as we can; the water is right below us."

"Mac... I love you," Vic gasped, pulling the ex-thief in for a desperate kiss. "We jump together, okay? I'm not losing you even for a second."

"You got it, dork man."

On the cliffs above a secondary sniper had moved into position, thanks to the distraction. Now all he needed was a clear shot.

"Dammit, there are two of them. Who to take out first?" the Director muttered as she sighted first one, then the second hostile.

"On the count of three," Mac murmured, breaking off the kiss and standing. "One, two, three!"

Everything seemed to slow down just like those cheesy movies that Vic detested with a passion. They pushed off from the wall and jumped wide, but as they did, Vic heard a shot and saw Mac begin to fall in a less than controlled manner. Another shot rang out, followed by a scream of agony, then another with the same result.

Water rushed up to meet him, and he was breaking the surface, frantically looking for Mac. A splash nearby and Li Ann surfaced next to him. Something brushed his leg, and he reached down to come into contact with an arm. "MAC!"

Between him and Li Ann they got Mac on board and inside. The boat powered away from the docks, and as he frantically tried to get his lover to breathe again, Li Ann tried to staunch the river of blood. But they were safe... if Vic had had the time, he would have laughed hysterically at that thought. Safe was Mac. And if he... well, then nowhere would be safe for Victor again without Mac.

Two weeks later

A private ward in a Toronto Hospital

The incessant sound of beeping finally brought Mac close enough to the surface to try and decimate his alarm. Except that his hand was so heavy he could hardly lift it, and it was caught by another hand almost immediately. Screw it, he was going back to sleep.

The next time he woke up, it wasn't to that god-awful beeping, it was to the sound of breathing just next to his left ear. Opening his eyes a crack and turning his head slightly, he saw a man lying there, looking grey and pinched and unkempt even in sleep. What the? But his eyes were so heavy—just a moment of rest and then he'd find out what the hell was going on and who that guy was.

"He's awake, Victor," a very tired and drawn looking Director informed the ex-cop as he walked into the secured hospital ward. "Victor," her hand shot out to stop him from barreling past and into Mac's room. "Walk with me."

"But..."

"Walk with me, Victor." Her tone brooked no argument.

"He doesn't remember a thing?" Vic choked out, praying this was a nightmare or a badly rehearsed joke. "Nothing about..." the ex-cop swallowed hard, "about us?"

"The last thing he remembers is seeing Li Ann down a hallway and Dobrinsky handcuffing him to a trolley. The doctors say this sort of memory loss, though not common, is not entirely unexpected given the circumstances. They say he has a good chance of remembering, given time and space but... no, Victor, he doesn't remember you at all, let alone that you were lovers. I'm sorry."

Patting her agent's hand awkwardly, the Director stood to leave. "If you need... anything..."

"I can't go back to what we were. I can't see him day after day and not remember, not want..." Victor looked up at the Director with devastated eyes.

"I need out."

"I can grant you an immediate leave of absence."

"No. I mean out. Entirely out... out of the city, out of the province, out of the fucking country. I need to be away from everything..."

"I can't look and not remember, not... he's everything, and now he doesn't remember there ever was an us. You saw the tapes, don't deny it, so you know... I gave up everything I am to him that night, but he doesn't remember. I can't deal, not on top of all the other crap I gotta go through. Not now. Get me out."

"Are you sure? He might remember, Vic."

“And he might not. If he doesn’t... I can’t be here for that,” Vic looked up at the older woman, eyes full of anguish and more haunted than she could ever remember seeing them.

“All right, Victor. I’ll see what I can do.”

—

As the plane taxied down the runway, Vic looked at Toronto for what could very well be the last time. A tear tracked unheeded down his cheek as the plane picked up speed and hurtled itself into the air, heading to a very distant land far away from Canada.

‘Forgive me, Mac; I’m just not strong enough to love you right now, not when you can’t even remember me. I don’t know if I’ll ever be that strong. Goodbye, baby.’

*When other lips and other hearts
Their tales of woe shall tell,
In language whose excess imparts
The power they feel so well,
There may, perhaps, in such a scene,
some recollection be
Of days that have as happy been,
And you’ll remember me*

Alfred Bunn, The Bohemian Girl





He'd been waiting for Vic to say no.

No, Mac.

Stop.

Anything.

He'd been waiting so intently that once he had stopped, thinking he'd seen Vic shake his head—but the creases in Vic's forehead had only deepened—"Mac, c'mon, what the fuck?"—and green eyes had flashed open accusingly, and Mac had shuddered at the heat and slammed forward again.

Vic had gasped. Appreciatively.

This was getting boring; the one time he *knew* he was right, everyone started playing the skeptic. Mac scowled. "Look, I'm sorry, this may be hard for you to come to terms with, but I *know* I didn't screw up on this one."

Vic scowled back at him. "Yeah, and since when does your assurance count for anything?"

"Fuck off," Mac frowned, then glanced at the ceiling and shrugged. "Listen," he said, calmly, knowing how irritating that was, "I know you've been pretty tired and stuff lately. But really," and with a deft little tilt of his voice, he threw a patronizing undertone into the mix as well, "you've gotta admit that if your mind had been on the job, the guy wouldn't have gotten away."

Vic was shaking his head, a sour little smile twisting his lips. "You were watching the wrong door."

Mac felt a little blaze of satisfaction. "Uh, no. *You* were watching the wrong door."

"Wanna check the blueprints?" Vic demanded, arms folding angrily against his chest.

Mac reached for the file, flipped it open with one finger. "Sure," he said, spreading the papers around, then selecting one and holding it up to the light. "This would be the one."

Vic plucked it curtly away from him. "Yeah," he said authoritatively, tracing fine lines on the delicate paper, "so here's their stronghold, and here's the door you were stationed at, and here's the door I was..."

Mac grinned. "The door you were...?"

Vic was frowning at the map. "That makes no sense," he muttered, turning it in his hands, tilting his head like someone trying to see what's round the next corner in a horror flick. "I thought—"

Mac strolled closer. "See *this*," he interrupted, pointing, a low burr of triumph underscoring his words, "is where they were. And *this* is where I was. And *you*, well, you were kinda just hanging round watching the janitor's room, weren't you?"

Vic glanced at him, eyes distant with resentful acceptance, then looked away. "Great. Apparently."

"Yeah, I'd say so," Mac said, enjoying himself. "But I'm sure you did a great job of making sure the brooms stayed quiet. No toolkit shenanigans or unruly floor polish—"

"The guy did come my way, actually," Vic snapped.

"Yeah, it's just a pity you weren't tough enough to bring him down."

"He had a helluva lot of bullets, or have you forgotten the swiss-cheese-effect he left in the wall? Although if you'd been waiting on the third floor instead of the second, we could've had him—"

"Waiting on the third floor, instead of the second, where I'd been stationed, where me and Li Ann were holding off a whole load of spontaneous thugs? I should've been on the third floor, leaving her to all that, so I could help you stake out the cleaning cupboard? Yeah, Vic, cool idea. You should've brought it up in the briefing."

Vic glowered, contempt mangling with embarrassment in his eyes. "Get out my way, Ramsey. I'm going home."

Mac took his shades out of his pocket, buffed them quickly on his sleeve, then snapped them on. "Wrong again. *I'm* going home. You've got paperwork."

Vic's mouth closed with a sharp click. "I don't think so. The paperwork can wait."

"You think she'd agree with you on that one?" Mac asked pleasantly.

"I don't think she'd care much given that, basically, this case was a fiasco from start to finish. I figure she'd like a break before having to read it all."

"Gonna tell her that yourself, huh?"

Vic looked softer through Mac's dark glasses, a study in frustrated charcoal. "I'll... look, I can't work right now anyway." There was a flash of monochrome brilliance as Vic threw him a brief glance. "It's your turn to write it up, anyway."

With great enjoyment, Mac shook his head once. "I think not."

"It is," Vic repeated, with just a trace of uncertainty wafting amongst the defiant waves.

"It is *not*, because I did the last one, and Li Ann did the one before that."

"What last one?"

"With the grass."

Vic blew out indignantly. "That? That was like, two pages. This is gonna take *hours*."

Mac nodded helpfully. "You sure can pick 'em." He laid a conciliatory arm around Vic's shoulders, felt the muscles in Vic's back seize up. "And," he said, dropping his voice in deference to the close proximity of Vic's ear, "I think she'll want it by tomorrow. You've got a loooong night ahead of you."

Vic twisted away violently; "I have *had* it with you," he snarled, whirling and stalking out the door. Mac stared after him, bemused, hearing words float back faintly, "I can't *take* this any more."

Huh, thought Mac, smirking. So he *did* have limited endurance, after all.

"I hope you're going after him," the Director's voice came, behind him. Mac tensed. "Never go to bed angry. Especially not in *your* profession." She sounded absently concerned, which was clearly a bad thing.

"Are you threatening me?" Mac asked, genuinely curious.

She smiled, awfully nice. "If I were threatening you, you wouldn't need to ask."

"I got that," Mac said, making for the door. She didn't seem too pissed off about the case. Of course, today he seemed to have a knack for not noticing until it was too late—just look at Vic, talk about hidden depth.

Or maybe, just a stretch of very choppy shallows.

"Wait."

Mac paused, fingers hovering near the door. "Hmm?"

"Take this to him." Her hands moved to the papers on the table, and then she was holding out a perfectly neat file, so quickly Mac wondered if he'd blinked too long. "Victor seems to have left it behind, too wrapped up in his precipitous exit, but if he's going to do a satisfactory write-up he'll need it tonight."

Mac looked at her unenthusiastically. "Can't he get it himself?"

"Undoubtedly. But I'd hate to make his life any more difficult than necessary."

Mac snorted, then held out his hand. "Are you feeling alright? Like, because this sounds suspiciously altruistic. Maybe you're coming down with a fever." He tilted his head, pausing. "Or," he said, skeptically, "am I being really dumb? You've got this big ole motive that's going right over my head...?"

"What do you think?"

"I think," he said vaguely, taking the folder and tucking it into his coat, then facing her. "I think, I don't care. Are we done?"

"We're done," she said, disinterested already. "Run along."

—

The door opened—and then jarred, caught on a chain. Vic's eyes flashed at him, aggressive. "What are you doing here?"

"She sent me." Mac looked pointedly at the door chain. "Let me in."

"No."

Mac raised his eyebrows. "It's her orders..."

"I don't give a fuck," Vic said evenly, making to shut the door.

Mac shoved his foot out quickly, getting annoyed. "C'mon, Vic, what'ya got back there? You got a *reason* not to let me in?"

"It's my apartment!"

Mac shook his head slowly, meanly. "It's her apartment."

Vic threw him a poisonous glare, then sighed, exasperated. "Fine." He looked pointedly at Mac's foot, then back at the door chain.

Mac let him close the door, and listened for the click of the chain being slid off.

Waited.

Reached for the doorbell again, when only silence followed.

No answer.

He rapped the door with his fist, wincing slightly at the sting of his knuckles.

No answer.

He got out his phone, stabbed in Vic's number.

"Yes?" Vic said, second ring.

Mistake, Victor—you should've checked your caller ID. "You know, you're gonna have to come out some time. For fuck's sake, Vic: I *know* you're there. It's really lame to hide out in your own apartment, you know that? And you really don't want me to have to call *her*."

There was a hostile pause. "Look," Vic snapped, eventually. "Can't you just fuck off? I mean, since when do you pay any attention to what she says?"

Since it leads to irritating you, Mac thought, absently. "Now, that wouldn't be very responsible of me, would it?" He shifted, scratching the back of his head with his free hand. "I'm turning over a new leaf. Gonna start being more reliable—"

The phone clicked dead just as the door wrenched open. Vic stood there, arms folded, animosity radiating over Mac in waves. "Fine," he growled, voice ragged with anger. "Say your piece, and get out."

Mac smiled, folded his phone. "Not that simple," he said, and slid it back into his pocket. "Can I come in?"

"Why is it not that simple?" Vic demanded, not budging.

Mac tilted his head, enjoying his composure. "Well, she didn't just send me to give back your file," he said, handing it over. Vic took it without looking down, still unmoving. "She said never go to bed angry."

"Personally, I find it helps me sleep better," Vic retorted, barring the doorway. His eyes were black and narrow.

"Lemme in." Mac glanced past him to the room beyond. "I've driven a long way to talk to you, Vic. The least you can do is let me in. Plus, all this arguing is making me thirsty."

Vic stared at him a long moment, then dropped his hands. "Fine," he said, blowing out an exasperated breath. He turned and walked away from the door, headed for the kitchen.

"Beer," Mac called, wanting to pre-empt.

Vic didn't reply, just rummaged around and then threw him a bottle. "Drink up and get out," he said, walking back round, tasting a beer of his own.

"What a host," Mac remarked, twisting the cap off his bottle and then pressing his mouth quickly to the top, catching most of the agitated overflow. "Oh, way to go," he said sarcastically, when he'd swallowed about half a pint of foam. "For a housewife, you sure take a few risks with the furnishings."

"For a brat, you sure live up to expectations," Vic snapped back, walking past him and turning on the television.

Mac watched the tense line of his shoulders, wondered exactly what was going through his head. "You know, I think she wants us to bond, or something," he said, throwing words into the air between them.

"I'd rather bond with an aphid."

Mac raised his eyebrows, more amused than insulted. For some reason, the air was even edgier than normal, and Vic seemed to be acutely aware of it. He took a deep pull of beer, then licked his lips. What had Vic said, he couldn't take it anymore? Huh. Maybe life really was getting to him.

He walked quietly closer, right up behind him, incredibly tempted to touch the stone-cold bottle to the back of Vic's neck. "I wonder if you'll have manners when you grow up," he said, instead, then blinked when Vic jumped like he'd stepped in a nest of electrodes.

"Fuck off," Vic insisted, turning round and fixing him with a darkly impatient glare.

Interesting.

"So," Mac said, gesturing casually with his bottle. "What's up?"

"Don't even try it," Vic said irritably, grabbing the remote from the table and thumbing up the sound.

Mac took the remote off him, a thief's fingers proving more than a match for an agitated cop; Vic turned on him with a growl, then jerked his hand back fast enough that Mac wondered if he'd strain something. "Man! What is *with* you?"

"Nothing, alright?" Vic said loudly, and Mac saw his gaze dart across his face, refusing to meet his eye.

"Nothing," he repeated, amused. "Yeah, great definition of nothing you've got there—anyone'd think you were in mortal danger the way you're jumping around."

"I'm not in fucking danger," Vic said, voice too clipped to be patient. His gaze snapped back, dark and hot, then skittered away again. "For fuck's sake—will you get out my space already?"

"Not in danger," Mac mused leisurely, ignoring him, "right, okay, so there's gotta be some other reason—"

Vic rolled his eyes and broke the tableau, stalking past him. Mac reached out and grabbed his shoulder; Vic froze and then twisted round violently, wrenching out of his grasp, eyes wide like a startled animal. "Get off me—"

"So there's something else there, huh? Something about me, some other reason..." He raised his eyebrows, grinning. "I'm right, aren't I? You've got something going on below the surface here—"

"Fuck off," Vic said earnestly, a skein of danger folding around his tone.

Mac's grin widened. "Oh no," he murmured, "no chance. I'm interested now." He could feel stirrings of energy going through his stomach—there was something so infinitely satisfying about winding Vic up, and this was unfolding into a whole new realm of wind-up potential.

Vic closed his eyes, apparently struggling for patience. "Can't you just leave me the hell alone?" he asked, opening his eyes again. His gaze bored into Mac's, direct with heat and fury, at odds to his forcedly even tone. "I don't wanna be part of your life, you don't wanna be part of mine, there's nothing to be fucking *interested* about, and yeah, there's something below the surface, in that I can't stand you near me getting in my *face* all the time—"

"Yeah, yeah," Mac said, agreeably, nodding, "absolutely, yeah, sure—bullshit."

Vic's eyebrows shot up, eyes flashing angrily. "Excuse me?"

"I said," Mac said deliberately, putting the flat of his hand on Vic's chest and pushing him backwards, "that's bullshit." His instincts were burning, radar picking up signals he'd never expected to receive. It was exhilarating.

Vic laughed—and it sounded half-strangled. "Get off me," he said—and it was threaded through with panic.

"Mmm, keep telling yourself you want that," Mac said, very nicely. Vic's chest was like hard rubber, moving shallowly beneath his palm. He increased the pressure.

Vic shook his head, panic definitely coming to the fore. "You're demented," he said, and his voice was rough. "But look, get out of my house and we'll forget it, okay?"

Mac felt a thrill bullet through him, pure and visceral. "Yeah, we'll forget this, will we?" he asked softly, reaching down with his other hand and running the flat of a knuckle up the solid front of Vic's cock.

Vic gasped, jerked, easily disguising Mac's internal flick of tension. It was true—Vic was actually *hard*. In front of him. Against his *hand*. Jesus. Feeling it made a difference, made him suddenly bolt-aware of standing here, trying to intimidate, discovering Vic found it—what? Powerful? Hot? Arousing?

His stomach tightened, another thin rush of adrenaline heating him up. Something special about causing that kind of reaction, no matter who was reacting.

"What are you doing?" Vic asked, and the strangled voice was in full now, and he could feel tremors going through Vic's chest.

Something more special about making Vic react. "Experimenting," Mac said, covering the brewing excitement in his voice with enforced casualness.

"You gonna hit me, just hit me. Don't be m—"

"I'm not gonna hit you."

"What do you want?" Vic's voice sounded restrained and unstable, like a flame stretched tight.

Mac suppressed a grin, felt it charge in his eyes. "Surely I'm the one supposed to be asking that question." He twisted his hand, cupping Vic's cock with an exhilarating sense of the forbidden. Yeah, so his life purpose had just redefined itself to encompass provoking Vic as much as possible: so?

Vic inhaled, leaning into him, then stepped back abruptly, getting out of reach. "Don't fuck with me on this, Ramsey," he warned, eyes stormy.

Mac glanced to Vic's mouth. Leisurely, he straightened his shoulders. "What if I want to?"

Vic blinked. "Do you?"

Mac raised an eyebrow. "Why? You offering?" He moved closer, and flashed his teeth when Vic's back hit the wall. He felt a sudden flare of certainty, let it cut into his voice; "You want to be fucked?"

There was a moment of silence, then Vic laughed, a nervous rasp of air, shaking his head. "In your dreams."

"Nightmares," Mac lied, and then flicked him a tiny smile. "Probably." He lifted his hand and replaced his palm on Vic's chest, pressing him harder into the wall. "But for you—I don't think it'd be such a nightmare. Right?"

"Get off me," Vic breathed, shoulders rising and falling, chest hot under Mac's hand.

"Yeah, I seem to remember you saying that before."

"Fuck you—"

"Not a chance in hell," Mac said smoothly, and slid his hand up to Vic's collarbone. The stitching of his shirt rasped on his fingers. The tip of his thumb brushed against Vic's top button; he swept it higher, finding the pulse in his warm dry skin.

"I guess not," Vic said, and there was a hitch in his voice now, getting breathless. Then, his mouth tilted into a small, challenging smile.

Mac flinched back, feeling Vic's firm fingers suddenly curl against the compressed electricity at his crotch—he grabbed Vic's wrist, slammed it into the wall. Half-hard only, he reassured himself. He hadn't lost too much of his advantage. "Don't move unless I tell you to."

Vic stared at him, then tilted his head, something luxurious trickling slowly into his expression. "Is that right?" he asked, and Mac could've kicked himself for letting himself get turned on.

"That's right," he said, as evenly as possible, ignoring the sensation of Vic's wrist flexing gently in his grip.

"Okay, so you've got me against the wall," Vic said, the drawl growing stronger in his voice. "Congratulations. Now what?"

Vic's colour was normal, and Mac felt the strongest desire to make him blush. Well, why the fuck not? He let go and stepped back, giving Vic a slow once-over, then ostentatiously checked his watch. "I dunno, I guess I've got two minutes to spare," he mused, then cracked his knuckles. "I can't see you lasting longer than that."

Vic smirked slightly and stepped forward; Mac had to keep himself from jerking away. He didn't like it, an unfamiliar situation, dangerously close to not being in control. "Don't judge everyone by your standards," Vic said softly, trailing a fingertip down Mac's chest. "Not everyone's so... volatile."

Mac pushed Vic's hand back, catching his finger in his fist before it had a chance to touch something dangerous. It was thick and firm and living, making him want to squeeze harder. "Gee, Vic. Why do I always seem to get a rise out of you?"

"Yeah, but I'm not alone," Vic pointed out, blinking lazily, reaching down with his free hand and stroking the back of his knuckles against Mac's crotch. "Takes a while to wake up, I guess."

Mac's jaw tightened and twisted his hips away. Still not fully hard, thank god. But really, *really* time to redress the power balance. "I wake up fine when I've got *decent* stimulus."

Vic shrugged lightly, radiating renewed confidence. "Apparently though, that's me."

Mac scowled at him. "What can I say—when someone's getting hot and bothered right in your face, it's easy enough to get in the mood."

"Yeah, happens rarely enough to give you a diamond-cutter, I bet." He grinned nastily. "Thank the Lord! Someone wants me!"

"I can leave, too," Mac warned, making to uncurl his fist.

"Don't," Vic said, too quickly, then added, equally quickly, "I'm curious now. Wanna know what you've got to offer." Mac felt a wave of relief; yeah, Vic fucked up there. Responded without thinking: dumb mistake.

"I'm not *offering*," Mac said, dropping Vic's finger and wiping his hand distastefully on his sleeve. If he was offering, he was vulnerable—but if he was under obligation, he had a safety net for later. "I owe you for covering before. Tuesday. The grass thing."

"And just like a whore..." Vic purred, apparently recovering from his blunder, and Mac raised his hand warningly.

"Shut up, or I leave. The rain's looking distinctly more appealing."

Vic caught his wrist, tight. "Don't leave," he said shortly, and Mac watched stoically as Vic worked his jeans and took his cock in his free hand, jerking it a couple of times before pulling Mac's hand against it. "Like you said, you owe me."

Mac curled his fingers round Vic's cock, not replying. He'd thought Vic's *finger* felt alive. Jesus. He could almost feel the blood swishing through its veins, feel ridges through the paper-thin skin; like his own cock, but not. An alien version. He tightened his grip, and Vic made a short sound in his throat, like half an involuntary sigh. Okay, similar equipment, similar responses. He could work with that.

His mind reeled and blinked, a double take, because this wasn't taunting any more; they'd reached the end of that conversation and were firmly ensconced in very different one. He was standing here holding another guy's cock; shit. Not just another guy, either—holding *Vic*. Bizarre—no, that didn't cover it. Fucking *weird*. Sort of fit his hand, too; sort of felt natural.

He looked up sharply, expecting to see a challenge skulking in green eyes, and found they were closed. Mac blinked, discovered he liked it. Vic's body was ringing with tension, totally focussed on Mac's hand wrapped around his erection, mouth silent at last. Mac felt a streak of hotness plough through him, etching the bulk of his cock more firmly in its prison. He slid his palm up, stirred the pad of his thumb over the slit in the head, and Vic's eyes flicked open.

"Careful," Vic said, shifting on his feet, then leaning back against the wall.

"Careful," Mac mimicked, under his breath, thinking what, Vic thought he couldn't even give a decent handjob? He started stroking, pleased when Vic's face tightened. Better re-educate him.

His fingers found the cut of the crown and shimmied slowly against it, finding it oddly satisfying when Vic's hips nudged forwards, like scratching a cat behind its ears and feeling it press mindlessly into your fingertips.

"Yeah," Vic breathed, when Mac flattened his fingertips and drew them slowly down his erection, then curled his hand firmly around the shaft and worked his way back up again. Mac found his eyes closing, focussing on the sensation of Vic's cock prying open his fist, and snapped them open again. C'mon, Ramsey. Stay with it.

He took a slow, silent breath, and then swallowed as aroused air found its way into his lungs—shouldn't smell good, really shouldn't, should nauseate him, but it meant Vic was getting off on this, and that, that power—that realization—refined the sickly edge to a dizzying perfume.

He pinched off the warm gloss that was easing out the head, spread it down the sides. A few strokes later and his fingers felt tacky, hitching on the skin, and he realized he was staring at Vic's mouth, the dark crack, the moisture of his tongue, the cut of teeth barring his way.

He let go of Vic's cock, held his palm close over Vic's mouth, close enough that he bet Vic could feel the heat on his lips. "Lick my hand," he said, and his voice was a shade hoarser than usual.

There was a moment's pause, then a hot wet tongue snaked out and lapped at his palm—he realized Vic's eyes were still closed, and swallowed, trying to rationalize the sensations of that tongue sliding over the creases of his hand and up between his fingers. Just, he hadn't been with anyone in a while. Not because it was Vic's tongue, servicing him. Getting him wet, so together they could beat friction and make him come. Not at all.

"Okay," he said, licking dry lips and swallowing again, and took his hand away, stealing it down between their bodies, wondering when he'd stepped closer because there was less space between them now.

His wet palm was tingling with air, and then it was touching the feverish skin of Vic's cock, feeling larger than before, and there was more fluid gathered at the head—what, so Vic was turned on by servicing him as well? By tasting himself on Mac's hand? Sweet Jesus. The thought made him squeeze hard, suddenly wanting to hear Vic say something, admit something, stroking fast and swallowing as it jumped again in his hand.

Vic's head tilted back into the wall, and he really seemed to be getting into it, teeth clenching and unclenching, his hand swooping down to fasten over Mac's and up the ante against working hips—and

then Vic had hooked two fingers into Mac's waistband, dragging him closer, and Mac almost let go with shock.

"C'mon, join in," Vic muttered, "I can practically feel it coming off you—c'mon, get it out—"

Numbly, Mac undid his fly, feeling his zipper come open like it had been waiting years. His cock was pulsing hotly, boxers taut and clinging, and then Vic's hand was burrowing blindly inside and easing him out, cold air buzzing with the blunt heat of his fist.

Vic tugged, and Mac stepped forwards helplessly, catching a hiss of breath between his teeth when Vic worked open Mac's grip to encompass his own cock as well.

Holding them together, tightly together, the wetness on Vic's cock rubbing off on his own. Mac took a deep breath, adjusting his hand, finding his fingers wouldn't fold all the way round. Thick, hot, male hard-ons, clamped together, and Vic was making circling movements with his hips, enough to drive him crazy. Shit. Crazy, yeah; this could never work, this was *insane*.

Then Vic reached back into the dark cramped heat between his legs and lifted his balls, rolling them, squeezing lightly, and Mac gasped shortly and started moving his hand, jerking them off together, finding moisture leaking from one cock and sliding over the other. Okay, they could cope with insanity.

Vic left his balls aching, both hands fastening on his hips instead, using him to get more leverage. He was panting, grinning upwards, eyes closed, head turning mindlessly from side to side, and Mac couldn't help but flash that grin against his cock, imagine Vic going down on him, fantasy mouth struggling to accommodate his thrusts.

A flicker of something like blissed-out pain crossed Vic's face, and then he let go and was undoing the buttons to his shirt, chest heaving tautly beneath. One hand raked down sharply on its way back to Mac's hipbone, leaving pale pink streaks on a smooth, heaving sweep of tanned skin. Mac's breath came faster. He stared at one dark nipple and felt the urge to lean down and bite it, imagining a helpless whine falling from Vic's mouth, imagining the glistening salt of sweat on his tongue.

He almost did it, decision veering off at the last moment, grinding down hard with his fist instead.

"Yeah, yeah," Vic whispered, sounding strained, hand wrapping over Mac's, tightening the friction into licking fire. Mac groaned as the world tilted into a place of finite oxygen, feeling his cock sliding hard against Vic's, and this was going well, this glorious *rasping*, this hot-sticky-tight, this gonna hurt later but feels immeasurably good right *now*—

"I'm gonna come on you," Mac growled, crowding him, cotton of his shirt grazing Vic's naked skin. "Gonna shoot," hand blurring, thick heat gathering in the base of his cock, "all over," nearly there, nearly nearly nearly, "your chest," and his eyes slammed shut and the world shuddered to a white-hot halt, and he hung there for a few glorious seconds—

He panted and reeled, then realized he'd forgotten Vic would have to come on him too, forgotten until he felt an otherworldly hot soft splash against his stomach, then another, heard Vic's breathing hitch loudly and then melt out on a low moan, felt his body rocking into a standstill against him.

His shirt clung insistently to his stomach, cooling fast, slick and unpleasant. The air was thick with lascivious salt as he stepped back, tucking his cock back into his boxers, stripping off his shirt with distaste.

"Talk about mess," he muttered, amused, then looked up, faintly diffident, wondering what the hell was protocol in these situations.

Vic stared at him a moment, like he'd just come out of a daze, then glanced down at his own chest. "Yeah," he said slowly, "point," then shrugged. "Leave that here, you can wear one of mine. Or take it, whatever."

Mac stared at the bundled-up shirt, then set his shoulders. "Where's your laundry basket?" he asked, then cringed internally as he realized he should've made a crack about Vic's clothes being pretty obviously inferior on *him*.

Vic opened his mouth, then shook his head. "I'm not," he said clearly, humour brewing in the tone, "having that festering somewhere."

"The bin?" Mac asked, taken aback. Talk about hygiene overkill—it wasn't like his shirt was gonna run around and infect the water supply, was it? Besides, when they came down to it, it was *Vic's* fault.

Vic smirked. "The sink, I was thinking," he said, idly scratching his chest, then staring startled at the slick on his fingers like it might bite him. "Okay, I need a shower," he said quickly, unbuttoning his wrist cuffs, heading for the bathroom. "Umbrella's in the closet, and so are my shirts," he called, over his shoulder; "yeah, and thanks for the file."

"No problem," Mac called back, mildly bemused, to the closing door, and stared blankly until the noise of the shower coming on jolted him out of it.

Grinning slowly, he realized he wasn't gonna get that last image out his head for some time: Vic standing there like ordinary but with spunk beginning to trickle down his chest, nipples dark and puckered, smelling like an advert for post-orgy cleaning spray. And *he'd* done that.

He turned and strode quickly for Vic's bedroom, then wheeled and went for the kitchen and dumped his shirt in the sink. Hot, he decided, turning the tap on hard, watching the fabric darken and balloon under the blast of water.

Wait: Vic was gonna hand-wash that?

For some reason, he kinda hoped so.

He turned the water off, stalked back to Vic's bedroom. He was cold; the hairs on the back of his arms were up. The smell of Vic's bedroom was familiar; the pictures it summoned weren't. Fuck. So every time he thought of Vic, he'd picture him half-naked, now? This was gonna be time-consuming.

He rolled his eyes, looking for a half-decent shirt. Not many he'd deign to wear—ah. A suit, dark blue—hadn't realized Vic owned one. Okay, this'd work.

He pulled out the shirt and slipped it on, then blinked as the smell of the collar drew up Vic's frown as he'd stripped off earlier and bolted for the bathroom. He started lingering over what Vic might be doing now, with the soap right now, and realized that if it was a woman he'd probably sneak in at this point and see if he could instigate Round Two, but given it was his allegedly hetero partner, that was probably out the question.

He froze—maybe the umbrella wasn't alone in the closet—then shook his head. Vic'd been far too wrapped up in Li Ann, not to mention the rest of his female entourage, and Mac didn't credit him with the subtlety to have been pretending all these years. He also didn't behave like a man just discovering his true sexuality. So. A bit of powerplay, that's what this had been.

He finished buttoning up the shirt, wondering if maybe there *could* be a round two—some time later this week, perhaps. Not that Mac was *amazingly* attracted, but they definitely had a spice in the air... and it was good to get laid, whatever the situation, especially when he hadn't for longer than he cared admit...

Okay, so maybe some other day. Hopefully. See if he could make him blush next time.

—

"Late again, Mac?" she said darkly, and Mac winced and apologized and tried to say he'd slept over the alarm without implying it was because he'd spent an inordinate amount of solitary time last night jerking off to the thought of cramming Vic's mouth until his eyes watered.

Vic was staring straight ahead; when he looked round, Mac saw a familiarly mocking smile with a touch more heat than usual. Shit. He'd kinda hoped Vic would be nervous, uncomfortable; although, this was okay too, he could cope. An uncomfortable Vic might not want to try again. His mind seethed with images of prying those lips open with his cock—he barely heard the Director chastise him until her voice rose menacingly.

"On second thoughts, Mac, would you care to share whatever's occupying your head this morning? I'm sure we'd all like to hear it."

"Actually," Vic said quickly, drawing it out like he was considering something, "I wouldn't. I mean, I already know what cotton wool sounds like..."

"Fuck you," Mac said lightly, not even glancing over, then cramped down on a wave of sexual agitation as he remembered those words yesterday, remembered what followed. "Sorry," he managed belatedly, to the Director, sounding pretty normal considering, and shifted in his chair.

Not for the first time, he wondered if it was intentional that this table couldn't even conceal an extra thread in his lap, let alone an excess of blood.

She raised an eyebrow. "If we're quite settled," she said pointedly, "I'd *like* to brief you."

"Sorry," Mac said again, trying to look attentive. He could feel Vic, sitting a distance of maybe five feet away. Not far enough.

Fuck it.

Not *near* enough.

He may as well admit it, painful as that felt.

Shit. Admitting to wanting to be nearer Vic—anyone for a nice white coat? With special sleeves?

"...Dobrinsky knows Silver Service, so he will train you."

Mac blinked. "Hey, wait," he said, then felt his blood creep a layer closer to the surface of his cheeks, "sorry, missed that," he murmured, and gritted his teeth against her appraisal.

"You know, I found a way to acquire Vic's attention," she said, gaze crackling to his lips, "and I'm tempted to see if the same method works on you..."

"It's okay, I'm listening, really, definitely am," Mac said quickly, remembering Vic's surprise at her kiss a few days ago—and the image of Vic rubbing his mouth to abrade the memory was quick to follow.

She levelled a long, skeptical gaze at him, then pursed her lips. "Very well. As your companions have known for the past half hour, you are to pose as high-class waiters. Your target is holding a dinner party for his father, who's just achieved the ripe age of sixty-five—sadly, the end of the road for him, unless you can intercept certain succulent morsels on Sunday night."

Mac tried to process, hit a stumbling block. "Say what?"

"His son wants him dead because then he gets legal access to a safety deposit box containing some formula or other," Li Ann said, with a little shrug, then nodded at the Director. "She won't tell us what the formula's for."

"Here," Vic said, passing him a piece of parchment. "His will."

Mac frowned, taking it by the edges, avoiding Vic's fingers.

"This is the latest version," the Director said, "and not a copy, so please don't crease it. It has to be returned in immaculate condition."

"Okay, okay," Mac muttered, reading. It seemed Mr. Wilson didn't want his son to have whatever was in the box until after his time, but had signed over the key—locked in *another* box, custody of the court—in his will. "Okay," Mac repeated, more confidently. "Motive, we got. Now you just need to explain where silver service comes in. And succulent morsels."

Unbidden, his mind flashed to Vic's mouth; he steeled himself.

"Dinner party," the Director said slowly. "Are you following, so far?"

Mac threw her a sour smile. "Yeah, and...?"

Li Ann sighed. "Jack Wilson Junior's holding the party: his house, some manor somewhere."

"Foxhill Grange, a few miles east of I-27," Vic supplied, and Mac frowned. He hated that Vic generally knew more geography than him. Not that he cared where Foxhill might be—it was just the principle of the thing.

"Okay, then what?"

The Director slid a photograph across the table. "He has unwittingly hired you to assist one Frank Church—a chef with predilections one wouldn't normally expect in the catering business." The man in the picture had more curves than Jackie—several chins, a belly bulging low over tightly chessboard-checked pants, and a chest that was in serious need of uplift. His eyes were grey, slitted over rounded pink cheeks.

"He does a great line in cyanide-related hors d'oeuvres," Vic said helpfully.

"Arsenious soup," Li Ann suggested. "Tasty, but deadly."

"Okay," Mac said, filing a mental note not to eat anything on the job.

"You can detect a variety of poisons using one of these," the Director said, and from the way Li Ann sat straighter, Mac guessed he'd caught up. He looked at the innocuous white thermometer the Director was holding. "It slips into your waistcoat pocket. Contaminated food is to be disposed of—my sources tell me that there will be opportunities to do this without rousing suspicion."

"Won't Junior notice if Senior doesn't drop dead?" Mac asked, wondering what Vic looked like in full waiter's costume.

"Don't you think the rest of the guests might notice if he did?" the Director asked sweetly, and Mac opened his mouth, then closed it again.

"Point," he said.

"Prolonged exposure," Li Ann guessed, and the Director nodded.

"That's right. If our crooked chef sticks to his customary recipe, Jack Wilson Senior will pass away from heart failure about six hours after coffee and mints. From the excitement of his birthday, no doubt. It will be a terrible shame." Her voice could have dehydrated oceans.

A young man marched into the room; Mac turned sharply, watched him approach the Director, hand her a piece of paper, then leave without a word. Mac tried to remember his face and failed; he'd never seen him before, and somehow never expected to see him again. Even though he'd seemed totally familiar with the room, familiar as Mac was after at least two years.

"Right," the Director said, eyes flicking over the paper. "You have an appointment with Dobrinsky: five minutes. Go to training room 45L, second floor."

"Where?" Vic said.

She looked from one to the other, an expression of faint surprise on her face, then reached under her side of the desk. A moment later, the young man returned.

"Yes?" he said, politely.

Mac frowned. He'd walked round that desk: there were no buttons. His appreciation of Agency technology rose, grudgingly.

"Take these three to training room 45L," the Director said.

"Second floor?" the man qualified, face professionally blank. Mac began to suspect he'd been here significantly longer than they had.

"Yes."

The man nodded sharply, turned on his heel and walked briskly out the door. His steps were even, precise, shoes making no noise on the floor. Mac began to suspect he'd been *born* here. Or maybe, he was a robot.

He glanced at Li Ann, who shrugged and stood up.

"I want you back here by six-thirty tomorrow morning," the Director said. "You have a job at quarter-to-eight, and you need briefing."

"A job?" Vic said, forehead creasing.

"You don't think I'd turn you out onto the rowdy streets of Frank Church's kitchen without hands-on experience, do you?" she said, like he was particularly dumb. Nice to see her slurs had their accurate moments.

"It wouldn't exactly be the first time," Vic said pleasantly, then stood up as well and walked towards the door. The man was standing there, stock still, radiating impatience. Perhaps human after all—or else the secret agent technology was getting pretty damn impressive.

Mac felt reluctantly pleased with Vic's behaviour, and followed him. He heard the Director murmur something to herself, didn't catch the specifics, and wondered if that meant they'd gotten the last word for once.

—

"You're late," Dobrinsky said, and the man inclined his head.

"Two minutes, thirty seconds, no more" he said; "I did the best I could."

"He took us to the third floor," Vic said, and Mac grinned. Well, he couldn't blame the man—definitely human, he'd hit the wrong button when Jackie slunk into the elevator before the doors closed, complaining about tooth marks on her inner thigh. They like, just wouldn't fade. And the Director had like, even *helped* rub in this bizarre oil, which was *supposed* to get rid of the marks real fast but was clearly made by someone from like incompetentsville because c'mon, how hard can it *be*? and it was all just *so* awful, because she had to be a virgin on this assignment thing? and like *no one* was gonna believe she was a virgin with bite marks like *that*.

It looked like she was wearing the Director's clothes again, too.

Mac was really kinda surprised they'd got to Dobrinsky at all.

"Well, go get into these," Dobrinsky was saying, tossing them each a cellophane-wrapped package. He jabbed his thumb over his shoulder. "Li Ann, Jackie, there's a screen. Malcolm: you staying?"

"No, sir," the man said quickly, eyes flicking to Jackie's back as she strode over after Li Ann. The screen, predictably enough, was backlit. Just enough light to make out faint shadows stripping off.

"Get, then," Dobrinsky said, and the man melted away, door sliding noiselessly shut behind him.

Mac dug his fingernails into the cellophane, tore it open. Black and white fabric spilled out; he sorted it into an outfit and started putting it on, burningly conscious of Vic getting changed to his right, of the shadows helping each other do up buttons. He scowled, pushing his toes into buffed shoes that looked like black scarab beetles, kneeling down to tie biting thin laces. Since when were the girls friendly enough to do up buttons? And why hadn't he been there to see that conversion?

He wondered, suddenly, who'd made the bite marks on Jackie's thigh.

"How the hell does this thing work?" came Vic's voice, suddenly, and Mac looked up from wrestling with some weird velcro-brastrap contraction to see Dobrinsky lean across and transform Vic's version of it into a neat bow tie.

Mac scowled at it. Uh, no. His one must be missing some vital parts—there was no *way* it'd turn into something respectable around his neck, no way in hell.

"Here, squirt," Dobrinsky said, sounding impatient, reaching for it and performing the same minor miracle for him. "You guys'd better learn to do this properly."

"Well, you know, mine was tangled," Vic said instantly, with a shrug. "I'd have seen how if it hadn't been."

"Well, you know, mine was inside out," Mac mimicked, fixing it under his collar, then glanced up to see the women stalking out from behind their screen. He lost interest in ties; the waitress outfit probably looked quite respectable on some people, but Jackie wasn't one of them.

"Right, all settled?" Dobrinsky said, rubbing his hands together, apparently oblivious to the fact that no man alive ought to feel settled right now. "Follow me."

He led them over to a long table, pointed out a large cardboard box and gave them each a folded sheet of paper. "Set it. Twelve places."

Mac stared at the picture on his paper: it seemed to show a plate being advanced upon by an army of assorted cutlery.

Jackie reached into the box, frowning, then snatched her hand back, sucked her finger. "Okay, like, this is so out of order," she pronounced, lips curved disdainfully at her paper. "*No one* needs that many knives. Are these guests, like, Samurai or something?"

Mac reached in gingerly, pulled out a handful of spiked metal and spread it on the table. Across from him, he saw Vic do the same, frowning thoughtfully at a small fork, before his face cleared and he set it precisely on the table. "Okay," Mac said, suddenly determined to finish before Vic did, "this looks simple enough."

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Okay, so it hadn't been simple. The subtleties of butter, fish and palate knives were deceptively complex. Plus, he'd forgotten Vic was already pseudo-culinary, with his whole let's-cook-and-pretend-we're-forty getup, and of *course* Vic was just the kind of person who'd know what "crumbing down" meant.

Still, Mac was better at serving soup, and he'd reached the point of celebrating small battle-victories as if they wrapped up the whole war. Plus he was better at using the fork-and-spoon to silver-serve plastic vegetables from a platter. Okay, so Li Ann was the only one who could actually pick up *real* vegetables, which was minorly embarrassing since Mac'd been using chopsticks all his life and the principle was identical, but Vic's kept sliding all over the place even more, so he felt sort of redeemed. He had a feeling he needed practice, though.

Mac walked quickly down the corridor, waiter's outfit packed into a briefcase, not pausing as he heard someone catch a door as it swung behind him. He'd had the whole afternoon in purgatory, thanks—he wasn't feeling too much like conversation.

"Wait a sec," called Vic, catching up and falling into stride with him as they walked out the Agency building. "Where are you going now?"

"Need to buy shoes," Mac said, checking his watch. He had maybe two hours—plenty of time, if he left now.

Vic raised an eyebrow. "Shoes?"

"You don't honestly think I'm gonna be wearing these," Mac said, snidely. "C'mon. They look like something from a car boot sale, and they pinch."

"Oh yeah, good point, great way to blow your cover," Vic said warmly. "A penniless waiter strutting round in Gucci."

"Shoes don't have to look expensive to feel good," Mac told him. "Not that you'd know—what, Vic needs new footwear? Off we go to Wal-Mart. There is such a thing as apathy-chic, you know. And I don't strut."

"You so strut," Vic corrected, "but sure, go spend a bomb because you've got deformed feet, it's no skin off my nose." He opened the truck door, leaning over and fishing something off the passenger seat.

"Not deformed; wide," Mac corrected, "and you know what they say about foot size." Then he blinked as Vic turned round, realizing what he'd said.

"I know exactly what they say about foot size," Vic told him evenly, and held out a folded Armani. "Your shirt," he said unnecessarily, and it was clean and crisp without the faintest hint of salt. Must've been machine-washed, after all.

"Thanks," Mac said, taking it, "and I'll drop your umbrella round later." He paused, then smirked, "and the shirt, since I bet you'll wanna wear a real suit *some* day this year," and congratulated himself internally on managing to get a jibe in about Vic's fashion sense after all.

"Sure," Vic said, "do it," and it sounded slightly off, like he was talking on another level. Shades of meaning rippled through Mac's chest, and he nodded.

"About nine," he said, meeting Vic's gaze head-on.

Vic tilted his head fractionally, then nodded. "I'll make sure I'm in."

—

He was gonna get ambushed, he could tell. Loitering around a corner after dark was just, well, *dumb*.

He wasn't even sure why he was here. It was only a quarter to nine, after all, and Vic's apartment was only five minute's walk away, and he didn't want to arrive promptly on time *anyway*, so he could've

conceivably waited in another twenty minutes before even putting his shoes on. New shoes, given that he'd somehow bought three pairs. He reminded himself again not to shop when feeling endlessly distracted.

Somehow, though, he'd gotten here. Checking his watch, he'd realized how unacceptably early he was, and had had to backtrack and loiter. So here he was. Loitering. For fifteen minutes, at least. Holding an umbrella, and a briefcase, looking ripe for a quick ambush.

He'd expected the walk to take longer—it hadn't. Maybe he was walking faster, or something. Possible, definitely. He'd felt electric with tension, barely noticing cars as they careened past the stretch of road he was about to cross.

Well, he was pretty sure he was gonna get laid. This was a good thing. So, why not feel a little buzzed?

It was odd, though, because Vic couldn't provide him with the warm, heavy breasts or silken skin or whimpered gasps that Mac preferred—and yet, he rationalized, it felt good in the way any pleasantly proportioned human body felt good, and Vic really wasn't bad looking when it came down to it, and someone else's hand was someone else's hand no matter the physique attached to it. Okay, he was repeating himself—but it bore repeating. So. No problem.

Ten minutes to wait. He rubbed one ankle over the other, hand on the cold wall to steady himself, appeasing the itch in his shin. Stupid new socks—the shoes, they were good, lovely. But the socks? He'd been preoccupied, sure, but still. Why were people giving out free socks—could it be, because they wouldn't sell? Because they were some bizarre combination of polyester and, whatever, *fibreglass* that irritated human skin? No, it was because the people at Banana Republic were truly concerned his feet weren't breathing properly and required a new environment.

Maybe they had a point, though. Maybe he *should* see about buying some more socks. Cotton ones. He'd seen a line in chenille, but that wouldn't last five minutes in *his* lifestyle. So yeah, better sticking with cotton, and actually, there was something energizing about knowing this was another guy, no worries about faked cries or lacklustre thrusts, no need to feel nervous about crushed ribs or scratching—because damnit, Vic had marked *him* up pretty well over the years. Plus, it wasn't like either of them were getting any other full-body exposure so a few fingertip-shaped bruises wouldn't figure in the scheme of things.

Not even on the hips.

He swallowed, feeling the train of thought carry him helplessly towards its destination. No, though, there was no way Vic'd let that happen, let him fold him over and hold him in place, the perfect forbidden fingertip-shaped bruises developing enthusiastically as Vic clawed the floor and let him shove into his—no. No way.

Better thinking about socks, he told himself, because there's an outside minuscule possibility you might be able to mentally persuade them to morph into something nice and hypoallergenic, while there is absolutely no hope in hell of getting into Vic's pants at *that* particular angle.

No way. As if. As absolutely fucking if.

He shifted, wondering if there were any surveillance units round here. Then his watch gave a single, quiet beep, and he swallowed. Shit. That was kinda sudden, actually. Okay. Time.

—

"Thanks," Vic said, taking the umbrella and the shirt and leaving them on the table. "I was just gonna watch the game. Nine-fifteen start. Wanna join me?"

"No," Mac said, walking in anyway, glancing at the mute TV, then back at Vic's eyes. I wanna fuck you, he thought loudly. "But you can watch it after. What's left of it."

Something akin to admiration winked across Vic's mouth and was gone—"Yeah?" he said, challenge-rich, watching Mac walk towards him.

Mac nodded lightly, held his eyes, implacable. Vic backed up, hands finding the table edge behind him, raising his eyebrows as Mac stopped just in front of him and stroked a confident fingertip down the clear bulge of his cock. "Not here," Mac said, eyes flicking at the bedroom door, then back. "There."

"Okay," Vic said, straightening, coming into dangerous proximity. "Lead the way."

Mac moistened his lips, shook his head. "You go first," he said.

The eyebrow went up again, but a sort of lightly guilty pleasure went through Vic's expression as well, and Mac decided he'd been right to go on his instincts here. "Have it your way," Vic said, as he brushed past and walked into the bedroom.

Mac followed, eyes sweeping over Vic's body; no, not bad at *all*. "Oh, I intend to."

—

Vic panted and squirmed against the sheets, up into his hand, effortlessly hedonistic as he finally exploded with a low moan, and it took Mac a few seconds to realize he hadn't come alongside. He smirked faintly, a flash of warm insouciant triumph trickling down inside him, and his cock throbbed against the inside of his pants. That could've been embarrassing. Nice to know his body had fought a fight for him while his brain had been reeling out of control.

To his credit, it didn't take Vic that much longer. Bleary eyes opened, blinked up, grinned rakishly, then took stock of the situation. "Whaddyou want?" he asked, licking sweat off his lips, and Mac stared at them and considered asking for a blowjob, then veered away. Never forget about the obligation to reciprocate. He didn't wanna raise the stakes that high. On the other hand, he might not have an opportunity like this again.

He looked at Vic's shirt, fabric crumpled but all buttons in place. "I wanna come on your back," he said suddenly, inspired. He waited for Vic to say no, hoping hard that he wouldn't. Some reason, the idea fired something inside him. His cock had jumped.

Vic raised his eyebrows, but didn't shake his head. "Whatever turns you on," he murmured, and it wasn't quite the insult Mac suspected Vic had intended.

"Take your shirt off," he said, and Vic's mouth twitched.

"Like I'd let you without," he said sardonically, standing up, but Mac didn't let it annoy him. Given what he was about to do, he really didn't have to worry about a few smart-alec remarks.

Vic draped the shirt on the bed, glanced down. "I'm guessing I don't get to put on my pants?"

Mac shook his head, pleased with how the evening was panning out, eyes roaming leisurely down Vic's naked body. "No chance. Now turn round and put your hands on the doorframe."

He heard Vic inhale, then watched him do it. The minute hesitation turned him on; if Vic had really objected, he would have refused. He wasn't a martyr; Mac knew that much. Which meant it hit a charge with both of them, one Vic hadn't expected. Excellent.

He stroked one knuckle down Vic's spine, watching the sleek lines. Soft skin, slightly tacky with sweat; Vic had really gotten into it earlier. Something powerful about that, hearing him pant, watching those white teeth close down hard and imagining it was the base of his palm. His shoulderblades were slightly distended; Mac found himself imagining if Vic was on his knees, what they'd look like then, if he had his hands reached up to the top of the door, if he was bent over the end of the bed.

Warm thoughts, forbidden for all they were attractive. He ran his hands up Vic's sides, felt the exposed strength. Vic's back would have turned him off, if it had been on a woman. Strong, with faint definition of muscle, narrowing to his waist from a broad start; it flexed under his knuckle, and he reached down and released his cock silently, holding steady as it thrummed and ached. On a man, this was pretty damn near perfect.

His free hand slipped round, fingers splayed firmly against Vic's stomach, feeling his muscles tremble and twitch. He drew Vic back, watching the tension flex in smooth shoulders as he put a faint strain on Vic's grip of the doorframe. Gorgeous. Guided, the head of his cock touched the shallow dip of a vertebrae, heat jolting through him, leaving a clear wet mark.

Stunning.

Vic's stomach jumped against his hand, and he grinned, starting to draw slow slick patterns around the base of Vic's spine. Heat was flowing down his cock, spreading out round the shaft, leaving him hot and frustrated. He pulled Vic back harder, heard the squeak of sweat-sticky fingers against paintwork, and dragged the tip of his cock slowly down the path his knuckle had taken earlier.

He saw Vic's shoulders rise and fall, wondered briefly what it felt like from the other side, and shivered. Of course, he'd slug Vic before he'd let him try something like this with Mac underneath—but the idea of Vic feeling it, tracing the path of his cock with his mind, feeling the air cooling on the smears he left behind—that was kinda hot.

Even hotter, to have Vic waiting for every touch. Anticipating.

He steeled himself and backed away, instantly missing the contact. Vic swayed slightly, and his knuckles whitened on the door; Mac closed his eyes briefly, started stroking his cock, then gave in and let his other hand slink back onto Vic's body and explore again.

He found tight nipples, and thrumming muscles etched in a way that indicated to Mac that Vic was leaning into his touch. He scratched down Vic's back, heard Vic's throat release a low cut of noise, and watched three white lines score to red and then fade into soft pink. His breathing was growing louder in his ears—he stared at his own hand, flashing over his cock, almost dreamlike, superimposed against a picture of a naked man.

His vision shifted, focussing on the curve of Vic's ass, imagining making the request. Oh, yeah. Imagine Vic accepting. *Yeah.*

His hand stroked down, following the path his eyes had just enjoyed, feeling the fullness of flesh in his palm, squeezing enough to feel the resistance. Not like a woman, somehow more exotic, a league of its own. God, imagine, spreading it and working his cock inside, hands clamping round Vic's thighs, anchoring them together—and then sitting down, pulling Vic down with him, feeling the sweetness of Vic's weight impaling himself completely.

His cock swelled a little further, head glossing over. He grinned to himself, fingertips tempted, and just brushed them wickedly up the crack of Vic's ass—"ah!" said Vic, like Mac had known he was gonna say it, say it and slap his hand and protest—except his spine arched as well, and his legs shifted instinctively *further apart*, and the noise twisted in Mac's ear and sounded erotic.

Erotic. Not a protest.

Something sparked in the pit of his stomach and sizzled up through his cock, and his fist ground down hard, and he snatched his other hand around his cock and jerked three times fast, fighting to keep his eyes open as white streaks spat over Vic's back and messed up his pattern, just as the enormity of what had occurred to him messed up the simple agenda in his head.

Vic wanted to be fucked.

Or, at least, his *body* wanted to be.

He reeled, one hand finding the wall and propping himself up against it, the other still holding his cock, feeling it soften enough to tuck safely away. The air suddenly felt dangerous, charged. He didn't dare say the words.

"Shit," he muttered, loud enough for Vic to hear. "Guess," he said, injecting a little humour, "you missed most of the game."

"It's on tape," Vic said, over his shoulder, lowering his arms, sounding faintly strained.

"Right," Mac said, staring at Vic's shoulderblades as they flexed and melted under glistening skin, then forcing his eyes away. "You need a shower," he told him, letting Vic hear him grin.

"Déjà vu," Vic said, and the grin was in his voice too, and Mac turned to fish his jacket off the bed.

"Well, I better get going," he said, glancing up just quick enough to see Vic in profile as he padded out the door. Just quick enough to see what he'd already guessed, that Vic was hard, that the conclusion he'd come to was on some levels mutual.

"Remember, gotta be at the Agency by six-thirty," Vic said, out of sight, voice hollowing as he moved into—Mac guessed—the bathroom.

"What's the odds she wants us serving breakfast to some psychopath," Mac called, lacing up his shoes.

"Or a team of Directors," Vic returned, grimly amused.

"Same thing, surely," Mac said, then walked out, smelling sex on his clothes as he met the fresh air of the main room. The TV was still blinking in the corner; he ignored it, making for the door. "Later."

"Bye," Vic called, muffled now the bathroom door was closed, and Mac swallowed. Shit. Shitting fuck. So he'd pretended not to notice: *why?*

He stalked down the stairs, deciding he really didn't feel like the enclosed clunking embrace of the elevator right now. Because, he thought, it would have been prime mocking material, would have caused bitterness, would have admitted something far stronger than a bit of drought-induced groping—and Mac really really didn't want Vic to back out now.

Not for another... he checked his watch... twenty-three hours at least.

Waking stupidly late again, there wasn't time for breakfast; getting the location via the Director's pissed off cell phone, he arrived at the hotel to see Li Ann finishing off a bagel. She was wiping her hands on her white serving cloth, folding it to conceal the greasy stain; "Ready?" she asked, moving into place, smiling apologetically when he said he was clearly *not*.

The hotel was opulent. No psychopaths, as far as he could tell; just luxurious well-rested rich people meandering down to breakfast. He'd shared a wry little grimace with Li Ann—this used to be their breakfast, their opulence. He arranged a smile firmly over his lips, stood straight, and looked after his allocated tables. Two dozen people, two dozen orders, barely three hours sleep—it blurred.

He served an obscenity of butter-glazed croissants and pancakes, pulpy orange juice and hot coffee, steam finding its way unerringly to the pit of his stomach. He learnt to aim a patient-yet-faintly-disapproving look at the man at the next table every time his stomach grumbled about not having had its fair share of cholesterol this morning.

"No, no, I realize some people prefer to avoid harsh stimulants; I'll bring a fresh pot right over," he heard Li Ann saying pleasantly, and fought off a grin—that guy was maybe two leers away from a scalding decaffeinated shower.

He'd chosen his tables carefully, making sure both women were between him and Vic. Just because. And so what if one man was sulking over his apricot compote, because he'd run out of peach and the

refill station was behind Vic's route? The man should learn to embrace new preserves, shouldn't restrict himself to just the one flavour.

He repeated that reassuringly to himself a couple of times, until the context twisted in his brain, and then he ground the train of thought into dust and concentrated hard on pouring coffee with his left hand.

—

"Well done," the Director said, reading what Mac assumed was a report on their morning off her laptop. Hell, what did he know—could be accounts, could be porn, more likely the latter but frankly he didn't wanna know. She frowned at the screen, then snapped it shut, and he wondered what—or who—had displeased her.

Probably someone not being submissive enough.

His lips pressed together, and he closed his eyes for a moment. Projecting, he told himself clearly, thinking he could probably count the teeth of his zipper from the inside, his cock was that alert today.

"Aside from a few mishaps," she sent a warning glare at Li Ann, "that went smoothly. Now. How do your wrists feel?"

Vic's choke drowned out Mac's splutter—he thought wryly that they were closer in mind than either of them felt comfortable with. He wondered what else Vic was thinking about, then swallowed at the memory of leaving Vic last night, positive he was about to jerk off in the shower. He could see it, drifts of soap gliding down Vic's wet body, the cubicle steam-silent except for his mouth working around low moans.

His dick nudged around uncomfortably in his pants. Forty-eight: and they were biting into sensitive flesh with the lack of regard only an inanimate piece of clothing would have.

"Fine," said Jackie, when no one else answered. "Like, the chef? he got the back of my hand with this tray thing, full of croissants? and it was like, *majorly* hot, so I've got this blister? but other than that, I'm good. Why?"

The Director beamed at her, then inclined her head. "I'm sure you'll do just fine," she purred; "it's the others I'm worried about. They probably don't have your... stamina." She glanced round the room, then back to Jackie, adding, "Li Ann has a particular disadvantage, I'd say."

"My wrists are fine," Li Ann said staunchly, just as Jackie broke in helpfully,

"Oh no, her stamina's pretty funky actually—I mean, okay, not like in *my* league, but still a-okay for most things we try."

Mac exchanged an incredulous look with Vic before he registered it, then found he was holding the dark eyes longer than necessary. He found he really, really wanted to adjust himself inside his jeans.

He looked away, back to the Director, who was smirking knowingly at Li Ann—who was blushing. Just a little. Interesting.

He gritted his teeth. Interesting, should have been *fascinating*, so why was the what's-Vic-doing-now question tugging so much harder on his brain?

He'd decided, firmly, at around 10 a.m. over a pot of steaming water as he polished countless knives to a professional shine, that he couldn't go back to Vic's place. Because he'd only been twice, and he'd left both times feeling disturbed to his bones, and it could only get worse.

Although...

He could almost feel Vic's eyes brushing over him, felt very grateful for the briefcase in his lap.

Okay.

Fuck.

It could only get worse, and *yet*...

Screw it.

Self-delusion was just *so* passé.

Vic's gaze was trailing his neck, he could feel it, and he *was* gonna do it again, he wanted to—it was heady with Vic, no denying it, plus incalculably good to feel any hot human body arching for the merest brush of his skin.

Mac shot him a sideways glance, let his breath open his mouth just a little, then bit down deliberately on his lower lip. Vic blinked, looked away. Mac licked his lips, then flashed his tongue round his mouth, where all the saliva had dried up. Cause for concern, perhaps. But hey.

"You can pick up new service cloths in room 22B," the Director was saying, and Mac pulled himself together quickly enough to paste a blank look over his face to match the others'. "Oh, never mind," the Director said, shaking her head. "I'll send them on."

"You know," Jackie said, "this place? I'd really appreciate like some sort of *map*."

The Director blinked. "I'm afraid," she said sincerely, the voice a teacher uses to talk to her pet, "that's absolutely out of the question."

"Huh," Jackie said, pouting. "Lame."

The Director smiled; she reached across, patted her hand. "The blueprints were destroyed; you're welcome to try and prise a home-made version out of Nathan, if you wish, but I don't think even *he* knows all the rooms."

Mac felt Vic looked too interested in that piece of trivia, and it gave him an oddly triumphant sensation in his chest. Looked like he wasn't the only one having trouble concentrating.

Jackie raised her eyebrows. "This place hasn't *got* a map?" she said, delighted. "Wow, that is *so* cool! It's a *total* mystery hideout. Although... I think I'm gonna try anyway, with that Nathan guy? It could be, like, incredibly useful."

The Director pulled her hand back. "On your own time," she warned, including all of them now it wasn't a one-to-one with her favourite pupil. "Now. About those wrists..."

—

Four hours in the gym. If they were going to be carrying stacked plates around all evening, they'd need stronger arms than *that*, the Director had said.

"I swear," Vic muttered darkly to him, from an adjacent rowing machine, "real waiters don't have to go through this shit." His hair was spiked with sweat, eyelashes glossy.

"Nuh-uh," Mac agreed, slowing to rest a while, feeling the muscle tighten and whine plaintively all down his arm. He watched the muscles in Vic's back work, the crunch of his shoulders on the downstroke, the misted dark patches where fabric had acted as blotting paper.

He was absently aware he'd arranged his workout to correspond with Vic's—or to put it another way, yeah, of *course* it was coincidence that he when he moved on to work his shoulders he chose the machine about three feet behind where Vic was speeding up on the treadmill. And he was staring into space to count the reps, honestly, not pacing himself using the movement of Vic's ass and thighs.

"What's the likelihood she's got something else lined up after, put us through real torture?"

The air smelt like salt, tasted pleasantly bitter with chemicals. Mac tilted his neck and kneaded his shoulder, fingers digging into an assortment of rocks. "Like, another job?"

"Pre-cisely," Vic grunted, heaving a last long stroke, then slumping back in his seat and panting softly. "I'm thinking beastfighting, thinking a spell in grenade disposal—"

"Thinking another waitressing job," came the Director's voice, cool and sweet.

"Waitress?" Mac demanded, twisting round, as Vic groaned and chimed in with,

"C'mon, that's pretty low—we may not be pushing Jackie's standards but we're still not as bad as—"

Mac caught sight of Li Ann approaching behind the Director, a towel slung over the back of her neck, poised to speak. "—Nathan," he interjected quickly, shooting a warning glance at Vic, who sat up and sent him a quizzical look; it cleared as Mac nodded behind them and Vic caught sight of his ex-fiancée.

"I'm sorry, but I've had enough—my arms feel like they're going to drop off any second now," Li Ann said, smiling agreeably, blatantly trying to butter her up.

"Me too," Mac said quickly, figuring this might be their only chance at escape for the whole afternoon. "There's such a thing as overwork, you know?"

"Not that we haven't been pacing ourselves," Vic added, getting off the machine and stretching. "But I know my limits. They were about a half hour ago."

The Director's gaze slid over them slowly, then across to Jackie, who was humming to her headphones as she executed smooth curls in one corner. "Oh, very well," she drawled, unimpressed. "But I want you back here tomorrow, improved by fifteen per cent on your current stats."

She slipped a hand inside her long black coat; it reappeared fingering a slip of blue paper. "Tonight, I want you to learn the file Nathan's prepared for you—by the way," she said languidly, through a faint smile, "don't you think a man who's acted as an intern in four major American prisons might have to be rather adaptable when it comes to upper body development? Judging the cover again, boys..."

"Huh," Mac said. Lurid pictures of Nathan swam through his mind; he forced them away.

"How about that," Vic agreed, rolling his eyes.

"Quite," the Director said, then handed Mac the slip of paper. "You two—dinner at the wrestling club."

"For us?" Mac said effusively, pressing a hand to his heart. "That's so kind!"

"You're working four 'til two," the Director said pleasantly, ignoring him. "I'm afraid you'll have to find your own way home."

"That's harsh," Mac said. "You should at least book us cabs."

"Do we get to keep tips?" Vic demanded, adopting a pugnacious stance.

"We've got a union, you know," Mac said threateningly, trying not to be aware of Vic's body drawn up next to him.

"We'll take strike action."

"According to the charter of '92, you're obliged—"

"Do you two jokers have any idea what you'd have to do for wrestlers before they'd give you a tip?" the Director asked dryly, then clapped her hands. "All right, hit the showers. Li Ann, you and Miss Janczyk are booked in to serve for a wedding anniversary. There'll be twelve of you in total: it's your mission to blend in, you hear me? Whatever the drunken guests say, you are *not* to reciprocate."

Li Ann tossed her a sour look, folding her arms. "Okay, sure, whatever," she said. "Do I detect a hint of sexism here, though? I mean, a *wrestling* dinner?"

"Actually, sexism hadn't crossed my mind—you are being punished for a volatile temper by having to work on the uneven mud of a marquee, and Jackie needs the experience of a large group situation." She turned, one hand landing on Mac's shoulder, the other slipping round Vic's waist. "Mac and Vic, on the other hand, need to lose their pretty little expressions of disdain. I figure that in an environment where projected contempt will get them assaulted, they'll develop appropriately docile demeanours rather quickly."

Mac slipped away from her, scowling. "Docile?" he protested, an extra line of irritation in his voice as he realized Vic was still well within her clutches. "No waiter I've ever been served by has ever been docile, especially not silver service men. Not even when Michael slapped one for insolence. We'll be rumbled for having good manners, and how embarrassing would *that* be?"

The Director smiled, and Mac watched her fingernails trace languid patterns on Vic's hipbone. "You didn't bother hiring from this Agency, did you? Serve with a simper, boys. No argument. Now go clean up."

—

Vic may still have been wearing the appalling shoes, but the rest of the uniform looked *fine*. Nothing like a penguin, or Mac was gonna have to rethink his stance on bestiality.

He smirked, shaking his head as he refilled the oil drizzler. Any telepaths with a propensity for loaded retired wrestlers would be giving him very weird looks about now.

"Excuse me?"

Mac turned sharply, then checked himself and pasted on a helpful smile. "Yeah?"

A large expensive brown bull-dog-type with petulant jowls stared up at him. Mac remembered filling his wine glass three times—this table had also had its allocation of free Bloody Mary's by the end of the first course. "This," the man said, with an irritable gesture at his plate, "is not what I ordered."

Mac glanced down. Actually, yes, it was. Exactly as he'd ordered. "Oh, really?" he said blandly, waiting for the man to realize his mistake and let him leave.

"Damn straight it's not," the man said, and jabbed a finger at his neighbour's dish. His heavy gold watch slumped against the base of his hand, and Mac reminded himself again to hire a wardrobe mistress if he ever got too rich to know better. "That's what I ordered."

The neighbour stared up at him accusingly. "And, hello? This ain't what I ordered either."

Mac restrained from rolling his eyes. "Lemme guess," he started, acidly, then stalled his tone, continuing ingratiatingly, "you wanted that?"

"Don't point at my food," the first man warned. "I might want to eat that. Except I don't."

"Yeah," the neighbour nodded, then frowned and bent his head sharply to one side; the crack was faintly sickening. He shook his head slightly, then nodded again. "I wanted that one."

Mac closed his eyes for a second, then smiled and addressed both men without actually looking at either. "How about we just swap your dishes then, huh?"

Pity he hadn't been looking; the hand that shot out and fisted the front of his waistcoat would've been easy to dodge had he been more alert. As it was, he had to clamp down hard on the jumping muscles in his arms, eager to floor this guy and leave an imprint or two.

"You trying to rip me off with second-hand food?" the man was demanding, belligerently. "I'll get the management down on your ass—we're paying customers, you know; *we pay your wages—!*"

"Can I help?" came Vic's voice, from next to him.

The man's hold of Mac slackened as he twisted in his seat to see the new speaker. Mac took the opportunity to step sideways, out of his reach.

"Yeah," the man was saying; "you can get me the fucking alternative, since this guy's too dumb to tell the difference. And the same for my friend."

"Sure," Vic said politely, swiping the offending plates from the table, all the decorum and form of a servant. It made Mac's dick twitch.

"One minute, sir," Mac said courteously, glancing at Vic's eyes and seeing the checked amusement there. He could imagine grabbing him, pushing his curtly groomed body against table, flicking the compressed laughter into low, choked approval.

Mac straightened his waistcoat, trying not to think too loudly, and nodded to the two ex-wrestlers as docilely as possible. "I mean," he hissed to Vic, stalking back towards the kitchens. "What's the difference between pork medallions and rack of lamb anyway? They both look like hunks of grey meat drowning in brown slime—"

"Lamb's more tender," Vic said, shrugging, handing him the first dish and then balancing the second on the base of his hand. "Voila," he said, amused. "Now go and play nice." He grinned, eyes glinting wickedly, compressed laughter bubbling to the surface again.

A flare of heat slashed through Mac's chest. "I want," he leaned in, holding the plates clear of their bodies, "to take you home right now, show *you* the difference between dealing with these guys and playing nice."

He heard Vic's teeth click together, by his ear, and wished with sudden desire that Vic would abandon chrome-plastic protocol and lick his neck.

"I can't believe you said that," Vic managed a moment later, "when I've still gotta serve desert."

"Sorry," Mac said, without a hint of contrition. "Meanwhile, where do you stand on a little InstaLax mixed in his gravy?"

Vic's hand appeared on his chest, pushed him back firmly. "I'd be more worried you carried powdered laxatives around with you, I think."

Mac smirked, then looked up sharply as a sucking noise from the corridor heralded the opening of the swing door, and stepped back. "Why Victor, that's why I was asking *you*," he teased, turning and heading back to the diners, smiling vaguely at a waiter who stank of an excessive amount of Lynx, holding his breath.

"Rack of lamb, sir," he said, finding the table again, syrup-polite. "And for you: the *alternative*. Enjoy."

He looked around for empty glasses, and rescued a basket of bread rolls from the edge of the table. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Vic carrying a tray of condiments to a table across the way. He moved fluidly, no hint of the hard-on Mac'd rubbed against just minutes ago.

Mac grinned to himself, imagining padding up behind Vic right here and now, wriggling a hand down his pants and jerking him off in the middle of the room, with a strong feeling that Vic would only protest because he needed something to do with his mouth—then reigned in his thoughts.

He'd found that by arranging the service cloth *just so* over his wrist and crossing his arm before his body, he could hide a multitude of over-excited sins—but there were always limits, and he didn't think the diners were quite *that* drunk. Yet.

Mac stumbled into his apartment, fingers sliding crazily against the wall to find the light. Never mind the *diners* getting drunk; he'd had a pleasant introduction to the perks of serving rich men a pre-determined volley of alcohol, in that all sorts of things can go missing without the blink of a single diamond-encrusted eyelash.

The headwaiter had initiated it. Dean, who was a tall, broad blond with skilful fingers and a charmingly sly smile, gave such a strong impression of faultless professionalism that Mac had actually jumped when he'd felt the smooth, cool bulk of a champagne bottle pressed into his unsuspecting fingers from behind. Luckily, he'd always had a quick recovery time.

Dean, continuing innocently past him into the dining room laden with small portions of French dessert, had nodded surreptitiously at a large metal service cupboard to Mac's left.

The ominously large hinges were silent, and Mac had had a fleeting suspicion that Dean had worked this venue before. With a quick look round, he'd stashed the bottle, shaking his head slightly at finding three jugs already waiting for him, full of the expensive fruit cocktails he had been serving wistfully all evening.

He could still taste their residue now, bright and sweet against his tongue, slightly curdled with time. Their effect was also tumbling around his head, giving the corners of his brain a rolling massage.

Stumbling in the dark, he found the light switch and pressed it decisively. Good. Bright, too bright, but way less scary than the proscript... the proscript... the thought of going through the room without light. When had he decided to furnish his apartment with so many corners, huh?

In the end, they'd had enough alcohol to drop a dozen carthorses, let alone five waiters. And Matt had gone home early, calling a taxi from Dean's house, citing a wife.

"You boys don't have wives, do you?" Dean had said earnestly, and Vic had shaken his head with a small grin and reached for another pitcher of Slaked Devil.

"No chance," Mac had said, holding out his glass. "No, no, no," he'd said, a moment later, to Vic, then beamed at Dean. "Not that; more *champagne*."

The champagne had been a nice touch, even if it was slightly sacrilegious to wind up drinking vintage Moetaet Chandon out of two-dollar mugs. Mac had felt it was his duty to drink more than Vic, because he'd been raised to the high-life and knew how to do a fine draught justice.

Pressure at his knees suddenly tipped him onto his bed—he crawled up to his half-submerged pillow, scabbled at the tightly-made covers, found a breach in their sternly impermeable body, and slid inside. Fabric scratched and twisted up his legs, and he wriggled free of his pants with a sigh. Pulling at the buttons of his shirt, sparing a moment to wonder wildly where the hell he'd left the bow tie, he finally relaxed into the nice, firm mattress.

There'd been this moment, he remembered, where he'd laughed even harder than before. When Dean, who was really a good guy—pity they probably wouldn't work with him next time—had done this classic double take, looked at Vic then him then Vic then him then turned to Jake, the forth man, and asked imploringly, "Wait, these two—have I been really dumb?"

He'd thought they were together: a couple. They'd laughed and laughed, waved him down, laughed some more.

Mac frowned, turned over. Now he thought about it, he wasn't sure what had made Dean think that. He didn't remember doing anything particularly gay, like kissing him or groping him or anything.

There again, Slaked Devil was pretty much enforced amnesia in a glass. Or out of the jug, when they couldn't find glasses any more.

Wait, no, he had done sex things: but later, just a few minutes ago. Dean couldn't have seen that, no chance. That was just them. Vic showing him to his apartment; he'd leaned back against his front door and slipped his hands down Vic's pants, cupped that ass, rubbed against him lewdly. "Spirit's willing," he'd said, smugly obscure.

Vic'd wriggled sluttily under his hands and understood and leaned forward and licked his ear. "Ditto," he'd said, a blast of velvety-hot breath.

"Have you got my keys?"

"No." Vic'd fumbled around in Mac's pockets, come up with a triumphant fist of scratchy metal. "Wait, yes. Now I have."

"Give here," Mac had said, easing his hands out Vic's pants, holding his palm up expectantly. Between them, they'd managed to get the door open. Turning, Mac'd tried to focus on Vic's eyes, found them as unsteady as his own. "No point in coming in," he'd said, clearly.

Vic had shaken his head. "No point," he'd agreed, and lifted a hand in farewell, and weaved off down the corridor.

Mac burrowed deeper under the covers, the frown smoothing out with intoxicated exhaustion. At least they were thinking on the same lines, right? Unbidden, the thought of his alarm clock loomed on the horizon, and he let the thoughts of Vic rove away from his mind and resolve instead into sleep.

—

"It seems you'll never be professional enough for my standards, but this will have to do," the Director said, loudly. Mac cringed into his headache. "Li Ann, you will wear a wire. You are also diabetic: under the guise of an insulin injection, I want a report at eight pm and another at midnight. He won't trouble you—he has a documented fear of needles."

Mac raised his hand, tentatively. "Uh, I need a new bow tie," he said, watching the Director for signs of increased volume. "Sorry."

She leaned over the table. "And why, Mr. Ramsey, is that the case?"

"Uh," Mac said, wondering which excuse would sound most professional, then wondering if it was possible to professionally lose a piece of your uniform.

"Perhaps the champagne was the culprit?" the Director supplied sweetly, then passed a hand under her desk and lifted out a brown envelope. "Delivered courtesy one Andrew Shields."

Mac frowned in confusion, taking the envelope and finding his missing bow tie inside. "That's... nice of him," he said vaguely, glancing at Vic for comprehension and feeling a little better when he didn't receive any.

"Known to you as Dean, I'm sure," the Director's voice came, low and cutting.

Vic's eyes widened; Mac felt his own face respond similarly, and looked quickly back to the Director. "He was a plant?"

"Sweetheart, sixty per cent of the people you meet with on any given day are plants. Shields is just... fonder of taking his work home with him than most." She waved a manicured hand at their protest. "Oh,

don't make such a fuss. I needed to know if you could keep with your stories under duress—and he provided sufficient *duress* to settle my mind. On the most prominent counts, anyway. You acted perfectly within my predictions."

Mac wasn't sure if he should feel insulted or relieved. He wondered what would have happened if they'd surprised her. Some reason, it gave him the shivers.

"So lemme get this straight," Vic was saying. "You *arranged* for us to go home with him?"

Jackie rolled her eyes. "What did you guys get up to that it's such an issue, huh? Like, I'm beginning to get kinda *intrigued*..."

"Nothing to do with you," Vic snapped, and then his eyes widened and he darted a panicked glance at the Director, "that is, uh, I mean—"

"Class," she said precisely, "will come to order."

Mac felt a tinge of jealousy: Vic would talk over *him* for hours, but when the *Director* said to shut up, Vic shut up. It wasn't fair.

"I want you to spend the rest of the afternoon preparing: you're to move into position at six. Arrive in different cars; all cabs, please. Mac and Li Ann, you come together." She slid a set of files across the table, one to each of them. "Mac, throughout the evening you are distracted by Jackie—you've wanted her for some time, flirted at a distance, but this is your first opportunity to work with her."

Mac glanced over, gave her a friendly leer. Jackie laughed. "Did you see that?" she said, pointing. "He's like, *so* ready for *this* role."

The Director didn't laugh, but the warmth in her lips gave Mac pause. Vic, he noticed, didn't even smile. Mac reached for his file, started flipping through. Boring as hell.

"Vic, you're on your own. This is the first time you've worked with this Agency, but you know Mac from a few years ago."

Vic was leafing through his file. "'Cat allergies—' Do I really need to know all this?" he said, skeptically.

The Director's eyes narrowed. "Frank Church might not ask you, but I will *not* have my agents wandering around without a three-dimensional history. Plus, I happen to know the house you are working in does not have a cat. But if it did, you would be required to react accordingly."

Vic shook his head. "Then why make me allergic in the first place?" he demanded, and Mac felt a tiny rush of adrenaline at the intensity of his voice. He was beginning to wish he'd brought Vic in last night, woken up next to him, didn't have this lazily gathering heat at his groin.

"I have my reasons," she shot back.

Vic scowled. "Do you."

"Perhaps," she said, her lips curving in a smile. "But it really doesn't concern you if I have or not. I say so, and therefore—"

Mac watched the moment Vic folded, frustration arching in his eyes. "Okay," Vic said, flatly. "You win. I'm allergic."

Mac wondered why he felt he'd lost as well. "I'm thinking," he said vaguely, then realized he'd never be able to argue Vic's case and switched to impudence, "I'm thinking I'm real tired, and I'd be better off sleeping a while. Get rid of the headache."

The Director frowned at him, then she gave a little implacable shrug. "Be back by five."

"Half five," Mac said automatically, wanting a victory over her. "And the others get time off too." Maybe he could lure Vic home with him. Sleep wasn't the only way to clear the mind.

"It's not time off, Mac," she said, sibilant and dangerous. "It's time for preparation. If you choose to spend it curled up in bed and then later fail me, you are absolutely responsible." She tilted his chin up with one cool forefinger. "Be back for five."

He opened his mouth, ready to growl, then felt his own resistance fold just as Vic's had. There was no fucking point, arguing it out with her. "Okay, sure."

"Five, Mac."

"I said okay, didn't I?"

"I don't trust you," she said, and it felt like a warning.

Mac felt a flare of anger strike through his body, and stood up suddenly. "Your loss," he ground out, and snatched the file off the table. "But I know I'll be back here for five, and I will be, and if you don't believe me, it's *really* no skin off my nose."

He stalked out, then reeled slightly with anger when Vic didn't follow him.

—

Ten to five, and Mac was in a traffic jam. He reached for his phone, jabbed in Vic's number.

"Yes."

"Vic?"

"Mac?"

"I'm on the road, traffic lights."

He could almost hear Vic's frown. "How far away?"

"Ten minutes. At best."

"You want me to... what? Cover for you?"

Mac felt a slight jump of surprise. He hadn't even thought of that—and if the positions were reversed, he wouldn't have thought of it either. "Uh, yeah," he said, "or just, you know. Let her know it's not my fault."

"Whose else's fault would it be?" Vic asked, pragmatically. "I mean, in her eyes."

Mac eased the car forward, scanning for a break in the traffic. "The city fucking planner's?"

Vic's laugh came loud in his ear, making it tingle. "I don't think she'd buy it. Look, I've gotta go. She's on the prowl."

Mac shifted in his seat, feeling a sudden desire for phone sex. "Is my bow tie still there?" he asked, wanting to prolong the conversation.

"...Yeah, I think," Vic said, after a pause. "I've really gotta—I'll see you in ten, okay? Good luck."

The phone rang off, and Mac glared at a spot on his windshield. Fuck. Now he had half a hard-on and ten minutes to think about it, with a withering glare to look forward to when he finally arrived. Fucking great.

—

The thermometers, Mac decided, were actually pretty cool. He'd learnt the scale—the different poisons sending the colour to different heights, so that if there was no opportunity to discard the meal then at least they'd know which foods were most toxic, and could act accordingly.

As Nathan put it, "if all the guests come down with mild food poisoning, they're not going to blame the waiters, are they? No. Blame the chef for his ingredients, and the host for his choice in catering firms—because they think small, you see, don't even imagine the conspiracy unfolding around their little air-soaked brains."

"Uh huh," Mac had nodded, wondering if he had any painkillers to hand.

"One last thing," the Director said, as they rose to leave. "Feel free to dole out a little tainted food to Wilson Junior, just enough to render him immobile for a day or two. Easier to pick up, you know. Also, don't eat anything you haven't tested—including fluids. Church has lost seven staff already this year. Let's not make it ten."

"Ten?"

"Well, Jackie would never eat anything I didn't expressly advise her to, now, would you?"

Jackie inclined her head, blonde hair falling forward, and smiled. "Like, of course not!" she gushed, rolling her eyes. "You have the *best* taste."

Mac shuddered delicately, then gave himself a mental shake. When the fuck did that become nauseating? Damnit. Today was *not* going well.

—

Frank Church was pretty much as he looked in the photo, a broad frame swollen like freshly risen dough, although he straightened when the girls came in. Mac exchanged a look with Li Ann as Jackie rose smoothly into her role and asked where she could freshen up.

No worries about nibbling on Church's food: he'd just lost his appetite.

"We need to get going," Church was saying, gruffly. "You three, start taking these here trays to the van." He handed Vic the key.

Mac picked up the first wide metal tray, hefting it in his hands, then set out purposefully for the white people carrier in the yard. He heard Church's voice carry behind him, "Load 'em carefully, you hear?"

"Wouldn't wanna spill something corrosive," Vic muttered, catching up with him, and together they wrestled open the doors and started stacking up cellophane-covered hors d'oeuvres.

The house was large, smug in its own polished interior. The rooms were slightly overstuffed, as if someone had had too much fun with a stack of contemporary catalogues. The walls were yellow; just a tone too daring for comfort, making Mac wish he could keep wearing shades. It had the air of a show home that was trying too hard.

Jack Wilson Jr.'s exquisitely tailored suit didn't fit him very well, and he had neither the suntan nor the charisma to carry off the pale yellow tie. His handshake was over-firm. Mac suspected he was overcompensating; for his life or his crime, he wasn't sure which.

Sandy Wilson looked about six months pregnant. She smiled brightly and welcomed them in with an effusive charm that probably would have cracked her husband's cheekbones.

Mac shook her hand and decided she knew nothing of the conspiracy against her father-in-law—or else, she was an incredibly good actor.

"Mommy, hey!" screamed a little kid, hurtling from nowhere, and she rolled her eyes and swung the child up into her arms, excusing herself from the room.

"Don't mind Lewis," Mr. Wilson said, slightly awkwardly. "Uh, kitchen's this way." He strode ahead of them, held open the door, and they filed inside. "Uh, use whatever you like, utensils and things," he said, hesitating in the door, then nodding once and backing away.

Mac could hear his footsteps traipsing quickly upstairs after his wife.

The large, tasteless kitchen looked like they'd been aiming for Rustic-Chic and missed by two decades. Cut glass goblets gleamed behind cabinet doors, never to be used. A fringe of dried herbs ran close to the ceiling along one wall—probably, Mac thought cynically, boasting organic vegetable dyes.

"Useless!" came Church's voice, disgusted.

Mac turned, saw the chef irritably palming a large black Aga cooker. "Problem?"

"Of course they didn't think to turn the damn thing on," Church was muttering, then cast his gaze around the kitchen. "Okay, we'll have to bring in the little oven. You," he said, pointing at Mac, "come help me. You three," he nodded at the others, "get the boxed dining sets from the van, and make the boxes into a stand. About so wide," he said, shaping a large rectangle with his arms. His eyes flickered disdainfully. "After all, we wouldn't want to leave a heat mark on this lovely faux-pine vinyl..."

They grouped round the plate, staring blankly from it to the hand-written menu and back again. Mac tried not to feel Vic's thigh pressing into his own when Vic reached for the piece of paper and folded it over.

"Chicken, ginger and spring onion wontons," Li Ann said obediently, looking politely at the beige parcel. Looked like a battered mushroom.

"Sliver of goat's cheese with red onion marmalade on barquettes," Mac said. "A.k.a, a slice of white stuff on a lump of red stuff on a little boat." He shut his mouth quickly when Church ambled over.

"Prawn in chilli jam on crispy noodle cake," Vic said, adopting a French accent, then dropping it quickly when the chef glared at him. "Sorry."

"Don't mock my food," Church warned, and Mac jabbed Vic surreptitiously in the ribs with his elbow and mentally added, *or I'll make you eat something I've specially prepared.* "Jackie? This one?"

"Uh, like a nice long pastry thing, smells beautiful, with green and pink stuff inside?" she simpered, then smiled sweetly. "Like, of *course* I know it. Asparagus with Parma ham and Parmesan in filo pastry. Highly recommended. I'm not *dumb*."

Mac caught her eye, grinned; she was the only one here who could get away with that.

Church's eyes narrowed at him. "You. Show me round this plate."

Mac gritted his teeth, repeated word-perfect definitions dutifully back to him, enjoying the way the frown deepened.

"Yeah, well. Good. See you don't screw up when you're out there." Something started sizzling violently, and the air filled with a pungent seafood aroma. Church turned and hurried back to the main stove, waving them at the side oven. "In there. Hot! Take them at once. Circulate—but come back, the moment anything runs out, you hear me? Never circulate with a half-empty plate!"

"Like, we have been doing dinner parties for six years," Jackie said mildly. "I think we know what we're doing."

He shot her a dark look, went back to stirring his prawns.

"Service gear," Li Ann said, passing over a pile of folded white cloths. Vic bent down and opened the oven in a cloud of steam, giving Mac a great view in the process. "If those plates touch bare skin..."

Stepping from the bright kitchen to the dusk-lit corridor made him squint, his hands felt like particularly mushy prunes from all the pre-meal washing up they'd had to do, and he felt an unusual flash of gratitude towards the Director: at least his wrist wasn't aching yet. Maybe the time spent working

out had benefited him more than just giving him the opportunity to comprise a detailed and intricate map of Vic's sweat-sleek shoulders and ass.

"Here goes," Li Ann muttered, next to him, and he smiled grimly and walked ahead to hold the door for her.

It seemed that while they'd been washing up six dinner services and filling the kitchen with steam, their hosts had been pretty busy too.

The room it felt bigger. Much bigger than when they'd had to hoist the side oven through it and worry about scraping the paintwork—damn all pretentious people who have Aga's but forget to set them heating up in time—although maybe now it felt bigger because the three-year-old kid had stopped running round on a sugar high...

The walls were no longer the garish yellow of the afternoon—Mac felt a low resentment grow towards people frivolous enough to decorate a room that it'd only look good semi-lit, after dark. On the plus side, Vic *did* look good in low lighting, prowling around demurely with the muscles in his arm twitching slightly under the weight of the tray.

Mac picked his way through the tables, heading towards the knots of people gathered in doorways to other rooms. Well, actually, heading after Vic's ass, seductively classy in eveningwear. He caught sight of him standing back to let some old hen in pearls through the doorway before him, and swallowed at the powerful urge to grab him by the starched collar and pin him to the yellow wall. He could almost feel the cool black fabric rustling against his hands, the easy slide of big waistcoat buttons from their tidy homes, the feverish smoothness of Vic's skin waiting under all those suffocating layers.

Vic looked up, a swift flash in the dark, then turned to give some airhead a piece of jumped-up asparagus from his tray. Mac blinked, realizing he was scowling, and forced himself to circulate. He kept peripherally aware of the others, making sure they were spread equally throughout the guests. He could hear them guiding people around their plates, repeating the same dry statements, heard his own voice copying them, inflected without attention. He tuned out determinedly whenever Vic's voice carried to his ears, because he wanted to be able to eat finger food again without getting a hard-on, please, and that was getting less and less likely with every increasingly smoky phrase.

He concentrated on the guests instead, then tried not to smirk. How was Alfie doing for himself—not bad? Good, good. We must catch up some time—here, take my mobile number. Did she know Stephanie was getting divorced? What had it been, two years? No, she'd thought they'd be together longer than that, too. Yeah, it was such a shame.

Two teenage girls hunched in the corner of one room, rolling their eyes and giggling at Vic. Like, oh my god, isn't he cute? Pity they could *never* date a waiter—how would it look? Plus he couldn't take you anywhere—probably didn't even have a proper car. Major pity, though. Like, where did your dad find him?

He passed Vic on his way out the door and innocently sent him over in their direction. "In the corner," he murmured. "They were deep in conversation, so I didn't wanna disturb them, but if you hover for a while..."

Vic frowned, and Mac had to clamp down on that same starched-collar-hard-wall impulse, which this time included his hands on Vic's shoulders, pushing him onto his knees. He smiled vaguely, hoping it didn't show in his eyes, and nodded at the girls. "Over there," he said, making it a whisper to disguise the way his mouth was abruptly far too dry.

Escaping, he made another circuit, trying to wait patiently for people to move out of his way. Cigar smoke stank from pinstriped sleeves. Business booming, yeah, flutters on the stock market. Just a little bit invested. Well yeah, maybe it *is* a risk, but we've got a man watching out for us, just in case. Oh yeah, gimme another of those prawn things.

"Scuse me? 'Scuse me, you with the canapés?"

Mac turned round, a bland smile plastered across his face. "Yes?"

"What's that?" she asked, frowning at the plate, then flashing him a sultry glance.

He kept himself from raising an eyebrow. Sorry, but he just wasn't *interested* in G&T-glazed women with pearls in their hair.

Now Vic, *he* might look good in pearls.

"Crispy noodle cake, prawns, chilli jam," he choked, swallowing down that image, ignoring the hand that landed on his elbow.

"Don't you have any of those goat's cheese ones?" the woman asked, pouting, squeezing his arm.

"Uh, apparently not. I'll go find some," he said, spotting one in the corner of the plate and carefully ignoring it. "Please refrain from squeezing my arm—you'll knock me off balance," he admonished blandly, and felt better when she blinked.

"I'll get some off the other man," she said quickly, and scurried away.

Mac smiled grimly after her, and weaved his way quickly back to the kitchen.

"You're coming with me," Mac said quietly, as the diners started to take their seats.

Vic looked startled, and glanced meaningfully at the bottle of wine settled snugly in the crook of his arm. "No time." He turned back to survey the tables, attentive and nervous.

Mac grinned. A challenge, Vic? My pleasure.

He checked round the room—good, no one paying attention to them, all too wrapped up in their crocheted napkins. He leaned forward and gently bit the back of Vic's neck, teeth slanted against the shallow swell of a vertebra, lips pressed against warm skin just above the crisp white collar that had given him so much trouble all evening. Vic inhaled sharply, and Mac stepped away silently and stood next to him, a picture of virtue.

"Coming?" Mac asked, and he could hear Vic breathing with determined slowness.

"The wine," Vic muttered, shifting uncomfortably, eyes fixed on the oblivious guests.

Mac glanced at the bottle, at Vic's white knuckles against the green glass. "You've only got a half-bottle left. Get rid of it, and come with me. They're not gonna notice if they haven't got hand-and-foot service for a couple of minutes." He lowered his voice, fighting down the urgency that was prickling through his chest now he had the prospect of getting Vic alone within his sights. "And I only *want* a couple of minutes..."

Vic hesitated, then nodded shortly. "Where?"

"Outside," Mac began, then cut off when Li Ann appeared, frowning at them.

"Guys, have you any idea how many plates he wants to load us up with?" she demanded quietly, eyes flicking meaningfully towards the kitchen. "We've been waiting—we need you in there *now*."

"The wine—"

"Leave the wine on the side—you really think they'll notice?"

Mac wondered just where he'd gone wrong, then realized it was back when he didn't tell the Director to stick the get-out-of-jail-semi-free card up her ass and sit out his prison sentence like a good boy. Then he'd never have met Vic, and he wouldn't be following him reluctantly into a steam-thick kitchen to get loaded up with succulent food for other people.

On the other hand, he'd never have met Vic, those eyes wouldn't be sending him hot little messages from across crowded tables, and he wouldn't be having nearly so much fun.

—

"It's gonna bruise; I'm *telling* you, the end's too big."

"I don't care," Mac hissed. "Just stick it in—we haven't got much time." He squirmed impatiently, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "Just touch it, then. The side; that's wet enough."

Vic glared at him. "Yeah, good one, Einstein," he said, "as if *that* will have any effect."

"Your fault if you don't know how to use it," Mac growled back. Growling felt good. His collar was strangling him, he wasn't going to have a chance to catch Vic alone for another hour at least, and un-growled-at-Vic's were getting pretty irritating.

"Whatever," Vic said, and pushed the poison thermometer deeply into the plate of pan-fried prawns headed for Wilson Senior. There was no change; the reading stayed firmly at zero.

"Now the salsa," Mac instructed, and Vic looked doubtfully at the greenish-yellow slime that didn't resemble any mangoes *Mac* had seen recently.

"Surely he wouldn't do the... salsa... if the prawn was okay?"

Mac exhaled slowly. "At this rate, I'm pretty happy to keep the birthday boy in the corner and feed the rest of his friends all the cyanide they can eat."

"Salsa's okay," Vic said, frowning at the reading, then quirked an eyebrow. "That is, it's not gonna kill anyone."

"Unless they're really set on aesthetics," Mac grinned, snagging the thermometer and tucking it back into his waistcoat pocket. "Okay, let's go."

—

Vic was becoming irritating as hell, and Mac was ignoring him and concentrating instead on the bizarre sense of shame he'd developed regarding the dining set he had at home. Not only did it not always match, but it had never been polished. And considering he'd just done two dozen glasses to a brilliant, dishwasher-commercial gloss, that was beginning to seem important.

He reached for another wet glass, fingers beating Vic's to it, and settled back against the counter. They were polishing champagne glasses, and it was more arduous than he'd expected, what with the need to get up a real shine with a dampening dry cloth, and the perpetual fear of snapping the stems.

Church was hovering, Vic was trying lamely to engage him in culinary conversation, Li Ann was checking how far along diners had got, and Jackie was strutting round with mineral water. Mac had started tuning out the discussion, finding it sickly to the core. Couldn't Vic just shut the fuck up like a normal guy? Did he *have* to endlessly extol the virtues of nutmeg and cardamom?

"Okay, put that'n down," Church said suddenly, pitched louder than the rumbled conversation, and Mac looked up.

"We've got more still."

"Vic can do them," Church said. "He's got narrower fingers."

Mac felt a flick of possessiveness; some reason, he didn't want anyone else checking out Vic's fingers.

"You: get the ice-cream into the fridge now, out the freezer—we'll lose the edges, but at least it won't be rock solid by the time of dessert."

Vic looked up. "You know," he said helpfully, swivelling the cloth deeper into the glass without looking, conceivably professional, "if you put ice cream in a microwave on defrost for ten seconds, it thaws out the middle just enough to make it possible to cut."

Mac watched Church's eyebrows draw together like thunderclouds, and tried to hide his smirk as Vic got a curt lecture on never ever using a microwave, ever. Except to heat formula for babies, sometimes.

It stripped the smug more-culinary-than-thou right down to bearable again.

"Yeah, okay, got it," Vic was saying, hastily. "Definitely. Not for cooking. Evil. You ever tried drying glasses in one?" he asked quickly, clearly trying to regain his footing. "You know, like a blast of hot air, not smudging, then there's no need to polish them?"

"Where would the evaporated water go?" Church asked ominously.

"Oh," said Vic, nodding vaguely. "I see."

"That of course," Church said, shifting on his feet, leaning one ample hip into the cupboard, "is why we should bring our personal dishwasher round with us. Machine-dry the lot of 'em. I mean this," he said vehemently, and waved the dishcloth around, "this is crawling with germs! Do you have any idea how unhygienic this is?!"

Not very, compared with poisoning your guests, Mac thought mildly, and excused himself to help Li Ann clear the starter.

"We should be locked up by the hygiene bureau," Church was saying, "cleaning things with dishcloths, I ask you! But you know, you can't lug round glass cleaning equipment, oh no. Big machine, you know—and there's no budget either, not when you get down to it..."

Mac caught Vic's stricken expression, and winked. "Bye," he mouthed, letting the door swing shut behind him, feeling lighter again.

"You're positive it's for him?"

Mac looked again at the reading. "Yeah. Junior came in, said Senior's wasn't hot enough, and that just wasn't good enough, they wanted a replacement... It was pretty lame. Church's eyes were almost gleaming."

Li Ann peered at the thermometer. "That's a pretty high count."

"I know," Mac said, irritated. "Obviously I'm not gonna *give* it to him. But how the fuck am I supposed to dispose of it?"

She frowned. "Didn't she say there was a place to get rid of stuff?"

Mac scowled. "She *said*, yeah. Doesn't mean she has to deliver. I mean—"

"Shh," Li Ann warned, raising her hand. "That door's not so thick, you know."

Mac took a deep breath, held it. "Okay, so what. I'm supposed to... stash it somewhere? Find a waste-disposal unit?"

"Wait there, and I'll drop these off," Li Ann said, taking a handful of used glasses back towards the kitchen. "I'll radio the Director, find out her take on it all. I'm due for an update, anyway."

Mac waited, staring morosely at the steaming meal, wondering if the poison had soaked through to the middle. He was really starved. It *smelt* good, that was for sure. Nothing like almonds—just rich, hot sauce wrapped around chunks of beautifully textured meat.

He plucked a roast potato off the edge of the plate, popping it whole into his mouth and chewing happily. "Mmm," he agreed, almost involuntarily. Beautiful. Exactly what he needed. He reached for another, then snatched his hand back as the door opened behind him, licking gravy hastily off his fingers.

"What are you *doing*?" Li Ann demanded, eyes wide. "I thought you said that one was laced?"

"More like soaked in," Mac said easily, "but I checked the potatoes. They're okay. And I'm *ravenous*."

Her eyes narrowed, but she shrugged. "Okay, I guess. It's your funeral. Here, I brought this."

It was a lockpick. Mac raised an eyebrow, and Li Ann knelt down at his feet and rummaged around briefly in the region of the sideboard. A piece of wood panelling folded inwards; Li Ann looked up at him and grinned, then held her hand out for the food.

Mac stared for a moment, then handed it to her. His fingers tingled slightly, not just from the heat of the dish. It was like... okay, so if Vic was here, at his feet, grinning up at him, he'd be well-near getting his hands in his hair and pushing him back into the sideboard, prying that mouth open wide with skilful thumbs to the hinge of the jaw—

But it wasn't Vic, it was Li Ann, Li Ann who was now sliding the plate out of view and getting to her feet again, and she was a friend, a sister, and the last person he'd want giving him a blowjob right now.

"All done?" she asked, dusting off her hands.

"Sure," Mac managed, then glanced at the door to the kitchen. "I guess I'd better go get another helping for someone, huh?"

She frowned, then shook her head. "No point. He'd only get suspicious. Wait a while, then take back a couple of empty plates and ask for one portion of second helpings. The wife's eating pretty fast—just clear her early, right?"

"And Senior won't notice he's missing out?"

She smirked. "Jackie's topping up his glass, and he's drinking it fast enough to keep her close by. There's *no* fear of him thinking he's missing out." The smirk broadened to a grin, and she nodded her head back behind her. "Meanwhile, how 'bout you go rescue Vic from those teenagers? They're about to eat him alive..."

—

Dessert, cheese, coffee. Certain plates for the head table disposed of, quietly. Mac wondered if the Wilsons were gonna have an infestation of mice, and grinned to himself. More champagne, more wine. They were probably gonna start on absinthe, next. A second helping of dessert for some old woman with bad teeth. Little bottled samples of poisoned food in waistcoat pockets. And now, orders for more coffee.

Mac watched Vic nod to Sandra Wilson, then head off to the kitchen. A moment later, Jackie slipped back into the room, a jug of coffee steaming from her French-manicured fingers. Mac walked past her, back to the kitchen, thinking wryly that the workout had paid off—a full jug was startlingly heavy, but her hand bore it like a pro.

He entered the kitchen, took a glass to the sink, filled it, and downed it. Vic was drying little jugs by the stove while Church frowned into the refrigerator.

Mac caught Vic's gaze, kept it. Church faded away. A faint tint touched Vic's cheeks, but maybe it was just heat from the stove. Not good enough. He'd never blushed yet, actually.

He should have kept him longer, in the traffic jam. He just hadn't been assertive enough, had let Vic drift away without complaint. He shouldn't have let him hang up—shouldn't have taken no for an answer.

Of course, he could rectify that now.

He licked his lower lip, thoughtfully. Vic blinked, looked away, then took a loaded plate from Church and pushed quickly out through the door.

Whimsically, Mac hurried, caught up with him in the corridor. The lights had been turned low in deference to the late hour; a few candles provided an aesthetic fire hazard.

"Vic, hey, whoa," Mac murmured, sliding a finger under the man's collar from behind.

Vic spun round, glaring, startled, the doily-clad plate of foil-wrapped mints and small jugs of cream balanced precariously on his fingers. "Careful," he hissed, and Mac ignored him and reached forward and stroked the surface of one jug with his fingertip, then spread cream across Vic's lower lip.

"Lick it off," he said quietly, even as Vic's tongue flicked out automatically, and he tilted his head and looked at his flame-polished mouth shining softly in near darkness. It opened, slightly, then shut again, and he could almost feel Vic swallowing the words.

He listened, picking out their breathing and the guttural mutter of a candle drowning itself. Almost entirely muffled by the door, the guests laughed and chattered like hyenas on a caffeine high.

Vic nodded his head at the door. "They're going to be wanting this," he said, voice quiet and hoarse, a second nod to the plate.

"They're really, really not gonna notice," Mac reasoned, moving back towards the kitchen, setting his heel against the bottom of the door. "C'mere."

Vic hesitated, then followed, plate of cream and chocolate tilting dangerously.

Mac opened his mouth to speak, stared at the wide, dark, molten eyes, and shook his head. His hand glided up, stroking the shape of Vic's mouth, feeling the residual wetness hot under his skin. Vic's breathing hitched, tip of his tongue catching against Mac's fingertip; Mac crammed his heel down, other hand moving to gently fist in his hair.

Vic nudged his head back, lips moving under his touch; Mac pushed a finger inside, feeling his teeth part, liquid heat sliding up his skin. There was a pause, and Mac stopped breathing, feeling like he'd been caught in some act as he realized Vic's eyes were staring back at him with full awareness of the situation.

He felt a minute tremor through Vic's tongue, set his jaw a touch defiantly, drawing up—hey, no, *you* let *me*—and then Vic started sucking, eyes closing—looked like pleasure, but Mac wasn't sure, could've been shame. Whatever, the sensations coursing up his finger were worth it, flowing right to his cock, alighting his skin on the way.

He shifted his hand; two fingers, then three, Vic's tongue sliding between them, slight cold hissing because Vic couldn't entirely close his lips around them and Mac could feel trickles of air being sucked in hard.

The cream in the jugs was shivering, and Mac swallowed to keep his breathing from speeding up, becoming audible. Very sweet, Vic sucking his fingers, muscles in his arm trembling to keep the plate horizontal. Sweet like sharp, clean adrenaline smashing through his veins.

He withdrew his index finger, let it swipe a trail against Vic's clean-shaven cheek, and pushed the others in firmly. He could feel the strong curve of Vic's tongue down to his throat, the hot ridges of teeth, then felt suction waver around him and was half-expelled, looked up to hear Vic swallowing hard, see his eyes glinting and blinking in the candle light. His cock tightened, reared; oh, fucking *beautiful*.

He drew his fingers out, fingertips playing along Vic's lower lip, poised at the entrance of his mouth, then plunged in smoothly. He wanted to make Vic's eyes water, wanted to prime him, could imagine sticking his cock between these pink lips and watching them slide down his shaft as he pressed uncompromisingly right inside—

There was another slide of glorious slick velvet, but Vic was ready this time; his tongue rose up between Mac's fingers, spreading them, reaching to lick the very inside of Mac's knuckle. Mac stared, the pink tip just visible between his fingers, making his blood thin with heat. His head spun and he withdrew his hand completely, leaning in to bite and suck, fingers twisting tighter in Vic's hair—then veered off sharply before contact as the door clunked behind him, eyes flying open, heart panting with fear.

Vic turned quickly away from Mac, wiping his mouth, taking a deep breath and starting forwards down the corridor to the dining room—Mac waited a count of three and stepped back, straightening his jacket quickly, grateful for the half-light to obscure his crotch.

"Is this door jamming?" Li Ann wanted to know, frowning slightly, catching the bottom of the door with her foot just before it slammed. She held a bottle of champagne in one hand, a tray of cobweb-thin glasses in the other. "It's impossible enough with no hands, let alone if I have to kick to get the damn thing open at *all*."

"All this money, can't afford a decent carpenter," Mac agreed, keeping his voice low as Vic opened the door and let the noise flow in.

Li Ann frowned at him. "Weren't you supposed to be collecting empties before the toast?"

Mac shook his head. "I tried, but they're all holding their glasses like, in their *laps*," he lied, shrugging. "Not my place to intervene."

She rolled her eyes sympathetically, and he moved back to let her past. "There's another tray of glasses still to come out," she called, reaching the door. "Here, can you help me open this?"

Mac hurried to help her, holding the door open, catching sight of Vic leaning over a table to lift an empty wine glass, then turning as someone signalled him, padding out of Mac's range of vision. Mac let the door swing, returning to the kitchen, and started washing up. Vigorously.

The others could cope for a while. Vic could get glasses. The kitchen was well lit.

He wanted to face a work surface for a while.

—

"One of those jugs spilt," Vic murmured, shoulder brushing past his chest. "I had a complaint."

Mac swallowed. "So report me," he called after him, then waved down Jackie when she looked up curiously.

—

"Sorry. She wants me to go in, get de-wired," Li Ann said, in explanation, staring out the window of the cab. "It doesn't make your journey that much longer, does it?"

"I guess, just... Couldn't you drop me off first?" Mac pleaded—although, not *too* hard. Not unless they wanted to drop Vic off at his place as well.

"I need to get there now, Mac."

He shrugged, carefully checking a smile. He could feel Li Ann's thigh pressing into his, and the texture was different, no tension, blood-warm rather than banked heat. "Sure, I guess. Okay. We'll do it your way."

"Yeah, guys, can I like, get dropped off here too?"

Li Ann paused in getting out, then held the door for her. Jackie smiled, waved a cheery thankyou at Vic, winked at Mac, and headed off for the darkened bulk of the Agency.

"You guys gotta be here at ten tomorrow, okay?" Li Ann said, then nodded to both of them and hurried off after Jackie's retreating waitress' uniform.

Vic pulled the door shut. Mac leaned forward, gave his address, then glanced at the other man to see if he'd protest. Vic's was closer, after all. But he wanted his own turf.

Vic raised his eyebrows, then shrugged lightly and relaxed into the seat. "Notice you've no idea where she goes after dark," he said, leaning his head back, closing his eyes.

It was quiet in the cab—just the slur of the engine, the creak of plastic seats and soft breathing. "Not back to the Janczyk mansion?"

"Nope," Vic sighed, turning his head slightly to look up at Mac, lips tilting in a little grin. "I checked up. Well, kinda. Just enough to find out she didn't live there any more."

Mac looked down at him, his dark hair absorbing more than its fair share of light, his face ivory-sleek, and decided this guy was way too comfortable around him. No tension here, either. Yet. "Seeking to take her under your wing?" he mocked, watching Vic's smile widen guiltily.

"You'd object to that?"

Yes, thought Mac. "Not at all. But the Director might."

Vic's eyelashes shivered, then parted, eyes black in the roving blocks of streetlight. "They've got something going on, haven't they? Not just my... fevered imagination."

"I'm not saying anything," Mac said, and Vic grinned.

"Might jinx it?"

"You calling me superstitious?" Mac murmured, sliding his hand up Vic's thigh, feeling the evening-crushed fabric coarse under his palm.

Vic shifted, easing his legs apart. "Not at all," he said, a hitch in his breath, eyes closing again.

Mac leant down, traced the corner of Vic's mouth with his tongue, then leant back again and watched with satisfaction as Vic turned his head to try and capture his mouth.

"This it?" asked the driver, bringing them to a halt.

Vic's eyes snapped open; he sat up, looked around. "Another half-block," he said, clearing his throat.

Mac eased his fingers right between Vic's legs, thumb reaching up and sliding over the ridge of his erection. Vic shivered, threw him a mock glare.

"I'm sure he's seen it all before," Mac said, whisper-soft, thinking there was no chance the cab driver had *ever* seen someone so achingly responsive.

"Here," Vic said loudly, reaching for the door.

The cab swerved to a halt, a couple of houses down; Mac got out, cold air blanketing him, and walked round to the pavement.

The apartment was warm, silent. Mac reached out, took Vic's hand, felt the fingers flex and then relax in his grip. He walked ahead, foot-sure, smiling to himself with a fast pulse in his throat. The slight drag of his arm—Vic not knowing his way round Mac's apartment in the dark—was making him hard.

He toed the bedroom door shut, letting go of Vic's hand. His territory—never done this before, in his bed, but *he* wanted to, and that was enough, between them, always enough.

He turned the light on abruptly, setting it at half-pitch. Vic's skin was golden, his uniform violently monochrome. He looked corruptible, full of appetite and fleeting uncertainty.

("Take your shirt off," he'd said, and Vic had smirked and said, "Like I'd let you without.")

A vague decision snapped into focus, and he let the predatory urge show in his eyes. "Lie face down, and take these off," he said quietly, running one finger under the waistband of Vic's fitted black pants, under the elastic of his boxers.

Vic frowned, hands moving slowly to comply, but Mac saw he was hard, and said nothing. The hem of Vic's white, slightly crumpled, Director-issued shirt swung against the curve of his ass. It brought a darker tan into his skin, taking Mac's breath away.

"Face down," Mac repeated softly, following Vic onto the bed, watching him lie down with his hands braced, licking his lips. The tension was there now, singing in the muscles as he slipped his hands between Vic's thighs. He eased them apart, graciously uncompromising, settling his knees between them.

He was tempted, totally tempted, to try and get inside him. That was what Vic was expecting, after all—and this rigid acquiescence was so succulent, so appetizing... Mac bit down on his tongue to reign in his control, felt the impulse gather itself and bunch up in the base of his stomach. He couldn't last, right now; the knife-edge was too precarious to give him the advantage he wanted. Plus, anticipation was half the game.

Vic stirred against him, and he leant down carefully, started sliding his cock in the crease of Vic's ass in a slow parody of fucking, heat sweeping through him. Vic's ass lifted, wriggling up, making it easier for him to do whatever he liked—and then he was speeding up and shifting forwards and bunching the bottom of Vic's shirt round his cock. He stroked into it, under it against the hot skin of Vic's back, tightening his fist, sweat-damp fabric scratching sweetly over eager nerves.

He felt Vic catch on and exhale sharply, and then the restless pleasure that had been gathering in stormclouds all night resounded through him, surf over gravel—and then he was coming harshly like a clash of symbols, the thin fabric of Vic's turning wet and sticky in his fingers, its translucence inadvertently proving the bronze of Vic's skin.

His arms crumpled; Vic hissed, squirming up against him, and he rolled off him stickily and stroked a hand down the white cotton sleeve. "Thanks," he murmured, eyes closed, feeling Vic turn onto his side. "Christ. Gimme a minute, I'll do you as well. Get out of that shirt."

"Not impatient or anything," Vic observed, humour in his voice, and Mac listened to the noise of him shifting and undressing, wiping damp skin, heard the faint whuff of fabric being tossed on the floor.

He opened his eyes, suddenly aware there was a naked man in his bed, expecting while he was satiated, everything so terrifyingly real and *why* did he want to roll over and touch him?

"Lie down," he said quietly, reaching for him, a thrill ghosting through his stomach as he watched the heat in Vic's eyes kindle as he obeyed.

Words filled his mouth, and he held his breath: he wasn't going to ask. Turnabout was fair play for the one who'd had a *bad* deal. He wasn't ready to go there yet, to what-does-Vic-want, to a place where decisions were taken out of his reach.

His hand found Vic's body, warm and dry and flexing against his touch. He swept his thumb down the dip in the middle of his chest, from heart to navel, then felt the underside of his wrist meet something bluntly warm and wet, and swept back up sharply, startled.

Vic sighed, deeply. It would have been a luxurious sound if the edge of need hadn't threaded through it, a demanding undercurrent, sharp in the air. Mac rose to his hands and knees, looking down, naked body, man in his bed, naked and he'd promised it, not just any man—

Vic's eyes were closed, thank god, and his teeth were locked. Mac leant down, pressed his teeth into the line of Vic's jaw, gnawed gently. He settled his hands heavily on Vic's chest, stroking firmly, exploring unfamiliar terrain. He could feel the burr of Vic cutting off sounds in his throat whispering against his palms as he stroked up, across, across, then down.

Strange, to feel crunched muscles in the place of soft, endlessly satin female curves. Even stranger, that he felt the same thrill of excitement, the same sense of the forbidden as he scratched his nails down Vic's sides and felt Vic's ribcage work in little pants and sighs.

He started sucking—Vic's throat tasted the same as the small of his back—and moved leisurely down Vic's throat, momentarily taken aback by the cut of Adam's apple that shouldn't have been there. He found the sloping glide of delicate collarbones, and bit down gently, hands circling lower, eventually locking onto Vic's hips and aligning him against fistful sheets.

He sat back between Vic's legs, looked down. Vic's eyes were still closed, his head arched back, his hands clenched tight. His cock was hard, arrowing straight up, the shaft flaring into a darker head, a patch of moisture glistening on the tip. Mac trailed his fingernail across it, watched it twitch. Almost like a separate entity, although linked totally to Vic—as the sucked-in gasp proved.

He licked his lips, decided he didn't want to know what it tasted like. One step at a time, thanks. Let Vic make that journey before he did, please.

He slid his fingers under Vic's knees and lifted, feeling a new tension go through the soft skin, lifting until his feet were flat on the sheets and he could run his hands up Vic's thighs towards the darkened, inexplicably exciting space between them.

Inexplicably. And he was kidding how many people with that one?

Still, he reasoned, strange to be so turned on before his dick had recovered enough to strain against his belly, strange to feel electricity where there *shouldn't* be.

He slid one slow hand higher up Vic's thigh, watching, mesmerized. The skin was like warm, silky paper, lightly hairy, muscles twitching beneath his touch. Satisfying.

His forefinger stretched out, brushed lightly against the dark centre. Vic's gasp hung in the air and then he was breathing hard, head turning relentlessly from side to side.

Mac grinned. Not gonna get a clearer invitation than that, actually.

He drew a small circle, smoothing tiny hairs, then reached up and rolled his fingertip in the fluid at the head of Vic's cock. Vic arched up, pleasingly.

Mac blinked and let his finger, slick and warm, tease against the breach of this smooth, hard body. He waited for Vic to rock back on him, still half-incredulous that he *would*, then felt a momentary relaxation and pushed it inwards swiftly before he had a chance to change his mind.

"Ah," Vic gasped, and Mac paused.

"Hurts?"

"Mm," Vic said, and Mac didn't move, tight prison with Vic's pulse cramping down on his fingertip, wondering if this was gonna be difficult, desperately hoping he could make this good now so that Vic wouldn't freak at the idea of doing it again some time. Doing it again with Mac's dick involved. As soon as possible.

Yeah, that was calculating. And? Because *so* many people are selfless in bed, right?

He stroked Vic's thigh with his free hand, wondering if he should've gotten lube out the drawer earlier since this natural stuff wasn't the effective wonder he'd been lead to believe—

He scratched down, and Vic's hips hunched slightly, a tiny rise of pressure. Mac closed his eyes briefly, unable to prevent himself imagining how that would feel on his cock. Slow, insistent rocking, his ass seeming to get tighter and tighter with every passing second. Damn good, was his cock's answer. Incredibly damn fucking good.

He wrapped his free hand around Vic's cock, felt Vic's back arch and bear down, and twisted his finger right in. Vic moaned, and he froze again.

"No," Vic breathed, voice splintering; "keep going—"

He couldn't move his finger, though. Not fast. He crooked it, and Vic gasped and arched and stayed there, panting shallowly, as if Mac'd just diverted an electric current up his ass. Mac grinned to himself. *Way* to immobilize someone. He straightened his finger again and settled for jacking Vic off, steadily, carefully, finding sweet spots and working at them like he'd persist with the weaknesses in a choked lock, worrying it patiently until the catch sprang free. Vic sucked air in through his teeth, writhing shockily, breathing speeding up, ass rocking deeper on his finger.

Mac stared at him, feeling about as aroused as he could remember, his dick growing heavily in his lap. Fucking hell. The heat, silken and clutching, was gonna kill him any second now. He sped up his grip on Vic's cock, fist moving faster, faster, furiously, then leant down impulsively and kissed the hollow by his hipbone.

Vic bucked, bore down on his finger, and came. Mac grinned, looking up, seeing the liquid spill and pool on Vic's chest like ivory candle-wax. He pulled his finger away carefully, still enjoying the cling of Vic's ass, distractedly relieved to see it clean and pink. He hadn't just wounded anyone, thank god.

"Mmmm," Vic sighed, and Mac watched him start to roll over.

"Wait," he said quickly, one hand on his hip checking him. "Okay, if you're sleeping here, you're so having a shower first."

Vic opened his eyes, shook his head in disbelief, then gave a half-laugh. "You're such a selfish bastard," he said affectionately, and heaved himself up into a sitting position.

"Yeah, well. If you're sleeping here, it's for your good too," Mac muttered, re-arranging the covers, then wriggling in to close his eyes. The eroticism was fading, leaving him with a faintly itchy sensation of giving up half way through. But, not a problem. He was *tired*, goddamnit. And there was always tomorrow morning.

"Sure, I'll sleep here," Vic's voice came, softly. Mac didn't know if he was a long way away, or just quiet.

"Mmm," Mac retorted, vaguely. He was swimming in the darkness behind his eyes. His hand found its way absently down to his cock, cupping the warm handful of silkiness drowsily, and he realized he was actually too tired to get himself off here and now.

He grinned slowly, his head making a slight rustle on the pillow as he turned it slowly from side to side. Hey, it didn't matter—he could get Vic to do something about it, tomorrow. They could wake up early, see exactly how far Vic was willing to let him go.

The heat of his bed was soaking up into his body, gorgeous and thorough, inviting him to breathe deeply and relax into its embrace. When Vic returned, faintly damp and smelling of expensive shampoo, Mac found it worryingly easy to relax into *his* arms as well.

The blackness receded, comfortably, then a shot of adrenaline fell over him like ice water. There was someone in his *bed!* Fuck! His mind span into overdrive, then he remembered, okay, yeah, Vic, that's okay—more than okay—

He rolled over sharply, throwing his arm across Vic's chest, pinning him to the bed. "Lie very, very still," he said, waiting for Vic's heart to stop thumping wildly at his hand. If this guy was gonna hang out in his bed, he should definitely make up for the cardiac near-misses.

"Mac," Vic said, and Mac stopped his mouth with his tongue, a strange, visceral thrill crashing over him as Vic's mouth opened easily, warm and wet and he'd had his fingers here, wanted his dick here, he'd *stared* at Vic's mouth and needed to bite those lips and feel that tongue squirm and thrust against his own—but feeling it, actually tasting the musky-deferential heat of it, sucking his breath away—

His cock was aching against the hot sheets; he had to get it touching skin. He shifted blindly, wriggling on top of Vic and groaning with the burst of gratification, then feeling a swift sharp panic as their cocks ground together between their stomachs, hard and indisputable. Was it worrying that a kiss got him this hard? More worrying that Vic would know it.

One of Vic's arms wrapped across the small of his back, anchoring them together. Mac started rocking, urgent, biting, liking the feel of Vic responding in kind, and then his hands found Vic's head, gripping tightly as he tore his mouth away, the air stinging freshly on his wet lips. A kiss, scalding him—his hands moved, pressing one set of fingers into his mouth, finding the curve of his hips with the other.

Vic made a low noise in his throat, exhaling against his fingers, taking them deeply into his mouth and spreading his legs at the prompt of Mac's knee.

Mac reached out sharply in the darkness, almost pulling the bedside table over as he wrenched the drawer too hard and scrabbled around inside. His hand half-crumpled the tube; he brought it quickly between them, squeezing out onto Vic's stomach, enjoying the gasp against his fingers, deciding not to free Vic's mouth in order to explain.

I know, it's cold. But you'll warm it up.

He swivelled his hand in the mess on Vic's stomach; the gel felt like it was squirming, oozing between his fingers as he rubbed it right down to the knuckles. Remember Vic's tongue there, just as wet but immeasurably warmer, squirming against his palm. Oh, yeah.

His cock rocked lightly against Vic's thigh; he was beautifully aware that Vic couldn't rub off against anything, that he was waiting for Mac's touch, that the only stimulation was from Mac's fingers, Mac's teeth—

He slid his hand between Vic's legs, searching for the vulnerability in an ass tight like steel, finding the soft point and pressing deliberately inside. His eyes were staring blankly into the darkness, nothing to watch, but they closed at the sensation of Vic's ass letting him in, the sensation of sliding up into the tight, velvet grip he was beginning to dream about.

Shit. If this was a dream, he was gonna murder someone.

Vic exhaled sharply, started sucking viciously on his fingertips, sending flurries of fire tumbling over his skin. Mac corkscrewed his fingers deeper, felt Vic bear down rhythmically, and felt his own shoulders start rising fast as the sensation around his fingers contrasted with the dry brush of Vic's thigh and burnt away his sanity like he'd never need it again.

He pulled his hands away, impatient, and rose to his knees. "Turn over," he managed, hearing his voice like birch smoke, "turn over, and get up on all fours."

He felt the mattress shift in the dark and reached out blindly—connecting with warm, solid, slightly sweaty flesh made his head spin. He stroked, finding the curve of Vic's buttocks, the dip between them. The sound of Vic's breathing came from further away, and Mac wished he could see better in the dark—wished he could see the stretch of Vic's back arching away from him clear enough to memories it.

He slid his hands down Vic's legs, pulled his knees further apart. Vic's hot thighs clenched, rocking under his touch. The way Vic worked with him, taking deep breaths and moving against his hands in agreement, made him blink in the darkness and breathe out slowly. Yeah, he had free reign to do this. Forget tacit approval—this was Vic on his hands and knees with "welcome" tattooed across his ass, spread and waiting, *wanting* it, and what else was a gentleman supposed to do?

Congratulations, he heard, surreally clear in the frenzied wild churning of his thoughts: you got there. He could taste salt and iron on his tongue, exhilaration gloriously tainting the air. His knees were

unsteady against the trembling sheets—he needed to get on with it, do it, get inside him before his muscles turned entirely to melting curls of steam.

Edging forwards, he smoothed his hands against Vic's ass again and spread it, aiming blindly for the heat between. The tip of his cock bumped wetly against hot, slick skin; he shifted on a rush of sensation, pressing forwards, slipping his wet hand blissfully around the head of his cock to guide it—and then there, pressure, heat opening for him reluctantly. He worked his hips, slowly easing inside, Vic gasping all the way.

Mac heard himself groaning, pleasure crashing across his body from crown to toes. His hands slipped down, locking round Vic's thighs, drawing him firmly back against him.

Fuck but—that was good. Everything he'd imagined, *everything*, all melted down and poured into this new mould of furnace heat and silk-glove friction.

He slid back then pushed inside, feeling the resistance of Vic's ass rake sparks up behind his eyes. Vic squirmed, shuddered, then started rocking back against him, waves of sensation sinking into his body like hot water spilt on blotting paper.

The sliding of their skin filled his ears, slick noises contrasted with the dry and ragged sliding of air in and out their lungs. He started moaning every time he hit deep, eyes closing again, back arching to force himself as deep as possible.

Deeper, he thought suddenly, from the surprised little panting noises Vic was making, than anyone else had been. He sucked in a breath viciously, the head of his cock buried impossibly far up Vic's ass, the sucking bright heat of it flooding his body in shallow, biting waves. This place was reserved for him—no way Vic'd let anyone else fuck him, not when it'd taken Mac so much to get here, and no way *he'd* let anyone else fuck Vic now, not without fighting through Mac first, finding out exactly how much it hurt to have your bones snapped with your own hands.

He shoved in hard, the angle working briefly against him before it capitulated, pressure honing and yielding, every stroke feeling deeper and more brutal than before. His teeth were dry with his own fast panting, cheeks aching distantly from a profound, perpetual grin. There was something incredible about not having to worry he was too heavy, too strong—Vic would take it, whatever he dished out. He licked his lips, hands working their way appreciatively up Vic's solid chest, then slid one arm around and pulled him backwards, sitting back on his heels.

He felt the resistance, then Vic moved with him; his cock nudged a little deeper, the last fraction forcing its way inside. His head fell back blindly, a groan passing from his throat.

He moved his hands to Vic's hips again, started guiding him to bounce up and down. He breathed in through a sudden rush of salacious electricity, feeling the small part of the universe he was still aware of squeeze its way into his cock and make it glow. Fucking amazing—Vic here, letting him fuck him, letting him actually shove his cock up his ass and not just letting him but *liking* it, *moaning* for it—

He started thrusting up, longer jerks, Vic's back skimming against his chest, every nerve in his body offloading furious pleasure onto the next. Vic started making complicated noises in his throat, a tangled aria of snarled breath and muttered curses, then hissed loudly and ground down hard.

"Yeah, just there, just there, just there," he was muttering, and Mac stayed just there, riding the spot that had Vic panting and growling, power thrilling through him like an electrochemical whiplash. This was raw, sensational—no one else, he was certain, had ever made Vic sound like this, had ever made him jerk and quake and moan by fucking him viciously from behind.

"Fucking *mine*," he growled, feeling the charge build in his balls, and reached up and crammed three fingers into Vic's mouth, hearing him gag and suck through a sensational haze.

That's it, that's it, just there, deeper, *yeah*— He thrust up hard, feeling Vic screw down on him, knowing it was all instinct throwing the fireworks around because they were both too far gone for technique of any kind. Pleasure started coalescing inwards, dragging him towards the edge, the edge—

Gonna come gonna come gonna *come*— He moved his other hand to Vic's cock, found it half-hard and slippery, realized Vic had come already and was still there, still moaning, still enjoying being fucked by him for being fucked's sake—

He hurtled over the edge like an exploding freight train, cock driving hard into Vic's body and grinding there, balls pulsing against his ass, shooting hot and deep inside.

"Fuck, yeah," he managed, fingers sliding from Vic's mouth, reaching for the mattress with both hands to steady himself.

"Mmmm," Vic agreed, heavier for a moment before easing forward and falling on his front.

Mac shifted, let himself fall onto his side. Jesus. Fantastic afterglow. He sighed softly, then paused; the air was kinda chill, currents teasing his skin a little too insistently for his comfort. "Mmm," he said in belated reply, scrabbling and burrowing under the covers, feeling a warm body scooting back against him.

He closed his eyes, exhausted and pleased. Good to know they were both after the same thing, get-laid-fall-asleep, no risk of “so about next Thursday...?” conversations or tightly-pressed lips because you didn’t spend enough time trying to make them come.

“Hey,” he heard, a few moments later. He felt it through his hand, as well—he’d stolen his arm round Vic’s chest again, finding he didn’t mind the residual stickiness nearly as much as he’d expected.

“Yeah?”

“That was not an appropriate use of latex,” Vic told him, through a yawn.

Mac squeezed him tighter, buying time. “Yeah,” he said, thinking quickly. “Well, you knew I was clean—there’s no way the Director would miss that kind of detail.”

“I guess,” Vic said, sounding sleepy as hell. Mac shifted against him again, getting a lovely warm Vic pressing back into his chest. Nice. “I’m clean, too,” Vic mumbled, and Mac realized, faintly sickly, that he actually hadn’t been thinking in that direction at all.

There again, not so much danger—he wasn’t the one being fucked.

That was Vic.

Who was now spooned up against him.

Okay, he had a feeling there might be time for more of this before morning. He licked his lips, tickled by Vic’s hair, and breathed deeply. He’d need some more sleep first, though.

—

There was an oil slick of light seeping from under the garage door, the only clue that it was occupied. Mac crouched behind the large expensive people-carrier parked outside it, then held his breath and made a quiet dash across the fishbone-brick drive.

“I’m not handing over a *cent*,” he heard, the voice snarled viciously low. He glanced sideways, caught Vic’s eye in the darkness, then nodded at the other side of the automatic garage door.

Vic nodded, moving stealthily into position.

“You signed the contract—you can’t back out now,” Church was warning, ominous and threatening. “I’ve got it in ink.”

“Worthless ink—what law authority’s gonna recognize that, huh?”

Mac pressed the button pad in his pocket. A sort of electrical skeleton key, Nathan had said, handing it over proudly. Three seconds to activate the lock; three and counting.

“I know a lot of people who’d recognize it,” Church said, his shadow blocking some of the light under the door, making Mac’s fingers tighten on his gun.

Wilson laughed harshly. “I don’t care: he didn’t die, so I’m not gonna pay!”

The door clicked and flew up. “Actually,” Mac said, stepping forward into the light and smiling pleasantly at the two men frozen inside, “you’re both gonna pay.”

Church cursed loudly, then gasped when Vic tilted his gun into his line of vision. “Shut the fuck up,” Vic warned, also smiling. “You made me polish a hell of a lot of glasses; my trigger finger’s feeling pretty tense.”

There was a moment of absolute silence. Mac thought, faintly, that Vic had never sounded sexier.

“Wait—you’re the waiters,” Wilson said suddenly, glancing from one to the other with panic. “You—you were here last night, you *served* us—You!” he shouted, interrupting himself, pointing wildly behind Mac’s shoulder.

“Hadn’t forgotten *us*, now, had you?” Li Ann said cheerfully, and Mac didn’t look across at her as both women slotted into line beside him. Damn, he loved this, performing as professionals, everything falling into place.

“Like, you don’t look majorly pleased to see us,” Jackie drawled, sweetly accusing. “I thought you said you *liked* women who knew their wine...”

Wilson had turned the colour of mango salsa. “You,” was all he seemed inclined to say. “You, you—” He spun to face Church, then whipped back when Li Ann raised her gun, “*you*, these are *your* staff, what the hell’s going on that your staff are here, that your staff are, what are you, police? FBI? private investigators?”

“I’ve no idea,” Church growled, hand starting to make its way to his belt; Li Ann and Jackie darted forwards.

“Stop right there,” Mac said, enjoying the snap of Church’s hand back above his head, then smirked and gestured for the women to proceed. “Well, no. You two go right ahead.”

Wilson let Li Ann arrange his arms behind his back in silence. He was staring into space, lips moving silently, eyes suspiciously bright.

"Like, what have we here?" Jackie crooned, fishing a small gun out of Church's checked pocket. "You know," she said conversationally, turning it in her hand and then slipping it into her own halter, "that's like a major safety hazard, you know, in the pocket and all, plus I *bet* you haven't gotten a license yet. You could get so fined."

"Get him restrained, and let's take 'em into the house," Vic said, tossing Jackie a length of garden twine.

"Want a hand with the knots?" Mac offered, stepping forward, hoping he didn't sound too eager, itching to help. Just *seeing* the man made him want to cause some serious pain.

"Oh no," Jackie said, eyes glinting. "I'm like, totally handling it." Mac grinned, watching Jackie take particular enjoyment in spiking a knee up into the small of Church's back. "That's for those *stupid* costumes," she hissed, and Mac mouthed to her, "don't forget the canapés."

It was gratifying to see the flash of Jackie's fist, hear the grunt as Church doubled over in pain...

Li Ann steered Wilson out the garage, and Mac smirked when he tripped on the slight step.

"Done?" Vic asked, walking across close behind him to the light switch. Mac leaned back, felt their bodies touch briefly. Vic's hand swept across his hip as he moved past.

"Done," Jackie said, sounding satisfied. She pushed Church out the door, Mac following, and Vic flicked off the light. Just before he stepped out onto the now-floodlit patio, Mac felt Vic's hand on his chest, then a flutter of warm breath at his neck.

"We finished, now?" Vic murmured, nipping the line of his jaw. "I wanna go back to yours."

"I wanna go back to *yours*," Mac said quietly, wanting to fuck Vic on Vic's turf, leave memories all over his bedroom. His hands found Vic's waist, tempted to pull him back inside and see if they couldn't find a new use for engine oil.

Vic sucked on his neck, tiny wet noises in the dark. "Mine, then," he concurred, and Mac stepped back quickly before he actually lost his mind and acted on the fuck-him-here-and-now impulse.

He rubbed his neck, trying to stop the shadows of sensation chasing each other haphazardly through his goosebumps. "Okay," he said, hurrying to catch up with the others. "C'mon." He didn't wait to see if Vic was following.

"My wife," Wilson was muttering earnestly, staring in agony at the house, "my wife can't know, she can't, she'll kill me—"

"Better she finds out now than at the court case," Li Ann said, throwing a wince in Mac's direction. Mac knew what she meant. He didn't fancy telling a pregnant woman her husband was going in for attempted patricide either. Maybe they could get Vic to do it—he was always good with the sympathetic tact thing.

The front door wasn't locked. Mac remembered to wipe his feet as they filed inside, the familiar yellow walls making him blink all over again. There were no traces left of the dinner party, only one table in the middle of the room.

Sandra Wilson came out from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel. "Can I help you?" she asked, then did a double take, eyes fastening on her husband. The towel fell to the floor. "Jack?"

"I'm sorry, Sandra," he began.

Her eyes grew very wide, and Mac realized grimly she'd just recognized them. "What's happening?" she asked, and Mac wished Vic would go forwards and comfort her already, cause he really didn't want to answer that question. "Jack? What's going on?"

Vic cleared his throat. "Well—"

"Oh," came the Director's voice, and Mac almost shot his foot, seeing her sweep down the stairs like some kind of leatherette film star, "but surely you know all about it?"

Sandra whipped round and gasped audibly. "You!"

"In the flesh," the Director said, walking right up to her. "Honestly, Rebecca—you didn't think I wouldn't notice, did you?" She tucked a strand of hair behind the other woman's ear, stroked the line of her jaw, jabbed her in the stomach with a gun. "Back up," she said quietly, steel-sharp.

"You *bitch*," the woman hissed, batting the gun away from her, smoothing protective fingers over her stomach. "I should've known you were watching—you never could appreciate when it's over—"

"Be quiet," the Director warned, then nodded at the door. "Once too many, and you won't have the shiny lawyer this time," she said, sounding as bitter as Mac'd ever heard. "Now get outside."

Jack Wilson Jr. looked away, didn't move as his wife left.

Huh? Mac thought, catching Li Ann's eye, finding an equal wry bafflement looking back at him.

"Okay," he said eventually, breaking the silence. "You two jokers can get outside too." The rumble of an engine started up, faintly, and it dawned on him that the Director had just driven away in their car.

"Yeah," Vic said quickly, "you two sit down there. On the step. And start thinking about your defence." He reached inside his jacket, withdrew his cell and met Mac's eyes. "I'm just gonna find out what the hell's going on."

"She's been shipped to London," Vic said, blankly. "Sandra, Rebecca—whatever her name is. The son's there too. Seems the Director's had this house under surveillance for weeks—we just brought in the final evidence."

Mac blinked. They were back in the kitchen, figuring that the prisoners didn't need to hear that their captors *still* hadn't the faintest idea what was happening next. "London," he said. "Right, okay. What the fuck do *we* do?"

"Just, get them back to base, I guess," Vic said, then sighed. "Of course," he said matter-of-factly, "she wouldn't tell me why, with Rebecca. Or how."

"Or what," Mac offered, feeling disheartened. They'd done so well, it had all been so dramatic, so slick—and then she'd had to storm in gracefully and take off the significant villain and leave them embarrassingly having to pool funds for a cab.

"Mm," Vic agreed, moodily pouring himself a mug of water and fiddling with his phone. "Here, okay. These guys take credit cards."

"They'd come out here?" Mac asked, skeptically.

"Yeah." Vic tapped in the number. "Ought to," he said, then set down his water hard when Mac slid between him and the sink and bit the back of his neck. "Mmm, yeah—hello?" he said abruptly, squirming back against him, and Mac's hand slid up to his throat, feeling his voice box buzz as he made the call.

"Okay," Vic said, hoarsely, eventually, "thanks."

Mac heard the beep of the phone turning off, then the plastic protest as he bit down again and it skittered across the floor. "Ten minutes?"

"Fifteen," Vic breathed, turning in his arms.

Mac kissed him briefly on the mouth, hands smoothing down his body, the flat of his thumb sliding down the side of Vic's cock, then wriggled sideways out of reach and walked to the door. "I guess," he said, feeling refreshed and smug, "we'd better go tell them then."

He noticed, pleased, that it was gonna be a while before Vic could face anyone.

They stood up to leave. The Director nodded, moving a piece of paper carefully from one pile to another. "Well done. All present and accounted for."

"What about the son?" Li Ann asked, arms folded accusingly, voice walking the dangerous wire between frost and fury. Mac knew how she felt; the Director hadn't told them a *thing*, and it didn't look like she was gonna. This time, they'd been hired muscle and that was it. It left him oddly churned up.

"He will live with his grandfather," the Director said, "who ought to have several years left in him, and far more energy now his son's stopped spiking his cereal with soporifics."

"Not enough energy to deal with *that* kid," Mac said, tone bordering on belligerent.

"You'd prefer for him to live with the rest of his family?" she asked. "I thought not." She shook her head, politely disparaging. "Really, it's not your concern. Nothing related to this case is your concern any longer."

Mac took breath again, and she looked up sharply. "That's my last word on the issue," she said, then shuffled some papers and cast a glance at her watch. "Girls, you can go. I need a man for this one. You've got the afternoon off."

"Uh, right," Li Ann said, frowning.

"Off, as in, I want that report by tomorrow morning, of course," the Director qualified smoothly, and Li Ann's brow cleared.

"Right, okay," she said, "thank god. For a moment there I thought you were actually giving me time off. My world view was shattered."

The Director looked up, amused. "Scram," she said, flapping her fingers.

Jackie slipped her hand into the crook of Li Ann's arm, tugged her away. "C'mon. There is *no* reason to give her chance to change her mind, you know? And we're not getting like a *terrifically* bad deal..." They trooped out, heading off in the same direction.

Mac felt his eyes narrow. "You need *a* man?"

Her gaze rested on him, languidly corrosive. "A man. Singular. Vic. In fact, Mac, you may leave too, if you wish. I just thought you two tended to leave together, these days."

Mac glanced over, frowning; Vic's face grew wary. "Why? Why do you need a man?"

"Sunday. There's an... a dinner. A meal. Some associates of mine—a waiter has dropped out, developed a terminal disease or some such garbage, and I need a replacement. You fit the profile."

Vic was shaking his head, backing away. "No, nonono, no way, absolutely not," he said faintly, waving his finger at her as if it might change her mind, "I know what this is, this is the Evening Nathan was talking about, the Directors, *all* of you—no. You'll have my balls for glazed shallots by the second course."

"Really, Mr. Mansfield," she tutted, "your imagination *has* become lurid. Too much time with Mac, I think. I shall have to cut down your interaction."

"Hey, no," Vic said quickly, and Mac scowled. Acknowledge she has the power, why don't you.

"Sunday night. Vic. Full black and whites, be here at six, ready to be blindfolded... I'm sure that was on your plans for the evening anyway, but we'd prefer to use our own props. Less chance of smears, you know."

Mac's mouth clicked shut—he didn't want to hear this. The voice was soft, luxurious, but the words were mean and her eyes were mean and the air was thick with, well, *meanness*.

"That's all right?" the Director said, and Mac just shook his head, disdain and disbelief.

Vic folded his arms, stood straighter. "I think I deserve a choice," he warned, and Mac swallowed at the tone of voice.

"Deserve," the Director repeated, staring at him flatly. "Sorry—remind me again, who owns your body? Your mind? Your free time?"

"I fucking do," Vic spat back; "You've got me under duress, that's all—I am *not* your property."

The Director raised an eyebrow, touched her bottom lip with her thumbnail. "You know," she said, eventually, pleasantly, "I think you couldn't be more wrong."

Vic just shook his head, silent, glaring. Mac could feel sparks spiking off him.

"You see," and the Director walked round the desk, walked between them, "you think your lives are difficult. You don't realize how much worse they could be. I'm lawfully within my rights to have you in solitary confinement for as long as I like."

"That's not law," Mac broke in, voice tasting sour on his tongue.

"Oh, but it is—my law." Her hand lighted on the small of his back, steel grip under a manicure. She turned them towards each other, lips gliding into a smile. "My turf. *My* possessions."

"I don't care," Mac said, flatly. "We have rights." He wished he couldn't feel the fire dying next to him, see the electricity fade from Vic's eyes.

"No you don't," the Director said sweetly; "You're outside conventional law. I protect you, arm you, dispatch you for the common good."

"*Your* version of the common good," Mac retorted, hopelessly willing Vic's hackles to raise again, for that spur of anger to add a spine to his protest.

"Precisely." Her finger traced up his back, a light touch, thrumming with victorious energy. Mac clenched his teeth, trying not to flinch. "And yet, my version sometimes has merit too—isn't that right, Victor?"

Vic stared at the ground. "Yeah."

Mac felt something go numb inside him.

"Yeah," she echoed, winsome, an edge to it. "Mac? Do you agree with your partner? My version of the common good has merit too?"

He tilted his head angrily, looked her straight in the eye. "When it does, it's a fluke," he said clearly, then flicked his attention to Vic, standing bolt straight, the Director's fingers playing at the nape of his neck.

Vic looked away.

He felt a harsh jealousy course through him—Vic was only supposed to roll over and show his underbelly for *him*, only supposed to cave and crumble under *his* instruction. Watching it happen for the Director felt... not like betrayed per se, but definitely intrusive. He didn't like the acquiescent defocusing that came over Vic's eyes—far too closely associated with their unspoken arrangement for comfort.

"Well, I suppose I could entitle you to your misconceptions," the Director was saying pleasantly, "just this once. After all, your views are of no concern to me whatsoever. But to business: Sunday, the common good is a pleasant little dinner party. I need you for six, Vic." She stroked her fingernail across his cheek, leaving a faint red mark that echoed through Mac's stomach. "Begin with canapés."

"Canapés, sure," Vic said brightly, not quite glib enough to be insincere.

The Director tilted her head, skeptic-come-succubus, then nodded shortly. "That's settled, then." Her eyes slid, impatient, over Mac, one eyebrow rising dryly. "Objections, Ramsey?"

I wanted Vic in my bed, panting and pleading my name, Sunday. "Vic's a pretty good person to watch hockey with," he said, measuring his tone, a shade over insincere, wanting it to be heard. "But hey, I'm pretty used to you messing my life around."

"Hmm. I suppose. But, not jealous of the blatant favouritism?" she asked, leisurely.

"If it means being at your service at the click of your fingers, then no, for *some* reason, I'm not."

"Oh, but the rewards for servicing me are... ample," she purred, and Mac gritted his teeth to keep from choking.

Vic raised his eyebrows at the corner of the desk, mouth set sullenly.

She ignored him, shooting Mac a nasty little smile. "Don't wear him out beforehand, okay? My need is greater than yours."

Mac's jaw started hurting, and he looked away.

Vic stormed ahead. Mac lengthened his pace, caught his shoulder just as they emerged into the sunlight. "Hey—"

"Don't even," Vic spat, breaking free and stalking to his truck; "She pissed me off enough already."

"Fuck her," Mac shouted, catching up with him again, slamming the truck door shut again. "Where are you going, huh?"

Vic's eyes flashed anger. "Mine. Follow me." He wrenched Mac's hand aside, jerked open the door. "Believe me," he muttered, hauling himself inside and making to slam it closed again, "you don't wanna share a ride."

Mac almost flinched when the engine roared, wheels scritchng too close to his feet then sending up a scatter of gravel as Vic floored the truck and drove away too fast. He watched it disappear round the corner; he felt alive, exhilarated. Vic's anger was something base and deadly, leaving him shell-shocked and rock-hard. "Believe me," he said to himself, hearing his voice husky, "I do."

The kettle was simmering, approaching the boil—apt, Mac had time to think, before hands were in his hair, Vic pinning him against the wall, biting his lower lip, sucking viciously at his tongue.

Mac twisted sharply, grabbing Vic's wrists, ripping away. "Fucking *hell*," already panting, feeling his startled cock swell and throb in his pants. He spun round, slamming Vic's wrists into the wall. "Give me," he snarled, "a chance to get my fucking *breath*—"

"Need you," Vic breathed, flexing forward, eyes wide. Mac's mouth went dry, a roaring descending on his ears as Vic's voice dropped to beg, to plead. He was abruptly happy he'd let Vic alone, let him go ahead and fume the distance between the Agency and Vic's apartment, because this was good, this wasn't anger any more, this had mutated into desperation, desire, *need*. "C'mon, Mac, please, get rid of her, I *need* you—"

"On my terms," Mac interrupted hoarsely, pulling Vic's wrists above his head and folding one hand over them, letting his other hand fall and relieve Vic's fly.

Vic's eyes fell closed, and his hips arched. "Fuck, yeah."

"You better never forget that." Vic's cock was hot, eager in his unfamiliar left hand. "You got that, Vic?" He could feel the pulses inside it, twitches of pleasure running up the shaft, ever hardening. "My terms."

"I know."

"Not *her* terms," Mac said, his voice dropping to a growl.

Vic exhaled sharply, eyebrows drawing together, almost as if in pain. Mac grinned—he knew exactly what Vic needed, exactly what would make the other man flinch and squirm. "Like that," Vic was murmuring, blurring the words, "like that but faster, faster, please—"

"Not her terms," Mac repeated, keeping the same pace for agonizing seconds, then speeding up and squeezing hard.

"Yours," Vic managed, breathing hard through his teeth, and Mac ground down with his fist and let himself fall forwards and bite his ear, then smiled smugly as Vic came between them with a groan. Not bad, using the wrong hand.

"Better?" he mocked quietly, leaning back, frowning as he realized he'd need another shirt to go home in. Maybe he should start keeping one here on standby.

"Fuck," Vic said distinctly, massaging his wrist as Mac let him free. "I need a bed."

Mac ran his gaze down him, derogatory. "So do I," he said lightly, letting the barest hint of a threat sidle into the tone.

Vic shot him a sharp look from under his lashes. "We're uneven again?" he asked, smoke in his eyes.

Mac pulled Vic's hands away from each other. "I'd say," he murmured, taking Vic's palm and pressing it into his cock. He grinned. "Wouldn't you say?"

Vic tilted his head. "Apparently."

Mac let go of his hand, turned away. Some point, the kettle had finished boiling; a faint taste of steam moistened the air. "Follow me," he said quietly, a shiver running through him as he remembered Vic using those same words earlier. As he walked into the bedroom he stripped off his shirt, dropping it on the floor.

He heard Vic's footsteps behind him, and turned.

"What do you want?" Vic asked, and Mac felt something twist and startle in his stomach, tempted to find something new and obscene, something that would force Vic to his metaphorical knees.

Although—wouldn't his actual knees serve just as well?

His cock tightened, and he swallowed. "I want," he began huskily, then cleared his throat. "Suck me—through this," he said, running a finger over the fly of his jeans, feeling the solid shape of his dick beneath.

Vic's eyes narrowed, and Mac felt a smile of sorts grow on his mouth.

"It's my choice now," he warned softly, watching for defiance.

Vic stared, then walked to him, sank to his knees. "If—if I have to," he said, sounding hoarsely resentful, but there was a flick of glitter through his eyes as he looked up at Mac's face.

"I want you to," Mac said clearly, then shrugged slightly. Power was playing through his fingers, making them itch to take Vic's head. "Up to you if you play the game."

Vic's eyes were large, intense, unwavering. His mouth was set. As Mac waited those familiar warm hands settled on his ass, then slid down to part his thighs; Mac let him, with just enough resistance that Vic had to work to be permitted to blow him. "Yeah, well. Not my call," Vic muttered, eyelashes dipping away, leaning in and tilting his head and sliding his teeth against the plumped-out denim.

Mac inhaled, feeling spikes. "Careful," he warned, hands dropping to Vic's head, feeling moist breath blast against his cock.

Vic grunted something in return, opening his mouth wider and closing his eyes and working his tongue against the denim—Mac squirmed lightly, crotch heating with sheer frustration, trying not to buck into Vic's mouth.

Had to leave something for later, after all.

"Yeah," he surprised himself by saying, when Vic tilted his head in the other direction and sucked hard. Airy tongues of heat were sifting through the fabric, leaving him weak and unsteady. His hand slipped down, finding Vic's working jaw, trying to work a finger into his mouth; Vic backed up a little, let him push inside and feel the silken-smooth contours skin to skin, sucked hard.

"Fuck," Mac bit off, eyes closing at the sight.

Vic swirled his tongue pointedly round Mac's finger, lips sealed around it, fingertip bumping back into the arch of his throat. Mac blinked his eyes open again, looked at his finger disappearing lewdly between angelic lips. His dick was tingling, abandoned, cold stroking through wet denim and torturing his skin.

"For real," he managed, backing up until his knees hit the edge of the bed. "Do it for real."

His finger slid silently from the wet heat of Vic's mouth, teeth scraping a reproachful path. "Another request?" Vic asked, silkily. "I thought it was my turn."

Mac took a short breath: one fist clenched in Vic's hair, forcing his head back, holding him on his knees; the other calmly slid the button from its home, drew down his fly. "It is your turn," he said quietly, watching Vic's eyes dilate. "C'mon; you want this just as much as I do."

"Projecting," Vic shot back, but it was a whisper, and his hands helped Mac peel down his jeans, guided him to sit down on the cool bedspread.

"What you want is so clear, I'd have to be blind not to see it," Mac told him, steering his head closer and spreading his thighs, then hissing sharply when that blessed mouth descended without preamble. It was like the friction from sucking his jeans had stoked it, abraded it into a sweet slickness like thrusting into hot Vaseline. "Fuck, yeah. That. Yeah, shit; *yeah*," he heard, his hands twinning together in Vic's hair, working him deeper onto Mac's cock. "Like that but harder—*harder*—"

He felt Vic twist against his hands, felt a rush of fever as he felt the squirmed resistance, and reluctantly let him back off. Vic's lips were wet, slightly swollen, parted around harsh breath. His eyes blinked back water. "Just a minute," he panted, softly, swallowing hard, and Mac twisted his hips against painfully unreceptive air and bit back a moan.

"C'mon," he whispered, hooking a heel round Vic's back, angling him closer. Strands of hair were biting rhythmically into his fingers as Vic's shoulders rose and fell. He watched that mouth edging closer, felt the shift of breath against sensitive skin, stared down like a well-placed camera in a porn movie. "Bring me off," he said, nudging Vic closer, "I want it, please, c'mon, bring me off with your mouth, do it, suck me—"

The tip of Vic's tongue flashed out, caught the end of his cock in a hot wet streak. "You want it," Vic said, hovering dangerously close, voice heady with air.

"You want it," Mac said firmly, bringing his other foot up to pin Vic in place, letting his hands force that sweet head down into his crotch. Oh, *yeah*. Sliding in like a dream, a fucking pornographic *Oscar* of a dream, throat clutching at his dick, pure slick pressure shivering end to end.

No resistance—Vic had learnt fast, or remembered previous encounters and steeled his muscles not to rebel. Mac tightened his hold, hearing the shallow sound of Vic sipping air rasp against a dozen erogenous zones at once.

He looked down, shoving deeper and liking the way Vic's breath cut off sharp. Heat swelled as his eyes focused on the supplicated arch of Vic's back curled up beneath his crossed ankles, raising his ass to the air—and he came suddenly. Pleasure blasted like salt-laced bullets; Vic sucked in a hard breath and shuddered under his hands, wrenching his head back, not before swallowing a deep deposit of come.

"Prick," Vic muttered, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

Mac smiled at him, falling back on the bed. "C'mere," he said, head spinning with dizzy pleasure, grateful when Vic crawled up beside him. He pulled at his clothes, somehow managing to drag them off his body and toss them onto the floor by the time he'd wriggled fully under the covers.

Vic's feet were cold; so were his calves. Mac had a sudden thought that the circulation had been cut off, that while Vic'd been sucking him—

"Hey," he squawked, indignant, when Vic's arms prevented him wriggling away from impertinent icy toes pushed into the back of his knee. "Watch it."

"I just blew you, Ramsey. That gives me certain rights."

"They don't include shock-bombing my nerves with cold," Mac told him, shivering slightly as Vic trailed his foot down to play with Mac's ankle.

"Yeah, well," Vic said, turning and kissing the corner of Mac's mouth.

Mac's lips parted automatically, and then he bit the edge of Vic's jaw and rolled back to go to sleep. He didn't want to taste that, thanks.

"Hey," he murmured, a moment later, "you know the Director?"

Vic yawned noisily. "I've heard of her, yeah."

"I want you to ruin their meal," Mac decided, opening his eyes long enough to flash him a grin.

"Ruin?" Vic said doubtfully, and Mac shrugged against the pillow and closed his eyes.

"Unsettle," he amended, sliding his arm under Vic's shoulders, feeling residual sweat catch on his skin. "I want her to know she can't just order us about, not all the time. We do have some integrity."

Vic laughed. "Integrity? You want me to risk decapitation for *integrity*?"

Mac jostled him. "Pretty much," he said, with a grin, then sighed, staring at the ceiling. "I don't know, really. I just wanna make a point to her, want us to stand up against her. Want you to stand up. I don't like that earlier you just—rolled over for her."

Vic stiffened. "What, I'm only supposed to do that for you?" His voice was low, dangerous.

"Hey, no, Vic, that's not what I meant," Mac said quickly, then realized he was lying. That was exactly right; he was not a sharing man.

Vic shifted, leaning up on his elbow, the anger of earlier storming to the surface again. His hand was fisted on Mac's arm; Mac felt a thrill prickle into his skin, reacting to threat. "What did you mean, then?"

Mac stared up at him, at this exciting stranger in his bed, eyes like pine needles, dark and spiked. That mouth, still pink with sucking him off, was tilted into half a snarl. "Vic—"

"What did you mean?" Vic demanded, and Mac felt a rush of defiant energy; he grabbed Vic's shoulders and pushed him over into the mattress, rolling on top of him, naked skin a hot clash against naked skin.

Vic stared up at him, lips twisted angrily—but he was hard between his legs, irrefutable, and Mac ground slowly against him and watched his eyes glaze and snap to focus and glaze again. "I meant, we should stand up to her, together," Mac said, chest tingling where it brushed Vic's on every slightly-heated breath.

"That's not—what it sounded like," Vic managed, eyelashes stuttering as Mac started a slow, thorough slide with his hips. His own cock was pleasantly firm, charged with the sparks between them, waking up to the idea of another round. Vic was clearly—beautifully—much further along.

"It's what I meant, though," Mac insisted softly, then took a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to get some strategy into his brain. Work out how, exactly, he wanted to play this. Vic wriggled beneath him, mouth opening in a silent plea. "You shouldn't bitch at me when you're the one misinterpreting," Mac said, thinking aloud.

Vic shivered, and Mac ground down harder.

"I mean," he continued, leaning down to murmur into Vic's ear, "it's not like we're on different sides, here—just I don't want her to win, and this time, you let her."

"It was pointless to argue," Vic breathed sharply, warm air tousling the hair by Mac's ear.

"Yeah, pointless except it made her look good—she chalked that up as a victory, and you know it. And I object to her winning."

"Yeah, I—Sorry," Vic said, and it sounded like he was squeezing the words out a punctured tire, like it hurt him to say it, like it aroused him more than anything else Mac'd done all night.

Mac's head spun. His cock beginning to ache, remembering where it'd been tonight, nudging at Vic's thighs and wondering where else it could go. He leaned back, holding Vic down into the mattress, and bit his lip hard to clamp down on the rush of eroticism at pinning this man into this bed.

Vic stared up at him, mute and silently panting.

Mac released his lip, licked the tiny indentation. "Make it up to me."

—

Two days later

Mac woke up, stared in the darkness. A man was sleeping next to him, breath soft and even. A man he could wake up, have do whatever he liked.

It was weird. He'd started this on impulse, secure, thinking he was taking, only taking, stepping it up in anger and frustration—but now he was in a place where Vic had enjoyed it all. Well. Maybe not all. But mostly. And while he'd enjoyed it all too, there was that edge, that sense that he was *working* for pleasure—

He sighed, trying to make the thoughts flock into some sort of order.

The last few days, all his excess energy had flown into devising incrementally baser situations. He wanted to shock, to stay one step ahead. He wanted to make Vic think every time, work out if he wanted Mac enough to let him do this, that, the next thing. Fuck him, grope him, order him around. It was like a hit: there was always a moment before Vic agreed, and that moment was *critical*, a splash of hot water at every increasingly unlikely consent.

"What do you want?" each time, an imperative in there to suit them both, eyes dark and swift with just the subtlest hint of rich beseeching.

"I want," each time, daring to push further and further, words sizzling and purring in his mouth, a high to beat all highs with steaming sex to follow—and yet fearful that Vic would shake his head one time and that would be it, everything would be over. Unsafe—and increasingly more dangerous. Every time Mac made him choose, Vic was gaining more and more power—because they both knew that the refusal that would finish it for good was the moment that Vic protested, and the only way Mac could retain his lead was by thinking up ever more-potent scenes and throwing them down like a verbal gauntlet he couldn't afford to sacrifice every time.

And of course, Vic didn't have to spend any time thinking at all. He sighed. Until now, he'd been so sure *he'd* been getting the better deal.

He felt Vic shift next to him, and slipped quietly out of bed. He needed a shower. Alone.

—

A few days later

"Where've you been?"

Mac scowled. "What's it to you?" The moment he said it, he realized what a bad mood he was in. Huh.

He hadn't been in a bad mood until he found Vic watching his TV, right where he'd left him. Something about it, crowding him, there when he left, there when he came back—it stank of faked marriage with Li Ann, when the walls and ceiling were that much closer to his head.

Vic frowned, looked up at him. "Christ—who bit *your* ass this morning?"

You would, if I asked you to. You'd lick my feet. "What are you still doing here, anyway?" Some crazy sensation inside him wanted to see how far he could push it.

Vic got to his feet. "I do sort of live here, you know," he said stiffly, eyes wary, frown deepening.

Mac gave a short, harsh laugh. "Sort of live here—read, I do sort of get fucked here, you know," he mocked, pushing past him to get to the fridge. He needed a drink.

"Man! What is your *problem*?"

"Who says I've got a problem?" Mac demanded, spinning round to face him.

"I fucking say—at least, it's not normal behaviour in *my* book," Vic said caustically, arms folded.

God, it felt good. Seeing that shimmer of defiance in a body he knew inside out. “Yeah, but frankly, Vic,” Mac said, honey dripped over steel, “your book isn’t the smartest in the country, now, is it?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Or should I say, healthiest,” Mac drawled, feeling the air crackle and sizzle between them. If only Vic would *move*—move of his own fucking volition, without Mac drawing him a map and telling him what face to wear while he did it.

“Mac, you got something to say, just say it.”

“Work it out.”

Vic shook his head, disbelief burning with anger in his eyes. “You know? Maybe I won’t stay tonight.”

“I could do with a break.”

“Oh, you’ll miss me. Come ten o’clock, you’ll miss me.”

“Will I.”

“I know *exactly* what you’ll miss,” Vic said, silkily vitriolic.

He’d miss having to contrive a situation dirty enough to get a little resistance before Vic bent over and took whatever he handed out? One he’d have to think about later, knowing it’d sprung from *his* head? Yeah, right. “Yeah? Well maybe I’ve exhausted all you’ve got,” Mac snapped, eyes running derisively over Vic’s body. It looked fantastic, taut and rugged with diffidence, and confusion, and anger. “You’re good, sure. But if I wanted to break this rut we’ve gotten into, it’d be broken like *that*.”

Vic whipped round. “If *you* wanted to?” he demanded, and apparently that was the last straw; his fists were clenched, body tight, getting right in his face, and that was good, there was fire there. Refreshing, perfect, arousing as fuck—Mac gritted his teeth, a wave of insistent lust swelling inside his skin. Abruptly, he couldn’t stand not to touch him.

He reached for him, watched incredulous—dreamlike—as Vic twisted out his way with a frown.

“Fuck off, Ramsey,” he spat, amazement in his voice. “You think this is all on your terms? You say frog and I jump, *unconditionally*? I’m telling you, the moment I don’t get off on being with you, we are *so* over.”

Mac stared. “I—I know,” he said, defensive, “of course I know that.” Relieved as fuck. “And—you do, though, don’t you?”

Vic shot him a look of pure disbelieving disdain. “If you don’t know the difference between me getting off and me lying there stone-cold unaffected, then I’m wondering if I’ve been sleeping with your clone for the last week and a half.”

Mac closed his eyes. “Okay, *now* who’s misinterpreting,” he bit off, wanting him, wanting him *now*—“I meant now, I meant today, the present; I meant,” he opened his eyes, stepped closer, curling his fingers round Vic’s lapel, “here. Right now.”

Vic’s hand moved up, covered his own, then wrenched it off his jacket. “Right now, I couldn’t give a flying fuck what you want,” he growled, turning and stalking out.

The door slammed; Mac groaned, long and painful, and sank down into his chair. Fuck. Handled that *so* badly. Wanted him *so* much.

—

Three days of glaring, projected indifference, and near-permanent hard-ons. He’d gotten used to satisfying himself pretty much whenever he felt like it; it hurt to regress, and he couldn’t find a substitute fantasy. He found himself groping for any little moment of heterosexual excitement, then jerking it to death, wringing out the arousal all too quickly to enjoy.

He’d even snapped at Jackie, had to duck an angry blow to the neck. “Like, what is your *problem*?” she’d demanded, angry, then leaned into the Director’s hand like a cat when they’d argued enough to attract professional interference.

Mac wondered wildly why that pout didn’t make him sizzle up inside.

It welled up inside him. He wanted to shout at her, wanted to ask *why*, what had she *done*, that now the sight of her left him cold, that now he preferred a shabby ex-cop with less fashion sense than a fishtank to a certifiably gorgeous blonde with legs up to there. Had she done something to her hair?

Or even, god forbid, had *Vic*?

He wouldn’t put it past him, the sneaky bastard. The manipulative, underhanded jerk. The shameless, responsive fucking seraphic *jerk*.

He heard the words trickle through his head again, and wanted to bang aforesaid head against the table. Or even, merely bang Vic. And only Vic. Shit. Shit! Whatever this was, it was bad.

—

Vic answered on the second ring.

"Hey."

No answer.

Mac swallowed, then spoke. "There's a game on tonight. Kick off's nine. I don't want to watch it. You interested?"

"Can you interest me?"

"I used to," he said, voice dropping, coaxing. He wanted to appeal to Vic's cock first, arresting rational thought. "I know what you like." He waited, hoping Vic would contradict that, that his brain would step in, that he'd demand more than what they'd had—

"Nine? I'll probably be in."

"Make sure you are," Mac heard himself say, slipping back into his role as easily as jimmying a familiar lock, feeling only the faintest edge of disappointment, and heard Vic inhale slowly. The sound rushed through him, faint but snowballing, blood siphoning away from the mainstream to plump up his cock.

"If that's what you want," Vic said, and Mac hung up and tried to feel good, turning on the stereo loud to drown out the noise of a crack sealing over like it had never been.

"I've decided, I'd rather watch the game."

"Mmm?" Vic said, then shook his head. Mac felt bullets crash through the air around him—then they faded, as Vic made no further move to deny him, teasing, "I checked. There are no games this evening."

"I know," Mac said, walking past him, dropping to his knees to find the tape he wanted. "I wanna watch this," he said, brandishing it.

Vic raised his eyebrows. "That aired two days ago."

"I was busy." Mac padded closer, pressed the tape into Vic's hands, then turned and sank into the couch. He hooked his foot round Vic's leg, tugged him closer, looked up into bright eyes. "I want you—want you on your knees, blowing me, while I watch hockey and have a beer."

Vic's eyebrows rose a fraction—and there was the pure moment when he might refuse, the one Mac worked for, the one that gave the extra spice to the evening—and then he purred, "but you don't even like hockey."

"So you better make it a good blowjob," Mac reasoned, pleasantly.

A few days later

"Where're you posted?"

"Mexico," Vic said, scowling. "Four days."

Mac looked at him, imagined taking his head lightly between his hands and leaning in and gently, gently licking his lower lip. Then he wondered how to make that impulse dirty enough that they could do it, that it'd fit in the parameters they'd set and cemented, and realized it wouldn't be worth it. "You leave tomorrow morning?"

Vic nodded, eyes falling to Mac's mouth. Mac wondered if he was thinking the same thing. "5 a.m. She's still cross about the canapés, at that meal."

Mac held his tongue, well aware that wasn't the reason at all, that this was the Director's subtle hit at *him*, pointing out delicately that they were still her fucking property no matter how well Mac could bend Vic to his will.

"—she just wants to make my life as uncomfortable as possible."

"So do I," Mac said softly, mischief sparking in his voice, and by the gleam in Vic's eye he knew he'd been interpreted correctly.

"What do you want?"

Oh, everything. More than you're offering. "I want you to sit on me, screw down, while I lie back and think about Jackie," Mac said, an answer he'd prepared earlier. It had been enough to give him a hard-on in the coffee bar, but he'd forced it down and simmered pleasantly all day, waiting for Vic to come and ask him the question, yet strangely worried that Vic might change the words. If Vic wanted to know what he'd like *most*, at this point, the answer would be... well, actually, to hear the one word he was thinking he'd never pry from Vic's otherwise faultless mouth.

It wasn't that he *wanted* Vic to say no, wasn't that he wanted to end it, just that—there was tension building, building, like elastic, and the sooner you break it the faster the marks fade. Just leaving it, endlessly tighter, means it'll snap one day.

Vic's eyes glowed faintly, and for the one terrified-glorious moment Mac thought he was going to refuse. Then he tilted his head, licked his lips. "Where." His voice was low, sexy.

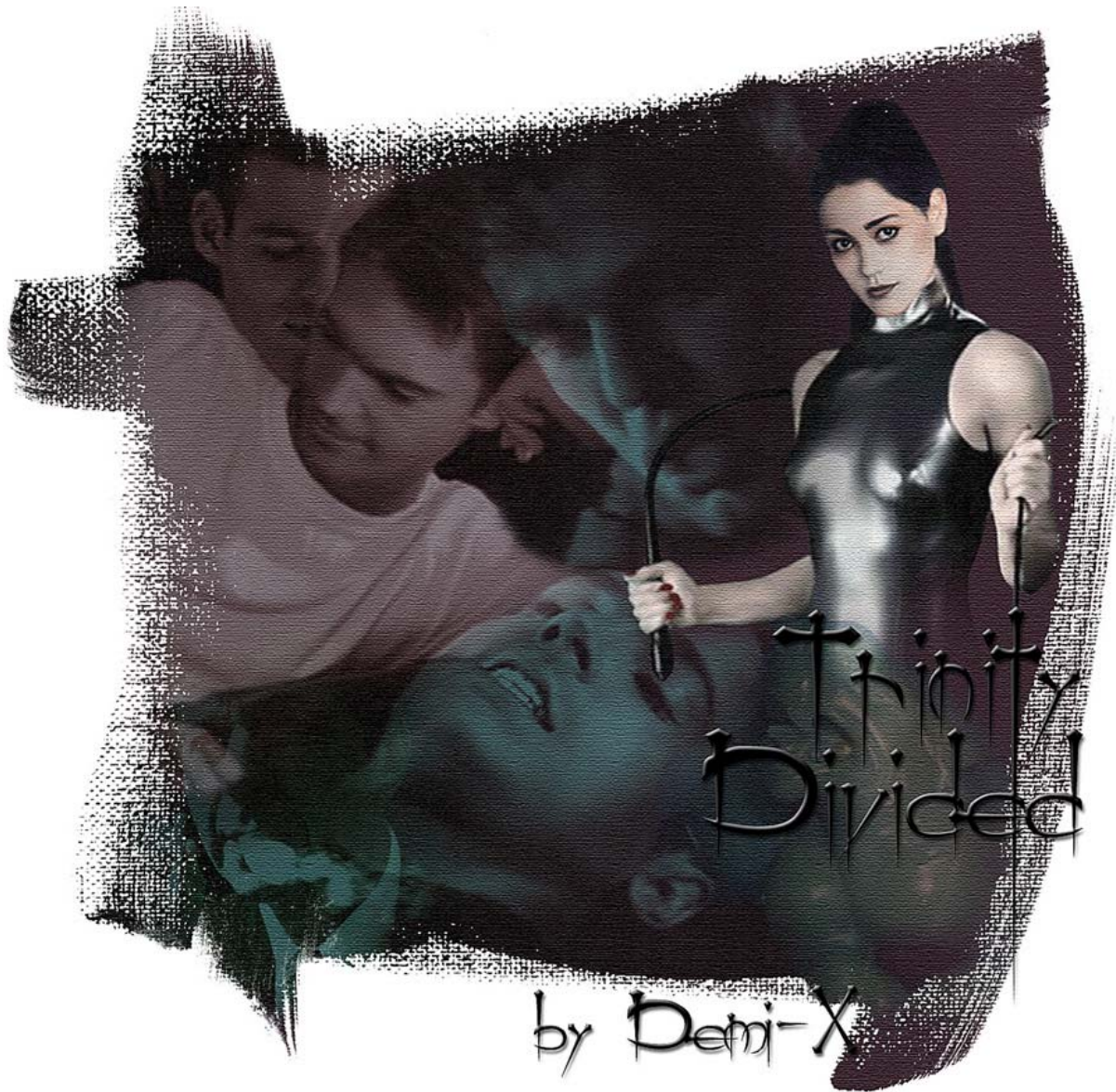
"On the rug," Mac said, planning to roll Vic over halfway through and grind him into it, leave a memory ringing indignant in his skin, one that would stay with him on the plane, "facing away from me."

And if he could get away with this, get Vic off on it, maybe when he got back from Mexico he could try the gentle licking, the soft holding—He saw the appreciative spark kindle in Vic's eyes, realized no, not on this take of their relationship. If he tried, Vic would be waiting, expecting some filthy twist to make them come like supernovae.

Well, he could live with that. Coming like supernovae was definitely better than coming in his own fist, night after night. Better than lapsing into an inferior, sugar-coated excuse for sentimentality, an idealistic white rose doomed to tarnish and wither away.

This, at least, was gratifying. A spiral, sucking him in, promising new and tempting things—and then *delivering*, to the nth degree. So what if a shake of Vic's head was the end of the line for him, and Vic knew it? So what if he was waiting, on edge, endlessly apprehensive? Maybe, he didn't need to worry. At this rate, Vic wasn't ever gonna say no.





Li Ann smiled at her own reflection. She carefully rubbed the intense red colour into her lips, and then left the slim tube on the shelf near her mirror. The stain on her lips would last for hours so there would be no need to re-apply.

All day, her body had 'itched' with need to get out. If she were a man, her behavior would have been labeled 'tom-cattin'.

The only name for a woman who needed to get out and get laid was 'slut'.

Li Ann was many things, but she certainly did not think of herself as a loose woman. On the contrary, finding a partner with whom to have sex was not something she rushed into. Always cautious, the intuitive young woman usually took her time.

At the moment, there was a particular man she had her eye on. If he was at the club tonight, he just might get lucky...

Hour One: Private S&M club, Leather or Not...

Once at the 'club', Li Ann breezed by two butch women dressed in matching red leather bikini tops and red leather pants; she ignored them and everyone else in the private fetish club.

The specialty at 'Leather or Not....' was that it catered to all fetishes in all kingdoms. From submissives to leather freaks, to people like Li Ann, a dominatrix specializing in pain. Her particular kink however, was not just dressing in the garb associated with the dominatrix. What really got her off was dominating men.

Vic and Mac—the two men who were constants in Li Ann's everyday life—would never in a million years guessed this of her though.

She'd never ever let either of them into her secret sex life, and she never would. Not even the Director, who would have both approved, and encouraged her, knew. Li Ann was ashamed of the dark spot inside of her, the part of her soul that compelled her to reach out and hurt someone.

Usually, Li Ann only had such feelings after her sexual high. Coming down was such a bitch, and it was at those times when the young woman had to wonder whom, in her lineage, had done the same thing. Her Mother? Her Father? All Li Ann knew was that the ugly trait had been passed on to her. After a long session with a man, Li Ann would last for about two weeks before feeling restless again. She'd try everything to stop it, but the only thing that worked, was her work. Unless she was concentrating on a case, the urges would eventually win. The outcome was inevitable; Li Ann would put on her secret clothes and then, the change was complete.

The remorseful Li Ann, who was full of misgivings, would disappear and then another more 'assertive' woman emerged to whom nothing mattered but her pleasure. Lust and sexuality replaced her feelings of guilt.

Here she was again, back at the club.

She strolled with confidence, tall and lean, wearing a shiny, black patent leather bodysuit. It was a one-piece with a collar that ran up high, to the bottom of her chin, full-length sleeves and thong style bottom, leaving her buttocks bare; she never felt so free.

She passed by the dykes in red, ignoring all except the man who had caught her attention a few weeks ago. As she made her way over to the tall, gorgeous Asian, she was very aware of how good her body felt, tightly encased, lovingly enveloped. All of her nerves stood on end from anticipation. The patent leather rubbed deliciously against her genitals, making her moist and ready.

The man on whom she had set her sights had been in the club a couple of times. Always cautious, the agent watched all of her potential partners carefully in the comfort of the club before choosing a playmate. The man who intrigued her now, seemed to be of Chinese descent. At the moment, he was dancing with a male and female couple; it was clear to Li Ann that the man was a sub.

She stalked toward her target; when she reached him in the middle of the floor, she pulled his head down and kissed him deeply.

The man and woman, who had been undulating with the handsome man, danced away easily leaving dominatrix and submissive alone together.

"Want to play?" Li Ann purred. Reaching out as she spoke and pinching the man's exposed right nipple. She twisted it painfully, making the young man to cry out in pleasure.

"Yes, Mistress, I do," the man responded immediately, in perfect English.

Li Ann smiled. "Playroom three is mine; I'll take you there." She snapped a collar and leash on her partner and led him out of the main area of the club and into the hall leading to the private rooms. She stopped at a door marked with a gold number three. She entered first, pulling her 'pet' in after herself. The door swung shut and Li Ann immediately got the business end of fucking each other out of the way.

"Do you smoke?" She asked, still holding the leash.

"No. Not cigarettes or dope," the man replied. Like a true submissive, he waited until spoken to, before voicing his opinions.

"No drugs at all?"

"Correct, Mistress."

Li Ann smiled, liking this submissive, he was just her type, tall, handsome and her own race.

Though she was a mixture of Chinese and American, she felt closer to her Asian roots. Li Ann was the product of a Chinese woman and an American sailor. Her mother was a prostitute, dancing in a gogo bar and working the crowd on the side.

Her father was just another customer.

Despite being pregnant, Li Ann's mother continued to work in the business. One day, almost eight months into the pregnancy, she gave birth to an underweight baby girl, Li Ann. The new mother named her daughter and then left her at one of the many nameless orphanages with the same 'St.' in front of the name, as all other such institutions seemed to have.

The young prostitute took two weeks off to allow her figure to recover, then went back to pole dancing and performing hand-jobs. There would be no screwing the clientele until her menses ceased.

Li Ann stayed in the same orphanage until she ran away when she reached the age of thirteen. She didn't run because of abuse or because she was being mistreated by the other kids. No. Li Ann was tired of living under the strict Catholic rules. So she set out alone and unprepared for what the street would offer. Luckily, before anything bad could happen to her, she was caught trying to break into a restaurant that was owned by a prominent Hong Kong crime boss: Mr. Tsang. She was brought before Mr. Tsang, where she answered his questions honestly and fearlessly. The young girl explained exactly what she was doing in the restaurant and she told him why she was attempting to steal; that it kept her from whoring.

She told Mr. Tsang in no uncertain terms that whoring was something she would never do.

What she didn't tell the crime boss was that the reason she wouldn't whore was because the thought of sex repulsed her. She associated sex with her prostitute mother whom she hated for abandoning her.

So it was, by chance, that a thief was created and raised in the lap of luxury. That was a long time ago and Li Ann had no regrets. Her life was perfect on the outside now, orderly and comfortable. With Victor and Mac, there beside her, waiting in the wings for her attentions, everything was running like a well-oiled machine.

She was happy though, despite the black spot on her soul, which reared its ugly head with regularity, demanding to be fed.

The boys would never understand her 'needs'.

She smiled at her slave, dropping the leash; she slowly circled the fine specimen of a man.

"What's your name, slave?"

"Trevor, Mistress." Trevor's body was lean and muscular; a little shiver rippled up his strong spine.

"My name is Li Ann. You may call me Mistress. What's your safe word?" She ran one fire engine-red lacquered nail in an arc over Trevor's bare chest.

The man quivered again, the he smiled and said, "I don't need a safe word, mistress. I'm yours to do with as you please. You'll keep me safe." He blinked his large chocolate eyes seductively.

"Mmmm," Li Ann purred. "How perfect." She did something that she didn't do with a partner very often; she leaned in and drew his head down and kissed him. This man made her hotter than she'd been for quite some time. As she continued to kiss her slave, Li Ann raised her hand and cupped Trevor's genitals through his leather pants. She was impressed by the young man's early promise.

Unbeknownst to Li Ann, Trevor was a spy. He had been coming to this club on a regular basis, in hopes of attracting the agent's eye. This scene wasn't really him, but he had orders that he would follow to the letter. As he was being kissed and fondled, Trevor gently eased three fingers into the side pocket of his vest and pulled out a small atomizer no larger than a canister of Binaca Blast. He pulled out of the kiss and stepped back.

Li Ann raised her hand to slap the defiant man.

Trevor sprayed her directly in the face. He smiled viciously and said, "We chose you because of your secret, *Mistress* Li Ann. Or should I call you Miss Tsei?"

Li Ann's eyes immediately blurred, she tried to blink them clear, but the fast acting drug was already making her too fuzzy-minded to retaliate.

"You're the weak link, Ms. Tsei. We culled you out of the herd because of it."

Li Ann heard his words, computed what he said and had enough time to realize that whatever was going to happen it was all her own fault. Before she could reply however, everything went dark.

As soon as his target hit the ground, Trevor went to the door and opened it. In walked four men, all of them were from the same triad. The 'family' needed money to support their members in Hong Kong; the Chinese government had arrested many of their brothers in the crack down against gangland crime.

"She's out." Trevor smiled; his godfather would be pleased with his performance and no doubt would reward him for it.

"You did good, Trevor," said the gangster in charge.

The men conversed in Cantonese.

The man in charge reached into his pocket and uncapped a pre-filled syringe. He took a dramatic pause and all five stared at the luminous orange contents. The gangster plunged the small needle into a large vein on the back of Li Ann's hand. "Bottom's up, sweetie," he said, pushing the plunger and injecting the contents.

The orange viscous liquid was not a poison or a hallucinogenic, but small, microscopic sentient robots, called nanocytes. This *virus* came from a source even more powerful than the triad itself. A covert

organisation had provided the nanocytes to the gangsters, who had done a special job for the syndicate. Their triad members had tracked down a nameless member of the syndicate's secret organisation, who had been hiding in Hong Kong.

The syndicate had drugged the woman then took her away and after that, the triad members had no idea what happened her; nor did they care. The woman they had turned over would no doubt, die a brutal death. At least their victim, Li Ann, might live. Americans were so ruthless, especially the covert faction with whom they had bartered for the blonde woman.

The nanos were fast acting. Once they had run through the entire body's blood system, they would settle down and begin replicating their ranks. As they reproduced, the nanos would mature and slowly start to take over Li Ann's healthy red blood cells. If the nanos were left to run rampant, her body would eventually become oxygen deprived and shut down all together. Only a very specific antidote would stop the nanites progress.

The gangster with the needle stood up. He capped and pocketed the syringe. Li Ann was out of it. "Pick her up. We want to make the drop without any witnesses."

Li Ann didn't know it, but soon her life would be left solely in her male partner's hands.

4:00 a.m.

"What?" husked Victor sleepily into the phone. Its annoying ring had pulled him from a very pleasant slumber. He squinted at his bedside clock.

"Vic, it's Mac. I wake you up?"

Victor laughed softly and scrubbed at his scalp. "Yes. I was sleeping, it is 4 a.m. you know." He sat up straighter, his head cleared a little. "What's wrong, Mac? Why are you calling so early?"

"I just hung up with the Director. She told me to phone you and that we were to get into work immediately. It's some sort of an emergency."

Victor rubbed at his eyes. "What's the emergency? Did she say?"

"I don't know, she wouldn't tell me. She said to pick you up then get right over to the agency. I'll be there in twenty minutes."

"Okay. I'll be downstairs waiting."

Outside his building, Victor paced up and down the sidewalk in the cold pre-dawn air. His breath came out in visible clouds; dewy air carried them away. For the nth time, he checked his watch. Mac wasn't even late yet. Victor heard the familiar hum of Mac's BMW and he looked up from his wristwatch in time to see his partner pull to the curb. He gracefully pulled the black beamer's door open and climbed in. He greeted Mac warmly, being together and working together was no longer strained, with or without Li Ann in the equation. Mac and Victor, without even realising it, had settled into a comfortable working relationship that had blossomed into a close friendship. There was nothing like a bomb exploding and a warehouse falling down around you to make one re-examine their life.

"Where's Li Ann?" Mac blurted out when he and Victor entered the Director's large office.

"Sit down, boys, and I'll tell you." The Director spun around in her chair and faced the two handsome men.

Mac, sensing the seriousness of the situation, skipped his usual round of jokes and pulled out a chair. The men sat in unison.

The Director drew their attention to the large television screen on the wall. She pushed a button and a picture of Li Ann slowly materialised.

Mac gasped and Victor uttered, "What the hell?"

On the large screen, there was a picture of Li Ann. It showed her in a hospital bed, the photo looked like it was taken at post mortem. She was so pale that she looked blue... the tint of the dead. Her face was serene and her eyes closed; midnight blue lines feathered out from behind her slim neck and ran over one thin shoulder and clavicle. Victor couldn't tell the colour of the lines that fanned from fingertip to the back of the wrist on both of her hands.

"What's wrong with her?" Mac stared at his former girlfriend's image, almost afraid to find out what had happened.

The Director left the television on, frozen on Li Ann's calm face and Victor felt that somehow Li Ann was still with them, sitting through the briefing.

"Last night..." the Director's voice pulled both of the agent's attention back to her and away from the screen. "...Li Ann was found at the entrance to the agency. Security cameras filmed her being dumped, unconscious, by four men wearing black balaclavas'. Our specialists have no way of determining the ID of these men; it's moot anyway..." The Director waved her hand, dismissing a stray thought. "...this note was found on her person." She clicked a button on her remote and Li Ann slowly disappeared and a ransom note replaced her. She gave the men a few seconds to read it.

It said:

'Your secret agent has been injected with a unique poison, only we have the antidote. If you wish to save her life, we will trade the cure for the Ming-Na-Zhun cat. We will contact you once it is in your possession.'

"Poisoned?" Mac turned to Victor. "Poisoned." To his superior he directed, "How did they get close enough to her?"

"Yeah," supported Victor.

"I'm getting to that. When Li Ann was dropped off she was wearing an outfit to rival any in my personal closet." The image on the screen switched and a picture of a patent leather bodice with full sleeves replaced it. "She's been frequenting an S&M club, that's where they got to her. They *wanted* us to know where she

was..."

"Li Anne? S&M? No way!" Victor didn't buy one word of it. Neither did Mac for that matter and he said so.

"Well believe it!" Snapped the Director. "Li Ann has been visiting the club, 'Leather or Not...' for over three years. We know it for a fact, and obviously who ever poisoned her knew it too."

"No!" Mac denied the Director's harsh words. "That would mean she was going there when her and Victor were still engaged. No. I don't believe it. She wouldn't hangout at some sleazy leather bar. Never!"

Victor sighed heavily and ran his fingers through his short hair. If Li Ann had been frequenting that club, he certainly had no evidence of that. "I'm with Mac. No way would she go to a place like that. She hates freaks and kink."

The Director glared at the older male agent. "Oh you *would* side with him." She was frustrated that her agents wouldn't believe such a thing of their female partner. Didn't they know that everyone had a dark side, including them; it was just that Vic and Mac hadn't found theirs... yet. Sighing to herself, she sat in her chair and spoke calmly. "You two can believe whatever you choose to. Regardless, Li Ann is in trouble... real trouble. Dr. Frye has examined her extensively and he has no idea at this point, what it is exactly, that's coursing through her veins. Only that it is alive and fast acting. As we speak, the virus, for lack of a better word, is replicating itself at an alarming rate. It's evolving and as it does so, it is taking oxygen away from Li Anne." The Director levelled a serious look at the two tense men. "This virus is killing Li Ann a little bit at a time. Dr. Frye estimates that at its current rate of growth, Li Ann will be dead in seventy-two hours. You have three days, gentlemen, to find who did this to her and why. And most importantly, three days to find the antidote."

"What about the Ming-Na-Zhun cat? Shouldn't Victor and I be stealing it?" Mac interrupted his boss.

"What exactly, is the Ming-Na-Zhun cat anyway? And where is it?" Victor directed his questions to his partner. He didn't like not knowing all the facts.

The Director took back the conversation. "It's a priceless piece of art that dates back over 1500 years to the Ming-Na dynasty in China. The cat is carved from a single piece of jade and depicts a snow leopard leaping from a tree branch. It's no bigger than a man's fist."

Victor made a fist with his right hand and then looked at it to give him an idea of the size.

The director clicked her remote and a photo of the treasure in question appeared. The tiny sculpture was beautiful, carved from the darkest, purest green jade known to man. The statuette was amazingly intricate. The tree's branches, which the leopard leaped from, were exquisitely accurate. The hind legs of the snow leopard were still on the branch and the cat's body was suspended in air; even the ripples of fur were carved into the cat. Both men could see why it was priceless.

"Emperor Ming-Na-Zhun commissioned an unknown court artist to carve it. Some say it was Ming-Na-Zhun himself who did the work. It's worth millions on the underground art market. Due to political unrest in the home country, Chinese officials worried for its safety, sent it here, to their embassy for safekeeping. It's under the tightest security possible. Rumour has it that the room holding the carving is rigged with lasers that when triggered, unleash a hail of bullets and tear gas."

"Well, I love a challenge. So where do we begin?" Mac was determined to get the sculpture.

"You don't. The agency will only breach the embassy as the last resort..."

"What!" Both Victor and Mac interjected at the same time.

"I am tired of being interrupted!" Snarled the Director, her patience gone. "So shut up and let me finish!" She was the recipient of two scowls, but the men closed their mouths and sat back in their chairs. "Now... as I was saying. Stealing the artefact is a last resort. I want you two to go down to Leather or Not and find out everything you can about the club, Li Ann, and the people that did this to her. The place is open 24/7. Do whatever it takes to find the information you need."

She gave each man a frank stare. "Whatever you have to... Got me?"

Mac screwed up his face, unsure of her meaning. Victor however, had a pretty good idea of what she meant. He nodded in silent affirmation.

"Good. Now get out. I'll phone the minute we know more about Li Ann or the virus." She handed a dossier on the club, 'Leather or Not...' over to Victor.

The men rose and started to leave. The Director called out after them, "Be sure to dress appropriately."

She switched off the monitor and looked at her watch. It was only 6 a.m. She hadn't even been to bed yet. Though the Director was tired, she wouldn't leave the agency until the situation was resolved. She had a small room upstairs, above her office where she would stay. She stood, locked all of the doors, and then ascended the stairs. Everything she needed was there, including a rack of designer clothes.

The Director left a wake up call for 10 a.m.; then, clothed only in a shiny black chemise she crawled into the small bed. It was the very same bed that she and Li Ann had once made love in... sweet and slow love. Unfortunately, they had only done it that one time; Li Ann had decided that she was het all the way after that. The Director smiled in remembrance, and then she was asleep.

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Hour 12: Victor's apartment

Mac rapped twice on Victor's door and not waiting for an invitation to enter, walked right in to the apartment. The young agent didn't have to wait to be let in anymore, he and Victor had exchanged keys ages ago, for one of those, 'just in case' scenarios that seemed to always be popping up. At the time, Mac couldn't figure out why Li Ann had not wanted to do the same.

"I'm here," announced Mac to an empty room.

"I'll be right out," called Victor from the bedroom. He did the buttons on his pants up and studied himself in the mirror.

Not bad, he thought, with a small frown, *for a guy my age!* He shrugged and went to greet his partner.

Victor had his head down, tucking his shirt into his pants when he entered the living room. "I hope this fits into the club okay, it's the most daring thing I own... Li..." He stopped moving and finished his task as he spoke. He looked up to see that Mac was staring at him, a minute grin played at the edges of the younger man's full mouth. "Heyyy... Butch!" commented Victor, laughing softly after seeing what his partner was wearing. He scanned his own clothes again then said in an ironic tone, "Let me guess, Li Ann bought your outfit for you."

Mac studied Victor's attire in return and as he did so a familiar gremlin whispered into his large ear, reminding him of something that he already knew all too well; that Victor was good-looking.

Strange, thought Mac, he'd never really considered men to be his 'thing', though he had messed around a few times.

But Victor was another story.

Perhaps it was the fact that they were so close now; they worked long hours with one another and spent most of their recreation time together. Over time, as they talked, confided, and joked with one another each man slowly fell under the others spell.

It was only that neither one realized it yet.

Or rather, Victor hadn't consciously clued in yet.

Mac, on the other hand, had. He knew exactly what was going on and the subtle changes in their dynamic set all of his nerves on end. What Mac didn't know however, was that Victor had looked at other men before; but that's all the former cop had done... look.

The older, seasoned agent had no previous experience with male-to-male sex.

"Yes, she brought this for me one night about three months ago. She wanted me to model it for her. I thought she was joking but I guess she wasn't. I told her that this getup wasn't my ticket... and so typical of Li Ann she walked out on me, leaving this behind. I didn't tell you because it was too embarrassing. She do the same for you?" Mac swept his hand in front of Victor.

Victor returned the smile. "Li Ann gave me these clothes quite awhile ago, while we were still together. I couldn't figure it out at the time, I mean, I'm a jeans and T-shirt kind of guy; she knows that." As he spoke, Victor's eyes roamed over his taller, younger partner. He made for a nice picture. Mac was

dressed in black leather pants latticed in X's' on the outside of his legs from ankle to thigh. There was bare skin showing and it was obvious to Victor that Mac wore no underwear. The pants, like Victor's, were much too tight for any style of undergarments. Mac also had on a white T-shirt and a black leather vest that hung open. Perched on his head was a black leather motorcycle hat. The hat matched his Dayton boots. Actually, the outfit looked good on Mac. It suited his lean lines, though Victor wasn't so sure about the hat.

Victor himself was garbed in a pair of chestnut-brown leather pants. They were a simple design; slim legged and form fitting, Victor's hipsters were far from his usual style. Instead of a button and zipper, there were four brass buttons, hidden by a leather flap. On top, he wore a deep emerald green, short-sleeved shirt that hugged every muscle of his torso and well-developed upper arms. The material was lightweight and semi-opaque. The green colour was so dark that it looked almost black. Visible through the sexy shirt were two silver hoops running through each areola of Victor's pert nipples. A matching silver chain connected the hoops.

Mac's eyes drank in his partner before he finally rested them on the older man's chest. The silver glinted and he felt a pull in his groin.

"You look good, Mac," Victor said, his voice soft.

Mac stepped even closer to his partner and reached out. He gently drew a fingertip over Victor's left nipple. It immediately puckered to a small nub. "I didn't know you had anything other than your ear pierced." Mac's breath came out a little bit heavier.

Victor smiled shyly. "I had them done when I joined vice. It's an initiation thing for the guys. The whole squad goes out together and gets pissed; women included. Then the men take the new guy out and get him pierced. The ladies are smart enough to go home before going to the body-piercing parlour. I wore these..." Victor fingered the other hoop, raising it into a matching nub, "right up until Li Ann and I broke up. She always liked them, but after having my heart broken, I put them away. I wear them now and again just so the holes don't grow over."

"I like them." Mac boldly stroked his hand over Victor's chest, seeing how far his partner would let him go. Victor's shirt was so tight, that Mac could feel that the hairless skin beneath. "I never realized you waxed your chest before." He felt like that was something he should have noticed before.

"Well, in this shirt I kind of have to. Besides, you wouldn't be able to see the rings for chest hair otherwise. There's an aesthetician who works out of her apartment down the hall; she did it for me after you dropped me off..." He stopped talking and stared at Mac's roving hand, transfixed, unable and unwilling to tell the younger man that he shouldn't be touching him that way. That the fingers were to intimate a stroke for friends. Victor thought that if anything, he wanted his partner to explore his body a little bit closer.

Finally, Mac drew his hand away slowly, and the two of them simply stared at each other. They stayed that way for several heartbeats.

It was easy for the other to see why Li Ann had loved both of them.

Mac swallowed hard, he was giving in to the whispering gremlins. The sexual tension in the room had suddenly taken a sharp upward turn. Both men felt it and reacted to it with increased respiration. Mac broke the eye contact first when he leaned down to the slightly shorter man and kissed him full on the lips. There was no hesitation from Victor as he ardently returned the kiss. Mac wrapped his fingers through Victor's short hair and pulled him even closer to his body. He poked his tongue out and prodded Victor's plump lips. Victor responded by opening his sensual mouth and inviting Mac's slippery tongue in. After a few seconds more, their necking deepened... finally, it was Victor who pulled away.

"That freak you out?" Asked Mac, in a frank tone, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. His pupils were dilated to their fullest and his erection pushed against the confines of the leather pants.

"Not really," husked Victor, his reply honest. He blushed then and cleared his throat, stepping back a pace. "We should talk, Mac." His erection was making silent promises to Mac's interested eyes.

"Okay," Mac said, reluctantly tearing his eyes off of Victor's crotch. This was happening so fast. One minute he was thinking about how attractive Victor was and the next he was kissing him and being thoroughly tongued in return.

The younger agent smiled and thought to himself *love amongst the ruins*.

Perhaps it was best that they took a few minutes. Because along with his beauty and wanting to kiss his partner, seeing Victor naked was also on Mac's mind. And *that* they didn't have time for... right now. Luckily, it wouldn't always be so.

Victor gestured toward the couch. Mac sat and Vic joined him. "I wanted to talk to you about what the Director said earlier..."

The older agent blushed again and suddenly Mac found his partner irresistible.

"...about doing what it takes to get the information. She's not referring to using violence as a means to find our answers."

Mac nodded in response.

"Well, I think we'll get more answers if we go in as a couple..." Victor ducked his head, slightly embarrassed.

Mac liked the idea of that, but he didn't immediately say so.

Victor rattled on, "I know for a fact that we won't get in the front door any other way. Inside if we're *together* a witness might be more apt to come forward."

"Yeah..." Mac started to say, but Victor was not quite done talking.

"I know that sounds like a come on, especially after kissing you, but I swear it isn't. There's something going on between us; suddenly everything has changed and I... I like it..."

Victor's cheeks still flamed red and his beautiful eyes were alluringly, wide open. Mac could see the sincerity in them, the younger man certainly knew his partner well enough to know what he was thinking.

And up until early this morning, he would have said the same for his other partner.

Mac pushed Li Ann away and concentrated on what his partner was talking about.

"...I want to... er... I mean, we should... explore... *this* you know, what's going on with us... it's just that the timing sucks..."

Finally, Mac took mercy on the waffling Victor. "I agree with you," he said.

Victor looked up, amazed. He shut his open mouth. *Mac agreed? He wanted to explore a possible relationship as well between them too?*

"You're right. We'll never get into the club as het singles. And if we are together, I'm certain we'll dig up more information than if we pulled the 'Men in Black' routine. I like what's happening between us too. I want to discover exactly what is going on, but I don't agree that this is bad timing at all..."

Victor arched one sable brow, dubious.

"Really," he tried to look earnest. "We kissed Victor, really kissed. When we're holding hands in the club, it will be real. Not an act." He grinned, his father always did say he should been a lawyer with the way he could argue his case.

Victor nodded, then smiled. "Okay, so we're the start of an *us*."

"Yep, we're a couple. God you are so cute!" Mac leaned over and kissed Victor's small nose then kissed his lips. He lingered there, relishing in the softness of the older man's mouth, he sought out Victor's tongue, using his own as a probe.

Victor, sensing Mac's growing ardour, pushed the taller man back gently. "We should get going." He stood and Mac followed suit.

"Maybe you're right. The timing does suck," complained the young agent.

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The cameras, which rolled twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, caught everything the two men had just done. In a few short hours, the Director would have already viewed them.

Every agent, under the agency's control had his or her apartment bugged. Each agent, including Mac and Victor, had found several devices in their places and had removed them. The *discovered* devices were only decoys however. The real cameras were so small, and concealed so cleverly, that they would never be found.

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Leather or Not...

Because of his days in Vice, Victor was slightly more experienced than Mac when it came to dealing with persons in the business of sex. He spoke to the girl sitting at a large, ornate desk in an outer lobby of the club. Standing on either side of the entrance that led into the private society, were two huge, hulking bouncers. Neither measured under the 6'6" mark. Mac felt dwarfed when he cruised by them later.

Victor had decided that honesty was the best way to go under the circumstances. "Hi." He smiled and the pretty girl returned the greeting pleasantly. "My partner and I would like to come in and check your place out. Would that be all right?"

At the mention of *partner* her smile faded. "Partner? You two cops?" She was suspicious now and the two toughs manning the doors perked up at her tone.

"No, not cops," Victor said, "but we are partners, working and otherwise..." he let that thought dangle alone before continuing. "We're private investigators. Last night, a girl we both care deeply about, was hurt in this establishment."

The girl grew alarmed; she hadn't heard anything about that. "Who was hurt?" she demanded. Her bosses would not stand for any non-con bullshit; they ran a clean place.

"Relax," soothed Victor in a voice he formerly used on street kids and victims. "She was taken out of here unconscious by four men. We just want to find out who hurt her and why. It wasn't a regular who did it, that much we know for sure." The former cop had no way of knowing whether or not a regular member of the club was involved, but it was best to paint a picture the young woman wanted to see.

Assuaged by Victor's declaration that no one she knew was involved, the girl asked, "When did you say this happened?"

"Last night, around midnight."

The young woman was sympathetic to the men. "Well, there won't be anyone in there from last night; come back tonight around ten." She handed Victor a pass to get in, which he put in his leather jacket pocket.

Mac stepped up next to Victor. He smiled at the girl casually then pulled Vic's hand into his own. Victor pressed a reassuring squeeze into the younger man's palm. "Would it be okay if we go in and look around now? I promise we'll behave."

The receptionist eyed both men, but then relented. They didn't look like a couple of guys who only wanted to get inside and bash the other patrons. They seemed genuine, if not more than a little nervous. "Okay, go on, but please respect the members."

"We will. Promise," swore Mac solemnly, winking at the pretty girl.

"I'm surprised. I thought these types of places didn't open until midnight, not eleven in the morning." Mac still held Victor's hand and let him lead the way down a dark hall, lit only by black lights.

The strange purplish bulbs made Victor's teeth appear even whiter than usual. "Places like this are always open for business." Victor squeezed Mac's hand tighter and pushed open a second set of doors.

A wall of music immediately assaulted the two. Techno-pop blared out of a bank of floor to ceiling speakers.

The agents took a few minutes to familiarise themselves with the floor plan of the place. There were four different bars and two gigantic dance floors, which even at this early hour, had dozens of people on each. Men and women danced with each other or with partners of their own sex. Mac watched as two men slow danced to a tune no other but they could hear. On the very same dance floor two women gyrated, several feet apart; the loud pop music possessing them.

Anything went in a place like this.

There were numerous tables and booths on the ground floor. In the corner near the washrooms, there was another unmarked door, which was guarded by a bouncer. The burly bouncer was tall and heavily muscled, poured from the same mould as the ones at the club's entrance. Victor couldn't be sure, but he assumed that behind the squared jawed man and beyond the security door was the private 'play' rooms for patrons.

Most private clubs had them, so apparently did this one. Victor leaned in and shouted into Mac's ear his thoughts about the extra door. Mac nodded and the two of them continued with their assessment of the inside of the private club. There was a second floor for those who chose to actually speak to one another.

People watchers could sit at a table above and watch the goings on below.

Satisfied, that he knew where all the exits were, Victor nodding toward the stairs then shouted at Mac over the loud music, "Why don't you go get us a table and I'll grab us something to drink. What do you want?"

"Long Island ice tea." On impulse, Mac kissed Victor on the lips. A small grin curved the corners of his expressive mouth afterwards.

Victor winked and then walked away; both of them were completely aware of the looks they were receiving.

Victor's cheeks reddened slightly from the attention but the lighting hid it and Mac's grin faded the second he had turned from his partner. Mac didn't want lascivious looks from anyone other than Vic.

"Hi." The bartender stroked his eyes up and down Victor in blatant appraisal. "What can I get you?" He grinned at the tall brown haired man.

"Two tequila shooters, two Corona's and lime, please."

"Coming right up." The bartender, blond with classic boy-next-door looks, chatted amicably as he set about his business of getting the drinks. "I haven't seen you in here before..." He raised his brows to the customer, seeking a name.

"Victor," came the reply.

The barman nodded, the name suited the customer; he was very butch. "Victor," he repeated once. "I'm Greg." He reached out his right hand and Victor took it. Greg held Victor's hand a fraction of a second longer than what could be considered *innocent* before letting go.

Greg opened the beer and stuffed a small slice of lime in the mouths of both bottles. He poured a pair of tequilas, using a good brand, not the house kind, even though the handsome patron had not asked for it. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Victor nod in approval. He put the four drinks on a tray along with a small paper cup holding two large lime wedges and then deposited a saltshaker next to the cup.

"Twenty-four dollars... please," said the bartender just before a large yawn escaped him. He quickly covered his mouth, trying to stifle it.

Victor reached into the pocket of his jacket and pulled out two twenties. He put them on the counter for the bartender. "Keep the change." He was just about to leave when the bartender yawned again while collecting the money.

The thirtyish blond haired, blue-eyed man shot Vic an embarrassed glance. He put the bills in the register and stuffed the change into his pocket. "Sorry," he said.

An idea came to Victor but before he could ask Greg a question, the man asked him one first.

Greg leaned forward and studied the man before him intently. "Listen," he said, "I never hit on the clientele, but for you, I'll make the exception. Would you like to go for coffee sometime?" The blond boldly reached out and stroked the back of Victor's smooth hand.

Victor blushed and he wished he'd just quit doing that, but it had been a very long time since a stranger had found him attractive enough to make a pass; it was flattering... ego building. Still, there was Mac to consider. "Well..." he hesitated for a beat. "...as nice as that would be..." Victor tried to be diplomatic,

"...I'm with someone. It's still kind of new." Victor looked up to the second floor, to where Mac was sitting, watching him interact with the man behind the bar.

Greg's eyes followed Victor's. He saw a younger guy scowling down at them. The bartender shrugged affably, you couldn't win them all. "Okay. Fair enough. Victor. Do you mind if I ask you a question though?"

"No what?"

"Well, you don't really look the type who likes being spanked or who gets off on dominating another."

The astute agent saw his opening and took it. He leaned forward and said in a conspiratorial tone, "I'm not. Neither one of us is..." Both looked up at Mac again, who was still studying them closely.

"But I thought you said..." Greg started to step back as he spoke.

Victor rested his hand on top of Greg's, halting the man's retreat. "No. I wasn't lying about that Greg. Mac and I really are *together*. It's just that this..." He gestured toward the interior of the club, "...isn't for us."

Greg nodded in understanding, this place wasn't his cup of tea either, but it paid well while he went to school.

"We work for a detective agency. A girl, who works closely with us, well, she likes to come here." Victor reached under his shirt and pressed between bare skin and his pants waistband was a plastic covered photograph of Li Ann. He passed it off to the handsome bartender, who took it and examined it closely. "Were you by chance working last night?"

Greg handed the picture back, his fingers brushed over Victor's as the agent took the photo back. "As a matter of fact, I worked from 6pm last night until two this morning. It's my regular shift. I'm only in right now because the girl who's supposed to start at ten called in sick. I live pretty close and I could use the extra cash, so I took the shift." He unconsciously licked his lips. "I'm kind of glad I did now."

Victor smiled and slipped the photo back under his shirt, giving Greg an unsolicited view of his lean waist. "Her name is Li Ann and somebody hurt her really bad last night while she was here. Mac and I are trying to find out whom. Do you recognise her?"

"Yeah. Yah, I do. She's a regular..." Greg stared into the air, trying recall the details. "...she comes in about once a week, sometimes more, sometimes less. She never *goes* for the help if you know what I mean; it's against the rules anyway. I saw her talking to a tall Asian guy last night, but then I got busy and I don't know from there... Chuck might be able to help." Greg went on to explain who Chuck was.

"Thanks for your help, Greg." Victor held his palm out and the two shook hands again.

"If you should ever find yourself single..." tried Greg.

Victor smiled and pulled his hand away. He did not reply to Greg, instead, he winked at the good-looking bartender then picked up his tray of drinks.

Back at the table, Mac had watched the handsome blond brazenly flirt with Victor. A spike of jealousy hammered through him. Mac thought that if the bartender got any closer to Victor he'd have to go down there and let the man know that his partner's attentions lay elsewhere. As he was studying them, they both swung their pretty heads and looked up at him. Mac wondered what was being said. When Victor pulled Li Ann's picture out from his hip, the agent could guess the conversation... now. Finally, the men parted and as Victor made his way to the table, Mac glared even harder at the blond. The bartender however, did not notice the menacing looks because he was too busy watching Victor's ass as the agent departed. Mac turned away and watched his... what...? partner approach? The younger man wasn't sure where to classify his relationship and Victor yet. *Lover* was too much; all they'd done was kiss. Yet, the platonic part of their friendship was over with.

Perhaps partner was the best descriptive for now.

Mac thought of many things he could say to Victor, all of them pertaining to and condemning the flirtatious bartender, but common sense prevailed and he held his jealous tongue silent on that subject. "I asked for a Long Island," he said benignly. His tequila gone; Mac sucked the lime wedge.

"I know," shrugged Victor unapologetically. He followed suit and drank the juice of his lime, but he took it a step further and pulled the pulp from the zest and ate it.

Mac copped a face; he preferred sweet to sour.

"When you pay, you can order what you want," stated Victor, poking the lime into his beer before taking a drink. He set the clear bottle down. "The bartender says he saw Li Ann here last night, that she had her sights set on tall, good-looking Asian guy. But other than that he hasn't got a clue." Victor took another swallow from his bottle. "Greg says we should talk to a doorman named Chuck." He pointed toward the large bouncer protecting the unmarked door at the back of the club.

"Greg?" Mac said, seemingly casual, but it really bothered him that Vic was already on a first name basis with the man who looked like he should be out surfing, not schlepping drinks in a kink club.

Victor laughed.

"What?"

As if he didn't already know. Mac's tone was a bit defensive; Victor could hear it. "Jealous already, Mac? And here we've only been a couple for three hours. How sweet." Victor stood up and held out his hand. "Come on."

"Don't mock me Victor." Mac accepted the offered palm and let his partner pull him up. He wasn't angry with Victor, just with all those who would dare to insinuate themselves into his partner's life.

"I'm not mocking you. I promise. Let's go see what Chuck has to say." Walking through the cavernous club, Victor never once let go of Mac's warm hand.

Back in the car, Mac groused about how Chuck knew nothing. "Come back tonight..." he exaggerated. The man had sniffed indifferently and looked at them like they were a pair of cockroaches.

"Well, what else could he say? If he wasn't working, he wasn't working," reasoned Victor.

After that, both fell into silence for the rest of the drive home. Both thinking the same thing, but it was Mac who brought *it* up first, over coffee at his place.

"How could Li Ann be into that scene? Vic?" They were sitting in Mac's living room; Victor was in a large leather armchair and Mac was seated opposite him on the couch.

"I don't know Mac. But you knew her first. Was there any indication that she liked to play rough? Did something bad happen to her to make her that way?"

"I don't think anything too bad happened. From what she told me, just the usual over zealous Catholic sister shit..."

"Catholic...?" queried Victor, he was thinking about sexual abuse, so was Mac, but it went unsaid.

Mac shook his head finally. "No. I don't think she would have kept *that* from us..." He was fairly confident of that much.

"Well, she managed to hide her participation at the club from us."

Victor could remember a few occasions when Li Ann came right out and denounced the Director, and the kinky private club that she chose to belong to. He massaged the large knot at the base of his neck.

"True, but from what I know after she ditched the orphanage, the Godfather found her soon after. And he's a lot of things, but a molester of young girls... he's not."

Mac was so adamant, that Victor couldn't help but believe him. The older man slumped down in his chair.

"Do you think...?" Victor said softly, his eyes were not on Mac, but focused off to the side of the large room. He was staring at a picture of Li Ann, Mac and himself. "...that the reason Li Ann wouldn't marry me was because I couldn't satisfy her? Because I didn't play her games... she never asked me to!" Victor said, his voice quietly but intense.

The depth of feeling in his partner's voice broke Mac's heart.

"I would have tried if she wanted me to... If it meant keeping her, I would have let her tie me up..." Victor's voice trailed off then stopped all together. The emerald-eyed agent slowly tracked his gaze back to the front until he was looking directly into Mac's chestnut depths.

In return, Mac studied his partner. He loved Victor's eyes; he could get lost in them. If only the older man knew how much his beautiful green eyes could affect people... if only he knew that they showed everything the veteran was thinking.

The emotion pouring out of Victor pierced Mac's very soul. It was obvious to Mac that though Victor was over Li Ann in the terms of a physical attraction, the emotional scars she had left behind had not yet healed.

The truth was that self-doubts still lingered, haunting the older man and making him wonder what it was that he lacked that made him a worthy partner at work, but undesirable as a partner in life.

"Victor... Oh Victor..." Mac went to his best friend and fell to his knees between Victor's wide spread legs. "I don't think it's so much the case that she *didn't* want to play her special games with you, but that she *couldn't* play them with you... or me. It's not us. We weren't the problem; she was. I think Li Ann knew, without having to be told that scenes like what we saw in the club today just aren't what we're about. It's not how we like lovemaking to be. I mean... er..." Mac rose up straight, on his knees, his hands slid up Victor's strong thighs.

Victor, emotionally tense and very aware, was positive that he could feel the lines on Mac's strong palms through his leather pants.

"I'm assuming like me, you prefer your lovemaking to be romantic, slow... loving... no violence involved..." Mac accentuated his words by squeezing after each one. He ran his hand over Victor's impressive bulge.

Victor gasped at the initial touch; his breath came out soft and airy. "Yes, I like romance..." His erection screamed to be freed from its sensuous leather confines.

"Me too," was all Mac said before leaning in and capturing Victor's mouth and holding his tongue hostage. He pushed his partner back farther into the comfortable armchair. While they kissed, each yanked the other's shirt out from the waistband. Mac pulled out of the kiss just long enough for them to strip the shirts off completely. The younger man grinned lasciviously once Victor's chest was bare, and went for his partner's sweet lips again, this time attacking the kiss with even more fervour.

With one hand, Mac gently ran his fingers through his partner's short sable locks. With the other, he expertly undid the four buttons that made up the fly of the pants. Victor sighed and thrust his hips upwards when Mac's soft fingers caressed his hard shaft. Without breaking the marathon kiss, he manoeuvred Victor out of his tight pants, and then eased the older man back into the chair's cool leather. Mac worked his way out of the kiss and slid his wet slippery lips across Victor's slightly stubbled, rounded jaw from chin to lobe and back again.

Mac took full advantage of the situation; this was a fantasy come to life for him.

Deep down, he'd always known that he and Victor would be good together. That they would eventually end up in bed together. The way his partner moaned his pleasure, Mac knew that the feelings were mutual. He slowly worked his way across his lover's firm neck, then down that incredibly sexy, smooth chest; a turn on all on it's own. All the time Mac kept gently caressing Victor's body. One hand bringing pleasure to the older man's considerable erection; the other running feather light touches across his hardened nipples. None of the ministrations were rough or demanding and the sensual slowness of Mac's attentions was an aphrodisiac unto itself. Mac thought that there was something so illicit, so thrilling about having Victor naked and squirming beneath him while he was still half clothed.

The younger man trailed kisses down the middle of Vic's luscious chest and kept on going; making sure to pay attention to the flat stomach rippling under his lips with anticipation. Finally, he reached his target and Mac flicked out his tongue, licking a giant pearl of moisture from the tip of Victor's cock.

"You don't have to..." breathed Victor, his deep green eyes flaring with lust.

Mac smiled to himself, judging by his partner's body language, he really *should*. "I want to taste you." Mac's hand was joined by his mouth; within a few short seconds, Victor erupted down his lover's talented throat.

And Mac was eager to accept all of his lover's offerings. The younger man swallowed everything and then came up for air. He crawled up between Victor's splayed legs and kissed him. Victor could taste his own essence in Mac's mouth and the very thought of doing so, both enflamed and repelled him.

"That was so good." Victor pulled Mac up to his chest and hugged him tight. "Thanks."

The younger man grinned devilishly. "Well..." he demurred, "...you can repay the favour in the shower; we stink like cigarettes." Mac wrinkled his nose and sniffed. He stood up and pulled Victor up with him by the hand. Then he led the nude man to his bathroom.

As soon as the movement in the living room ceased, the cleverly hidden camera in the living room stopped filming. The camera hidden behind the small speaker of the wet radio hanging in the shower stall took over and yet another tape for the Director—for the agency's arsenal—was created.

What a show Victor was putting on for the lenses. He was on his knees before Mac, swallowing down all he could of the younger man's cock. The older agent presented a very erotic image for all to see. The hot water sluiced through his short, thick sable hair, droplets of warm water cascading over his taut muscles, green eyes unfocused and hidden behind a fringe of long dark lashes. One hand assisted him during the blowjob. He had two long nimble fingers of the other hand buried deep inside Mac's tight ass.

The younger man was ready to cum; he only needed one more thing. "Look at me, Vic," he demanded softly. And Victor did, he raised his eyes and in them, Mac could see how much Victor wanted to please him, which was all it took, that, and a clever finger raking over his prostate. Mac grunted and thrust his hips out; he pulled Victor's head closer to his crotch, wanting his cock as deep inside of Victor's luscious mouth as he could get it.

While Mac came, Victor gagged, but he fought the reflex and triumphed, but he was still unable to swallow all of his lover's spunk. Embarrassed by his inexperience, Victor discretely spit the thick liquid out and the water, still hot, carried it away.

"Sorry." Mac helped his lover up and hugged him. He had seen what Victor had done.

"No. I'm the one who should be sorry. I'm not very good at..." Victor blushed. There was a time, back in vice, when nothing would have bothered him. Now it seemed everything embarrassed him. Perhaps it was simply because of the company he was in.

Mac smiled and kissed his red-cheeked lover. Despite the eight years difference in their ages, Mac was the one in control. Neither one seemed to mind though. "You were awesome... the best ever." He reached behind Victor, whom he still held tightly to his furry chest and turned off the water. "Come on, I'm tired. Let's get a nap in so we will be fresh for later."

Once dried, the two snuggled up naked in Mac's large bed. They talked for a few minutes before falling asleep. "Were there very many men before me?" asked Victor, feeling both insecure about his own abilities to please and jealous at the same time.

"A few. None of them memorable." Mac squeezed Victor's thigh under the blankets.

The gesture made Vic smile.

"You?" Mac asked, trying to keep his own voice even. Just watching that blond bartender flirt with Victor had enraged him; he wondered how he would feel finding out that there had been other men before him.

"No, none," came the whispered reply to the question.

"No one? Ever?" Mac was amazed. Victor was obviously receptive to being with a guy. He was so damn good-looking; Mac couldn't believe that no man had managed to pick Victor up. Perhaps his partner never wanted to be *picked up* before. Mac couldn't help but feel honoured.

"Never." There was a brief pause of silence. Victor was embarrassed by his virginity and quickly changed the subject. "I hope we find this triad's hangout. Because if we don't, then the consequences will kill Li Ann."

"Don't worry, we won't let her down." He gave his lover's strong thigh another reassuring squeeze. Mac's confidence soothed Victor, he didn't know if he could live with not saving her life.

They stayed silent after that and a few moments later Victor drifted off. Mac easily recognised the sounds of slumber so he turned and propped himself up on one elbow and studied his older lover. Yes, lover... his lover. Just thinking about *that* made the young agent smile at Victor. Mac could hardly believe the path the two of them had taken. In just a few short, hectic hours, everything had changed between them, a change for the better. He ran the tip of his finger over one sable brow, and grinned again, he gently cupped the side of Victor's face and staring down at the peaceful man he said softly, "I love you Victor Mansfield. I'll never hurt you the way Li Ann did." Then Mac sealed the oath with a soft closed mouth kiss.

He lay back down and shut his eyes, allowing himself to be taken to the realm of dreams.

"It's becoming worse. Nothing we've done has made a difference." Dr. Frye stood over Li Ann's bed, writing in her chart and speaking to the Director at the same time. "She's due for a major vascular event. It's only a matter of time."

"How long?" The Director's tone was cold and detached, just like Dr. Frye's, but deep inside she was broken-up about the young woman.

"In another fifty-six hours, she'll be dead. Her blood has things in it... that we've... never seen before... only heard about."

The petite redhead sighed. Some days, she really hated her job. "What exactly is the virus?"

"Nanocytes, replicating at an alarming rate."

The Director led Dr. Frye from Li Ann's room and as they headed from the infirmary to her office, the doctor filled the Director in about the nanos.

"Well, how did the club crawl go, gentlemen?" asked the Director of the two men, knowing full well neither one of them liked the place. She smiled, both agents looked guilty. Good, then it was true then, that Mansfield and Ramsey had sought comfort from Li Ann's deadly predicament in each other's arms. Another Director, the one in charge of surveillance on the agents had told her so, but she didn't dare believe it. After this was over with, she couldn't wait to see the tape of them. The Director in the surveillance room said the tape of the two of them in the shower was so hot that it was practically smoking.

Following their custom, Victor spoke first. He cleared his throat. "We checked out Leather or Not, but the only person who was there last night that we've talked to is a bartender. He said that he remembers seeing Li Ann, that she had her eyes on a big Asian dude. But that's all he knows for sure. The bartender thinks she might have rented a private room. Mac and I will go back later tonight, to talk to the personnel that were on duty."

"Ten bucks says the guy in the club was a plant," stated Mac with confidence. "We'll no doubt find out for sure tonight, but I'm positive the plant is a triad lifer."

"Your dedication to your task is admirable. I talked to Dr. Frye just before you got here. It doesn't look good, unless we can find the antidote."

Mac cut in with, "Or we manage to steal the Ming-Na-Zhun cat." And received a hard stare from his superior for his observations.

"I'll address that comment in a moment," the Director said coldly, her eyes pinning the agent to his chair. "As I was saying, we discovered that the virus inside of Li Ann is not organic. It's man made."

"Manmade?" Victor's brows knitted together with concern.

Mac glanced at his partner as the older man spoke, and Mac wanted nothing more than to kiss the darling little horizontal crease at the apex between his bridge and brow.

"It's technology that we don't 'even' have yet. Dr. Frye says that there's a syndicate, a consortium, if you will—whose purpose no one knows—who controls the nano-technology. The virus's purpose is to replicate itself; they will take over and kill Li Ann. Dr. Frye says that the antidote would most likely be a floppy disk or a CD. You boys better not fuck this up."

"We know," the men replied, in unison.

"I've dispatched another team. They will attempt to relieve the Chinese embassy of their priceless treasure."

"Who's in the team?" inquired Mac.

Victor answered the question for him. "Who do you think? It's the look-a-likes."

"Can they do the job?" Mac wasn't totally sold on the others.

The Director scowled once more at her younger agent. "Of course they can or they wouldn't be here at the agency, now would they? Have faith Mac, you're such a pessimist."

Victor nodded. "If you believe in them, then I guess we will too."

"Okay, I've got work to do now. You two get out there and call me the second you get anywhere. And I'll keep you apprised of the other team's progress."

Leather or Not...

The two agents flashed their pass at doorman—a different one than this morning—and the large man let them in, no questions asked. He stared at Mac's ass as the two men passed down the long, blacklight-lit hall. The younger man could feel the pug nosed man's eyes on him but it didn't matter, as long as Victor's eyes were on him that's what counted; he didn't give a shit about anyone else.

Once inside, the pair split up. Victor went to the doorman who was watching the locked entranceway to the private party rooms and Mac took up questioning several of the pretty, scantily clad waitresses.

It took Victor just over an hour to question the attendants who looked after the private party rooms. He'd gone behind the secretive closed door and found that there was a whole other bar back there. Victor checked out the room from which Li Ann had disappeared, thoroughly. The distance between the door of the room she had used to the emergency exit was minimal.

To his consternation, while searching the tacky room for clues, he came across a full complement of the 'devices' that were so cherished by the people who lived in the S&M world. The doorman, who kept a close eye on Victor while he examined the large bedroom, said that all the rooms were similarly equipped.

Finally done, Victor stalked the gaudily papered red and gold halls with purpose; he just wanted to get the hell out of there. Once back in the main part of the club he headed for the bar; he really needed a drink. While on his way there, he could feel the stares of many men and women on his back and after a little while, he began to resent the implications behind the lascivious looks.

It had been a long time since he'd felt like this. Not since his days in vice, dangling his ass on the corner trying to reel in a john.

Cheap.

That's how places like this made him feel.

Victor finally managed to reach the bar; the club was packed with leather and vinyl clad patrons. He sat on an empty stool and smiled at Greg, the bartender, who was back to working his usual shift.

Greg flirted with Victor, pleased to see the private detective back again so soon and served him a Corona, but then he was gone again; the place was a hive of activity.

Victor sat and waited for Mac to return. He drank his beer with his eyes down; he was tired of this place.

One pair, out of the many that watched the handsome agent, actually knew Victor. Knew him from before, from his days in vice. The observer smiled: he knew that this place wasn't Mansfield's scene. He'd heard through the grapevine that Victor had left the force, so he must be working for the private sector... once a cop, always a cop. Probably investigating the drugging of that leather chick that liked to shove men around. Bitch deserved it. She was so stuck up; her exterior was a glacier. The observer smiled to himself, he was sure that there was a way to take advantage of the situation.

Finally, Mac joined Victor at the bar and Greg served them each a beer, this time settling for flashing a small smile toward Victor.

Mac gave the handsome blond his best menacing scowl before he took a long pull on his bottle. He put it down and sighed heavily, his fingers massaged his temples. The continuous throb of the music was giving him a headache; perhaps he didn't like Techno as much as he thought. He liked club music as much as the next guy did, but this was too much even for him. "I don't know about you, but this place depresses me. I heard shit tonight... terrible stuff... I never thought I'd hear about Li Ann."

"Yeah, me too," said Victor, his tone unhappy. He was saddened by what he had learned.

"Let's get a table." Mac motioned toward a table tucked in the corner on the bottom floor. As they passed, him the observers eyes tracked the two men; body language told his practised eye that the pair were not only a *couple* but were work partners too. It was also obvious that the younger one of the two was very possessive. The beautiful brown-eyed man had his large hand planted firmly to the base of Mansfield's back, guiding the older cop to a table. The observer grinned. The young one was jealous, that would make his burgeoning plan all the more fun.

Victor started the conversation first. "The door man remembers Li Ann. Says she picked up the tall Asian guy." Mac nodded, they knew already for whom they were looking. "He says that they went to a private room to *party*. The guy has been hanging around for about three weeks now, but no one really *knows* him. Li Ann and the plant were in a room for about five minutes before the doorman allowed three Chinese guys in suits to come in. He'd been paid a thousand dollars to look the other way. The guy who appeared to be in charge of the other two said that it was a fantasy of Li Ann's to be... kidnapped. How's the guy to know the difference? The shit he must see here every single night..." Victor's voice drifted off; this place was giving him the creeps.

"The doorman also said," the agent shrugged off his discomfort and picked up thread, "that Li Ann could get pretty heavy handed at times. She had a reputation for being very hardcore. Apparently she had a taste for hurting men," finished Vic blandly.

The thought that he had been engaged to a virtual stranger rattled Victor so much that it sickened him. How could he not know? He gave a small shudder, the club was creeping him out.

Mac nodded. "I got much the same story too. Except that the guy was young and really good-looking. A waitress was checking him out and when he bent over his vest separated from the top of his pants... She saw a tattoo of a red cobra head at the base of his spine." Mac's voice was hopeful. "She thought it was sexy, that's why she remembered it." The young agent leaned closer to his partner. "The red cobra head tattoo is the mark of a major Hong Kong Triad, the Leung family. Every one just calls them *Red Cobra*. Lately, the Chinese government has been cracking down on the gangs. With the Tsang family in ruins, Red Cobra, as the second largest, could come back into power. It makes sense Vic! Many of the Triad's ranks are in prison or have been executed. An artefact like the Ming-Na-Zhun cat could help them to pick up and relocate elsewhere. With the money the sculpture would fetch, the gang simply pulls into another port and continue their operations from where they left off in Hong Kong."

Victor nodded in agreement; he trusted Mac's instincts when it came to triad activity. He was the expert after all. "Makes sense. Why risk losing more members of the family when you can force others to do your dirty work? They wouldn't want China to know it was really them behind the theft for fear of repercussions."

Mac smiled in agreement then his demeanour abruptly changed and he pushed his empty bottle away in disgust. "I heard the same types of things tonight about Li Ann, too." His smile slipped away. "I don't want to believe what I heard."

"Me either. But why would these people lie to us?" Victor picked at the corner of the label on his beer bottle.

"Yeah, I know," mumbled Mac. "They wouldn't lie. To them, this is normal." He disliked the club and its patrons but it wasn't because they were into sado-masochistic acts. He hated the way that all the men stared at Victor... or the imagined looks. At the moment, no one was actually staring at either one of them.

Except the observer, who licked his lips and stood. He crossed from the shadows to the cop's table. He pulled a chair over from a nearby table and straddled it backwards. "Officer Mansfield," he said, his tone somewhat smug. "How nice to see you again." And he meant it.

Victor squinted at the young man, then his face evened out with recognition. "Tommy Dillon." The former cop's eyes swept over the not half-bad looking Dillon. His heart rate had increased at seeing someone from his old days in Vice, but not dramatically so. He wasn't too worried about seeing any one from those days anymore. Tommy Dillon was just another street punk. Victor's face and mannerisms appeared calm. He snorted, "Figures I'd see you in a place like this."

Tommy smiled, his teeth were even and white and Victor thought that Tommy had changed dramatically. Ten years ago he was a cute sixteen-year old but his teeth were crooked and cavity riddled. Ugly teeth was why Dillon never made a living at selling himself, though he did on occasion do hand jobs for money. Dillon made his way on the streets by stealing, scamming and scheming. Victor had arrested him for a raft of various infractions over the years. He did not comment, however, on Tommy's new crowns. "Mac." He looked to his lover. "Can you please go get me a tequila and a beer?"

"Who's this?" demanded Mac, ignoring Victor's request.

"No one. Just some turd from my days in Vice. Please, Mac, one more drink then we're out of here."

Mac nodded and rose, he scowled at Dillon and warned, "Don't get any ideas." Then he was gone, stalking toward Greg, the bartender.

Dillon smirked at the much taller man but wisely, said nothing. After Mac left, Tommy turned to Victor, "Me... a turd? You hurt my feelings, Officer Mansfield."

Victor gave a small half laugh and shook his head. "You were a scamming little weasel back then, Tommy; just because you're all grown up doesn't mean that anything has changed. What do you want?"

Tommy laughed, he always liked the cop; he never pulled his punches. The people on the street respected that about him. Tommy was amazed to find that he still had a crush on the older Mansfield. "You're right. I'm working some old geezer," the younger man conceded. "Are you working too, Officer?" Tommy picked up Mac's half full bottle of beer and drank from it; he smirked up at Victor, daring him to say something about the beer.

"It's just Victor. I'm not a cop anymore."

"So I heard. But you're still working. These types of dumps aren't your thing. I know that. Unless lover boy gets off in places like these." Tommy liked that about Victor that he wasn't into shit like this.

Victor's eyes narrowed with warning; discussion of Mac was off limits. "I'm with a private agency now." Technically true. "I'm trying run down some skulls wanted for assaulting a woman..."

"Asian girl, tall, looks like a bitch... acts like a bitch..."

Victor cut Dillon off. "Yes." He was surprised that the younger man knew.

Dillon chuckled, reading the expression on the former cop's face. "I know everything, Victor. I told you that once, years ago. I wasn't lying... for a change."

Victor nodded, he remembered. "What do you know about that... about the suspects?"

Tommy reached out and stroked the back of Victor's large hand with his fingers. Victor tried to pull his hand away but Dillon grabbed it and held it still. "Ahh... ahhh... ah," he said in an exaggerated tone. "There's a price for what I know, and believe me, I know something really big about that girl and the poisoning."

Victor's eyes flew open at the mention of poison. Dillon wasn't fucking with him. "How much?" sighed the agent.

"No." Dillon shook his head. "Not money."

"What then?" His eyes dipped, Dillon's hand still holding fast to his wrist.

"You," said the younger man softly.

"No." Victor was adamant. "It was 'no' back then and it's 'no' now." He knew that back in the old days, the teenager had a *crush* on him.

"A kiss Offi... er... Victor. That's all I want, ten seconds of real kissing, tongues and everything. You do want to help your friend don't you? I know exactly what the antidote looks like."

Victor weighed his options, kiss this weasel or Li Ann dies. "Ten seconds. That's it."

Dillon couldn't believe it. He had wanted this for such a long time. "Agreed."

Before the young felon could say another word, Victor leaned in close and lowered his mouth to his. Victor rimmed the perimeter of Tommy's mouth with his tongue, then gently pried the younger man's plump lips open. Tommy's breath was mint on top of vodka, not too bad. As Victor shared his mouth and tongue with Tommy, he mentally counted off the seconds. At exactly ten, he pulled back. "Okay." He wiped his lips and wished for some antiseptic mouthwash. "What have you got?" Victor could see Mac approaching with his beer and tequila.

"You're a great kisser... you know that?"

The agent smiled at his approaching lover, then turned his attention back to Tommy. "I know that," he replied flippantly, shrugging. "Now, what have you got for me?" He suddenly turned serious.

Mac arrived back at the table, stone-faced and suspicious, drinks in hand. He had heard Victor's question and he wanted to know the answers to it.

The young criminal ignored Mac's brooding presence and spoke directly to Victor. "The guy your friend picked up is Red Cobra, he was the bait. When she bit, they were ready. The goon subdued her, then three more Chinese guys in ten thousand dollar suits doped her up with some strange orange shit and took her out of here."

"That, we already knew," warned Mac. "You had better have something good, before I get really pissed off."

Dillon shot the agent a quick look before he again spoke to Victor. "They are from Hong Kong. The Leung family."

"We knew that, too!" Mac growled, banging his bottle on the tabletop. This time he did get a reaction out of Dillon who started at the loud noise.

The practised criminal thought for a minute that lover boy was going to hit him but Victor covered Mac's clenched fist with one calming hand and as quickly as it had been put there, it was gone. And then Victor gave his former informant an ultimatum. "I suggest you get to the point, Tommy." His tone was even and relaxed. Victor knew how Dillon worked; he liked to linger over every little detail.

Finally, Tommy got around to the good information. "The Red Cobra ranks are decimated, they desperately need some cash. They moved to Toronto last spring and set up shop in the Jung family's warehouse over on Sixth Street."

"What about the antidote?" Victor asked with hope in his voice. He could hardly dare to believe the incredible break they were getting.

"It's a yellow floppy disk labelled 'sunshine'." Dillon stood, he had told Victor and his jealous partner enough. He could lose his life for the price of a kiss; the risk had been worth it though.

"How do you know all of this?" Mac asked suspiciously. "Either he's feeding us a line of bullshit or he was there when Li Ann got attacked!" The young agent stared down at Tommy Dillon menacingly.

Dillon did not back down right away. He stood his ground and stared up just as hard. Then he cracked a goofy grin and stepped back. He shrugged affably, "You can believe me or not. Makes no difference to me." His eyes went back to Victor. "It's up to you." Dillon said to the agent, he touched his fingers to his lips for a brief second then spun around and left them.

"Is he telling the truth?" Mac watched Dillon walk away.

"I hope so." Victor drank down half of his beer and let out a soft belch immediately afterwards. "Let's go tell the Director. The sooner we report it the sooner we can run down the floppy disc. Victor really just wanted to get home and brush his teeth. Kissing Tommy Dillon had crept him out and he felt guilty for not telling Mac.

Back at the agency, after they told the Director what Victor's former stool pigeon had said, their boss gave them the bad news.

"The team sent to retrieve the Ming-Na-Zhun cat was caught in the middle of the mission and shot on sight. All three are dead."

"Jesus," Victor murmured.

"The embassy and our agency have covered it up as best we could, but the cat has disappeared underground, I don't know where."

"Shit," uttered Mac softly, under his breath.

"Li Ann's condition has taken a considerable turn for the worse." Both men snapped their eyes to their boss. "It's up to you now, boys. Try not to fuck it up."

"We won't," replied Victor, determined to save his former fiancée's life.

"I've got a team waiting to back you up; Dobrinsky will head it. You two get downstairs and suit up. Wear your mikes. At best, Li Ann's got hours, you'd better hurry up."

Both men beat a hasty exit. The Director had faith that the men would return with the antidote.

Hope and faith, was all she had left.

Both agents discussed their roles in the mission and as usual Mac would be the point man, while Victor watched the rear. Once the floppy disk was in Mac's hands, he would leave first, Victor last. If they got into trouble, Mac had orders from the Director to leave Victor behind. It would be up to the older agent to stop the Red Cobra triad members from pursuing at all costs. Whatever the scenario, the younger agent was to get out of the warehouse as soon as possible.

Mac didn't want to leave his partner behind for anything or anyone. There was a greater stake in all of this now and Mac didn't know if he could choose between Li Ann and Victor's lives. He just hoped it wouldn't come to that. "Let's just try to be extra careful on this one." Mac had instructed his partner after being informed of the 'at all costs' directive.

Victor smiled at that, imagine, Mac Ramsey telling *him* to be careful.

"Yeah," concurred Dobrinsky as he handed a newly loaded 9mm gun to Victor. For once, he agreed with Ramsey.

At the warehouse, Mac and Victor successfully broke in and located a hidden safe. Inside the safe was a yellow disc with the word, *Sunshine*, written on it in large black letters. Mac tucked the disc safely inside an inner pocket of his vest. He patted the spot afterwards, making sure the disc was secure.

"Something's not right here Mac. This break and enter was waaay too easy," Victor murmured.

Mac had time to nod his head in agreement before a barrage of bullets came at them. The spray of hot metal was aimed directly over their heads; both men drew their weapons. Victor had one large gun in each fist; he shoved Mac aside, hard. "Go! I'll follow!" he yelled.

Mac scrambled away on hands and knees with Victor close behind him. They made it through the darkness to the other side of the large, mostly empty warehouse. "You go first..." A bullet pinged off of the piping overhead.

Mac turned away from his lover and started for a small window.

"I got your back..." before he could finish his sentence, a bullet hit Victor squarely in the chest, then two more in quick succession landed near the first bullet. The older agent yelled loudly at the pain and fell backwards, gasping for air...

"Victor!" Mac screamed out his lover's name and ran back for him. It was dark, Mac shone a small light strapped the underside of his wrist toward Victor. The tiny bulb was dim and he could just make out his partner on the floor.

Through pain-wracked eyes, Victor gave his lover instructions. "Go!" he gasped, "Don't worry about me, Mac... you need to get out of here before you're hit too."

"Victor... I..." Another bullet passed inches over Mac's scalp; he felt the air brush the short hairs on top. He knew he had his orders, but he didn't want to carry them out. The Director had chosen Li Ann's life over Victor's. He had no choice... or did he? "I love you Vic..." The young agent's voice faltered slightly.

Suddenly, green eyes cleared. "I love you too... Now go on!" Victor kissed Mac then pushed him away with what was left of his strength before he started to fire blindly in the direction that bullets had coming from. As Mac's body disappeared into the shadows, all Victor could think of was the blood that he felt on the inside of his bullet proof vest—the best available—yet the vest had been unable to stop the projectiles. The seasoned lawman knew he was hit. How bad, was the question. Victor wasn't sure if he should believe the rule, *'it's the wounds that don't hurt which kill you'* or not. At the moment, his chest was aching fiercely and red-hot bolts of pain burst out from the site of the wound and coursed to the tips of his fingers and toes. He clung to the hope that Dobrinsky would rescue him in time. It was no use shouting for help, his mike had been damaged by one of the bullets. Victor didn't know if Mac had made it out or not; he hoped so.

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Mac slipped unseen by his pursuers through the small window. As he ran for his car, his voice raised an octave with panic, shouting out instructions to Dobrinsky and the team. At the time he was unaware that his microphone had been damaged by flying debris; it would be hours later when he would find a large bruise on his clavicle, where the small device had been seated. Assuming Dobrinsky was on top of things, the young agent jumped in his small sports car and sped off, all the while worrying sick for his lover.

Partner.

He realized that the only reason he wasn't turning around and going right back to help Victor wasn't because the Director ordered him not to, but because Victor wanted him to get the disc to Li Ann. At that moment, feedback echoed from his mike, "Fuck!" swore Mac, realising that his mike was malfunctioning. Suddenly, he thought about what he had said to Victor and he wondered if Dobrinsky and the team had heard them; Mac wasn't surprised to discover that he didn't care if they did.

—

Thirty minutes later, Mac was running down the agency halls, toward the infirmary. He found Dr. Frye immediately.

Dr. Frye was already waiting for the agent to arrive. He took the disc from Mac and immediately fed it into a laptop. The doctor pushed play, and both men waited.

Mac watched Li Ann closely; he didn't know what to expect, but it wasn't silence. The computer's volume was working, but there was seemingly nothing on the disc.

"Why isn't there any noise?" Mac was growing nervous; he'd felt like this was a set up from the beginning.

"I don't know why there's nothing but just because we don't hear or see anything doesn't mean there's no noise. There are several frequencies that the human ear is unable to detect, yet a dog will react to them..."

"Please Doc, let's not do this." Mac cut the scientist off; he had no wish to listen to the man drone on about the human ear versus a canine one.

The Director stalked into Li Ann's room just as the computer indicated that the disc was through running.

"Where's Victor? What's going on?" Mac was all over the Director the second she appeared.

She glanced at Dr. Frye who was busy examining the vital signs of the still unconscious Li Ann. She replied to Mac. "I don't know where Victor is right now. Last I heard, the sweeper team was under fire. They were trying to fight their way inside when you didn't report in."

"What!" The agent was horrified; the team waited twenty minutes before going in. Victor could be dead; he had been hit.

"There's a slight change," announced Dr. Frye. "It's subtle, but still, it's a change."

The Director smiled; Li Ann would live.

"Congratulations, you saved your former fiancée's life..."

"At the expense of Victor's." The conflicted agent turned his back on both his superior and the doctor.

—

Mac slipped into the shadows and Victor sighed. He was glad that Li Ann would be saved. He fired into the darkness, a bang nearby drew his attention away for a second, and suddenly, a bright spotlight hit him in the face, temporarily blinding him.

"Freeze," rasped a voice from the dark. The lights in the warehouse came on, and Victor saw the man who had spoken. He was shrivelled, like a rotting apple and smoking a filtered cigarette. There was a twenty-something man standing to his left. The two were the only Caucasians of the large group. The rest, about ten in all, were impeccably dressed Chinese men.

"Who the fuck are you?" Victor sneered. His chest was on fire and throbbing. The stain was growing larger; he could feel the warmth of his blood spreading across his chest. The agent could smell his own blood and it turned his stomach.

A young guy, wearing a white lab coat approached Victor warily. The Asian men had their weapons trained on the agent in case he should threaten the approaching scientist.

Victor however, did not have the energy to put up a fight. He thought that he was about to die and he was grateful that he had told Mac the feelings in his heart.

The former cop loved, and, in return, was loved. That's all that mattered; he could go happy.

The consortium doctor squatted down in front of Victor, whose breathing rasped in his damaged chest. "We finally caught up with you," was all the doctor said before spraying Victor in the face with chloroform. The noxious liquid immediately put the injured agent to sleep. The man pocketed the small atomiser. The Doctor positioned Victor so that he was flat on his back.

The smoking man with help from the younger man knelt down next to the unconscious agent. The doctor walked around the unconscious agent and squatted across from the old man. Victor was prone between them. The scientist pulled Victor's shirt from his waistband then he quickly cut the black cloth away. Beneath the long sleeved shirt there was a state-of-the-art bullet-proof vest. Both consortium men had expected to find it which was why all the men's guns were armed with special ammunition. It was specifically designed with Victor's body armour in mind. An example of the agent's vest had been obtained ahead of time.

The consortium's arms reached everywhere; even a covert government agency in Canada.

The bullets were supposed to penetrate the high-grade Kevlar mix armour, but not his chest bones. The smoking man only wanted to incapacitate his target, not kill him... yet.

The old man flicked his cigarette away without taking his eyes off the drugged man; the doctor proceeded to remove the vest. Below the safety device was a white tank style undershirt. It was stained deep red. The doctor quickly tore away the cotton for a closer look.

The old man lit another coffin nail, he squeezed Victor's left hand... it was real. From the hand the old man moved on to the agent's flat stomach, he stuck his finger inside the deep-set navel. "This isn't Krycek, or one of his clones. Clones have no navels." He took a deep drag off of his cigarette. The old man cupped Victor's face and examined it closely. He turned it this way and that. "Fortunately for this man, he's not Alex Krycek."

Victor's face was fuller than Krycek's, and had no facial nicks; Alex had a few tiny scars on his chin. This close up, the smoking man could easily see the differences between the two. When the report of a Krycek sighting came in, cancer man had set this large, elaborate plan in motion. He needed to get close to Victor to see if he was really Alex Krycek; rogue consortium agent.

It was fortunate for the Leung family that Cancerman's offer came at a time when the triad needed cash and quickly.

"Luckily," declared the doctor, "the bullets worked. They broke the skin and penetrated the flesh, but did not break through the bone. His chest is going to hurt like hell, but he will be okay."

The old man nodded. "The similarity between the two is remarkable," commented the smoking man. "Weathers, you've heard the saying that everybody has a twin?"

"Yes." Replied the doctor, still examining his *patient*.

The old man caressed Victor's handsome face, pausing to gently rub his warm lips. "This young man has the unfortunate gift of being Alex Krycek's look-a-like." The silver head shook in disbelief. "The likeness is uncanny; he'll be a permanent target."

"Well, for about five more seconds maybe." The consortium doctor pulled a syringe out from his pocket. The contents glowed orange.

The old man stopped the doctor's hand in mid-air. "No," he said, tossing his lit cigarette butt away. A member of the triad stepped on it. "The other needle will suffice, Weathers. No need to kill him; one of Krycek's many enemies will find him sooner or later."

The doctor switched needles then injected the contents into Victor's vein at the crook of his left arm.

The two men, old and young alike stood and an Asian thug approached. "It's time to go."

The smoking man nodded, he handed an envelope to the well-dressed man. The gangster took it and smiled. "Too bad you couldn't obtain the cat. It would have been a nice bonus to go along with the five million," the consortium guard dog commented, before lighting up again.

"I'm glad we could do business." The refined gangster offered in perfect unaccented English. Without counting the money, he tucked the envelope into the inside pocket of his suit.

"Me too. Make sure your men outside hold that back-up team for another twenty minutes."

The leader of the triad nodded in confirmation. "Twenty minutes." He signalled to his men and they left leaving the smoking crony and the medical man alone with Victor. The old man lit up again, and inhaled deeply. He squatted next to the unconscious agent. In an uncharacteristic act of gentleness, he brushed the sweat-dampened hair off the man's high forehead.

"You don't know how close you came to dying tonight," he whispered in a rather fatherly tone.

Instead of the nanocytes, the consortium doctor had injected Victor with a drug, which would wipe out the last twelve hours of his memory. The agent would never remember seeing the smoking man or the doctor.

—

Mac was driving the Director crazy with his insistence that *he* go back for Victor, since no one else seemed to *care* if he was dead or alive.

Finally, tired of her agent's nagging, the director lured the troublemaker into an interrogation room and locked him in. She ignored the pounding on the door and the shouted threats, and got on her cell phone and tried to reach Dobrinsky. The room would only hold Mac for so long, eventually the resourceful agent would get out.

That damned car freak's phone kept signalling busy, she slammed her cell shut and stalked to Li Ann's room. Hopefully, she had made some more progress.

—

A full seventy minutes after Mac had first arrived at the agency, Dobrinsky and the sweeper team showed up with a fully conscious but somewhat confused Victor. The Director came storming into the infirmary just as another doctor was settling Victor in a bed in order to examine him.

By this time, Mac had managed to break out of the secure room. He came racing into the small room on his boss' coat tails.

"Victor! Thank God," cried the emotional young man. He elbowed the Doctor, Dobrinsky and The Director out of the way and pulled Victor into a tight embrace. "I thought you were dead... I saw... you were hit in the chest." Victor groaned and Mac eased his grip. "Vic... I was so worried. The Director wouldn't tell me squat; then she locked me in an interview room. I wanted to go back for you, but she wouldn't let me." He glared accusingly over Victor's head at his boss, his eyes whispered, *bitch*. The agent didn't care how it looked with him hugging Victor; he was too relieved to see his lover alive.

The Director shrugged, unapologetic. "I didn't tell you *squat* Mac because Dobrinsky's phone was knocked out in a fire fight. I locked you in that room so I could get a break from your complaining. I knew you'd bust out eventually."

"Sorry, Ace," Dobrinsky piped in, "but those triad soldiers held us back with firepower, we couldn't get close enough to see what was going on." His tone was regretful.

At least this appeased Mac, he stopped shooting knives with his eyes at his boss.

Victor, still crushed to his partner's chest, mumbled something. Mac reluctantly let his lover go. "What?" he said.

"I said," husked Victor, still kind of dopey, "What happened? I don't remember anything."

"Nothing?" Mac was afraid. What if Victor forgot how they felt about each other? What if he forgot that they were lovers? He stood still for a few seconds, staring at his partner, unsure of what to say.

Always sensible, Dobrinsky saw the lull between the agents as an opportunity and pulled Mac out of the way so that Agency's top sawbones could examine Victor.

"Mansfield was unconscious when we came across him in the warehouse." The large man kept Mac pinned firmly to his side. "The whole incident was been a set up from the get-go. They poisoned Li Ann and allowed us to find the antidote. Then at the warehouse, they let Mac escape. As soon as he cleared the perimeter, they opened fire on us and kept us pinned down and unable to reach Mansfield for over twenty minutes. When the firing stopped, we breached the building and found Vic unconscious in the dirt."

"Who administered the first aid? You?" the Doctor asked of the bald agent, his eyes examining the bandages that covered the bloodied wounds.

"No. We found him like that. One of the team found this in the corner." He held up what looked to be a rubber bullet.

"Interesting," mused the Director. "They shoot him three times, then administer life saving techniques." She took the bullet from her right hand man and examined it closely. She held it up for the doctor to see; he nodded his head after a second then went back to what he was doing.

Dobrinsky felt Mac relax and he let go of the younger man's wrist.

"Not life saving," corrected the physician. "The bullets drove though his flesh bone deep, but oddly enough, did not penetrate the chest cavity. In fact..." The doctor pulled away one of the blood stained squares completely, and took a good look at the wounds. The man's thick glasses amplified the bright spotlight over the bed. "...the bone beneath is merely bruised, not even cracked." He shook his head; agent Mansfield was very lucky indeed.

"Who would go to this much trouble and why?" wheezed Victor. His chest felt like a freshly skinned knee only a thousand times amplified.

"Good question. Have this analysed." She passed the black bullet back to Dobrinsky.

While Dobrinsky and the Director spoke, the doctor went over Victor's large frame inch by inch.

Mac was listening to the older black man talk but his eyes were on his lover. He gasped inwardly when all of the bandages were removed. The wounds certainly looked serious to him. The three spots were large, bloody and surrounded with black and blue marks.

Victor hissed at the doctor's probing fingers. "What happened to me, Mac? I can't remember a thing after leaving the apartment tonight." He studied the lesions on his chest; without that vest, he would have been dead.

"I don't know, Vic. I'm so sorry..." The bullet holes affected Mac worse than they did Victor. The heavy lump in his stomach grew even bigger, making him want to puke. His lover could have died tonight, those holes in his chest proved that. And for what? Li Ann and a secret that she was foolish enough to try and keep? Secrets always destroyed their guardians in the end.

When would Li Ann learn?

"Good thing you had a vest on and those triad thugs were using that high tech armour piercing ammo," mused the doctor as he re-banded the wounds. "Mind you, even riot bullets can kill if they hit you right. You're one lucky son of a bitch."

No one in the room would ever find out that it hadn't been the vest or the changed ammunition that had spared Victor his life, but the whim of a very sick, old man.

—

The Director's phone rang, pulling her out of a conversation with Dobrinsky. She listened to the speaker then hung up. "Li Ann will make it," she said emotionally. Suddenly her eyes teared and she quickly turned her back on the men in the room. A few seconds later, she faced them again, completely composed. "It's going to take her awhile to fully recover, but she's going to live."

After more examining and the discovery of the puncture mark, Victor declared that he was fine. He was tired of being prodded and Mac, who had grown quiet, worried him. Now that his female partner's prognosis was good, he could relax and concentrate on the overly silent Mac. After the initial comforting yet bone-crushing hug, Mac had stepped back into the corner of the room and stayed there.

"He'll be all right," declared the doctor, he had to, the agent was leaving anyway. He spoke to the Director and Mac. Dobrinsky had gone already.

"I'm sitting right here, don't talk like I'm still out of it," grouched Victor, throwing off the Doctor's hands. "I'm out of here." He jumped up too fast, eyes swimming around dizzily.

Victor lost his balance and Mac was there to catch him before he hit the ground. He cradled Victor in his arms gently and helped him to the edge of the bed. "I got you," he said softly.

"Take me home, Mac." Victor let go of the end of his bed and righted himself. He stood tall, his equilibrium had levelled out now. Smiling up into Mac's concerned face, the older man convinced his lover, "I'm fine. Really."

The younger man nodded in acquiescence. He released his hold on Victor's elbow and turned to the Director. "We're out of here. Please phone when Li Ann wakes up." Mac was tired; it had been a long two days with virtually no sleep.

The Director and the doctor nodded and watched as Mac helped Vic get dressed back into his dark, blood stained pants. The shirt was a write off so he grabbed a surgeon's scrub shirt off of a nearby shelf and handed it to his bare-chested lover. "Put this on," he said. During the whole simple procedure of dressing, Mac was very attentive toward Victor.

After the agents had left, the doctor turned to the Director. "Those two are fucking each other."

His frankness surprised the Director. She turned and smiled at him. "They're not quite there yet, but soon." Then she too was gone.

—

On the ride back to his place, Victor slept as Mac drove. The younger man appreciated the silence. He didn't quite know what to say to his lover. Generally his emotions were controlled, but now they ran rampant with fear, remorse and anxiety. He wanted to straighten those feelings out before he unleashed them on Victor.

—

"You're awfully quiet." Victor stripped to his underwear then sat on the side of the bed facing his lover.

Mac was seated in the large padded chair across from him. "I'm trying to order my thoughts. There's so much I want to say. I'm not sure where to begin. I don't want to freak you out."

"Start anywhere, Mac. I'm a big boy; you won't scare me." Victor touched the spot where he had been given the injection and wondered silently, *why*? What had been in that syringe? Something slow acting and deadly? Hopefully the agency would find out the contents. Again, Victor found himself wondering why all this had happened in the first place.

Mac sat and watched Victor finger the small, round Band-Aid. "I know you don't remember, but when I went from the warehouse, I... It was all I could do to leave you there. You were hit and it was dark..." Mac's eyes welled up but he was not ashamed of his tears. "I didn't know if I had seen you for the last time or not. I thought that you were going to die... and in the car..." Mac's tears flowed freely, but his voice was strong and clear. He knew what he wanted to tell his lover. "...I thought about Li Ann dying too. I chose you, Victor. I chose your life over hers. I even stopped the car but I didn't turn around because I knew that you wanted me to get the disk to the agency. That's the only reason why I didn't come back for you. I love you... I chose you..." He mopped at his tears with his fingertips.

"Ohhhh... Mac..." Victor held out his arms and the younger man immediately stood and crossed to him.

Mac dropped to his knees between Victor's bare thighs. His remorse for choosing between the two was obvious.

The older man embraced Mac tightly. He supposed the whole ordeal had been harder on Mac than him. After all, he was unconscious for what ever it was that had happened to him. Or at least Victor hoped so. Fortunately, he couldn't remember. Mac had had to wait and worry that he was losing two partners.

"I'm okay, Mac. Nothing bad happened to me. Or at least I don't think so. Anyway, you saved Li Ann's life... please don't feel guilty." Victor stroked Mac's soft hair, trying to assure his young lover that everything had turned out well for them.

Suddenly, the former cop felt a small pang of his own guilt. He squeezed tight. "Remember in the club, just before Tommy Dillon left us?"

"Yes." Mac's tears had dried up but he wasn't inclined to leave Victor's comforting arms.

"Before he'd tell me where the antidote was, he wanted me to kiss him. So I did." He felt Mac grow still in his arms. "I needed to know where we could find the disc."

Mac stiffened; he pulled out of Victor's hug, but did not rise. He remained tall on his knees so that he was eye level with the seated Victor.

"Did you like it?" Mac asked evenly, jealousy flaring in his dark eyes.

"No." Victor shook his head. "I didn't, but we all did what we had to on this one."

The point was taken and Mac let go of his grief and guilt over choosing.

Victor smiled, a sweet, tiny smile. "By the way, I love you too, Mac Ramsey," he said before lowering his mouth and kissing the younger man softly.

Mac immediately reciprocated and now a more familiar, far more welcome emotion claimed him... lust. Nothing else mattered anymore, just he and Victor.

Li Ann would never come between them again.

Mac gently prodded Victor backwards, so that the older man lay flat on his back on the bed with his legs still hanging over the edge. Breaking the kiss between them, Mac's mouth travelled down his lover's nude torso. He kissed Victor gently all over, carefully avoiding the bandaged bullet wounds. Mac paid special attention to the nipple that still sported the rings; he made a note to tell Victor later to keep the nipple jewellery but get rid the leather pants.

Victor in return, softly murmured his pleasure at the attention; he slowly rocked his hips upward, in silent pleading. Mac smiled at his lover's impatience. He released the silver hoop from his teeth and made his way towards his lover's begging cock. The younger man eased off Victor's boxers' just far enough to swallow his lover's large organ; then for the next three minutes he gave him the blow-job of his life.

Just before Victor could orgasm, Mac pulled his mouth away and squeezed off the impending explosion at the base of his considerable cock. Victor moaned out a protest, but then quieted when Mac resumed his explorations a little further south. As the younger agent kissed down one strong thigh, he pulled the underwear down with his long fingers, exposing clean, sweet flesh wherever he wanted his plump lips to go.

Eventually, Mac worked the underwear off all together. With his eyes locked on his older lover's body he stood and quickly stripped off his own restrictive pair. Once naked, Mac stilled, staring in awe at his partner. So beautiful and so unaware of it... that was the main appeal of the older man. Mac suddenly thought of Victor as an opal in the rough, all hard edged and everything that was so beautiful about him hidden beneath a rough exterior. Polish the opal, and you would see the beauty come through; many veins of colour, like Victor's emotions, hidden until coaxed into revealing them. Mac felt honoured to be in his presence. Suddenly, the unfamiliar emotion of insecurity rose to the surface. He wasn't good enough for Victor... wasn't pretty enough...

"Mac, stop staring and kiss me," purred Victor as he stretched his hands high above his head.

His self-doubt evaporated and Mac knew his misgivings were fuelled by his own imagination. Fully in charge of himself, and the situation again, he sank to his knees again and lifted Victor's long legs. He pushed them back so that his lover's knees were bent and his feet were resting on the edge of the bed. Victor remained placid, and allowed Mac to manipulate his body into the desired position. No real words passed between them, just murmured exhalations. Satisfied with how he had manoeuvred his partner, Mac bent his dark head and ran the very tip of his tongue over Victor's clean, tiny opening.

Victor, who was not ready for the unfamiliar touch, nearly jumped out of his skin.

Mac simply smiled, and held on tight to Victor's bare ankles in order to slow down his undulations. He continued to lick, kiss and lave the sensitive area; Victor could scarcely breath, he never realized that a rim-job could feel so good.

Working vice, many times the young cop had uttered the timeworn phrase, *'twenty-five bucks for a hand-job, fifty for a blow, seventy-five for a rim and I wear a condom on my tongue, hundred bucks to fuck and two-fifty buys you any three acts.'* Victor was well versed in quoting the acts, and knew what every one of them was, but not what they felt like.

Mac's tongue was velvety soft and the older man would never have guessed how much more erotic a tongue felt on your asshole. In fact, Victor liked this part of the love-making very much. Finally, Mac released one ankle and immediately pushed his pointer finger inside of the now sufficiently slippery opening. Though his finger was fairly lean, Victor having never been penetrated before, hissed. The young lover would not be dissuaded however and he gently nipped Victor's inner thigh with his teeth, just hard enough to draw his attention away from his ass. Mac added another long, thin digit, then slowly began to fuck his older lover.

This act, which caused Victor just as much pain as it did pleasure, drove the inexperienced agent to the brink of ecstasy. Again. Luckily, Mac had a few more little tricks up his sleeve to stave off orgasm, and he used all of them on his begging lover. Listening to Victor beg for mercy mingled with his pleas to be allowed release made Mac hard. The way Victor swayed and undulated on the bed while begging to be allowed to spend his seed tormented the younger man in turn with a frustrated need too.

Mac was in control and he liked it that way.

Somewhere in the back of his mind the thought that he wasn't that different from Li Ann niggled at him. But as much as he wanted to own Victor, to be his lover's whole life, his whole reason for his heart even beating, Mac could never actually hurt Victor. He could never hit him with an object that would cut his skin, or tie him up and call him demeaning names.

Mac wanted to own Victor's *heart*, not his body.

Wishing to use only the body's liquid offerings, but knowing that it would be too painful for his lover if he did so, Mac took a few seconds to fumble around the nightstand drawer. He found a tube of lubricant and used a liberal amount to ready his partner. Finally, Mac decided that Victor was sufficiently stretched. He pulled his fingers away and quickly positioned his partner by pushing him up the bed some more. Then joined his lover and pulled his hips so that Victor's ass was right in his lap. From there on in, the rhythm would be up to the younger partner. Mac held himself and slowly entered his untried lover. He tried to slide in gently, but with each fat inch Victor would let out a little gasp, emitted because of both the pain and the pleasure of the act.

Mac gave Victor a few seconds to adjust to the first half of his cock, then he slid home all the way and he had to stop right there to prevent himself from coming. Victor was so warm, sooo tight, sooo comforting. The idea that he, Mac Ramsey, was taking Victor's virginity was a tremendous turn on for the younger man. Victor was so responsive, so willing to please that Mac wanted nothing more than to give that same pleasure back to his lover.

Finally, back under control Mac gently began to glide in and out of Victor's slickness. The agent was positioned so that with each thrust, Mac's cock raked over Victor's prostate, pulling another round of groans and satisfied hisses out of the older man.

It took him a few seconds, but finally Victor made himself comfortable by resting his feet flat on the bed, on either side of Mac's lean hips. No stranger to bringing himself pleasure, Victor wrapped his fist around his own erection, and in a manner he knew well, masturbated himself in time to his lover's increasingly fast pace.

Mac drew his thick sheath out to the tip and then slammed it home again, no longer gentle but urgent with the need orgasm. He pounded Victor's tightness a few times before he reached his peak. Replacing his lover's furiously working hand with his own, Mac thrust deep inside of Victor's ass one last time and stayed there.

He had jumped over the precipice of ecstasy and took his lover with him as they descended into the valley of carnal rapture.

Victor's seed jetted out from his cock and a hot spray of thick white come feathered up over his chest and hit his whisker-laden chin. Mac collapsed into a satisfied heap on top of his exhausted, sweaty lover and sighed contentedly. With his dark brown eyes closed, he inhaled Victor's naturally sweet, slightly citrus scent deeply.

Ahhhhh... The younger man adored the smell of his lover.

He raised his head and studied Victor's eyes. Those dark green canvasses betrayed all of his secrets and Mac couldn't wait to get to know the real man behind all of those concealed emotions. Suddenly, so in love he felt dizzy, Mac kissed Victor deeply then licked the cold semen off of his chin.

Stricken ticklish, Victor giggled and Mac couldn't help but join him.

Mac pulled back, "I love you, Vic."

"I love you too, Mac."

Green eyes sparkled up at him and Mac knew it was true.

"Now, lets get some sleep," said Victor. He rolled over and waited until his lover had cuddled up behind him before getting comfortable.

—

"It's been two weeks, why can't we see her?" demanded Victor of the Director.

"I told you... because."

"Because isn't an answer," Mac retorted losing his patience with his superior.

"Fine. You two can see Li Ann tomorrow." The Director was growing bored with baiting the two agents. "Be here tomorrow at 10 a.m. you can talk to her then." The Director held up her hands cutting off any comments the men might have. "10 a.m. tomorrow. Now get out. I have work to do." She opened her middle drawer and began to search for something.

Rudely dismissed, the pair turned in unison and retreated. There was no point in arguing; she would let them talk to Li Ann tomorrow and not a second sooner.

Both Victor and Mac wondered where their former lover was staying. They snuck into the infirmary in search of their partner but she was no longer there. Then out of desperation, they had broken into her posh uptown apartment.

Nothing.

Her clothes were gone and some personal effects. The gold chain and lock Mac had given her when they were still kids and a delicate sapphire tennis bracelet Victor had given her on her twenty-fifth birthday to name two. Her apartment was a dead end. After that, the boys gave up. If they had known where the Director lived they would have tried there, too. No doubt *she* had Li Ann stashed nearby.

The bitch, thought Mac as they walked down the long quiet corridor; his eyes devouring Victor's denim clad ass. He could think of many ways to pass the time until tomorrow morning.

As soon as the boys had disappeared, the Director slammed the drawer. She aimed a small remote toward the double doors and pushed a button. All of the doors leading in and out of her office were simultaneously locked. She leaned back in her chair and waited, her patience was rewarded when a few seconds later, Li Ann slowly descended from the mysterious upstairs.

"It's all set." The Director did not turn around to watch the agent's approach. Instead, she stared at where Victor and Mac had sat mere moments ago side by side, holding hands without even touching each other. "By this time tomorrow you will be in Bangkok starting your first assignment as a Director. The youngest agent ever to move up." The redhead wiped a non-existent tear at the corner of her eye, then smiled. "You make me proud Li Ann. I knew when I recruited you that you were director material."

Li Ann frowned at her former superior's words. She walked around the desk and stood in front of her equal. "Yeah." She said dully. "Who would have thought I'd live long enough to get a promotion." The thin woman shrugged. "I'm going to miss the boys."

"Well don't! They'll only hold you back." Snapped the Director.

Li Ann barked out a harsh, cynical laugh. "You mean they will interfere with me learning how to lie and manipulate the agents below me. You're just afraid that they will keep me honest..." She smiled, then sighed, seemingly old for her twenty-six years. "Don't worry *Veronica*," Li Ann used the Director's personal name; promotion had its advantages. She said the name like it was a hard earned badge, knowing Mac and Victor would never know their boss's first name. "I'm not going to back out of this. I'm going home to make a tape for them to watch. I can't face them." She couldn't wait to get out of the office.

The Director sat up, ignoring the use of her name. A vexing decision was made for her. "You might want to watch this first. The redhead passed a single videocassette case to the *new* Director. She smiled at Li Ann, her look predatory. "It will certainly... ahem... ease your fears about what the boys will do when you're gone." She took the tape and put it into a VCR then she dimmed the lights with a universal remote and set it down on the desk in front of the young woman. "Watch the tape here, and afterwards use the equipment," the Director gestured toward the wall of electronic devices, "to tape your goodbyes." The Director waved her hand toward the wall again, "You know how everything works. Just stay off of my computer." She warned. With that, the tiny redhead went up the stairs to get ready for her next *discipline* lesson with one of the rookie agents.

As soon as she was alone, Li Ann pressed the play button. She watched the tape all the way through then re-wound it and started again. She saw the exact same things the second time around as the first time around and it stunned her. Mac and Victor having sex—giving each other blow jobs. She watched, just as raptly the second time around as Mac made love to Victor—her Victor! It angered her that this was Victor's first time—he had said so on the tape—and the agency had the touching moment of truth on film, for all who had power to see. The way her two former lovers looked at each other broke her heart and made her jealous, but in a healthy way.

What did she expect? They couldn't wait for her to come around forever.

She had strung both men along because although she didn't want them, she couldn't bear for another to have them either. Somewhere in those two's sarcastic friendship, they had found love. Li Ann could see it plain as day on both men's handsome faces. The Director was right. This tape did change things, but not in the way the Director thought it would.

Victor and Mac's affair didn't enrage Li Ann; she was relieved by it.

Now neither would be alone.

The Director was worried that she was going to back out of going to Bangkok but she needn't have worried. Li Ann was more determined than ever to be the best damn Director this shadowy government agency ever had. She promised herself that she would be a good director to her agents and treat them with respect.

Alone, in a foreign city, a Director for the agency, Li Ann felt that she might have a shot at conquering her demons once and for all. Maybe she would even fall in love for real this time. And if she did, she promised herself that there would be no more secrets.

The tape of the boys' apparently healthy sex life finally came to an end but Li Ann didn't notice at first. Her eyes stared unblinkingly and unseeing at the blank screen, rehearsing in her mind what she wanted to say to her former lovers.

Finally she found the words and after setting it up, Li Ann stared into the video camera and began to speak.



Agency Office, 10:00 a.m.

Victor and Mac arrived on time for the meeting. The Director and Li Ann however did not. The two passed the time quietly whispering to each other details of a case they had been given last week, Dobrinsky said that they were to work it as a pair this time around.

The Director finally showed up, Nathan the records rat, complaining about *not* being under surveillance trailing in her wake. She finally stopped him and then proceeded to scare the crap out of him with threats of death at the hands of the bug people.

Nathan dreaded the bug people... they buzzed. Sweating profusely from fear and paranoia, he gave up and scuttled away.

The Director slammed the door and turned to the room. She stormed to her desk. "Don't..." She warned the two. "... you say a word." She settled into her leather chair, unconcerned and unapologetic at being twenty minutes late. "I've got good news and bad news for you."

"Where's Li Ann?" asked Victor.

The Director ignored her agent. "Patience Victor." Admonished the redhead. "The bad news is that Li Ann won't be here today... tomorrow or even the next week. The good news is that she's been promoted to a Director and has transferred to the Bangkok office." The tiny woman shifted in her chair, grinning smugly at the two men. Both of them had their mouths hanging open. "Oh, don't look so surprised. We all knew Li Ann had the right stuff."

"Li Ann... A Director?" repeated Victor slowly.

"Has she already gone?" Mac asked, the Director made it sound like she had.

"Yes." The Director grew serious. "You two will remain partner's..." She knew they would have guessed that much already. "I'm not going to put Jackie with you full time, only when you need her. I think her presence would upset your... ahem... upset the dynamic that's between you two." She raised one ginger brow provocatively.

Both men were thinking the exact same thing at the exact same time. Each wondered if the Director knew about them.

"Li Ann left a taped message. I haven't seen this yet either." The lights dimmed and the tape started.

The screen slowly came into focus, and then a few seconds later Li Ann appeared and sat in a chair in front of the camera.

Both agents noticed immediately that the tape was filmed in this office.

"Hi guys. I hope you're doing okay. Especially you Victor. I heard you took three in the chest for me."
Li Ann was smiling but the boys could see that it was false. She was fighting off tears.

"Anyway I'm so glad that you both came out of this all right. I'm sorry for not saying goodbye to you in person..."

The smile faded and a single tear escaped the corner of her large brown eye. It rolled down her sculpted cheek slowly.

"... but I'm too ashamed to face you right now. I'm not that brave... I can't face you now that you know what it is about me that makes me different. I'm sorry, I couldn't tell you..."

Another fat tear fell and then another, but her voice remained calm.

"... about the club, about the things that I like, because I thought you would think that they were depraved... that there was something wrong with me. I know now that I was wrong in assuming that but it still doesn't change the fact that I'm not ready to see you face to face yet. I don't want to hurt either of you anymore than I already have. It's time for me to go. Besides,"

She held up a videocassette titled in red felt pen, 'Mac and Vic'.

"I think you two have something worth exploring. You don't need me here messing things up for you."

Both agents sat up straight as they silently read the label on the side of the tape. The printing was clear.

"The Director gave me this to watch."

The tears ebbed and a small smile returned.

"She was hoping to seal my decision to become a Director. She didn't have to worry. I'm not going to change my mind. I want to be a Director."

Li Ann's laugh was ironic.

"Can you beat that?"

Her facade completely shattered then and she turned her face away. Li Ann's tears streamed; the dam finally burst. After a full minute, the sobbing ceased. Suddenly she snapped her head back, angry and ready to face the camera again. She flipped the edge of the tape open and grabbed the shiny ribbon and pulled.

The Director let out a horrified shriek behind the boys. Both turned and looked at their boss briefly, then back to the screen. Li Ann spoke again.

"I know that's not her only copy but I still couldn't help it. You two have something special between you. You're in love; I can see it. To tell the truth, I'm a little bit envious of you. Perhaps this is how it was always supposed to end."

Tears threatened then showered again at the thought of never seeing the two men she had cared deeply for again. She had tried to love them, but could not. And in the end, it was each other they turned to in their time of crisis. Li Ann brought tissues to her running nose. She shook off the drops as best she could and spoke haltingly.

"Trust each other the way you trusted me and you'll be okay. Don't let the Director steal everything. Keep your humanity for each other... Don't let the agency hold this tape over your heads. And don't let the Director destroy your love. Be happy for me guys. I promise not to give up on finding love. I only hope I find someone who looks at me the way you two look at each other... especially after making love..."

Her voice waned and she turned away for a few seconds, then, she returned her gaze.

"This is goodbye..."

She stopped there, got up and disappeared from the camera. An instant later, they heard Li Ann whisper, "I loved you both." Then the camera was turned off.

And just like that, their cozy little triangle was converted to parallel lines. Their unity, their unique relationship was gone, their trinity divided.

Mac rubbed at his eyes, they had grown moist the second Li Ann's had. He never could stand to see her cry.

Victor leaned over and whispered some encouraging words into his lover's ear. The older agent turned around in his chair and faced his boss.

"Li Ann's right, we're not going to let you ruin or control us."

Mac turned in his chair too. Together the agents presented a rather ominous, united front.

"We're out in the open. We're here working for you. Mac and I aren't going anywhere..."

Mac finished his lover's thought. "... so don't film us again."

"Fine." The Director conceded. She'd give honesty a shot and *not* install surveillance equipment if and when these two moved in together. It would be her housewarming gift.

Epilogue

Turned out that the Director's intuition was right. Victor and Mac did move in together. They chose a converted warehouse in a trendy part of town to live in.

The two men stood together, arm in arm and staring into the orange flames flickering in the gas fireplace.

"Here's to us," Mac toasted.

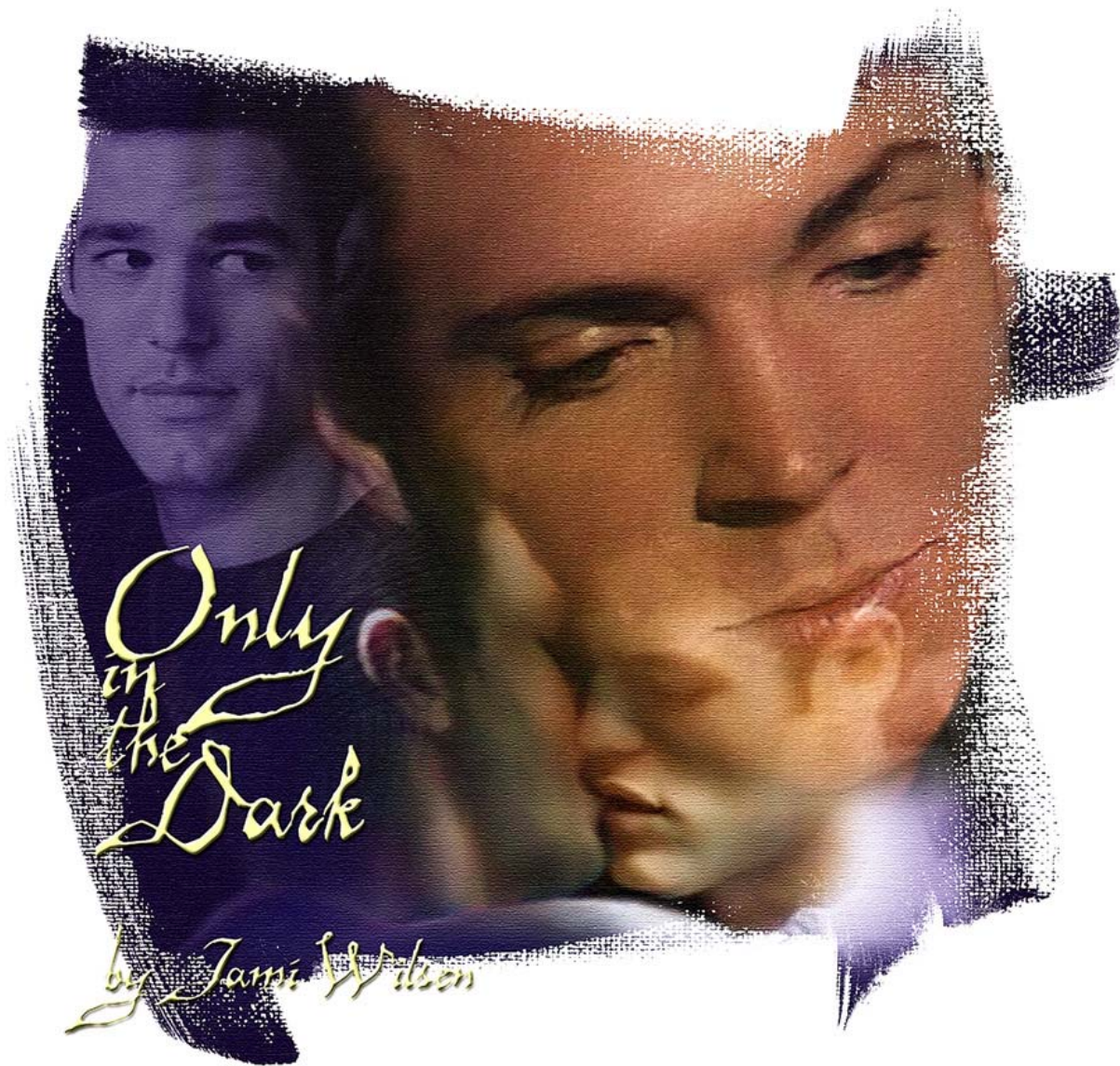
They clinked champagne flutes then drank.

"To us," returned Victor, his green eyes mere bands around large black pupil.

They were celebrating their new place together, enjoying a newly found freedom. Because the men were open about their relationship at work, they were liberated from the Director's chokehold. And fuck any one at the agency who couldn't handle the two of them together. Victor and Mac no longer cared what others thought.

Mac poured the last of the champagne into the flutes then took up a new position on the floor beside his lover. The men kissed deeply, then broke apart. Content, they went back to staring into the fire; each of them wondering what Li Ann was doing at that very same moment.





Victor lay awake, unable to sleep as restlessness gripped him and he shifted uncomfortably in bed. It was late. It was far too late at night to be awake, and he desperately wanted to sleep. Couldn't, because of the same old tiresome problem.

It was simple. A very simple, tiresome problem that needed a simple solution. He was alone, very alone. Had been since Li Ann had dumped him, in fact. He wanted someone to lie next to, someone warm and huggable. Someone to touch. Someone who would touch *him*; hold him close. He wanted more than that, too. Someone to make love to. Someone to make love to *him*. Was it really such an extraordinary thing to want? Someone who would be there for longer than one night or five? Or ten? He wanted someone who would stay with him, for God's sake.

The answer wouldn't have been very complicated if there hadn't been a little hiccup. There was only one person at the moment that could assuage this longing, and Vic was under no illusions that he shared his feelings.

Mac.

What a cliché, he thought. How banal, to fall for the man who was his ex's ex. It was pathetic, much like he felt most of the time around the scintillating and brilliant younger man. His partner. In a three-way team with his ex, and hers. God, there was something so warped about it, that all three of them should be romantically entangled like that... Wait, that was not entirely true. For he and Mac hadn't been

romantically anything, ever. Except in his head. Over and over again, in every possible position. Every night for the past... several months? Longer? Since Li Ann dumped him? Had it been that long? He wondered if there was a connection between losing Li Ann and falling for Mac. That was it: Mac was just his rebound; it wasn't serious.

But this didn't explain the depth of the longing. Or the fact that it was another man. He was straight, wasn't he? He wanted much more than a one-night stand. He wanted more than a 'relationship'. He wanted to possess him and keep him and wanted Mac to feel the same way for him. It was just a fantasy, of course.

Mac was irritating beyond belief sometimes, juvenile in his manner and entirely frustrating to be around for too long. Vic couldn't imagine that sharing an apartment with him would be anything but an aggravation. Vic went out of his way to let him know it, too. This was mostly because Vic didn't dare show much approval for anything Mac did. He was worried it might be taken out of context or be seen for what it was: open appreciation. He did have a certain amount of respect for Mac and had not always hidden it. But lately he'd found himself on a very short fuse with him. Mostly because of the frustration he felt, being around him and unable to do anything about it or about how Mac's nearness made him feel. And also because he was slightly afraid. He wasn't ashamed of wanting him. But he knew that there was a simple rule governing his life: Everyone left him. In the end, everyone always did. What was the point of another attempt to build a solid relationship with anyone when they always left? It just seemed pointless even to try after a while.

Especially with someone like Mac. The playboy.

Yet, here he was, still unable to stop conjuring the most intense and vivid ideas of what he'd like to do with him, if only he had him here in this bed. Or Mac's bed. That was a dangerous line of thought because now he found himself assailed by all sorts of intriguing possibilities of what Mac might be doing in his own bed at that very moment.

Was he alone, touching himself lazily in the same fashion Vic was currently touching his own body? Or was he with someone, a hot blonde maybe, or a dancer? A pretty redhead with long legs... or another man? No, not Mac. Mac was far too popular with the girls and even though some men glanced his way, he had far too much female company to choose from. To warm his bed. To be with him in the dark, in his bed. Naked and flushed and warm and...

It didn't matter, because all that counted was that he, Victor, was not. *Not* in bed with the playboy, the delicious and funny and lovable...

He stopped himself in surprise. Lovable? *Fuck*, he thought, realization dawning sickeningly. Since when had the name 'Mac Ramsey' come to be synonymous with the word 'love' in his mind? Mac. Mac Ramsey. Annoying, irritating and eminently fuckable Mac.

It wasn't the same as love. No way. It was lust, yeah, that was it. It was a crush, just a crush. That's all it was.

So why was he laying here alone, twisting under his sheets, roughly calling out Mac's name as he brought himself quickly to orgasm with one hand pumping his cock and one finger thrust into his ass, just like the night before? And why was it every night he'd tried to think of anyone else, the one thought, the only one, that finally brought him off was that of Mac leaning over him, his ankles thrown up over Mac's shoulders while Mac pounded his ass? Actually, there was one variation: sometimes he imagined himself on his knees with Mac thrusting into him from behind. Tame, really. Hardly adventurous, as far as fantasies go; basic and rough, but *God*, how he wanted it. So badly he could taste him, could virtually taste the sweat and the heat and the nearness of him. Taste his come as he finally came himself, spilling into his own hand. Mac!

For a little while he was hot and happy; panting, smiling, allowing the flow of heat to circulate delightfully around his body. Afterwards, far too soon afterwards, empty and cold; to have to face yet again that it was a soap bubble image dissipating into the shadows of his room. Replaced by the oh-so-familiar lonely ache that returned with stale realism and over-familiarity of objects and the covers, the empty bed. The knowledge that if he were to try to share this excitement, his longing, with the object of his affections, Mac would probably...

What? Be disgusted? Reject him? Laugh? Make a joke of it? Stare at him seriously and claim that he was nuts? Worry that he'd fixated on him out of desperation?

He already knew that Mac considered him strait-laced, conservative and boring, as well as predictable. He briefly wondered how surprised Mac might be to discover that his boring, conservative partner, his predictable fellow team member, was in lov— ...lust; *lust*, damn it... with him... oh God. Love.

That elusive, dreamy concept that always fled. Whenever he imagined it was finally his, he turned his back just long enough to let it slip away. That's how it had happened with Li Ann. One moment they were together; the next, she was going through changes or some crap. Needing to find herself, no doubt.

While he found himself alone, again. Why couldn't he keep her? Maybe it was his subconscious desire to be with Mac that had ended up pushing her away? But no, that couldn't be it. He hadn't really begun noticing how much he loved to watch Mac move until...

God, it had been when they met. Sparks had flown; the energy between them had been so fiery, so dynamic. His relationship with Li Ann was gentle and tender in comparison. He wanted to have both from the same person, not divided between them. Now he didn't even have Li Ann's affection and he was suffering from the scorching he received when he tried to re-ignite the level of intensity in his exchanges with Mac. If anything a careful unspoken truce that had been so delicately built over time was threatened now. Because he wanted him so badly it was a painful, burning ache in his chest. Because he couldn't stop turning every conversation they had into a needling match, each trying to have the last word, to be one-up on the other. Because it took such an effort not to fling himself at Mac and beg him to fuck him—one night, just one night!—touch me, hold me, *please*—

And he sighed, closing his eyes to shut out the darkness of the room with its solitary enclosing walls. Remembered that he'd see him again tomorrow and could refuel his dreams with fresh impressions. He couldn't even determine when exactly his interest in Mac had started, let alone progressed from a grudging admiration to a full-blown physical fascination. Vic could not account for it, he couldn't explain even to himself why he wanted him. He let darkness claim him and wipe away the pain in unconsciousness for a while.

Morning was cold and gruelling, as always. Getting out of bed with tired limbs and empty eyes, trying to shake the cobwebs and clear away haunting visions left over from sleep.

He had a half-hearted breakfast and coffee, all unsatisfying because the kitchen was empty apart from him. And then he was leaving, locking the front door behind him. What a joke, he thought. A day in the life of an agent of a shadowy government agency. It was a bum rap; surely they could get written into their contract some kind of clause that stated they wouldn't have to spend their nights without company, without partners. If they couldn't have their working partners, he added to himself silently.

Ah, his truck. One of the things that was his, despite all else it was his joy; one of the things that made him an individual with his own taste and wasn't something instilled in him by the said shadowy agency. He was too serious, too clingy to keep a lover, was he? Wasn't good enough to keep anyone near him? Drove them away eventually, and always because of his needy side? Too gullible to see the inevitable, future betrayal? Well, he was positively intractable about his personal tastes and style, the things that made him feel like an individual. Actually, that was one of the things that had caused a rift between him and his father. Like the earring; a token rebellious gesture that had endured and even now remained a part of him. It made him feel he wasn't compromised by the authority of his parents, by the Director, by society, even his friends... if he really could call them such. Partners, he corrected, they were his partners.

And he wondered how Mac could accuse him of being conservative. Just because he refused to be a fashion victim like Mac, running to keep pace with the trendsetters. Well, he thought quickly, maybe that was overdoing it a bit; Mac was a good dresser. Too good, he added, running his tongue over his lips suddenly and trying to prepare himself for today's encounter as he neared the agency's headquarters. God, another day of temptation and trying not to look too long upon forbidden places.

His hands itched to cup that perfect, tight little ass under those silk trousers, black jeans, hell—whatever Mac was wearing. To mould themselves to those buns and draw him close to him while Mac's arms went around him and their lips collided and their hips, too...

He narrowly avoided colliding his truck with the streetlight that was standing innocently in his path.

Li Ann and Mac were already waiting there when he finally made it into the room without further incident. He casually sat down in the chair on Li Ann's right, ignoring the way Mac slouched so indolently and effortlessly in his own. As always. But it was getting harder to feign disinterest. Vic had to spend more effort ignoring him and he was beginning to worry that this would be noticed.

No sooner had he sat down than the Director made her entrance. Interestingly, she was dressed neatly and almost conservatively in a tasteful cream silk blouse and dark trousers, a simple black silk scarf adorning her throat. Her hair was up too, in an elegant configuration. She looked... nice. Vic found himself trying not to notice. Hell, if he was even starting to find *her* attractive, he was in deep trouble. He was too horny; he had to do something about this. The woman was a man-eater and would discard him without a second thought. Why the hell was he... oh, right. Ramsey. Another clever attempt of his subconscious mind to pretend he wasn't sublimating like crazy.

"Victor, please close your mouth and try not to drool on my table. Li Ann, that's a lovely shade of lipstick you're wearing today. Mac," she stopped and sat down, tapping her finger against her lips.

Mac nervously returned her gaze. "What?"

"I have a dangerous mission for you. One that will require the backup of one of your fellow team-members. I think you, Li Ann, would be the perfect partner to assist him."

Vic looked from one to other, wondering if he should be pleased or worried that this didn't seem to include him.

The Director enlightened him a moment later. "It seems that you are in need of some training in the placement of night devices and covert surveillance, Mac. It would seem also that Vic can't control his violent impulses and keeps taking them out on my nifty cameras. They cost a fortune and take time to replace as well. So tonight you, with Li Ann's assistance, will replace all of them and in more strategically cunning positions, too. Then Vic will do his best afterwards to take them out. Dobrinsky will monitor your progress and report to me how successfully you disable them, Vic." At the swift look of hurt and resentment that crossed Vic's face, she added, "You may not believe me, Victor, but they are there for your safety. That is the primary reason I want them installed." She hesitated, innocently. "Did I say that? I meant *re-installed*."

"Yeah, right," muttered Vic, thinking 'freak' silently to himself.

She raised her eyebrows loftily at him. "Victor, it hurts my feelings that you think I don't care for your well-being. And besides, you belong to me. It is well within my interests to ensure that this agency's investment in you is safe. I'm responsible for the welfare of all of you."

Mac spoke up. "Why do I have to do it?"

Li Ann joined in also. "And why do I have to help him?"

She smiled. This in itself was terrifying. She looked relaxed and happy; there had to be a reason for it: Vic knew he really didn't want to know. "Because I want you to. Think of it as a time-out, some light relief from your usual life-threatening pursuits. Surely you can remember your Easter egg hunts, children, when you were little?"

Li Ann and Mac exchanged a cynical look. "We were too busy learning our craft," Li Ann said.

"Yeah, we didn't have Easter. We had training sessions on how to infiltrate high-security buildings and bank vaults, instead." Mac was dryly sarcastic.

Li Ann added, "And hand-to-hand combat."

"How to pick locks; blow safes."

Vic muttered, "Great childhood."

"Well, at least *you* know what I'm referring to, don't you, Vic?" the Director addressed him. "You can count yourself lucky that I didn't see the need for Jackie to be there tonight too."

He knew exactly what she was really talking about. She was obviously pissed at not being able to watch—correction—monitor him. He sighed. He wasn't even allowed to mope in peace. No doubt he would begin hearing reports from her each morning on how many times he called out Mac's name in his sleep. "Okay." Resignedly, he added, "What about the bugs I *do* find? Don't tell me we'll have to go through all of this again."

"That depends on you. For every one that you do find, I'll have Dobrinsky give you two more. So you might want to reconsider looking too hard. And remember, Vic, you are to be elsewhere other than your apartment by 7 p.m., which is when Mac and Li Ann will arrive." She smiled at Mac. "Do me proud, Mac. You know how to hide things, I know you do. Remember the Rembrandt?" She gave Mac a cool stare. He shrank under it, his face shuttered; he would never admit to that particular escapade of his, even if she tried to torture it out of him. She turned to Vic. "Before you leave, I want you all to check in with Dobrinsky for a complete weapons refit. I understand that some of them need maintenance, even replacement. Oh, and Mac? Don't try this on your own. You need Li Ann's extra help. Li Ann, you know Vic's apartment inside and out, and you're also familiar with his habits. This is why you're to be there. Surely between the two of you, you can find places to put them where Vic can't. That's all, kiddies. Mama is quite busy today so you may have the rest of the day off. Have fun. Go play." She stood, waiting.

Obviously, her appearance had something to do with her plans for the day. Perhaps she was going to blend in at some conference or lecture, or a get-together of high-powered politicians. God only knew. She might just as well have plans to join a quality inspection tour of a nuclear weapons testing facility.

Vic found himself racking his brains trying to come up with a logical explanation for the way she was dressed. Unless it was something to do with them... It was a frightening thought. She was a mistress of manipulation par excellence; he wouldn't put it past her to do it to throw them off balance. It had certainly rocked him this morning and she had definitely noticed his reaction.

They filed out, Vic feeling slightly sick. The look on both Li Ann's and Mac's faces mirrored how he felt. The sharp reminder that their privacy was so badly compromised was not pleasant. Even their personal lives were considered agency business. Vic also had to fight to keep at bay the suspicion that his recent sulking moods had brought this upon his own head. Maybe if he'd made a better job of pretending to be carefree and well adjusted, she wouldn't want to watch him so closely.

"Vic, wait up." Mac was running to catch up with him in the hall. "Let's go out for lunch, after. We can, you know, make plans. About tonight."

Vic swallowed, wondering if he dared to make a joke about that. To go out... and make plans for the evening... he knew what he'd rather be doing with him. And then thought better of it. Best that the entendres come from Mac. If he started initiating them, Mac might get ideas about him. Might even suspect that he meant it. It left a nervous, jittery feeling in the area of his stomach as they met up with Dobrinsky and visited the arsenal to pick out replacement weapons. He threw himself into the joy of selecting guns as if they were new toys. Somehow, he felt this was the Director's attempt to sweeten the job at them.

They didn't finish until noon, Mac and Vic managing to lose themselves in the professional delight of selecting their personal arsenal. They went in his truck and left it in the nearest parking garage to their favourite eatery. Walking along the street towards the outdoor café, Mac noticed Vic's reticent, subdued attitude.

"Hey, is everything okay with you? You seem really quiet. I mean, not that it isn't like pulling teeth most of the time to get you to open up, but this is getting scary. Usually you would've tried to put me down at least once by now."

"I'm not in the mood, today," Vic said, blandly.

"Is it the Director? I know how much that bugs you, having to put up with her bugging you."

"No, it's not. Could you just drop it?"

"Sure thing, 'Moose'." Mac's smug grin was familiarly irritating.

Something gave way inside Vic at this. "Thanks, Mac, I can always count on your impeccable timing to remind me of what an ass you are," he replied angrily, letting the bitter sarcasm show in his voice.

Mac stopped and clutched at his heart. With a mock gasp, he said, "Ouch! Y—you've wounded me! That was a low blow. That was really bad. I'm not an ass, I'm an agency operative. Can't you come up with something better?"

"No more than you deserved," Vic muttered, knowing that it was hardly a comeback. "Why do you have to be so—so—" he ran out of steam.

Mac's grin was positively delighted. "Spit it out, already."

"Infuriating."

"What? How am I infuriating?! Just because I called you by Allegra's nickname—"

"Alice," Vic corrected, automatically. "And it's because you're immature. Why won't you grow up?"

Mac snapped his fingers. "Vic, you're right. When I grow up, I wanna be just like you." He shook his head. "What is *with* you today? Did you get out of the wrong side of the bed this morning? *Jee-zus...*"

Vic ignored him, striding ahead on the sidewalk. Mac ended up having to catch up with him. Finally, Mac's hand on his arm halted him. "Vic, stop. Stop a minute. Look, why don't you just tell me what it is? Whatever it is that's bothering you. Something's going on, isn't it? You're acting like you're on the rag; like you *fell* of the bed or something."

Vic shook him off with a sigh. "It- it's nothing, alright? Forget it. I didn't get enough sleep last night, that's all." He took a deep breath. "Really, that's all it is."

Mac regarded him dubiously. "Really."

Vic squinted at him. "You don't believe me? Fine. You don't have to." He turned away, wondering if there was something in his eyes that gave him away, that somehow betrayed to Mac how desperately he suddenly wished he could...

Break down. Confide in him. Beg him to hold him. Tell him that he meant everything in the world to him. He couldn't bear to even think of what it would do to him to lose him. If Mac was injured, or even... killed... because of a stray bullet or some crazy explosion on some future night mission or dangerous venture. He wavered indecisively, wondering what he could possibly say that Mac would buy, or would make him leave him alone. He swallowed, wondering why he was swimming in an emotional fever pitch just standing in this proximity to him and why it was so difficult to even consider talking about it. Screw this, he thought. It's all a bunch of psych bullshit, anyway.

A slow smile crossed Mac's face at last. "I've got it, I've *got* it!" he said, in a tone that conveyed imminently that he had Vic's number at last. And that he should be worried.

Why did he always allow Mac to get to him? Vic looked down exasperated, a slight smile born of annoyance and curiosity twisted his lips. "What?" He considered him with suspicion.

Mac folded his arms and stared at him, his head tilted to one side. "You need to get laid." When Vic started to protest, he held up his hand. "Come on, I know you. At least, I know you don't have much luck. Look, why don't you let me set you up? I could get you someone really great. There's this club I know. It's not too far from here, actually."

Mac was far too close to the truth for this to be anything but unsettling. Vic strode off once more, muttering, "I can't believe I'm listening to this."

Mac was once more keeping pace easily with his long legs. "What? Come on, Vic; whatever your taste is, I can help you get it."

"I don't need your help," he growled, somewhat frustrated that Mac wouldn't leave it. "I'm perfectly capable of finding a date."

"Just tell me what would interest you," urged Mac, getting into his new role of supportive matchmaker. "Trust me on this; I know how to do it. I can get you set up with the girl of your dreams. What would interest you? And I don't mean just looks. What kind of personality? Strange as this may sound, I don't actually know what you'd prefer. Hookers and marks are always a little too convenient. Tell me what you're really into."

Fully exasperated now, Vic rounded on him. "Look, I don't need to be set up on a blind date—as kind an offer as that is, coming from you. It won't help!"

Mac regarded him seriously and quietly replied, "What would, Vic? It's obviously starting to affect your performance."

Vic stood, his mouth slightly open and his breath held, wondering what on earth had possessed him to lose it enough to say that. Finally, he let his breath out in a rush. "Mac, thank you. But I don't need to get laid. That's not—it's not what you think."

"Well, come on, buddy, talk to me. What is it?"

He pursed his lips and considered the sidewalk between them before looking up at him, right in the face. "That's just it. We aren't buddies, are we? We're partners, not friends. Not really. I mean, come on. You don't even *like* me. We hang out only because there isn't anyone else to hang out with, apart from Li Ann... and frankly I don't *want* to hang out with her!"

A little shadow crossed Mac's face. Oh shit; he hadn't meant to say that the way it sounded. He quickly said, "Mac, it isn't you. I'd take a bullet for you; you know that. It's that I'm not allowed to find friends who I would like to spend time with. Christ, I already spend hours of my spare time looking for bugs and hidden surveillance devices and disabling them. Now she's got us doing it as a job." He stopped at Mac's smile. "What, don't you?"

"Nah, I don't bother. Hey, if it gives her a thrill, so what—you know? I'm tired of hiding from her. She's pathetic—terrifying, yes, but also pathetic. A twisted leather voyeur who can only get off watching her agents get off." He was the one who turned this time and started down the street once more. "I'm not saying I'm into exhibitionism but there's only so far I can be bothered to care."

Vic offered up a silent prayer that he had managed to disable all the bugs in his place, before today. He really didn't need the Director lecturing him on calling out Mac's name when he came. Particularly in front of Mac and Li Ann... But he knew his candid response had hurt Mac. He could see it in the way Mac grimly strode down the sidewalk. He tried to think of what he could say to make up for it.

When they got to the café, Mac turned to him. "I'm not all that hungry, actually. Listen, why don't you go ahead. I'll—I'll come over later. We can talk at your place. After all, you're the one who's bug-free, right?" He gave Vic a little smile, meant to convey camaraderie.

Mac didn't fool him though. Instead, Vic found himself frowning and biting his lip. "Hey, Mac, come on. I didn't mean that the way it sounded. Let's have lunch, okay?" He took a breath. "I'm sorry. I'll make it up to you. I'll pay."

Mac stopped and regarded him with surprise. "What did you just say?"

Vic was puzzled. "I said I'd spring for lunch. It's on me."

"No, before that." Mac grinned again. "Vic! That's the second time you've apologized to me. Now I just *know* something's up. Right, let's order and then I want to know what's going on. And I want the real story this time."

Vic sighed. "Sure." He felt like giving up at this point. He couldn't win; had Mac only been pouting to try and get to him?

Ordering sandwiches and drinks, they sat down at a table outside in the sun. Mac didn't waste any time. "Spill it, Vic. Why are you in such a bad mood?"

Vic looked up at him and found himself lost for words. He could dissemble, pretend any old crap and it still wouldn't change the fact that he wanted him and couldn't have him. And that it would continue to make him cranky, surly and generally exhausted from lack of sleep. Beating off in the dark just couldn't cut it. In fact, it was still in his head, too. He wasn't even sure he could handle the thought of actually physically doing anything with him. He was straight, or had thought so. It was just a warped projection of need. Mac was right; he just needed to get laid. But maybe there was a way... "I'm not getting much sleep these days. Or, nights," he corrected. "You're right, you're half-right—I *do* need to get laid. But before you get all excited about this," he said quickly as Mac sat up with a gleam in his eye, "I've already got someone in mind. In fact, that's the problem. My—my 'dream girl' is kind of out of reach."

"So, you can't sleep, you're in a foul mood, you're touchy with everyone... Oh man, are you—" Mac stared at him, the light coming on upstairs. "Vic? Are you saying what I think you're saying?" He grinned, evilly. "Are you in lo-ooove?"

Vic inhaled, trying to ready himself for the certainty of Mac's barrage of questions and incessant nagging as to this unknown person's identity. But hopefully he could just stall him indefinitely now. "No. I'm not. It's just a crush. It doesn't mean anything. It isn't serious. Okay, genius, you can stop congratulating yourself," he said, gruffly.

Mac actually wiggled in his seat with excitement. "Oh, come on, you can't just leave it at that. Who is she? Where'd you meet her? What's she like? What does she look like? Does she like you?"

And here we go, Vic thought. How to play this one? "She doesn't know."

Mac's brows went up and he regarded him from beneath them. "She *doesn't*? Oh, Vic, Vic," he sighed, shaking his head. "Why am I not surprised?"

Vic crinkled his brows in that little way he had. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Mac drank from his bottle. "You have to tell her if you want to get anywhere. How's she supposed to give you an answer if she doesn't even know you're interested?"

"Maybe you didn't understand. I'm in *love* with her. I can't just walk up to her and say, 'hey, babe, fancy spending the rest of our lives together?' That would put anyone off." He threw him a wry glance before returning to watch the passing people. Shit, he hadn't meant to say that. It wasn't love. It wasn't.

"Then how do you know it's love? Sounds like just a crush, to me." Mac regarded him with a knowing grin. "Vic, what are we going to do with you? You have to give her a chance to get used to you before throwing a line like that one. Spend some time with her, take her out. Get to know her."

Vic gave him a dry smile. "The last time I tried that, the lady in question left me."

Understanding was reflected in Mac's eyes. Li Ann. He tried another tack. "Do I know her? It's not... Jesus, Vic. It isn't Jackie, is it? Oh God, say it isn't so!"

Vic gave him a look of horror. "Please, give me a little credit."

Mac paused, looking out over the street. "I've thought about her."

"Yeah, so've I."

Their eyes met.

"No way." Mac was adamant.

"No way in hell," Vic agreed.

Mac continued to try the process of elimination. "It's Li Ann, isn't it? You never got over her; you're pining to regain what you lost."

"Nope. Wrong again."

"The Director? I saw the way you looked at her this morning. She was dressed like someone *you* would like, today. No twisted leather, no whips or chains or even heels. Nice and classy, clean. Almost conservative. Your type."

"Third strike... and you're out, Mac. C'mon, I'm not going to make it a guessing game."

"Then stop making me guess and just tell me," urged Mac, impatiently. He really wanted to know, now. After all, someone who could capture Vic's attention this badly had to be worthy of it. Vic's standards were high—too high. It had to be someone worth saving, someone whose overall value included a measure of integrity and nobility that he could look up to, or a cause that he could invest in.

Vic bit his lip and looked down, regarding his uneaten lunch. He'd been picking at it. Now his appetite was gone. Why was he being so stupid as to actually discuss this with him at all? "It's not that simple.

She's... special. She's not like other girls." That wasn't a lie. 'He' wasn't a 'she'. "It means more to me than just a night, otherwise I would have said something a long time ago."

"I get that part. But who is it? Do I know her? You can tell me that, at least."

"Okay," Vic gave in. "You do know her. But I'm not going to tell you who it is, so you can stop with the guessing." For a brief, dangerous moment, he actually felt the urge to tell him, to just let Mac deal with it. But he still had to work with him, still had to look at him every day. He wasn't sure he could risk baring himself like that and possibly making himself vulnerable, more than ever before, to Mac's razor wit and smart-ass comments. Mac already considered Vic pathetic enough without adding 'lovesick fool' to his repertoire of opinions of him.

"I can still help you get her," Mac declared, solemnly. And then added seriously, "If you want her, that is. What's she like?"

Vic gave a laugh. "Everything I'm not," he said. "You probably couldn't find anyone more opposite to me than she is."

"They do say opposites attract. C'mon, details."

"Funny, smart, outgoing, lively, good-looking," Vic rattled off, quickly, and added, "Much better dresser. You get the picture."

Mac grimaced. "She's not the problem, then. You are. I mean, there you sit, running yourself down. Now I know for sure it's true love. Otherwise you wouldn't be saying you don't deserve her."

"I didn't say that," Vic protested. "I'm just not her type."

"She doesn't sound like your type, either. So why do you love her?"

Vic shrugged. "I just do. Can't choose love, you know."

"Well, so long as you realize that she's the one who doesn't deserve *you*."

Vic shot him a look of disparagement. "How do you know? I mean, for all you know she could be a much better person than I am."

Mac stared at him sardonically. "Please. Better than you? Mr. Nobility, who could run for the nomination of integrity's spokesman and win? That's a moral impossibility. Someone more straight-arrow and true blue than you, Vic? I'd give anything to see that. And now I *know* it's true love because there isn't anyone I know who matches that description. I think you've put her on a pedestal."

Vic shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "I never said she was better than me. I only said she might be. Let's just drop it, alright?"

Mac was smiling and shaking his head. "I gotta know, now. Vic, you've gotta tell me. Now *I'm* going to be the one who can't sleep."

"Blame yourself. You're the one who kept pushing. Let's get back to the real problem, which is the Director's obsession with spying on her agents... Namely, me. We already know she watches you. Now she wants to get me on tape as well."

"Well, since you don't have any bugs there right now, I vote we go over and I can tell you where I plan to put them so you can take them out later. Makes sense to team up on this one, yeah?"

Vic couldn't help wondering at this. "Mac, why? Why should you care whether or not she's watching me?"

Mac shrugged and finished his bottle, downed the last of his sandwich. "Because it matters to you." He looked over at Vic's unfinished food and tutted. "Not eating, not sleeping. You've got it bad, lover-boy."

Somehow, hearing that phrase aimed at him pass through Mac's lips did something to his insides. Turned them to jelly, made him stay still for a moment. He knew it wasn't serious, and he could even take offence, make a comeback. But he wanted to indulge in the warmth of it, even if it was for a few seconds. And then realized what a complete and utter idiot he was becoming. Mac didn't mean it at all. It was at that point Vic isolated what he really wanted from Mac. He wanted Mac to care about him. That was the basis for this 'crush'. Nothing more. He stood up abruptly. "Let's go," he said curtly, almost as if in disgust.

"Okay, okay. Keep your knickers on, sheesh." Mac grinned at him.

As they walked back up the street to the parking garage, Vic murmured, "That's my line."

"I know. That's why I used it." Mac impatiently said, "So, what are the odds that it *is* Li Ann?"

Vic snorted. "You and I both know that neither of us stand a chance."

Mac nodded. "I know. That's what I mean. She fits the profile perfectly. You had her before and now that she's off-limits, that makes her twice as attractive to your sense of doomed tragedy."

"Look, it's not Li Ann, alright?" Vic declared, peevishly.

Mac shook his head again. "God, you really have got it bad, haven't you? I can't believe you didn't just go ahead and let me think that it was. You know, to keep me off the scent. I would have left it alone. That's what I like about you, Vic. You're so refreshingly uncomplicated."

"So I'm simple, is that what you're saying?"

Mac looked at him, worried. "Now you're starting to really frighten me. Why are you taking all of this so personally? Just... forget it, okay? I didn't mean anything by it."

"What? What did I say?" Vic demanded. They had reached his truck.

Mac was shaking his head. "Doesn't matter. Let's just go." He opened the door and stood for a moment, holding it open. "I think I preferred you when you weren't in love. At least then you had a level head. Now you can't even give me a run for my money. It gets boring always having the last word."

Vic hesitated with his hand on the door handle, cursing to himself for a moment. Then took a deep breath and opened the door.

They drove in relative silence to Vic's apartment, apart from trivialities. Vic worried throughout the entire drive that he'd gone too far and his bitchy attitude had finally alienated Mac completely. It wasn't until they'd got in the door and Vic had shut it behind them that Mac's mouth started up again.

"So, why don't you give me the run-down? We can find all her usual spots and then I'll tell you all the places I intend to put them. Of course, if you'd rather have the fun of finding them yourself, I wouldn't want to ruin it for you. Like she suggested, maybe you could do with a little distraction. Like, from being in love and all that?"

"Why is it a bad thing?" Vic asked, curious.

Mac stopped. "What?"

"You heard me. Why is being in love such a terrible thing to be?" He wandered into the kitchen. "Want a drink?"

"No, thanks, I'm fine." But Mac's answer was given absently, still thinking about Vic's question. "Just look at how it's affecting you. You can't concentrate as well as you used to, it might even jeopardize your performance in the team. Imagine it *was* Li Ann; working in such close proximity with her would start affecting the way you work with us. It could be dangerous. Why don't you tell me who it is, this mysterious beauty, so I can help you get her and then we'll have neutralized the possible threat to our team dynamic?"

Vic shot him a look that told him he couldn't fool him. "The Director likes us to have a sexual dynamic, she's already made that plain. Keeps us on edge, on our toes."

"Gives her something to watch," scoffed Mac, scornfully. "And she meant between us, not outside the team. That's why she doesn't actively encourage us to seek company that might last past the first date."

"She certainly seemed alright with your marriage plans, last time."

Mac chuckled. "Yeah. Although I think we all knew that it wasn't going to work out. Besides, she likes having us sexually frustrated. It gives her entertainment. She's a voyeur, I'm telling you."

"Yeah, that too," Vic sighed. "Look, let's focus on the real issue, here. The cameras. She had them all over the place. Up there, in here, over there behind the picture. And in the bedroom. One in the bathroom light. They're pretty obvious once you know what to look for."

Mac gave him a careful smile. "Are you sure you don't want to go ahead and guess where they are, later? Are you afraid you might find I'm better at hiding them than Dobrinsky?"

"No," Vic retorted, wondering what Mac was hinting at.

"Well, how about the possibility that some of them may not feed audio and visual just to her, but to some hidden setup of my own?"

Vic stared at him. He pointed a finger at him. "That... didn't occur to me. I didn't take *you* for a voyeur. You shouldn't have told me. I never would have suspected. Of course, this way you can find out who it is I like, by waiting night after night and hoping I'll spill her name in my sleep, right?"

"No, actually I'm hoping you'll blurt it out loud, lover-boy." Mac put his hands on his hips and sighed, looking around the room. "Dobrinsky has no imagination. And I'll have to tell you where I'm going to put them because I don't think even you could find them."

Vic raised his brows. "Are you sure you know what you're doing? If you don't put them in the right place, the proper angle won't feed back and they'll be virtually useless anyway."

"I'm going to do my damndest. Look, you're just going to take them out afterwards. Why don't I at least demonstrate to you how good I can do it? I consider it an artistic challenge to do a job like this. Besides, usually I'm the one trying to debug, not the other way around. It's kind of novel to be given this variation of a test of my skills."

Vic sank into his couch. "Whatever. I don't really care anymore, to be honest."

Mac came and sat down in the chair near him. "Yeah, me neither. It makes me sick after a while, the sneaking around and trying to ignore the fact that she's watching every move we make. Cramps my style."

Vic snorted again. "Everything cramps your style; you're a prima donna."

When Mac didn't respond, he looked up to find Mac regarding him, puzzled. "What?" Vic asked.

Mac looked him over carefully before replying, "There's something different about the way you say things like that, Vic. I don't know what it is, but somehow they seem a little more..." he stopped.

Vic felt a cold feeling like dismay tiptoe over him. "More what?"

"I don't know." Mac looked away. "Hurtful, I guess. Like you really mean it. Maybe I just wasn't paying attention before but when you talk like that, you don't usually sound so serious about it."

Panicking, Vic swallowed. "Hey, I—I didn't mean it. Not like the way you're saying, anyway."

Mac raised one brow at him. "Gotcha. See, now I know something is up because otherwise you would have just laughed it off, told me I'm crazy or something. This person you're in love with... there's more to it than that, isn't there? You really have got it bad."

Vic felt the sudden rise of heat in his face and he thought, oh fuck. Not now. Please don't let him latch onto this. He felt caught, and knew it was too late. He bit his lip and looked down at his floor. At the carpet. And sighed. "Look, it's like I said before. Things have been... getting to me more. Getting me down. I've kind of lost my way here. I don't really see where all this is getting me. I can't even pursue a relationship of my own choice, let alone a normal life. I mean, we're screwed here; any chance of a normal life is zip. We don't even *have* a private life, let alone a social one. It just gets a bit much after a while." He

was complaining, and he knew it. But it was better than talking about emotional crap. Mac could relate with what he was saying.

"I hear ya. How ironic is this: having to spend an evening placing bugs on each other." Mac sounded pissed off and sympathetic. Then his voice hardened. "Still, that doesn't excuse your attitude. We fight; we've fought before. A lot. But right now, you just seem... beaten. You can't let it get to you, you can't let her win."

"Is it really the Director? Or is it me?" Vic asked, musing almost absently as if to himself.

Mac regarded him. "Victor, why don't you tell me who it is? Maybe I can help. Just to have someone to talk to about it, if nothing else."

Damn. Shit. Shit, shit, shit. Vic's face still felt hot. It was so tempting right now. It would be so phenomenally easy to just say it. Right to his face. That he, the moderate, prudish, good-guy ex-cop was in love with another man. The man sitting so close, in his own living room. This crush. This passing fancy. This insignificant, unimportant little thing that had begun as a simple admiration for the way Mac moved, when he fought, when he stalked down corridors, when he simply sat in chairs—he lounged in them and slouched with casual grace like a cat. It had grown and developed into this towering, overwhelming desire that encompassed everything else. Stealing even his sleep. It wasn't fair. He couldn't even talk to him about it. But maybe...

He cleared his throat. Without looking at Mac, Vic said, "I guess... I think—I think I'm afraid that if I tell you, you'll," he stopped. "I don't know. Use it against me? Make fun of me in front of others? Turn it into another joke, like everything else? Why should I trust you, Mac? Not," he said swiftly, "that I don't *trust* you, as my partner, as part of our team. I just mean, well," he ran out of words. But it rang in the back of his head, in his ears... want you, want you, want you... And knew he was treading dangerous waters here. He couldn't believe that it could mean anything to Mac if he were to reveal his feelings for him. He'd think him weak or stupid. And he probably was. He wanted too much. Even if Mac found the suggestion interesting, found Vic interesting—as unlikely as that was—Vic was bound to frighten him off as soon as he knew that Vic wanted him for real. That it wasn't just a crush. He closed his eyes. He couldn't bear it. For there it was; it was a lot more than a crush, it was his usual style: the Victor Mansfield brand of falling hard. It wasn't in him to fall for someone he didn't care about.

Mac nodded and supplied gently, "It's like you said, earlier. We aren't exactly real friends, are we? Would you believe there are things I wished we could talk about, but don't because after all you already have such a low opinion of me? I mean, Christ, Vic; no one could ever match up to the standards you expect from people. I don't have a hope in hell. You see me as a buffoon, a clown. So I'm hardly surprised that you don't trust me to be able to talk with you about something personal like that."

His voice rough, on the verge of explaining the real reason, Vic murmured, "I don't see you as a clown."

Mac chuckled. "No?"

"Well, maybe I do, but not in a bad way. I'm kind of... jealous of you. You're the fun one while I have to be Mr. Reliable, Mr. Serious."

Mac regarded him quizzically. "You don't have to be. Where'd you get that idea?"

Vic frowned, frustrated. Abruptly, he stood and went to the drinks cabinet. "I need a drink."

Mac was taken aback. "This early in the day? I don't know," he replied, doubtfully. "We've still got tonight and I think we should be sharp. Don't you?"

Vic snorted. "Whatever happened to that free and easy, devil-may-care attitude of yours towards life, Mac? I think I'm actually rubbing off on you." He took out a scotch blend, a good one. Single Highland malt, ten years old. And poured himself a good finger full. He wasn't drowning his sorrows, he told himself. He was fortifying himself against the presence of the temptation currently sitting on his living room couch, staring at him concernedly.

Finally, Mac sighed, resigned. "About half of what you just poured yourself."

Vic complied, saying as he poured a second shot glass for Mac, "Or is it the other way around; you're a bad influence on me?" He picked up both glasses and brought Mac's to him. Handing it to him, he sat down at the farthest end of the sofa from Mac. Regarding the warm liquid, he watched as it coloured the rest of the room amber through the glass.

Mac sipped, surprised by how good it was. "This is great stuff, Vic. Where'd you get it?"

"It was confiscated in a bust; I got it from an inside source," Vic murmured, enigmatically.

"Vic, I really do think we need to talk. About this matter of the heart. It's already affecting the way you relate with me. And I don't think I'm the only one who's noticed either. Why else would the Director suddenly show such concern for your 'well-being'? Maybe she's worried that the job is starting to get to you and she wants to keep a closer eye on you."

Vic rubbed his eyes with one hand. "Too complex. No, it's because she's a freak. A freaky dominatrix. It's that simple. She can't stand it, knowing that I'll resist being under her complete control. Besides, I can't tell you who it is 'cause I know you'll tell Li Ann."

Mac regarded him with shock. "And just how do you figure that? That I would betray your confidence... to her? What, you think we sneak around together like a couple of kids, whispering, sharing gossip about people?"

"No," Vic said, irritably. "I just—look, you're close to her. Closer than I ever was. I didn't want to believe it but it's pretty obvious to me, now that she and I are no longer an item. You have an entire history with her." At this point, Vic had a hard time identifying which one he was more jealous of. All he knew was that he felt left out. Great, Mansfield, he thought to himself. Now you're getting morbid on drink and unrequited passion for a guy who already thinks you're a complete loser. Next you'll be sobbing on his shoulder. Somehow, the very real threat of doing just that seemed to loom eminently closer, as the simple comfort of the act appealed to him more and more. He scowled and gulped down more of the fiery resolve the whisky offered.

Mac sniggered. "Li Ann treats us both like kids. She thinks we're immature and she spends far too much time remodelling herself after the Director. She's already started taking her cues from her. The only thing we really have in common anymore is a love of good Chinese cuisine."

Vic grimaced at the thought. "Please. Don't bring that up now."

Mac swirled the scotch in his glass and threw him a look from beneath his brows. "So, who's this dream girl of yours? Do I at least get to know her name?"

Vic sipped more. "Nope."

Wheedling now, Mac earnestly said, "I swear I won't tell anyone. I won't make fun of you. And I really can help you get her."

"Why is it so important that you know who it is?" Vic said dully, hoping his tone of voice conveyed the proper loss of interest in the subject.

"Because I've never seen you look so sad and down. I've seen you depressed before; I've even seen you unhappy, but I swear I've never seen you this miserable. You look like you don't think you have a hope in hell."

Angrily, Vic exclaimed, "Why should you care? What difference does it make? It's a lost cause. Why can't you just believe me? Take my word for it: she's not interested."

"Vic," Mac replied, gently, "you already said that she doesn't even know. How do you know you don't have a chance if you haven't told her?"

Vic looked into his glass. It was empty. He continued holding it simply for the saving grace of having something to hold in his hand. "I know her. She's not that kind of—" he bit off the word. Fuck, he thought. He'd been about to say 'guy'. He really was losing it here, big time. Mac was right; he shouldn't have started drinking this early on. It hadn't even hit his system yet. Why was he falling for this? He had no intention of telling Mac anything. If only he'd tried to hold out until the end, pleaded feeling sick or something... but knew that Mac wouldn't have bought that anyway, would only have delayed the inevitable interrogation until later. Yeah, he'd have kept up the pressure until he cracked.

Thoughtfully, Mac answered, "Whoever she is, she's lucky. She doesn't deserve you, Vic."

"Yeah? How do you figure?" Vic laughed, humourlessly, unable to stop the pain from colouring his voice now. He felt helpless. Even the heat from the whisky wasn't helping. It just made him feel flushed. In fact, he could feel his face was hot. He was glad actually; it helped his alibi. Never mind that Mac in a caring state was such a novelty and appealed so deeply to Vic's longing to have him show such care. Never mind that the younger man was also looking flushed and a little—Hell, the whisky wasn't that strong. Who was he kidding? He was trying hard to conceal his partial erection again; an embarrassing situation that occurred with greater frequency these days, particularly when he was in the room alone with Mac. Like right now.

"Don't you know? You're a decent person, Vic."

He couldn't stand it anymore. He could bear to hear Mac trying to make him feel better; could even bear that tone of voice that made him think that maybe Mac gave a damn. He couldn't bear having to conceal it any longer and hiding like he was ashamed. He wasn't ashamed at all. He just didn't like being alone, and he knew that Mac couldn't be anything but sympathetic towards him. He could hardly expect him to happily throw himself at him upon hearing the news. They had already spent far too much time letting each other know that the other was less than liked.

Huskily, his voice rough, Vic said, "I'll tell you. But you have to swear to me that you're not going to get on some kind of consolation kick over it. Trying to lecture me about it, or getting me help, or laid, or whatever. Or try to talk me out of it. Okay?"

Mac nodded. "Fair enough."

Vic shot him a look.

Mac shrugged. "I swear. I won't laugh, either. I promise, alright? Cross my heart, hope to die." He grinned.

Vic took a deep breath. He licked his lips and stared mournfully into the empty glass. Where was courage? Oh yeah. He didn't care anymore. Right? Okay. Might as well go for broke. Get it out there, out in the open; no more hiding, no more having to pretend. At least it would dissipate the tension, the fear of him finding out. The fear of ridicule, of rejection. At least he'd get it over with. And he knew he was being incredibly stupid; to take his cue from the scotch and confess like this was too dramatic. He'd regret it later. But then, he hadn't had that much to drink; that was more of an excuse. His eyes narrowed. He could always claim temporary insanity afterwards and blame it on the scotch. That was it! A graceful way out that Mac would probably tacitly agree to take himself, if things got too heavy.

Mac was waiting. He looked like he was on the edge of his seat and holding his breath expectantly, while trying to look nonchalant as if he had all the time in the world.

A small laugh caught in Vic's throat and he couldn't help snickering at this.

Mac frowned, chuckled with him even though he didn't quite get the humour. "What?"

Vic shook his head. "Nothing; I just—I've never seen you look like that before. You look like you're about to pop a vein."

Mac let out a tense exhalation. "For God's sake, Vic! I'm sitting in ultra-suspense here. Put me out of my misery! Who. Is. She?"

Vic thought about it. How to put it. Oh yeah... "She's a he."

As the import of this sank into Mac's comprehension, his only response was a puzzled lift of one eyebrow. "Okay. So, who?"

"What, doesn't that surprise you?"

"Why should it?"

Vic snorted. "That boring old has-been Mansfield has suppressed bisexual urges? Come on."

Mac finished his own glass and put it on the table, and folded his arms across his chest. "You're forgetting who you're talking to. I'm far more liberal than you are. I don't have a problem with it, if that's what you mean."

"Oh, well, excuse me for implying that you would. I still have to work with you, don't I? You think I want to have to hear you making comments about this in the open? Can you imagine what the Director would say? What others will say?" Vic sounded bitter rather than sarcastic.

"C'mon, I wouldn't do that. I'm not that insensitive." Mac tried to lighten the mood. "Oh, no. No. No! Don't tell me; it's Dobrinsky?" He held an expression of mock horror.

Vic let out a short laugh. "Yeah, right. Jungle fever, that's me. At this point, you could still say the Director and be well within the range of possibilities."

Mac laughed out loud at this. "Oh God, it's a good thing she can't hear this. That is so-oo *her!*!" Then he stopped abruptly and shot a warning glance at him. "Murphy or Camier?"

Vic winced. "I oughtta shoot you for that! Are you crazy?!"

Mac looked away. "No. I'm just playing for time, I guess. See, I hate guessing games too. Narrowing the odds, eliminating the obvious choices. It doesn't really leave me many more guesses. Is it me?"

Vic hesitated a little too long, paused for several seconds too long and they stretched out agonizingly slowly as he tried to find a handle on how to answer this casually. "Of course not. Look, you don't know him, okay? You don't. It isn't anyone you know."

Mac sat quietly, watching him. He blinked a few times. And took a breath himself before replying. "Vic, it's okay, you know. It's only natural, really. I mean, we do have a lot of tension between us. This friction; it's been there from the beginning. I've felt it myself."

Vic didn't look at him. He felt caught, and as if he were moving in slow motion. Every thought seemed too deliberate. And he knew it wasn't the drink. He didn't dare look over at him. Everything was exposed now, all his insecurities, all his longing. This was torture. Why the fuck hadn't he kept his goddamn mouth shut? He closed his eyes. It didn't help.

"If it's any help, I feel the same way about you." Mac sounded subdued.

Vic's eyes flew open. He threw him a look of disbelief. "You can't be serious."

"Why not? You don't think I'm capable of feelings? Or just feeling something for you?"

Vic stared at him, not really comprehending this. Any of it. How could Mac—"You have a crush... on me?"

"What did you think I would say?" But Mac's eyes were gentle; he looked sympathetic. Vic could tell out of the corner of his eye, in his periphery.

Still, he felt as though his heart was in his mouth. "I don't know. That—that you'd tell me to go to hell. That it wasn't what you wanted. That you didn't want—" ...me... But he couldn't say it. Why would Mac

want him? Mac couldn't be serious. This was a mistake. He felt awkward and stupid for having revealed it. It was over so soon, too quickly and now he couldn't take it back. He should have protested, claimed that there was nothing further from the truth. That being near him was hardly enough to set his pulse leaping and his heart pounding. That it wasn't killing him to have to be so close to him day after day, after day. He jumped up from where he was sitting and sought the safety of retreating to the kitchen. At least there he could keep the kitchen table between them and remain by the sink.

As expected, Mac followed him in although he remained in the doorway. "You're right, I probably wouldn't have believed you if you'd told me before now. And I know you consider me immature and everything. I would have thought it was the other way around, that *you* wouldn't want *me*. It's funny, you know, because I always wondered about it. But I always thought you'd think I was just kidding you, or that I was a perverted psycho for even suggesting it."

But Vic was trembling now; he was having a hard time even swallowing in his dry throat because of the momentousness of it all. He couldn't take the words back. Now that Mac knew how Vic was tearing himself apart over him all Vic wanted to do was climb into bed and stay there, for good. Forever. With the covers over his head. He closed his eyes and leaned over the sink, gripping it with both hands for something to cling to. God, how could he have let his guard down? How could he have let something so personal and damaging slip by?

Too many disappointments, too many betrayals; he couldn't face yet another one. It was too close on the heels of the last one, and all the more painful in that he had to be reminded of it every day. This had to be some kind of joke that life was playing on him. To have to spend so much time in such close proximity to two people who wouldn't have him, didn't want him. Was it so much to ask for, just to want someone to want him back? He realized it was self-pity, the feeling that had dug its claws into him and didn't want to let go. He couldn't believe that Mac felt the same way. He couldn't.

Mac wore a worried frown now, though. He came up behind him and put his arms around him, just enough to let him know he was there, that he cared. "Vic," he said huskily, "you're not alone. You don't have to give yourself away just to have a friend."

Vic tightened under his touch, Mac instinctively loosened his hold and stepped back.

Vic turned around, a look of empty despair upon his face now. "I wasn't offering myself in return for your friendship. I didn't mean that I thought I'd have to have sex with you in order for you to like me."

Mac raised his eyes to the ceiling and sighed. "Man, you are so... so obtuse sometimes! I wasn't trying to offend you. I only meant that you don't have to sell your body as well as your heart. They come together, all parts of you. I accept you as you are. I want you. You have no idea how much."

He stepped closer again, this time letting both his hands fall on Vic's shoulders, in a friendly gesture. "I just don't think that you should do this out of loneliness or desperation. I want you too, but I'm not willing to unless we agree we can still be friends." He paused, took a breath and bit his lip before adding, "I don't want to lose your friendship if you aren't going to want this afterwards, once it's happened. If you change your mind."

"That's just it. We aren't friends, Mac." Vic shrugged his hands away, more angrily. "This was never about sex, for me. You think I want to sleep with you just so you'll be my friend. Even more interesting though is that you want to be my friend so I'll sleep with you. Tell me, which is the more screwed up?"

Mac shook his head slightly, regarding him with what could almost be described as bewilderment. "Hey, you tell me. I don't think we can be friends unless we sleep together. Friends *and* lovers. Like I said, the complete package. We fight way too often for anything else to work, for there to be any other answer. And we'll never know unless we try it."

Vic's mind was whirling. He had assumed that in telling him, Mac's response would come in the usual form he'd come to expect: telling Vic that he was too needy. Such an open declaration of love was most likely scary. And it was probably a turn-off too. There was nothing like a needy, desperately lonely person with a propensity for clinging and a tendency towards emotional insecurity to turn away someone of Mac's preferences and predilections. If he'd had any brains left at all, he would have covered up his pain with the usual banter and pretended everything was fine. Why hadn't he? Oh yeah. He'd decided that he'd had enough pretending. Fuck. The scotch still sang in his blood. And now here was Mac saying that he wanted him? He couldn't believe that. It didn't compute. Besides, he was in love with Mac. Not just wanting to sleep with him. In love! Wasn't he?

But this was worse. He hadn't prepared for the thought of Mac actually accepting him! Desiring him equally... What was he supposed to say? Do? How to behave? Did he really want to continue with this? Did Mac?

And he stood there, mutely, helplessly, until Mac couldn't stand the sight of him looking so sad and lost anymore and came forward to gently pull him into his arms. Wordlessly, Mac held him. Long minutes passed and gradually Vic's tension dropped and he returned the embrace, allowing himself this

unexpected reprieve to simply revel in the closeness and comfort of his touch. Mac's heartbeat was loud and he was so warm; Vic wanted to bury his face in the other man's chest and just lose himself for a while. It was easier, he knew, when his senses and inhibitions were dulled slightly with alcohol, regardless of how much of an excuse it actually was. One shot wasn't enough to make him tipsy. Somehow he also had the feeling he would regret it later.



He let himself be led by the hand into the bedroom, watching like a stunned rabbit as Mac drew the curtains. And then also allowed Mac to help him undress. Climbing beneath the covers like an automaton without thinking about it. Finding Mac getting inside the covers beside him to take him in his arms again, this time wearing only his shorts. He said, gruffly, "What the hell are we doing? It's the middle of the afternoon. Not even that yet."

Mac shrugged. "She gave us the day off. It's our time; we can spend it however we like. And I want to spend mine with you, if you'll let me." And he pulled Vic closer, tighter, back into his embrace. "I think you need it. We both need this, Victor. We've been alone for too long. Maybe we can be happy, if only for a while."

Vic hugged him back, clung to him almost as if for reassurance. Not quite believing it was happening. "This is too weird. I didn't think that you would... that you'd..."

"Vic, oh, Vic. How could you think that I wouldn't want you?" Mac's voice was strained and he sounded miserable. "You're beautiful, so perfect and good and beautiful. I never thought you'd let me do this. I didn't dare. I've imagined this for weeks now. I didn't want to hear you tell me you weren't interested. I never dared to think that you would want to."

Surprised, Vic looked up into his face. "You actually want this? You're not just saying that, to make me feel better? I mean, you don't have to go through with this. This is enough for me. Just being here, like this."

"I know," Mac said, nodding sadly. "You need a friend. Someone to hold, and to hold you back. I need more than that. But hey, I'll take what I can get. We don't have to do anything you're not comfortable with." He loved the way their bodies pressed up against each other and just prayed Vic would be open-minded enough to pursue this all the way.

Mac enjoyed the intimacy of simply holding him; Vic was still taut and faintly covered with a sheen of pure Vic-scent. Mac was feeling rather mindless, as if the smell and the feel of Vic's body against him was a drug. Certainly he was no longer capable of resisting him. He would do anything Vic wanted at this point.

This was moving way too fast. Vic was having trouble getting all of it. "Wait a minute. Just—hold on. I don't... you're saying that you didn't think I would want *you*? And that you think I'm in love with you just because I'm lonely?"

"No, you idiot. I'm saying that *I'm* in love with *you*. And that I had more reason to be afraid you might tell me to go to hell than you ever did. Why do you think I wanted to know who it was you were in love with, why I kept pushing you about it? I was really worried you had finally lost your heart to someone else." And Mac held him tighter, burying his face in Vic's neck. Muffled, he said, "I could just stay like this, right here. We don't have to do anything. If this too much for you, I mean."

"Dream on," Vic muttered, entirely entranced by the novel idea that Mac actually had feelings for him. Let alone wanted his body. Christ. He pulled the covers up around them and then moved, rolling to push Mac under him, ending up atop him with a crooked smile. "You've been driving me crazy. Let me get a little of my own back, now." And he gently pressed his lips to Mac's, enjoying the soft warmth of them and the surprised little breath that escaped as Mac responded to him. He felt relief run over him and also a trickle of electricity that sped up his heart rate again.

Mac lifted a brow. Tearing his mouth away to the left, he gasped, "You think you're going to be the top here, huh?"

Growling a little in his throat, Vic answered by moving his hands up to take Mac's face in both of them and kissing him passionately, worrying at his chin and face, leaving a trail of softly bitten skin after him. "Not at all. I want you inside me. I want you to fuck me, right now. I've been dreaming about it for months."

Mac moaned against him and arched upwards. He was still trying to get air into his lungs after this sudden, heated declaration but it was made difficult as Vic claimed his mouth again, this time running his tongue along the edges of his teeth and darting playfully with Mac's tongue as Mac attempted to breathe in through his nose. Finally, he pulled his head back. Gasping, he said, "Fine, okay. So why are we still wearing shorts?"

"Damned if I can figure that out," muttered Vic, reaching down to try to pull the clothes in question down off of both of them. But he had no leverage and was still lying on top of Mac.

Struggling, Mac pushed him off to sit up. "Have you got anything we can use?" he said, breathing hard, hoping Vic wouldn't get cold feet. When Vic stared at him, Mac said, "Lube. Lube!"

Vic dove for the nightstand with the little-used bottle there. When Mac caught sight of the brand on it though, he coughed and started laughing. He couldn't stop. "'Probe'?" he said, between laughs, trying to catch his breath.

"You bet. That's what I intend to do to you, later. In intimate detail," Vic promised, in a smoky voice that left a coil of urgent desire suddenly winding around Mac's insides.

"Okay, lover-boy," Mac managed as he finally pulled off his shorts, revealing an anxiously stiff cock. "Where's the rubber? You know, the, ah," he gestured, and murmured his thanks as Vic slapped a condom into his hand and then moved to shrug off his own shorts.

"How do you want me?" Vic breathed, licking his lips as he watched Mac unroll it over his length. He hadn't seen that many cocks in his life; at least, not in situations like this one. He had always imagined he'd be daunted. Instead, he found himself curious and hungry.

Mac smiled at him, slowly, that evil mischievousness returning. "Ready, naked and hard. Just like you are now. That'll do. But on your back. I want to see your face when you come, screaming my name."

Vic lay back amongst the pillows, his breath still coming short. If he stopped to think about what they were doing, he thought he might freeze up. "You think you can make me scream, Ramsey?" It wasn't like he'd never messed around, but this meant too much to him and he was just praying that it ended up without awkward results, for their first attempt.

"Is that a dare, Mansfield?" Mac's eyes gleamed and he moved to crawl between his legs, placing one hand on either thigh and then slowly sliding along the sensitive skin there, up and down, pushing them even farther apart with each motion down.

He leaned down and let the bobbing, wet head of Vic's eager cock rub against his lips, his cheek; causing the breath to hitch in Vic's lungs and making him throw both his hands to either side of him to clutch at the sheet. Vic couldn't stop a moan from welling up.

"Let's see," Mac said, calculating, "I'd guess I have about four or five hours left to try to make you scream." He licked at the head and then washed the length of Vic's cock with his tongue, making Vic gasp and moan again.

"This is too easy," Mac chuckled.

"Hey, I'm not screaming yet." Vic looked down at him, his brows crinkling and biting his lips as he tensed with the effort of not losing it too quickly at the sight of Mac between his legs. And the feeling of those hands that were still working wicked magic on him. Mac was caressing his legs and upper thighs now, wrapped around them, lifting them slowly upwards so that Vic's feet were nearly resting on Mac's own thighs.

Mac couldn't help whispering as he surveyed the glory of a naked Vic spread rather wantonly out before him, "I'm going to make you feel so good. I'm going to make you come, baby. I'm going to fuck you good, and so hard. Oh, yeah." And he bent his head to trail his tongue lightly on his cock again. Teasingly, not enough to bring him off.

Vic couldn't help a cry at this. "Jesus, Mac, come on."

"You sure you don't want to be on top?" Mac frowned at him. "No? Then shut up and let me do this my way. I promise you'll like it."

Vic gave up and just lay his head back, his lips parted with the pleasure of letting Mac have his way with him.

Mac's hands were everywhere now, although his touches were still slow and caressing. Vic realized they were meant to calm him as much as arouse his body; he was still tense at the thought of what they were about to do. Then, out of nowhere, Mac's lips were gently teasing his cock again, as a wet finger slid slowly into him, up to the first knuckle. Then the second. Mac was murmuring hoarsely, "D'you like that? Shall I give you more? Let me know if you're okay with this."

Vic couldn't respond at first, the breath stuck in his throat. Finally he managed to reply, his voice husky with urgency, "Fuck me, Mac, oh God just fuck me. Please!"

"Easy, babe, easy. I don't want to hurt you; I want this to be good for you."

Vic groaned. "If you don't fuck me, I'm gonna die."

"Yeah, well, if I hurt you, then you'll kill me and I'll die."

"God... Mac, *please!*" This last was torn from Vic in desperation as Mac's finger was joined by another.

He withdrew and obediently climbed up to position himself against Vic's waiting hole and then slowly, oh so slowly, shoved forward little by little, until Vic was panting, his voice suddenly going up an octave in moans and whimpers.

The sounds alone were nearly enough to bring him off and he didn't want to disappoint him, not after waiting for so long. He tried to keep still, remaining where he was.

Vic could feel beads of sweat collecting and dripping down his skin, down his sides and from his armpits as he tried not to come at the sensation of being filled with Mac's cock. He hadn't felt like this in... well, actually he'd never felt like this before. It had never meant so much to him. He felt invaded, overwhelmed and entirely free. That Mac would do this to him, for him, it filled him with wonder and gratitude. He wanted to move but found he couldn't; he was legless and sprawled under the younger man as if he'd lost all motor control.

Then Mac began tentatively to push forward again, filling him up even more. The pressure gave and then Mac was sliding inexorably home, all the way until Vic cried out as Mac finally pressed in as far as he could go. Mac stopped, looking down at Vic and grinning at him with an exultation and delight that made an answering joy bloom somewhere in the region of his chest, as well as a further twist of arousal deep in his gut and spreading to his crotch, to his ass. And he involuntary clenched around the cock embedded in him, making Mac gasp and cry out, "Wait, not—yet. Shit, stop, stop!" Panting, Mac looked into his eyes in the half-light of the bedroom. And then brought his hands up suddenly to seize Vic's wrists and hold them down, firmly, while he plundered his lips, his mouth, that chin and then covered his entire face fervently with kisses and nipped at him.

Vic was squirming under this affectionate assault, open-mouthed, relishing the feeling of being held down by his passionate lover... yeah, they were lovers now, weren't they? Could hardly be mistaken for anything else, what with Mac's cock lodged in him so deep, so hard. Oh God.

And then Mac drew upwards again and stared meaningfully down at him, another grin spreading over his face, even more wickedly this time, knowing what he planned to do. And he began to move, slowly at first, sliding and thrusting upwards, each penetration jabbing deeper every time and gaining in strength, until Vic felt as though he were being cored out and hollowed by the sheer spiking pleasure of each thrust. And still Mac's gaze held his, intense and watching him, watching as the sensations gripped him and made him cry out over and over, with each plunge upwards, with every brush against the sweet spot inside him.

And Mac was whispering, almost inaudibly, "Fuck you, fucking you, gonna fuck you, Vic, oh yeah... you like this? You like me fucking you? I'm gonna make you come. Oh God, wanna make you come for me. Come on, oh beautiful, Vic, Vic, fuck yeah, Vic, oh Vic..."

Vic couldn't really answer, he was too busy trying not to come too soon. Each plunge made him jerk and writhe beneath him and the added feeling of Mac gripping his wrists and holding them down against the bed, being restrained by Mac's weight as he stared into his eyes, not letting him go... it was too much to bear. Vic's legs were pulled tight against Mac's upper thighs and his hips.

And just as suddenly, almost too soon afterwards, Vic's cock was pulsing, leaping between their stomachs and shooting pearly hot fluid onto their skin; the sensation of his orgasm sending sparks and

chills over his body, inside his blood like little tingling electric shocks, all the way down to his toes and making his skin flush even hotter. Their bodies were slick where they rubbed together and Vic's wave of pleasure set off Mac's, as he now rapidly jerked against him with short, hard little thrusts, finally flooding his insides as he cried out with a sob against him, leaning down to let his face fall against Vic's collarbone and press up into his neck. He released his arms and let himself remain there, like that. Vic's arms came up to wrap around him, holding him closely.

Then, with his muscles slightly cramped and shaking from the delightful ordeal, Mac slowly pulled out of him, one hand groping blindly to remove the condom and throw it over the edge of the bed onto the floor. He lay against Vic's heaving chest and just stayed with him, letting Vic's hand freely comb through his hair gently.

They stayed like that, not moving or speaking. Time passed and they felt nothing but utter contentment. No need to jump up or explain, or try to cover up anything. Just the lazy thrill of enjoying the aftermath.

It had to happen eventually, Vic thought. Mac cleared his throat and asked, almost defensively, "That was good, wasn't it?" Mac was obviously worried that it might not have been as good for Vic as it was for him.

Vic chuckled and stroked Mac's arm where his hand lay proprietarily on it. "I don't think 'good' is the word I'd use. Explosive? Sinfully wonderful? Beyond description?"

Mac let out a sigh of relief. "Thank God. I was worried there. Performance anxiety, you know."

Vic snickered at him and leaned round to kiss his cheek. "No worries, Ramsey. You're a real stud."

Mac fell quiet again. His voice was more serious when he spoke next. "You up for round two?"

Vic raised a brow. "Already? Great stamina, kid."

"Hey!" Mac protested, "who you calling kid, old man? Can't you keep up with me?"

"I'm just wondering what the rush is." Vic was half-serious. He liked the post-coital glow. He was more than a little nervous as to how Mac and he would relate now that this had happened.

Mac turned this time, looking into Vic's face earnestly. "No rush. It's just that you haven't screamed my name yet and I sort of have this deal on with myself that you won't leave here until you do. I promised that I'd make you and I'm quite willing to keep you from leaving. Even if I have to tie you down here and take a break while Li Ann helps me install the Director's spy cameras tonight."

Vic groaned and thumped his head backwards against the pillow. "That's right, you did mention something about that. I recall now. Barely. Does it count if I'm not actually coming? I could scream your name out loud so you can hear it, right now."

Mac shook his head quickly. "It has to be during the actual act or it's not authentic."

"Well, what are you waiting for, then? On your back. It's my turn now, I believe." Vic grinned at him.

Mac went weak at the sight of it. "Your smile always was a little too effective in getting your way." And grumbling, he lay back and stretched.

"Okay. It's your choice, Mac." Vic looked shy, as if he wasn't sure how Mac might respond to what he was about to say. "Do you want me to fuck you, or make love to you?"

Mac lifted his brow at him and grinned widely at this. "Which one is more likely to have you screaming my name?"

Vic seemed stumped. "Process of elimination then, I guess. Suits me."

"You know, you could start off making love to me and then switch to hot, hard fucking half-way through. If it isn't working; right?" Mac pointed out.

"You have a point." Vic took a breath, as though he'd come to a decision. "Spread your legs."

"Hold—hold on. Which is it gonna be?"

Vic smiled at him. "Trust me." And with that sultry promise, he bent over Mac and bit his shoulder, then moved to his right nipple, eliciting a shuddering little gasp from him. Flicking gently with his tongue-tip, he then wandered over to the left nipple, until it was as erect as its twin. He started lightly running his fingers down Mac's sides and laughed as Mac jumped and twisted.

"Hey, that tickles." Mac sounded out of sorts about it. "Don't tell me you're into feathers, ice cubes and kinky games; not that I won't do it, I'd just like some warning."

"You really shouldn't have told me that, Mac," Vic said, teasingly. "Now I know your weakness. Don't worry, I won't tickle you to death or anything. Besides, I'm gonna have *you* screaming my name, first."

"Yeah?" panted Mac, trying to control his reaction to the lightly grasping hand that moved to his lifting cock and began gently pulling on it.

Vic paused, his hand on Mac, holding him there, the weight of what they were doing hanging over his head with the finality of it. They couldn't go back now. Not that he wanted to. He said, desire lacing his words with a slightly out of control quality, "Mac, I want you. I've wanted you for so long. I want you

here, with me. Not just for now but tonight, too. Every night. Will you? Stay with me?" His heart was in his mouth and his dreams were on the verge of being either made or broken.

Mac stared at him, breathing heavily, feeling trapped. "This is a *hell* of a time to ask me that," he said, finally.

But Vic was moving now, rolling a condom onto his own stiff prick and grabbing up the lube to spread an over-generous amount on his fingers, he began giving Mac a hand-job that had him bucking against the hot, wet and gripping fist that held him, squeezing him gently, expertly. And he pressed a finger into Mac, making him lift his body at the double pleasuring of both his cock and his ass. "Stay with me, Mac. I'll do this for you any time you want. Anywhere. I'll make you feel so good. So wanted. I need you. I want you." He pressed another finger in. "Anytime. Whatever you want, I'll do it." Vic felt stronger, as if he were in charge, he held the reins. It gave him the confidence he needed. And sliding Mac's engorged, red cock in and out of his one hand and slowly fucking him with his fingers, he said in voice gone husky with promise and desire, "I'll do anything you want, Mac. I'll let you take me whenever you want to. I'll take you wherever, however your imagination decides you want to be taken. Suck you, fuck you, love you. Oh God," and he couldn't help a moan at the way Mac was writhing helplessly under his ministrations.

"Oh Vic, your mouth, your pretty mouth. Your pretty lips," whispered Mac, quite beyond rational thought. "Been dreaming about your mouth. Want you too, so badly. Do me. I'll stay. Just stop talking about it and do me!"

Vic obediently knelt into him, holding back his knees, lifting them up slightly, pressing the head of his eager penis into Mac's tight ass, riding the crack and suddenly finding his tight hole. With a rushing intake of breath at the sensation of moving into him, Vic nearly lost it again. "You're so fucking tight, so hot, Mac."

His head tilted back, his chin up, his lips parted as he took Vic's cock deeper and deeper inside of him, Mac said, "Tell me, Vic; tell me what it feels like for you."

Vic tremblingly began to move his hips back and forth, letting each movement increase the pressure until he was drawing out of Mac and then sliding back in with slow, deliberate thrusts. "Oh God, tight, smooth, hot. Oh God you feel so good. Want to just stay here with you, fuck you, fuck you Mac, fuck you! Oh God... Fuck! Mac! Ohhh—"

The sudden sensation of Mac bearing down on him, his ass muscles tightening around his cock at this exact moment, timing it just so... Vic couldn't stop himself and he launched into a rapid-fire fucking of the tight, squirming ass under him, gripping Mac's legs, crying out, repeating his litany. Mac soon followed, his own hand shot down to pull at his pleading cock and the waves of their respective orgasms were staggered right on the edge of syncope.

His brain having dripped out of his head and shot into Mac along with his semen, Vic sank down and tried to catch his breath. "What the fuck... I am totally fucked. Totally."

Mac was grinning up at him. "You said my name. When you came."

Realization slowly crept into his head. Vic met his eye. "So now what?"

Mac chuckled at him. "You worry so much, Vic. Too much. It'll give you an ulcer before your time. Come lay down. We can pass the time until we need to go shower. Hell, we both need one. We can save the third lap for then."

Vic settled down beside him and pulled him into his arms, hot and sweaty and feeling as though he'd just had the most satisfying event of his sexual career. "I do love you. I really do. I meant what I said, about staying here with me. Will you? I know it's hard to take someone seriously when you're fucking them."

Mac kissed him soundly. "Babe, if you think I'm going anywhere, you don't know me at all. Consider me a permanent fixture."

Vic smiled. "I guess you're right. I do worry too much. Damn, I should've started something with you right from the beginning."

"Oh, I don't know. It wasn't until I got to know you better that I really got it bad for you."

Vic considered this. "Yeah, I guess you're right. About a lot of things. Like the friends and lovers bit. We need to be both. We can't be one and not the other."

"I'm always right," Mac said with a smug degree of satisfaction.

"Yeah, well, you screamed my name, too." Vic let him dwell on that.

"So?" Mac finally replied, jauntily. "We never said anything about not leaving until I did. The deal was to make you do it. And I did."

Vic kissed him tenderly. "Thief."

Mac stiffened. "Why?"

"Why do you think, fool? You stole my mind, my attention, my heart. Even my sleep. It's okay though. I fully intend to have you make it up to me." And he kissed Mac again, this time not letting him make the retort Mac wanted to give. Kept the kiss up, in fact, until Mac gave way and relaxed beneath him. Vic lifted his head. "You're going to stay. For good."

"Yeah." Mac agreed in principle. Though neither of them could tell what the future held.

"Just wanted to be clear on that point," Vic murmured, resting his head on Mac's shoulder, nestled against him.

"Try to get rid of me," muttered Mac, already scheming about what he would get Vic to do in the shower, later.

And the fun he would have with this afterwards, with innuendo and in-jokes that Li Ann couldn't possibly understand. No doubt the Director would be onto them if she wasn't already. But at this point it was academic. He wondered if the Director in some bizarre way wasn't already involved, if she hadn't somehow arranged this turn of events.

Vic's thoughts had run virtually parallel to his, for he cleared his throat and said, "Do you think she knows?"

"Yeah. Probably. Certainly. C'mon; she's the one who arranged this, isn't she?"

Vic was laughing, quietly.

"You think it's funny?" Mac was puzzled.

"Think about it. She likes sexual tension in her team, but not *this* much tension! It was too hot even for her to handle."

Mac snapped his fingers. "I'll bet that's it! She couldn't take it. So she decided to do something about it."

Vic fell quiet. "I hope this isn't on tape anywhere," he said, a trace of worry showing through.

Mac turned his head and looked at him, then leaned forward to whisper in his ear. "Don't forget who you're talking to, here. I'm still one of the best. If there is a tape of this, I'll get it. Don't worry so much." And he chuckled at Vic's visible chagrin at the thought of Mac infiltrating the Agency's surveillance stash.

No doubt there would be more tapes to find in the future, anyway. Especially since Vic had every intention of keeping Mac in his life if it was the last thing he did.

"Just don't get caught," Vic warned him.

"Hey," Mac replied, his voice sleepy, "You caught me. Nobody else gets me from now on."

And that was about as sincere a promise and pledge Vic could actually hope to hear from Mac. He smiled against his lover's skin and closed his eyes. "You know, if we keep it in the dark, she won't be able to watch. Unless she goes to infra-red and that's not always as easy to install, either. Not as nice or as clear a picture. All we have to do is keep the lights off and stay in the dark."

"She'll still hear us, though."

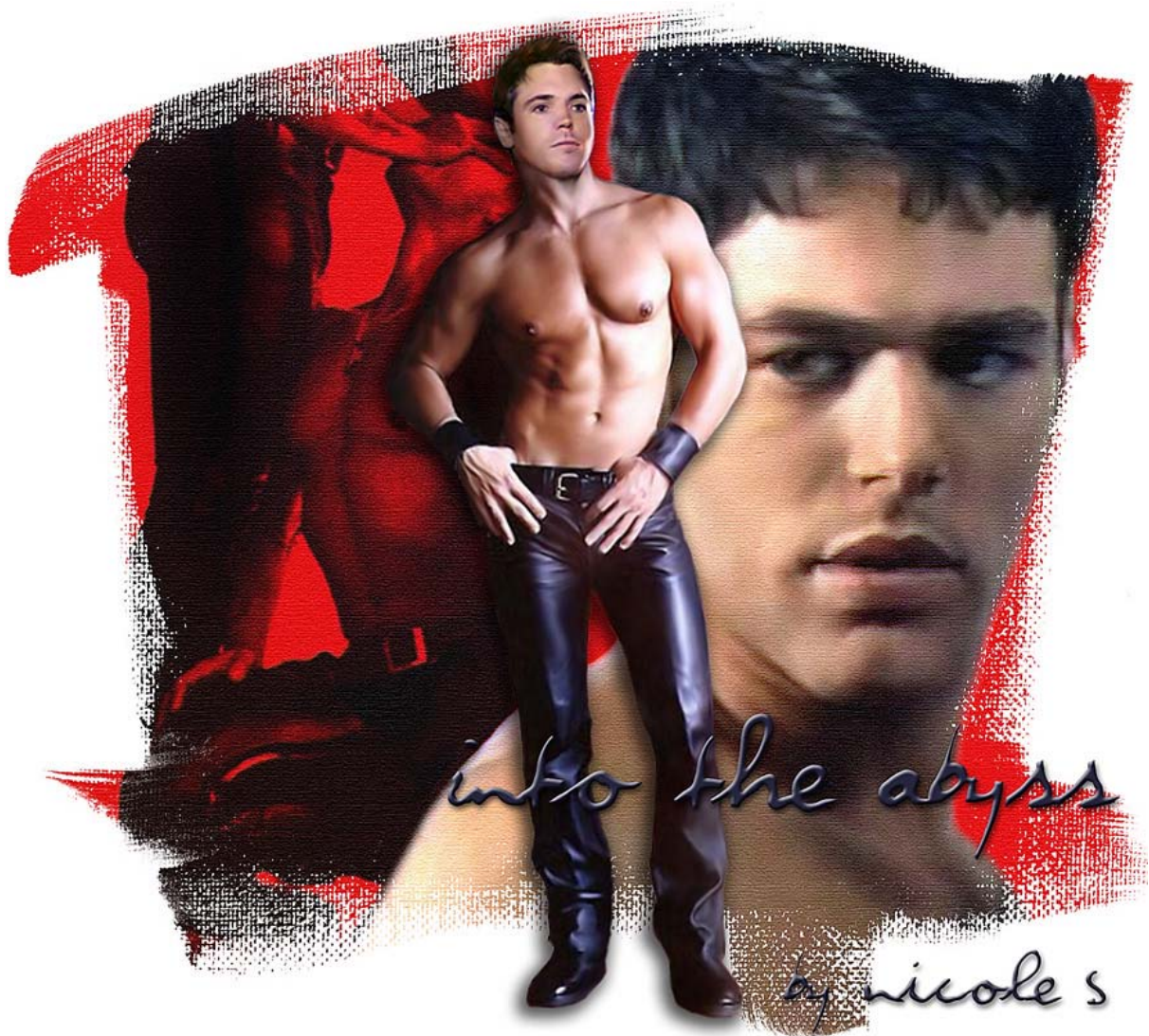
"I guess we can grant her a little relief, don't you?"

"A bone for the bitch," Mac snickered.

And then exclaimed as he found Vic doing a very good impression of a hound burying his head into him and worrying at his flesh with his teeth, with accompanying growls. It very nearly escalated into a pillow fight.

And far off, in the Director's office, a recording device took down every second. The Director herself was not present, but she knew it had to happen eventually. Both of them had been so ripe for it. She'd had a feeling they might break today if she gave them the opportunity. She was looking forward to checking the tape and also observing this evening's show. It certainly beat television.





The fire after the explosion had been the worst part. Flames licking the sides of his ears, the heat making his leather jacket steam as he pulled Mac and Li Ann out of the wreckage. Victor didn't know how he found the strength to drag them out of there, but he did and placed Mac and Li Ann at the wounded Director's feet before collapsing.

He didn't remember much after that except waking in the hospital a few days later with Mac in the adjacent bed.

It took nearly a month to heal while the men argued, talked, and got to know one another.

The time spent in the hospital was pure agony. Vic suffered from third degree burns to his lower back, singed ears, broken ribs and a punctured lung. They also had to remove his spleen. The pain of healing was so intense that it drove him to press his face into his pillow and sob every single day.

He tried to conceal his emotions from Mac, but the young man could hear his distress. Mac, recovering from a broken leg, dislocated shoulder and some minor burns, hobbled to Vic's bed, sat on the edge and tried to calm him down.

"Hey, man," he said, gently patting Vic's leg. "I know it hurts. You cry all you want."

Vic denied he was crying, but Mac knew.

Mac sat by Vic's side for hours, caressing his leg, trying to make the other agent feel better. He never went beyond the leg, however, and much to Vic's disappointment, only as high as his knee. Vic wanted to hold him in his arms and have him kiss his pain away. At night, he dreamt that Mac would do this to him

and much more, leaving him groaning in agony seemingly greater than the pain of his wounds. He couldn't tell the young man, however. He couldn't be that forward; that wasn't him.

Li Ann came in a few times but didn't stay too long. She had superficial burns and scrapes, but nothing too serious, as the men had mostly shielded her from the fire. By the time Vic and Mac got out of the hospital, they hadn't seen her in a long time.

His first night home, Vic was surprised to find Mac at his door, asking how he felt, wondering if he still hurt. Quickly they fell into a routine, Mac coming over every night to drink some beer, eat some new food that Vic had tried out of one of his many cookbooks, and talk. Vic always hoped that something else would happen, but he never pressed his luck, so it never did.

They still argued, still delighted in egging each other on and criticizing one another, especially at their daily physiotherapy sessions. And even though their egos refused to admit it to each other, they had become friends.

A month after getting out of the hospital, Mac turned up at Vic's door agitated and half-drunk. He quickly explained that he'd found out Li Ann had gone back to Hong Kong to be with Michael. He had somehow survived the car crash and explosion and was alive, albeit not well.

"Michael! He's got more lives than a damn cat," Vic grumbled.

"We should fly to Hong Kong and kick his wounded ass!" Mac shouted, pacing Vic's apartment, his hands clenching into fists, frustration showing on his face. "I can accept that she doesn't love me anymore." He looked at Victor. "I can even accept that she actually loved you once."

Vic sat down and leaned back. He knew exactly how Mac felt.

"I just can't..." the young man began then stopped. "I just can't accept the fact that she's with Michael. He tried to kill us, tried to kill her. It's like he has some sort of power over her." Mac threw his arms up in frustration before flopping on the couch beside Vic. "She never loved him, she thought of him as family, a brother. Not as a..." Mac broke off and leaned forward, his head in his hands.

Vic looked over at Mac and gave a short, sympathetic smile before reaching over and placing a hand on his back.

"I know it hurts." He repeated Mac's own words to him. The words that had given Vic comfort so many times before.

Mac looked up at him, his brown eyes so sad, threatening tears at any moment. "Li Ann and I have known each other since we were kids. For a while, all we had was each other. I always promised that I would get her away from the Tangs and start a new life for us somewhere else."

"You tried, Mac."

"I wanted to give her something better."

"You can't protect her forever." Vic rubbed Mac's back as he spoke. "You have to let her live her own life." He sighed loudly, "As much as I denied it, I knew she never really loved me; I was just convenient for her."

They sat, Vic rubbing the same spot on Mac's back over and over, their thighs touching, arousing Vic beyond comprehension. His heart pounded as conscious thought left his mind. He reached down and tilted Mac's face up to his before planting a sensual kiss on his full lips. They lingered for a moment before Mac quickly pulled away and nearly fell off the couch.

"I... uh... I have..." Mac jumped up and ran to the door, opening it to leave.

"Mac, wait." Vic leapt off the couch and raced Mac to the door then slammed it shut before he could escape. "I'm sorry, I was just caught up in the moment."

"Look, Vic, I'm flattered." Mac laughed, "If I was you I'd be turned on by me, too," he said, trying to make a joke. "But it's just not... I can't... I'm your friend."

Vic nodded, "Okay. Friends." He turned away from Mac, leaving him at the unlocked door. Vic's guts wrenched and his heart pounded. How could he have been so stupid as to think that Mac would want him? He knew he shouldn't have taken the initiative. It was better just to let things happen if they happened and not be in charge. Being aggressive only meant that he left himself open to get hurt. He sat down on his couch and stared blankly at the television screen, which wasn't even on.

He was surprised a minute later to hear the fridge door open and the clink of bottles. He was waiting for the front door to slam. Then a cold beer was pressed into his hand.

"Look," Mac began. "Let's just be buddies here and get drunk over a lost girl, okay?"

"Sounds good to me," Vic said and clinked his bottle against Mac's. Having him as a friend was better than nothing.

Afterward to curb his lust and resist another fiasco with Mac, Vic found himself frequenting an out of the way club with pretty young men. He told himself he was only there to relieve tension; it didn't mean anything; it was just sex. With perfect strangers, he could be aggressive and it didn't matter. They didn't know who he was, or his business.

He found himself going to the club a few times a week but didn't take anyone home, instead opting for blow-jobs from any tall, dark stranger he could find. As unfulfilling as it was, it did take the edge off.

Six months later, Victor was alone with the Director in the large conference room, she sitting on the table, the slide projector remote in her hand. The machine made its familiar whirring click then a picture of a rather large man wearing a toga came into view.

"He calls himself Cesar," the Director began.

Vic wondered where everyone else was. It wasn't often that Jackie and Nikki were late, and Mac... well, he was always late. But it was still odd being here by himself. Being alone with the Director unsettled him.

"This man was a black mark on our records at my club," she seethed. "His membership was revoked months ago for not playing by the rules. He was certainly not playing safe, he was clearly insane, and the young men he had brought as guests were definitely not there under their consent. He's a disgrace to our fellowship. It's supposed to be about having fun."

Vic nodded at her although he decided this discussion was in the 'too much information' category.

"Where's Nikki, Jackie and Mac?" he asked.

"Jackie is trying to infiltrate Ernie Kingsheimer's son's gang. Since the death of his father, Prince Kingsheimer has been up and coming up in the crime world, and has taken over the family business. Jackie is trying to get into The Prince's head. She seems to have that way with people."

The Director gave Victor that 'look' she always gave when she meant to indirectly insult someone. He cleared his throat and she continued.

"Nikki managed to get Mac into an exclusive rave club that is a front for a slave ring. She still passes herself off as young and hip." The Director paused, but Vic wasn't going to say anything no matter how much he wanted to.

"Young men kept disappearing from this club. We suspected it could have been part of the Colonel's gang, but that lead turned into a dead end. These young men or their bodies were never found, so they are still alive. We now know that they are being taken to a private resort run by Cesar, which stages mock gladiator fights with the young 'slaves' he kidnaps." The Director paused. "The loser is the winner's prize for any sexual pleasure he wants."

"Any pleasure?" Vic croaked then looked like maybe he shouldn't have said that out loud.

The Director leaned forward, her cleavage heaving with her breaths. "Any." She leaned back.

Victor swallowed.

"But by the time Nikki had found out that little nugget of information, it was too late.

"Too late?"

The Director slid off the table and went around to the back of Vic's chair, where she massaged his shoulders for a moment. "Mac had already been captured and whisked away to Cesar's resort. Now you have to get him back."

Vic's heart jumped, and his mouth went dry as worry and panic consumed him, but he played it cool.

"Me? Why me? Nikki was Mac's partner on this mission, and she lost him. She should go get him." He frowned. "Just because she's been rolling around in the dust with a bunch of people in Afghanistan and firing a gun once in a while, that doesn't mean she knows anything about being an agent. And even though she has a connection with this 'rave' culture and this music doesn't mean she's experienced in the field." He breathed in and out loudly. "It's the music, it's just, it's... It's evil. "He tried to sound as annoyed as possible to cover the concern he felt.

"That's what they used to say about Elvis Presley," she said as she walked around his chair.

Vic looked as if he'd been kicked in the groin.

"Don't worry, Nikki is being punished and is currently learning Zen and the art of car maintenance with Dobrinsky. She will not be allowed out of his garage for some time. I've taken extra precautions. The resort Mac was taken to is a 'male only' club, although I don't see why it should be. If I want to play with boys, that's my prerogative." She frowned and looked at Vic for a moment then gave a shrug. "You're the only one who can get him back."

"What do you mean, 'men only'?" he asked knowing the answer already. He started to sweat.

"It's a sadomasochistic sex resort. Only men allowed."

"Excuse me?" His heart jumped as he feigned shock rather than fear. He knew exactly what she was talking about.

"Victor, do I have to spell it out for you? Honestly." She sat on the table in front of him. "You will have to go to this resort and buy him back at the slave auction. That way we can prove that Cesar's dealing in human cargo and arrest him."

"Slave auction?"

"Victor, do pay attention. You and another agent will go to this resort and pose as Master and servant.

"And I'll be the..."

"Master. Although, I think you'd probably prefer being a bottom."

Vic laughed, he hoped not too nervously, then gave her a serious look. "Wait a minute, I'm *not* going to do anything like that with a complete stranger."

"I assure you, the other agent is quite experienced in his field. And besides, you even know him."

A few possibilities ran through Vic's mind, and he wasn't pleased with any of them. He didn't know if he could do this. When he frequented his club, he didn't have to do or say anything; he just had to stand there, and someone would come over and drop to their knees. He'd seen these tops, these Masters with their leather outfits and pierced nipples offering their slaves to each other, or just making a show of what their boys could do. Vic had watched with uneasy fascination at their complete comfort with having sex and displaying their naked bodies in front of God and everyone. He couldn't be so bold. Could he? He knew he had to get Mac out of this... whatever he had gotten himself into. He tried not to shiver, but the thought of displaying himself in public made him incredibly uncomfortable. There was still a moral guilt associated with "dirty sex" as his mother had called it. He looked the Director in the eye. He knew she'd won. She always fucking won.

"So, what? I get to boss people around all day?" 'And act like you,' he thought to himself.

The Director frowned again and leaned forward, caressing Vic's cheek with her hand. "Victor, you really don't have a clue, do you?"

She pulled her hand away then got off the table and pressed a button on the console at the side. After a moment, the door opened and a very fit redheaded man wearing jeans, boots and a goatee came through the door. He was followed by another equally fit, yet less muscular man on a leash wearing nothing but a small scrap of leather covering his genitals. When they stopped, the man on the leash immediately dropped to his knees, his hands behind his back and his head bowed.

The Director went over to the redhead and kissed him on the lips then patted the man attached to the leash on the head.

"Victor," the Director purred with excitement. "This is Will. He'll teach you everything you need to know about being a... being in charge." She stroked the man's face, and he smiled at her. "Will is extremely qualified." She took the leash from Will and snapped her fingers. The man on the other end leapt to his feet yet kept his head down.

"You're a very good boy," the Director said to the young man. "Why don't you show Victor just how good you can be?" She unsnapped the leash from the collar at the man's neck. The man walked over to Victor before dropping to his knees and putting his head against his thigh. "How may I serve you, sir?"

"Whoa!" Vic stepped back from the young man but stopped suddenly. He knew that voice; it was somehow familiar. "No way. This is too weird."

"Well, you're going to have to get over it. I need you trained and on a plane in 48 hours. The auction is set for Tuesday, and you need to be up at the resort by Sunday." She smiled a wicked smile. "Now, why don't *you* be a good boy and come along with Nathan, and we'll get started."

As soon as the Director said his name, Vic balked. Nathan? He tilted the man's head up to meet his own. The man on the floor was fit, his muscles taut under tanned skin. He wasn't twitching, he wasn't sweating, and his voice was confident. This wasn't Nathan, not the one he knew, anyway.

"But it *is* Nathan," the Director purred in his ear, as if she could read his thoughts. "He has undergone quite a transformation since you've been gone. He's proven to be a most useful employee."

Victor could do nothing but stand there and stare. "I don't have to... I don't have to fuck him or anything, do I?"

"You'll do what Victor tells you to, right, Nathan?"

"Yes, Mistress."

Victor continued to stare in disbelief.

"Come, Victor, enough gawking. It looks like we've got a *lot* of ground to cover with you." She grabbed his arm and hauled him away, following Will and Nathan through the door.

2 days later

Vic sat back in the limousine and tried to relax during the hour-long ride from the small airport to the resort.

Nathan lay at his feet on the floor, smiling up at him, ready to serve his 'Master' at any moment.

Vic didn't glance down; he was trying to avoid Nathan as much as possible. He'd already had to deal with Nathan's desire to please on the private plane and didn't want a repeat of that in the car. He had wanted to lie on the floor, but the pilot wouldn't take off until he was secured in his seat.

Now that they were in the limousine, however, Nathan could do as he pleased. He was still clothed however, and for that, Vic was grateful. Vic closed his eyes. He was supposed to be the dominant one; he was the one who was supposed to be demanding, right? He felt Nathan nuzzle his foot. When he looked down, he saw the man was using his boot as his pillow.

"Have you ever heard of topping from the bottom?" Vic rolled his eyes. "Look, while we have roles to play when we get to the resort, all this posturing is getting on my nerves."

Nathan looked up at him through his lashes, although this was the first time Vic noticed the other man even HAD lashes.

"Permission to speak freely, sir?"

He nodded his head and breathed out. The Director owed him for this one.

Nathan climbed onto the seat beside Victor and looked at him intently. Vic stiffened as Nathan put his head on his shoulder and nuzzled his neck. Victor was about to push him off when he spoke.

"Victor," Nathan said with determination into his ear. "I've been trained not only to be a submissive, but to be an agent. The Director herself hand picked me for this mission."

Vic was going to say something, but found Nathan's finger pressed against his lips. He felt his pulse race as Nathan climbed into his lap and embraced him. He didn't want anything physical from this man, he had made that perfectly clear before they left. They were here to find Mac and that was it.

He was about to protest when Nathan spoke again so only he could hear. "I don't know if you've noticed, but Cesar's men have been watching us since before we got on the plane. I'm pretty sure the limo is bugged. I'm definitely sure the plane was bugged. Now, if you want to make this a successful mission and find Mac, I suggest you get into character and stay there."

Nathan pulled away and gently ran a hand down Vic's face, but to Vic it felt as if he was being slapped. This was certainly NOT the Nathan he remembered. Wasn't he supposed to respect and obey him?

"I don't know you," Vic whispered. "I only know the sweaty man with the strange ideas and massive paranoia. I've never worked with you before like this, you're not who you used to be. How can I trust you?"

"You're just going to have to, aren't you?"

Anger suddenly washed over Vic and he grabbed Nathan by the shoulders. He held on to him for a moment, intending to do damage to the man, until realization washed over him. He knew Nathan was right, they were being watched, and Vic wasn't treating this seriously. He'd have to put his feelings aside to complete this mission successfully.

Vic brought Nathan in for a long, yet dry kiss, before pulling back. That was what he needed, something to shock his system and get him into his game. Now he was ready.

"On the floor," he barked, sending the other man scrambling down from Vic's lap.

"Good boy," Vic said, reaching down and ruffling Nathan's hair. He then leaned back again and tried to see out the tinted window. This was going to be a long mission.

During their training, Nathan had told Victor how he had been alone in the Agency library when Dobrinsky had told him of the shooting and explosion and how the Director had needed someone to tend to her as she healed. He'd explained how he had been nervous at first, and scared that the alien queen was going to use him to incubate her young. He'd soon realized that she wasn't an alien; she was a human being, and a lonely one at that. She'd told him he had 'hidden talents', which pleased him, no one had told him he'd been good at anything before. He liked making her happy.

He had been, and still was, loyal to the Director, and she liked that. Then she'd made him an offer to become an agent. He was good at gathering facts, and could listen in on conversations easily. He could be her little spy. Nathan had loved that idea. There was an assignment coming up, and with a little training, and a boost of self-esteem, he could be a great agent.

So, he went to train for months with Will, who had taught him everything he knew. The Director came in every day to check on his progress, and marvelled at his transformation. He remembered Nathan telling him, 'It was wild, Vic. I didn't know the human body could withstand so much.' Nathan had a new direction in life, which translated into self-confidence and self-assurance. The nervous, sweaty, wounded Nathan was gone.

Vic had filed that away in his 'too much information' side of his brain with the Director's various stories of her conquests and her private club. He thought about it now, though, and agreed that Nathan was trained exceptionally well. And he really enjoyed it. And if he got off by making people happy, then who was he to argue?

Although he knew Nathan was right about their deep cover, there was another reason why he didn't want to do this. When he was in Vice, Victor had posed as a pimp and gotten close to a man like Cesar. This man, Jake, would bring young men and women to his parties, invite them to stay in his home and supply them with drugs until they were addicted, then he made them a deal. They either had to sell themselves to his clients to remain high, or be turned out into the street where they'd be at the mercy of anyone. After they were used up, they'd be dumped.

One night, Jake had Vic prove himself with one of the young men. This man hadn't been much older than 20 and was high as a kite. Vic thought he didn't even feel himself being breached and fucked hard. When he was done, the young man looked at him with vacant eyes. His dick wasn't even hard. He was just a vessel, just a piece of meat.

Vic had felt disgusted with himself. He'd told himself he was trying to help these people by gathering the evidence to put Jake in jail. But even today, all these years later he still felt like a rapist.

The guys in Vice had never treated him quite the same way after it had leaked that he had to fuck another man. Vic had gratefully transferred to narcotics soon to get a fresh start, but that had been even more of a fiasco. He'd always suspected that his reputation was the real reason he had been set up by his so-called buddies.

And now he was walking into the same mess again, but this time the stakes were different. This time it was for Mac. And he convinced himself that Mac was more important to him than his reputation would ever be.

Mac groaned out loud as the cold water shocked his hot skin and worn muscles. He had been working all day in the searing heat, grooming the golf course and beach for guests that weren't even here. In the beginning, he'd refused to work and told them to shove it, but every time he protested, he got whipped so he stopped after a while. Now he and the others were finally being hosed down after a day of hard labour and jostled each other for position to gain the most spray from the hose.

He had woken here three nights ago, naked, lying on a plush rug. Before that, the last thing he'd remembered was dancing in that club with Nikki before following Cesar and a young man down a flight of stairs, then his whole world had gone black.

So, there he was on a plush rug in what looked like a hunting lodge with a large, bear-like man glaring down at him. Mac had refused the man's sexual demands and orders, fighting every step of the way, and after a few hours, and a good beating, he was banished to the 'stables', where proud and disobedient 'slaves' were kept for work details and 'training' to be obedient.

During the day they hauled dirt, cut grass and raked sand, things that Mac had never done for anyone before, but it was either that or face the consequences. Although he hated the degradation more than the pain, he decided that stained, cracked and blistered hands were better than getting whipped.

During the night, the slaves were taught discipline and forced to fight each other for dominance among them. The losers were not only forced to do extra duties, but were available for the pleasure of the men who beat them. Mac lost once and only once. While he was not unfamiliar with having sex with another man, he hated to lose.

Rumour had it that they would be auctioned off to the highest bidder once the guests arrived, and the harder they fought, the higher the guests would bid. Mac nearly gagged at the thought. He didn't want to be sold to someone like a possession; he was a man, not a thing.

The spray of the water stopped, jolting him back to the present, and he was led back to the barracks with the other men. He sure hoped the Director would pull him out of here soon, he didn't like it here. He put up his brave front as much as possible, but deep down he could feel a shiver of fear. He hoped she knew where he was. He mentally shook himself; of course she knew where he was, she always knew where he was, didn't she?

He shrugged the thought off. He knew the Director would probably want to come in here and pull him out by his ear for getting involved in the operation in a way he wasn't supposed to. But any woman would be turned away, he knew that at least. And besides, it wasn't his fault, Nikki was supposed to have been watching his back. No, she'd send Vic.

He hoped she'd send Vic. Even though he wouldn't admit it, he missed not seeing the other agent every day. Yeah, Vic was probably on his way right now... 'unless...' The Director wouldn't just leave him here to stew for a few more days, or a week, would she? He shuffled into the barracks with the other men, and tried to put the thought from his mind.

Vic looked down at Nathan as the limousine rolled to a stop. He breathed in and out quickly and reminded himself that no matter what he had to do, he was on a mission to save Mac. If he could just keep that focus, he could do this.

The door opened, and Vic got out of the large, black car and blinked into the bright sunlight. He immediately put on his sunglasses, his eyes slowly adjusting to the harsh contrast from the darkly shaded interior of the vehicle.

He heard another car pull up behind his, and realized that he was just one in a caravan of upscale cars. Nathan scrambled out of the vehicle like an excited puppy and ran around to the trunk to get his luggage.

Vic watched as men dressed in expensive clothing extracted themselves from the expensive cars. Some had companions, while others were alone. Suddenly, he noticed that a contingent of men clad in a leather g-strings were helping people with their bags. He was disappointed to notice that Mac was not among them.

A man holding a clipboard came over, checked Vic in, and gave him a security card and directions to his room. With Nathan in tow, he made his way across the grounds, noting the layout and possible security breach points. In two nights, Nathan, who apparently had vast computer knowledge, would disable the alarm system. This would allow the Agency to swarm the compound the night of the bonfire celebration in two nights. That would give them time to buy Mac back, and gather incriminating evidence against Cesar and his cohorts.

Their quarters were spacious, with a bedroom and parlour, along with a large washroom equipped with a whirlpool bath. D rings and hooks were set around the room so one could be bound wherever their Master pleased. There was a wardrobe full of toys and drawers of condoms and various lubricants from KY to Elbow Grease. A sling hung in the corner, swaying slightly from the overhead fan.

Vic eased himself into a chair set by the large sliding patio window in the parlour and watched Nathan, who was now dressed in nothing but a blue Speedo bathing suit, bustle around and put their things away. Nathan's lack of clothing seemed silly to Vic, but all the other slaves were wearing them, and they couldn't afford to stand out.

Suddenly, Nathan was kneeling beside him, his ever present willing to please grin on his face. "Would you like a drink, sir?"

"Yes, a beer would be nice."

Nathan smiled at him and quickly got up and went to the fridge in the corner. Soon, he came back with a frosty mug of beer as Vic had requested. Nathan leaned close as he handed him the glass. "There's a camera in this room and the bedroom, but the washroom seems to be clean. I'll check again just to be sure." He then dropped to his knees.

"Thank you, Nathan," Vic said.

He reached down and ruffled Nathan's hair and sighed into his mug as he took a sip. This was it. He was in character now and would be until it was time to kick some ass later.

Mac was tied to a frame, his limbs spread out, collar around his neck, blindfolded and gagged.

Vic had to hold himself back as he reviewed the slaves for sale at the auction. All of them were bound this way and on display like pieces of meat. Some of the guests went up to the slaves and fondled them or slapped them to see what they could take. He just stared at Mac, who was wearing only a skimpy bathing suit, his body taut and fighting his bonds. If Vic wasn't so worried about his partner, he would have sniggered to himself that at least Mac was quiet for once.

Yesterday he had lain in the sun and tried to gather as much information about the other 'Masters' as he could, while Nathan doted over him, offering everything from sunscreen application to feeding him lunch. Vic drew the line at being fed, although the other guests made their slaves do everything for them. Some of them treated their slaves rather badly, making Vic angry. Justice couldn't be served to these men. Not yet, anyway.

The most popular topic of conversation around the beach and neighbouring pool yesterday was the slave auction. There was talk of a wild, defiant slave who had only lost once during the Gladiator games. He was tall and handsome with a fine body and full lips that would look great stretched around one of their cocks.

Somehow, Vic knew they were talking about Mac, but he just smiled and nodded at them. He would have to outbid these assholes or Mac would be in a situation much worse than he was in already. He took one last wistful glance at his friend before taking a seat.

Vic watched as slave after slave was paraded before the audience. Most of these bound young men hung their heads, not in submission, but in shame. They didn't want to be here, they didn't deserve to be

here and sold as mere objects. This was making him sick; didn't this Cesar or these so-called 'Masters' have any shame?

Finally, Mac was brought up before them, still bound, blindfolded and gagged. Murmuring rippled through the crowd as they were told of this slave's defiance and the need for him to be broken.

"The bidding will start at five thousand."

Victor raised his numbered paddle into the air.

"Five thousand, do I hear six?"

"Six thousand, seven?"

"Seven, can I get eight?"

"Ten."

"Ten thousand, thank you, sir. Do I hear twelve?"

"Twelve, thank you Mr. Christian. Fourteen?"

Vic raised his paddle into the air. This was going way too fast. Was the price supposed to rise this high this soon? He suspected this was Cesar's doing.

"Twenty," came a voice from the back.

"Twenty, very good, Mr. Daniels. Twenty-five?"

Vic started to sweat. He looked down at Nathan, who nodded his head slightly; he knew it was a high bid, but they couldn't leave Mac to anyone else. Vic raised his paddle into the air.

"Thirty?"

Mr. Daniels raised his paddle.

"Thirty-five?"

Vic raised his paddle again.

"Forty?"

"Fifty," Vic said. Excitement vibrated through the crowd.

"Fifty, from Mr. Mansfield. Mr. Daniels?"

Vic noticed Mac's head move slightly at the mention of his name.

Mr. Daniels hesitated but raised his paddle.

"Seventy-five," said Vic. Nathan squeezed his leg from his position on the ground beside him. This was as high as they could go without contacting the Agency for more money.

"Mr. Daniels?" the auctioneer asked. "The bid is Seventy Five thousand dollars. Seventy-five thousand once. Seventy-five thousand twice. Sold to Mr. Mansfield."

The spectators and bidders broke into applause as Victor rose to collect Mac. Cesar met him at the pay desk.

"You've paid a lot of money for such a defiant slave, Mr. Mansfield."

"I like a challenge." Vic handed over an envelope of cash to the clerk.

"You have your work cut out for you. We'll see how you do tomorrow evening."

Vic was confused. "Excuse me?"

Cesar draped his toga around himself more tightly, revealing his lumps and bulges of obesity even more prominently. "Don't tell me you don't know about the 24 hour rule."

"Obviously, a detail has been overlooked."

The portly man grinned at him. "When you buy a slave from me, you have 24 hours to prove your worthiness as a Master. If the slave does not perform as he should, we void the transaction and the slave is disposed of. We can't have an inferior product tainting my good name." The man grinned more broadly. "This keeps second-rate Masters and frauds from leaving here with a product that they cannot handle. As you know, discretion is of the utmost importance."

"Of course," Victor seethed. This man was a piece of work, all right. As the Director had said, he, and those who followed him were a disgrace to society and this community.

"Then we'll see you tomorrow evening with your new, submissive slave." Cesar gathered the hem of his toga and waddled off to speak to the others who had won their bids.

Vic clipped a leash to Mac's collar and, with Nathan's help, escorted him back to their quarters. Once inside, the bindings were removed, enabling Mac to move freely, not to mention see and talk again. Vic hoped Mac would keep his mouth shut for once but the younger man spoke before he could be warned.

"Vic! I knew you'd come for me, buddy. Let's get out of here." Mac looked around the parlour and spoke low. "You've got a piece for me, right? 'Cause we're going to have to blast through tons of security."

Vic moved his mouth to Mac's ear. "We can't leave. Not yet. They're watching and listening."

"You haven't lost that wry sense of humour, Vic. Come on, let's go." He made a motion to go toward the door, but Vic grabbed his arm.

"I said you're not going anywhere," Vic harshly whispered.

"Come on, Vic, quit kidding around," Mac said, his voice dropping.

Victor got near Mac again and held him close so he could speak to him without the surveillance equipment picking up their conversation. "Does it look like I'm kidding?"

"Gee, nice 'tude. I'm treated like garbage for days and instead of rescuing me, I get treated like crap again."

"I'm sorry, Mac, I really am," Vic kept his voice low. "But we can't leave until tomorrow night. Like I said, we're being watched, so I suggest you stay in character until then."

"What? Be your little boy?" Mac pulled away from Vic and motioned to Nathan. "You have one already."

"Nathan, would you be kind enough to get me a glass of water?" Vic asked.

"Yeah, Nate, I'll take one too..." Mac trailed off as he watched the other man set about getting Victor's water before walking toward him. "Nathan? Our Nathan?"

"Mac," Vic warned, his gaze drifting up to where the video camera was.

Mac walked over to Nathan to check him out. "Look at you! She did this, didn't she?"

"This is the last time I'm telling you."

Nathan remained silent as he brought the glass of water over to Victor, who drank it down in one gulp and handed the glass back.

"Relax." Mac flopped down in one of the chairs.

Vic's eyes narrowed as he reached out and yanked Mac up from of the chair. He dragged him by the arm into the bathroom, where he pushed Mac to the floor and held him down.

"I warned you."

"Get off of me." Mac struggled.

"Not until you've calmed down. There's a lot at stake here."

"Fuck you!"

Vic felt as if he'd been kicked in the stomach. "Fine, you can stay here until you've learned your lesson. Nathan!"

Nathan appeared in the doorway.

"Nathan, bring me that length of chain and padlock in the wardrobe and some handcuffs."

Mac laughed, "What are you going to do? Chain me to the shower rod? You can't keep me here."

Nathan was back momentarily with the requested items.

"No, I'm going to chain you to the toilet." Vic reached up and cuffed Mac's hands together then ran the chain through the cuffs and around the porcelain. He then padlocked the chain together.

"I can pick this lock in under a minute," Mac taunted.

"With what, your dick?"

Mac looked like he was going to say something, but for once, was at a loss for words.

"Mac, if you say one more thing, I'm going to gag you again." To Vic's relief, the younger man stayed silent. "We are on a mission here. Part one of our mission was to get your ass out of the stables, although right now I wonder if you're worth a fraction of what I paid. Part two is to gather information on the others at the resort to use against them during the trial. Part three is when the Agency comes over the wall, but that doesn't happen until tomorrow night."

Vic leaned in close to Mac. "But we've run into a complication. Now we have to make sure we put on a good show, or they're going to kill you. But that doesn't seem to matter to you. It does matter to me, however. Not just the fact that someone is probably going to shoot you dead, but I will have to explain to the Director why you died, and fill out a lot of paperwork, and probably wax Dobrinsky's cars for the rest of my life. So if you don't care about yourself, at least think about me."

"You're exaggerating."

Vic was inches from Mac's face, and he could feel himself projecting heat from his body due to his sudden anger. "There are cameras in the parlour and the bedroom. Since we haven't found any here, this is the only room where we can speak freely, although we're not discounting another type of surveillance device." He breathed out slowly. "Mac, you need to stay focused and help us here. We need to get this guy and put him away."

"Fine, whatever, I'll play along. Now unchain me, so I can call for room service. I'm really hungry."

Vic stood, anger coursing through him. "You haven't heard a word I've said."

"What? Bow down to you. Be good, yada yada."

Victor left the room, but returned a moment later with a ball gag. He fit it around Mac's thrashing head and secured it in place. Then he turned off the light and shut the door to the bathroom, leaving Mac all alone.

Vic went to the bedroom, the farthest he could get away from Mac, sat on the bed and put his head in his hands. The young man infuriated him, to say the least. Didn't he understand the gravity of the situation?

About twenty minutes later Nathan came over to Vic and looked at him. "Do you want me to talk to him?"

Vic shrugged. "Knock yourself out."

Nathan opened the door to the washroom and turned the light on. He could see Mac squint against the sudden glare and turn his head away. He sat on the floor beside Mac and started stroking his hair.

"You're just as stubborn as he is."

Mac grunted and rolled his eyes.

"I had to tell him the same thing on the way down here, that we're on a mission, and are getting paid to do our job. The only way to pull this off is to get into character and stay there."

Mac mumbled something through the gag.

Nathan caressed Mac's face before removing the ball gag.

"Thank God," Mac said and flexed his jaw a few times. Then he looked at Nathan and frowned. "I'm not like that. I'm not submissive. I don't like being told what to do. I'm not a 'bottom'"

"You make submission sound like a bad thing."

"That's not me, Nathan. You may get off on people walking all over you and jumping at their every command, but I don't."

Now Nathan frowned. "You don't understand."

"No, I don't understand how a grown man can let people oppress him."

"It's not like that at all. When you give yourself to someone, it's very special. Doing things for them pleases me as well."

"I don't call being told what to do and jumping at someone's every command very special." Mac swallowed. "It's not very..." He looked disapprovingly at Nathan. "It's not what a man does," he said, condescension in his voice.

The old Nathan would have started to shake and sweat at conflict, especially after Mac had basically just called him a sissy. He still felt that uncomfortable twinge deep down, but this was the new Nathan. Even with that twinge inside, he decided enough was enough. He refastened the gag in Mac's mouth and left him there again in the dark.

Vic was sitting in the parlour when he came out of the washroom, and Nathan immediately went over to the bar where he poured two large shots of scotch, took a sip of one and gave the other to Vic.

Nathan clinked his glass against Vic's. "Here's to ball gags."

Vic smiled as he took the glass and swallowed a large gulp. Nathan took a healthy sip himself, the liquid burning sweetly down his throat. Nathan then put his glass on the table, sat down at Victor's feet and rested his head against his knee.

"He doesn't understand," Nathan whispered. "He thinks it's bad to be a bottom, just as you thought it was bad being a top."

Vic grunted and answered softly, "I never said it was a bad thing."

"Why didn't you want to come here then?"

"It's just not my scene."

Nathan shrugged. "I guess not."

Nathan's head was petted absentmindedly, and he wondered if Vic had ever owned a dog as a child.

Nathan stroked Vic's leg; he knew how difficult this process was. His training had taken six months; Victor had only had two days. He could feel the tension radiating off of him in waves. Vic needed to relax, if he made one mistake tomorrow, it could be fatal for all of them.

"Sir?"

"Yeah."

"You're very tense."

"Gee, what a great observation."

"Let me give you a massage."

"I don't think so, Nathan."

"Sir... Vic, if I may. You're going to have to be in prime condition tomorrow evening. You need a good night's sleep, and right now, you're too high strung to actually rest."

Vic scrubbed one hand over his face. "I'll be fine." He downed the rest of his scotch then stood and went into the bedroom.

Nathan followed him and watched as Victor unceremoniously disrobed and flopped into bed.

Two hours later, Vic was still tossing and turning. The impending scenarios of tomorrow evening ran through his mind, shoving sleep well out of reach. He was so worried about Mac blowing their cover that he was risking blowing it himself. They all had to stay in character. If they didn't put on a good show, they could take Mac away before the Agency had a chance to arrest Cesar and his cohorts.

He groaned then flopped over again, and suddenly found himself staring into the glare of the bedside light. Nathan was there as well, a scowl on his face.

"Okay, that's it; you're keeping me awake. On your belly."

"What?" Vic asked, surprise in his voice. "Aren't I supposed to order *you* around?"

"Remember 'topping from the bottom'?"

"Yeah, but..."

"Shush. On your front."

Vic hesitated then complied, he hadn't seen Nathan like this before and was afraid what would happen if he didn't do what he said.

Vic lay on his stomach, his arms under his pillow, cradling his head. He heard water running then low talking and Nathan bustling around. He strained his ears to hear what was going on.

"Relax, Victor," Nathan said from the next room.

He heard something being placed on the bedside table behind him, then felt the mattress dip as Nathan sat beside him. Next came the soft sound of fabric being laid down, which he suspected was towels. A slightly spicy, musky smell wafted over from whatever was placed on the bedside table.

Nathan tried to remove Vic's T-shirt, but he was met with resistance.

"No," Vic said. "Leave it on."

"It's coming off."

"It isn't." Vic tried to sit up, but was held by Nathan.

"Vic, your scars don't bother me. I've seen them before." Nathan began rubbing Vic's back through the cotton T-shirt, starting with long strokes, meant to calm and soothe.

"It's not the scars. It's just..."

"What?"

"No one's done... touched..."

"This is purely clinical, Victor. I just want you to relax."

Vic sighed. "Okay."

Nathan helped Victor remove his shirt, and, when he was settled, started stroking him again.

Vic bristled at the first touch of Nathan's oiled hands on his bare skin, but soon calmed down as he realized they were soft and felt nice. Like he said, it had been a long time since he'd been touched this way, especially since the accident. That was one of the reasons he only opted for blow-jobs in the sex club; he didn't want to have to show his body to anyone.

Vic groaned into his pillow as he felt Nathan straddle him and use his weight to lean into his shoulders before pausing for more oil.

Nathan began telling Victor about when he was a little boy there was another boy next door who got a puppy for his birthday. Nathan used to watch the boy and his puppy play together from his bedroom window and he wanted a puppy, too. He'd watch them play fetch and chase sticks, run after squirrels and have a great time together. Nathan was jealous of the boy next door and his puppy. He wanted a friend like that; he never had any friends.

They grew older, the boy turning into a young man, the puppy into a grown dog. Nathan noticed that the young man didn't play with the dog as much as he used to. The young man had lots of friends and didn't have time for the dog anymore. But that dog would sit and wait for the young man to come home, and when he did, his tail would wag and he would get excited and jump around.

Nathan was always jealous of the love and devotion the dog had for the young man. Nathan had always felt so lonely, up in his room with his asthma inhalers and air purifying filters humming. He promised himself that when he got older, he'd get himself a puppy and have something that would love him. But his apartment didn't allow pets, so he had to make do with some goldfish that he kept in a square white corning-ware dish as he didn't have a fish bowl...

Nathan's story bored Vic, although there was certain to be some sort of hidden message to it that he didn't care about right now. He had nearly tuned him out, only the somehow soothing tones of his voice coming through the haze. The fingers continued to dig into his back, working out all the knots and tensions of the past few days.

Vic had never felt this way before; he was usually a bundle of inner stress. He'd never allowed himself to let his guard down. He'd always been undercover, or too tense to totally relax. But Nathan was no threat, even with his new muscles and weight. Victor could break him in half if he had to.

Suddenly, he felt a tug on his boxer briefs and, surprisingly, gave no objection when they were removed from his body.

His upper thighs were being massaged and he couldn't help the blood filling his cock. He didn't really care. It just felt that good. He thought of Mac in the next room and how he wanted him here, wanted him stroking between his legs, lightly skimming his balls with his fingers, sucking and licking. He groaned out loud and pushed his hardness into the mattress.

Then Vic was being rolled onto his back. He was too weak to do it himself. He tried to reach down to cover his erection, but found his arms too heavy to move.

Nathan paid as much attention to the front of his body as he did the back, leaving Vic panting, hard and leaking.

"This is supposed to relax you, not work you up."

"I *am* relaxed."

Nathan trailed his hand up Vic's thigh to his cock and lightly stroked it with his fingers. "You're aching for it," he whispered. "Let me help you."

"No. I'm okay."

"No, you're not," Nathan said, still whispering. "You need to take the edge off."

"Fuck the edge."

Vic felt warm oil being drizzled on his cock then a strong hand grip it tightly.

"I said no. I said... Oh God, yes." Vic moaned again, giving in to what he really needed.

A few strokes later, Vic arched his back and warm semen spattered his chest. He gave a final moan then a sigh, then felt Nathan wipe him off with one of the towels. He wanted to unchain Mac and bring him here and snuggle with him, even though he had pissed him off so much. He wanted... He drifted off before he could finish the thought or feel Nathan kiss his forehead and pull the covers up to his chin.

—

The next day, Vic went into the bathroom and unchained Mac from the toilet. He noticed the ball gag had been removed, and the chain had been refastened to give Mac some more slack. Mac sat up and rubbed his aching arms and wrists.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. Nathan slept in the open doorway most of the night."

Vic nodded. "I thought he would."

"We talked. And although he made some great arguments, I still don't like this."

Vic sighed. "I'm not too crazy about it myself, but we have to stop this guy, Mac. Think of how he treated you."

"Just like the way you're treating me."

"I'm teaching you a lesson."

"That's what *Cesar* said. I'm..." Mac was clearly frustrated. "I'm not a bottom!"

"I'm sorry, Mac, but you're going to have to play along. They're watching us for Christ sakes."

"I don't give a fuck if they're watching. This isn't me."

"Well, too bad," Vic said, exasperated. "Why do you think you were left in here all night? I had to show them that I could assert my authority."

"At the expense of my pride."

"You think *I'm* proud of this? I chained up the man I..." Vic stopped himself.

Mac swallowed. "The man you what?"

"Nothing." Victor inwardly kicked himself

"No, not nothing. Finish what you were going to say. The man I what? Hate? Despise? Dislike?"

Vic felt a stabbing in his heart. How could Mac think he didn't like him? "No, no, that's not it at all." He suddenly felt nervous, as if he was 15 years old again and speaking to his first crush.

Mac stood. "Fine, whatever." He made motions to leave.

Vic, shaking, used pure adrenaline to make himself stand, knowing what he was going to do next. He grabbed Mac's arm and whipped him around, slamming him against the wall. "Did I say you could go?"

"I told you, Victor, I'm not playing this game."

Vic reached down and grabbed Mac's sac through the skimpy bathing suit he still wore. "This isn't a game."

Mac's hand came down to cover Vic's, but he found it pinned back against the expensive wallpaper.

"Leave it there," Vic whispered.

Mac looked as if he was going to move, but thought better of it. His eyes rolled back in his head as his rapidly filling cock was kneaded and massaged until it was hard.

Vic heard Mac whimper, which made him smile. Whether he knew it or not, this was what he needed. "Mac," he began, his voice sultry and low. "You're going to do this and like it, or I'm going to leave here and let you rake leaves for Cesar in the fall."

Mac gasped and opened his mouth to say something, but Vic cut him off. "You may not speak."

Vic squeezed Mac's sac harder and tugged slightly, causing him to cry out.

"I hear he's open year round. I wonder how much snow they might get up here?"

"You wouldn't... you wouldn't leave me here. The Director..." Mac gasped as his balls were tugged on again, the last word more like a sigh.

"I said you may not speak. I *will* leave you here if you don't smarten up. I'll tell the Director you were bought by someone else and taken away."

Victor gave Mac's balls one final squeeze then leaned back and admired his handiwork. Mac was a mess, his cock was poking through the top of his swimsuit, a pearly drop of precome on the tip. Vic licked his lips at the sight, he wanted to taste that drop so bad. Instead, he leaned in and kissed Mac on the cheek, lingering for a moment only to whisper, "Now, clean up and let's go get the bad guys."

Mac only nodded and rubbed his exposed cock against Vic's leg.

Victor stepped back and looked at Mac, whose face wore an expression of pure confusion. He opened the door and said, "No coming. I'm sending Nathan in to keep an eye on you."

Mac let out a frustrated groan as Vic left the room and Nathan entered.

Vic shut the door behind him then leaned against the wall, gasping. He was shaking and sweating. He had never spoken to Mac that way, hell, he'd never spoken to anyone like that before. Or grabbed anyone's dick, for that matter, just to prove a point.

He felt exhilarated and scared at the same time. What would Mac think of him now? Did Mac think this was all part of the role, or did he realize just how much Vic wanted the younger man? He laughed to himself; was it wicked to like this? He moved away from the wall and started into the bedroom, pondering the thought.

—

It was still hot that evening when Vic left their rooms, Mac and Nathan in tow, their leashes in his hand. As instructed by Cesar, Mac was wearing nothing but a silver cock ring, which didn't do anything to quell Vic's urges.

They strode through the grounds, Vic's head held high, full of adrenaline from earlier that day. They got to the bonfire celebration on the white sand where Masters sat in canvas beach chairs and relaxed while their slaves toasted marshmallows for them and served them cocktails. A few slaves were giving their Masters blow-jobs, and one was getting fucked down by the water.

Vic knew that in a few hours the Agency would storm the place and bust every single one of these cruel men around him. And by the way they were drinking, it looked like it would be easy pickings.

Nathan and Mac sat at his feet as the bonfire continued throughout the evening, various Masters showing how well they had trained their newly bought slaves on a makeshift stage set with a frame and flogging horse. Most were particularly cruel, leaving more than one young man unconscious to be dragged away. Vic was sickened; he couldn't wait for this to be over.

Nathan was stroking his leg then lightly pinched the inside of his knee, the signal that it was time for him to go and put the scheme into play. Vic leaned down and whispered to him, then sat up suddenly and yelled at the other man, "Well, go get it!" Nathan scrambled off into the direction of their rooms. He wanted to go with him; he didn't like Nathan working without backup. While he trusted Nathan, Vic didn't really know what the younger man was capable of as an agent. But he couldn't leave with everyone's eyes on him and Mac.

"Mr. Mansfield," Cesar said, suddenly beside him. "I see you have tamed this wild one, but you seem to be having trouble with your boy?"

"No trouble. You just have to know how to show them who's boss." Vic knew those words were wrong as soon as they came out of his mouth. It was as if he was challenging the other man.

Cesar's eyes darkened, "Perhaps it is time you showed us just how you did it." He motioned to the small stage.

Vic smiled at the portly man, but his mouth was as dry as sawdust. This was it; there was no turning back now.

He led Mac up to the stage and secured him to the frame, his back to the crowd. He thought he should say some words of encouragement but couldn't think of any right then.

"Let's get these creeps," Mac barely whispered, making Vic nearly smile.

Vic went over to the assortment of toys and implements of pain along the side of the stage. He picked up an oxblood leather flogger from the rack and held it in his hand, caressing the worn leather handle with his thumb, trying to remember everything Will had taught him.

He looked at Mac, naked and bound. For the first time, he noticed he was tanned a deep brown, save for a skimpy tan line. His cock jumped as he moved closer to Mac, swaying the flogger in his hand. His

nipples puckered with excitement as he let the tendrils of the flogger caress Mac's back, draping down over his shoulder. That's when Vic noticed the marks.

Mac's back was covered in old scars and wounds inflicted over the past few days. He stifled a cry as he thought of this fat bastard hurting Mac like this. The very idea made his skin crawl. He wanted to take Mac in his arms and comfort him, not hurt him. He cursed Cesar under his breath.

"Do it," Mac hissed.

Vic hesitated a moment before continuing his sensual teasing of his partner. He had to see this through to the end.

He angled the tendrils down Mac's ass crack and between his legs, lightly slapping the inside of his thighs before going around to face him, where he teased his bound cock with the leather strips. Mac looked up, his lips swollen with passion, and eyes heavy, the lids fluttering as he stifled a cry when Vic teased his nipples with the flogger then pinched them hard.

Suddenly, Vic lunged forward and kissed Mac, his tongue plunging into the moist heat of his mouth. "I'm sorry," he whispered as he lingered for a moment then pulled away to step back behind the bound man.

Gently, he ran his hand down Mac's shoulders to caress his ass cheeks, then up to the curve of his back, not wanting to touch the wounds there, but had no choice. He then ran his hand back up to his shoulders before going back down to cup Mac's ass cheeks. He did this a number of times, sensitizing the skin with the palm of his hand, his fingernails, and the flogger.

Vic couldn't tell who was trembling more, he or Mac. Mac's body gleamed with sweat in the light from the fire and the torches around them. A bead of sweat rolled down Vic's forehead, and he was suddenly very hot. He ripped the black T-shirt he wore over his head and flung it aside, not caring who saw his scars now. If they thought he was a Master, then he'd be a Master.

"Now," Vic whispered softly and watched Mac tense in his bonds.

He raised his arm and whipped the tendrils of the flogger against Mac's ass. Mac flinched as the first strike made its mark, but didn't cry out. Blow after blow landed on the soft padded area of Mac's round buttocks, but he still didn't make a sound. Victor did it again and again, his arm using fluid strokes for precise control.

After making Mac's ass thoroughly pink, Victor moved up to lash Mac's back, then down to the upper part of his thighs, ensuring to flick along the underside of his balls.

Every blow landed on its predetermined mark, Vic's concentration showing in how he wielded the flogger. Suddenly, he felt like another person, as if he was standing outside his body watching this from afar, yet at the same time, he felt everything. As the leather lashed Mac's flesh, leaving a trail of pain, Vic was sure he could feel it hit his own back. He could feel the heat searing his own skin.

Vic struck harder, causing Mac to cry out, eliciting a soft moan himself. He put his arm down and took a step forward and stroked the sweaty, heated flesh, marvelling at the colour and the temperature of the skin.

"Once more," Vic whispered as he stepped back into position. He lifted his arm and struck a few more times, harder than he had before, sending shivers up his own cock, moaning with Mac's cries. They shared every hit, every sharp shard of pain between them, as if they had become one person.

Finally, Vic threw the flogger down and just stood there, his chest heaving from exertion and arousal. He could feel his pulse pound into his cock, making it impossibly thick and hard. In an instant, he was himself again, separate from Mac. He didn't want the feelings to leave; he didn't want to be himself, he wanted to feel that oneness again. He tried to will them back, but they wouldn't come.

He looked at Mac's sensitive skin, excitement and desire running through him. He'd enjoyed that a lot. Too much, actually. When Will had been training him, Vic had gone through the motions but had never felt anything like this. Will had told him to enjoy himself and lose himself, 'Once more, with feeling,' he'd said. Vic had never understood what he had truly meant until now.

He didn't notice the men standing around with their dicks in their hands, he didn't notice the full moon overhead, or the crickets chirping, or the fact that the Agency would be busting through the door in just over an hour.

"Sir? Sir?"

Nathan was suddenly beside him.

Vic looked down at him for a few seconds before acknowledging him. "Yes, Nathan?" His voice hoarse.

"Shall I release Mac?"

Realization suddenly took over and Vic rushed over to Mac and looked at his face. His cheeks were flushed, and his lips were swollen more than before. His skin was slick with sweat. Looking up, he grinned hungrily.

Vic's groin throbbed some more, as he felt Mac project waves of raw emotion and lust. He knew something had changed between them; it was going to be different from here on in. It could never be the same again, not after what they'd shared. He bent forward to kiss Mac, when he sensed a presence beside him.

"Very good, Mr. Mansfield," Cesar said. "You have proved your worth."

Vic looked down at the plump mound of a man. He nearly sneered, but this wasn't over quite yet. "Thank you," was all he said. He noticed Nathan starting to unshackle Mac.

"Come join me for the rest of the night's activities. There's a fisting exercise I'm sure you'll enjoy." Cesar grabbed Vic's arm to pull him away, but the grasp was shaken off.

"I have to take care of my slave."

Cesar gave a short laugh. "Let your boy do that. There's a young man over here that would be perfect to relieve you of your obvious tension." he pointed to Vic's groin.

Vic fought hard to keep from attacking him. "I'd rather do it myself."

"He's just a slave, Mr. Mansfield. He's here for your enjoyment only. You can get another if this one wears out."

Now Vic did glare down at Cesar, who seemed oblivious to the fact that these young men were human beings. His anger nearly boiled over, and he prayed the Cleaners got to this prick before he did when the time came.

Vic softened the look on his face and gave a sly smile. He leaned down to the man's ear, fighting the bile rising in his throat. "I've paid a lot of money for this man, I'm not going to merely throw him away. Besides, I'm not finished with him, not by a long shot. But there are some techniques I reserve for my private play." Vic then straightened up and fought the urge to spit.

Cesar looked up at Vic, giving a broad smile. "I see, Mr. Mansfield," then actually giggled. "Should you need any sort of... assistance..."

"I'll handle it," Vic said curtly, disgusted by whatever this human pig was implying. He clipped the leash onto Mac's collar and led him away, Nathan trailing behind.

The three men got back to the room and just stood there looking at each other for the longest time. Vic and Mac then concentrated their gaze on each other while Nathan regarded the situation.

Vic turned toward Nathan and embraced him then reached toward Mac. He held them both, feeling the heat of their bodies against his. "What time is the Agency coming in?" he asked softly.

"Exactly fifty-three minutes," Nathan replied.

"Everything in order?"

"Yes, the security system will fail in fifty-two minutes and thirty seconds."

"Good."

They stepped back and looked at each other again. Then Vic walked toward Mac; he couldn't stand it any longer. He looked into the younger man's deep brown eyes as he reached out to caress his face.

"I could feel you," Mac said, his words hushed. "I could feel your emotions above the pain."

Vic was pleasantly surprised at that remark. He held Mac's head as he ran his thumb across red lips. "I could feel you, too." He hesitated for a second, but soon Victor pressed up against Mac. He teased the large lips with his tongue before slipping past and into the moist mouth.

Busily, they explored each other's mouths with their tongues and each other's bodies with their hands. Vic pressed his body up against Mac's hard body and harder cock, rubbing against the stiff member, white precome smearing the black leather of his pants.

Neither man noticed as Nathan lowered the lights and left the room.

Vic moved his hands around Mac's back and felt the heat of his wounds there. Mac flinched and Vic stepped back. "I'm sorry."

Mac shrugged, "It's... it's okay." He smiled. "It's not so bad."

"I've got some cream to put on those," Vic said as he turned toward the bathroom. He emerged a minute later with a small jar in his hand.

"Why don't you get on the bed?" Vic asked softly.

Mac spread out on his stomach and rested his head on his folded arms.

Vic sat on the edge of the bed and removed his boots then stood and took off the leather pants, leaving him naked. He knelt on the bed, fingers trembling as he unscrewed the cap of the jar. He was incredibly nervous; it had been some time since he'd been this way with anyone, especially a man. Especially someone he genuinely cared for.

Momentarily frustrated, he threw the cap to the floor and dug his fingers in the thick herbal cream. Gently he spread it over Mac's shoulders where the individual lashmarks stood raised and red from the dark skin. The aroma of the herbal cream somehow heightened his arousal.

Carefully, he worked the cream into Mac's heated skin, ensuring to make this a pleasurable experience to contrast with the previously felt pain. Both men remembered to keep their voices low as they spoke to each other.

"I like this," Mac said.

"Good. I want you to like this."

"I meant what I said before," Mac paused to gasp as Vic rubbed a particularly sensitive spot. "I could feel your emotions."

"It's weird, but I did, too." Vic had reached Mac's ass and was caressing the round globes for a few minutes. He hesitated then dipped his fingers inside the crack. There was nothing to fear now, not after what they had shared. Not to mention the fact that Vic was deliberately naked and rubbing his hands all over Mac's body.

"I could feel your pain, Mac. Every blow."

Mac moaned and spread his legs as Vic gently rubbed the opening to his ass.

"Could you tell I liked it?"

"Yeah. I think I could."

"Because I never... I always said I'd never let anyone do that to me. But it actually felt so good. I felt... I could feel your concentration and attention. And I kind of felt loved. I'd never felt that way before."

Victor didn't know what to say, except he had felt the exact same thing. It was obvious that neither man had known what he was missing since they had objected so vehemently.

"Mac," Vic's chest heaved with his words. "Mac, I want you so bad."

Mac moaned and wiggled his ass. "Yes. Please," he begged.

A shock ran through Vic at those words, even if he was ready and naked, considering he'd been shot down the last time he had tried anything.

"You sure?" Vic trembled at the thought of a negative answer.

"I've always wanted you, Victor. I always did but was too afraid. I didn't want to screw it up like I did with Li Ann."

"You wouldn't have screwed it up."

They remained as they were, Vic's thumb at Mac's entrance, teasing the opening, while Mac moved his hips, trying to push it inside.

"Victor?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you going to fuck me or what?"

Victor kicked himself mentally. 'Okay, Mansfield, it's time to quit doubting yourself. It's getting old.'

"Hey," Vic laughed and swatted Mac's hot ass, gaining a gasp from the younger man. "Who's the top here?" Mac only moaned as Vic dug his thumb into the soft, trembling hole.

Vic moved his thumb in and out of Mac's ass, stretching the opening wider and wider with every push. He wanted to explore the puckered heat with his tongue and fingers until Mac was left screaming and writhing under his touch, but time was of the essence, so Vic prepared him as well as he could.

He reached over to the well-stocked night table and grabbed a condom and tube of lube. As he tore the packet open and rolled the condom on his cock, he noticed Mac was looking back at him, a playful grin on his mouth.

Vic grabbed Mac into his arms and kissed him deeply before releasing him. "I want to face you, but your back can't take it."

"You're right."

Vic could hear a wistful tone in Mac's voice as he gathered Mac's hips in his hands and nudged his cock between the bright pink ass cheeks. There was a moment of resistance, but soon Vic's cock slid past the tight ring of muscle and inside. Both men moaned out loud as the unique feelings spread through their bodies.

Vic pushed once more, fully sheathing himself in Mac's slick heat. He bit his lip, and worried that it was going to be raw before this was over.

Steadying Mac, Vic brought them up to their knees, so their bodies were pressed together, front to back, the intense heat making each man sweat. Vic kissed Mac's neck as his hands wandered across the front of his body. Mac's hands covered his and together they explored his torso, tweaking hard nipples and caressing taut abs.

Mac began slowly moving his hips, leveraging himself up and down on Vic's cock. Vic reciprocated by moving his own hips, matching Mac stroke for stroke.

Vic's hands wandered down to Mac's cock again, his fingers tingling as they touched the hard, yet velvety flesh for the first time. He felt a drop of precome at the slit and ran his thumb across the head to

spread it around. Then gripping the shaft tightly, he began to pet the stiff member, his hand moving in rhythm with their hips.

He slid his hand down further to Mac's balls, feeling the metal of the cock ring that held them tight in their sac. Vic moaned, now wanting the long cock in his mouth. He regretted not tasting the younger man before this began. Hopefully he'd have another opportunity in the near future.

Mac twisted his neck so Vic could kiss him long and slow, nibbling on the corner of his mouth and playing with his tongue until both men gasped for air. Soon, Vic released Mac's mouth with a sigh and started to increase his movements.

Mac's ass felt so good, so tight and slick and hot. Vic felt lost in the moment, like this could go on forever. Gunfire from outside jarred him out of his endorphin induced haze and he realized that they could not let this go on, as a matter of fact, they had to hurry.

Vic pushed Mac onto all fours and knelt behind him, his thrusts faster and stronger. He pumped into Mac, his cock hitting his joy spot hard, doing everything in his power to make him come first.

He knelt over Mac's back, his balls making a slapping sound against the tight ass. With a death grip on Mac's cock, Vic's hand worked as furiously as his hips, stroking and spreading the large amount of precome around.

"God, Victor," Mac moaned. "Feels so good. Can't hang on..."

"Come on, Mac. Come for me."

With a loud moan, Vic felt Mac's body spasm and shake under his. Long ropes of come shot out and landed on the comforter and floor then dribbled onto Vic's hand. Vic leaned back and came a few strokes later, the orgasm tearing through his body, feeling like it was going to split him in two.

Seeing stars, he collapsed to the side, still hard and still embedded in Mac, kissing the beads of sweat away from the back of his neck.

Outside an explosion rocked the air and jolted the two sweaty men clinging to each other.

Vic quickly disengaged himself from Mac and sat up in bed. "Dammit!" He was about to stand up when Mac pulled him back.

"Vic, that was incredible," Mac whispered against his mouth. "You made me feel so good." Vic melted against Mac and kissed him until another explosion tore them apart.

"We should go," Vic breathed, now not wanting to move at all.

"Yeah."

Another spray of gunfire was heard and Nathan burst into the room, dressed in a jumpsuit and kevlar vest. "The Director's looking for you!" he yelled as he threw the men their own suits and vests.

At the sound of the name 'Director', both men flew out of bed and rushed into the washroom. Vic stripped the condom from his rapidly deflating cock. The cock ring fell from Mac's lap and landed with a thud before it rolled across the carpet and under the wardrobe.

Hastily, they cleaned themselves up and got into their gear, Nathan handing them their firearms.

Vic and Mac looked at each other, and with one last kiss, went out and into the firefight.

By the time they got outside, however it was nearly over. The 'slaves' had been rounded up to be taken to the hospital for medical evaluation, then back to their homes and loved ones. The 'Masters' who had been so cruel to these men were being arrested.

Cesar gave up without a fight, dropping to his knees before Murphy and Camier. The two assassins had their weapons raised and were about to dole out justice, when the Director stopped them. Apparently, he was better to them alive than dead.

Vic looked at the man in the now filthy toga being held by two agents. He wanted to kill the man; he wanted to make him hurt for all the pain he'd caused others. He stalked up to him, fists clenching the handgrips of his guns, teeth bared, his fingers ready to pull the triggers.

"Victor!" He heard the Director warn, but he kept walking. He heard someone come up beside him, then his arm was grabbed. He tried to shake them off, but the person held fast.

Vic whirled around and found Mac behind him.

"Let it go, Vic. They'll deal with him."

"No." Vic fought hard to whirl around and empty his clip into Cesar's head.

"Vic, this isn't going to make things right."

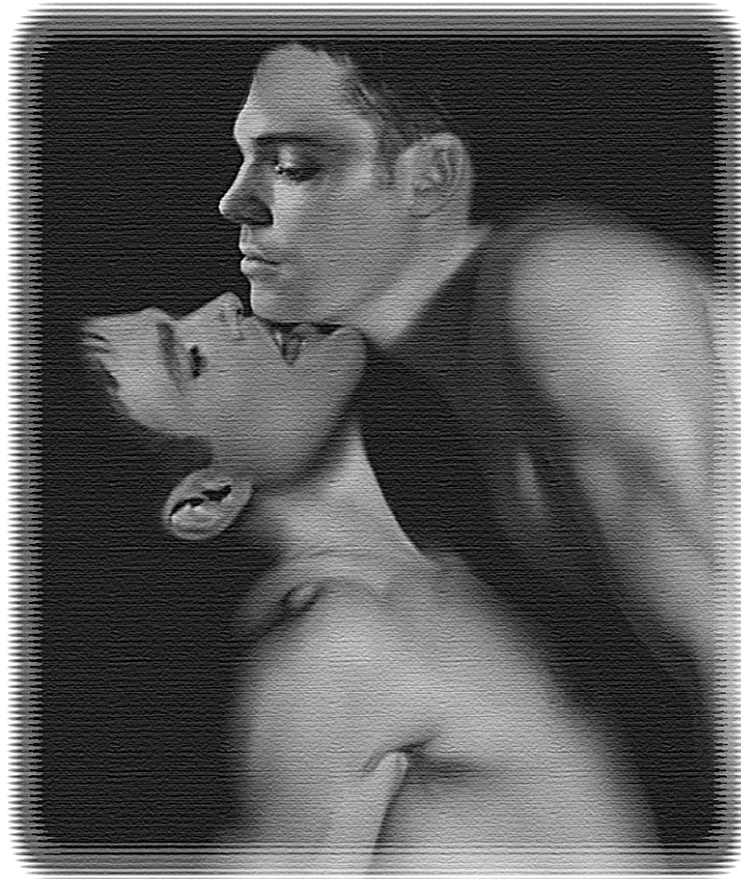
"The way he treated you..." Vic broke off, emotion consuming him.

"We got him. It's done." Mac reached up and touched Vic's face. "It's over."

Vic breathed in and out loudly as he reluctantly let the man be dragged away. Mac put his arm around his shoulder as he watched the agents cuff and shackle the man then put him in the back of an armoured car. Only then did Vic let himself be led to the waiting helicopter. Vic put his arm around Mac's waist and gave him a squeeze before giving him a kiss on the cheek and climbing into the vehicle.

They strapped themselves in, and the machine rose up in the air, taking them away from this place, from this false Eden, this paradise gone awry. Vic squeezed Mac's hand and looked down at the carnage

below. It was going to take a long time to forget this place and the experiences they'd had. But Vic was now confident that it would be all right, they'd get over it, and when they got home, they would create their own paradise together.





Vic had stayed in Mac's empty apartment for some time, not thinking, just standing there, staring in leaden disbelief. Finally, he'd forced himself to move, turning and leaving with dragging steps. As he went, the memories started, every moment he'd spent with Mac, every smile and shared laugh, every supposedly innocent touch, and underlying it all, at first grudging affection, then trust and lust, and finally love.

Why hadn't he told Mac he'd loved him? Why had he been so damn scared of admitting that vulnerability that he'd pushed the other man away? If he'd only told the truth, Mac would still be here with him. He could still feel the faint ache from the previous day's unaccustomed activity, but that was the only reminder he had of the man who'd so briefly been his lover. He didn't have so much as a photo, since the Agency frowned on photographic evidence of its agents' existence.

He somehow found his way home and lay on his bed, fully dressed, staring blankly at the ceiling. Mac was gone, and it was all his fault. He might even be dead, though Vic couldn't bring himself to believe that. The day passed into night, and the next day dawned while Vic lay there, but he didn't move. He wasn't sure he would ever move again.

After a while he became aware that the Director was there, standing in the open doorway of his bedroom, watching him. He gazed at her indifferently, green eyes muddy with pain.

"Did you kill him?" he asked finally.

"Why do you care?" she riposted.

The tortured eyes closed slowly, and a shudder wracked his body. "Because I love him."

One russet eyebrow rose slightly. "Then shouldn't you have told *him* that?"

Vic laughed painfully. "I couldn't. I was afraid it would hurt too much to admit it. Ironic, eh?"

The Director sighed. "Victor, Victor, Victor. When *will* you admit that I know best? Two days ago everything was simple, but as usual the pair of you managed to make it painfully complicated. You hurt each other, and Mac needed to get away somewhere where he wouldn't see you every day. He made that perfectly clear."

Vic winced, but his eyes focused on her with painful intensity.

"Yes, Victor, Mr. Ramsey's alive. Did you really think I'd kill him?"

He just looked at her.

She smiled faintly. "I suppose you have grounds. Mac is alive and well, but I'm not going to tell you where." She held up a hand to silence him when he would have interrupted. "Not yet. You hurt him, Victor. You have to give him time to heal."

"But I need to tell him that I'm sorry, that I love him," Vic protested.

She only shook her head. "He won't listen to you right now, Victor. It's too raw. You're going to have to give him time."

"Time to think that I don't care, that I've forgotten him," Vic snapped angrily.

The Director's eyes narrowed. "Be careful, Mr. Mansfield, or I may decide *never* to tell you where he is."

Vic subsided with a sulky frown. "Having fun throwing your weight around? This is my *life* you're toying with!"

"Your life that you screwed up," she added coolly. "Your life that belongs to me. I told you that years ago, Victor. Now you will wait until I decide that Mac is ready to see you. You don't have a choice."

"Now get up! You have work to do."

Vic sulked some more but stood up, then immediately sat down again, woozy. As he clutched the bed covering to prevent himself from falling over, the Director shook her head.

"When was the last time you ate?"

Vic shrugged indifferently. "I dunno. Yesterday, no, two days ago now. I made dinner for Mac."

"Planning to starve yourself? How romantic," she scoffed.

Vic gazed up at her, not even having the energy to get mad. "I wasn't hungry."

"But now you are?"

"No." He stood up again, more slowly this time, then moved toward the bathroom, knowing that he needed to shower if she was going to drag him out. He'd been wearing these clothes for nearly two full days now. When he heard the sounds behind him, he glared over his shoulder half-heartedly. "Planning to watch live this time?"

"Just want to make sure you don't slip and kill yourself," she returned. "I have to protect my investment after all."

Vic sighed and elected to ignore her, shedding his clothes into the hamper and stepping into the shower under the hot spray. He desperately wished Mac was there with him. This was something else they hadn't shared because of his stupidity. He could see the Director's silhouette through the frosted glass of the shower door, and for a moment he seriously considered drowning himself. Unfortunately, he knew she wouldn't let him, and the thought of her giving him mouth to mouth ended that idea.

He stepped out and towelled himself off, indifferent to her appreciative gaze and faint murmur of approval. "So now what?" he asked as he shaved. "You're missing one third of your team."

"Ah, but we have Jackie, don't we? Such an interesting threesome you, Li Ann and Jackie make," she purred. "It's a pity there are no romantic entanglements, but Li Ann really does best solitary, and Jackie, surprisingly enough, seems uninterested in anyone other than Dobrinsky. That even surprised me," she murmured. "Ah well, we'll make do."

He glared at her through the mirror. "I don't want anything to do with that psychopath!"

"You don't have a choice, Victor dear. You lost your options when you drove Mac away," she said brutally. Vic flinched, and she was hard-pressed to maintain her façade of cool indifference in the face of his pain. Fortunately, years of practice stood her in good stead, and she was able to meet his eyes without showing any remorse.

"Please," he begged hopelessly, desperately afraid that he would never see Mac again or that she would make him wait until it was too late for Mac ever to forgive him.

"All in good time, Victor. Trust me."

He laughed bitterly.

He had a point. "Hurry up and get dressed," she directed, finally leaving the room as he finished shaving.

When he stepped out of his room a few minutes later, fully dressed and as armoured against her as he was going to get, the smell of coffee drew him to the kitchen. His eyes widened when he found the Director frying bacon and eggs, a pot of coffee nearly ready beside her.

"You *cook*?" He couldn't have sounded more shocked if he'd found her eating young children.

She sighed. "Yes, Victor, I cook. Contrary to what you seem to believe, I need to eat too. Put the toast on."

Still stunned by this surreal scene, Vic obeyed then leaned against the counter, watching her suspiciously till she handed him a plate. It was surprisingly good.

That morning set the tone for the next several months. The Director chivvied Vic into taking care of himself, turning up at his apartment at irregular intervals to make sure he ate a decent meal and occasionally letting him know that Mac was well.

Vic sometimes wondered if she was lying to him in an attempt to salvage what was left of her hand-picked team, but he didn't ask. If Mac really was dead, he didn't want to know. The illusion, if it was one, let him continue to function.

His indifference to his own wellbeing had grown obvious, and Li Ann and even Jackie watched him worriedly. He did whatever was necessary for their assignments, then went home. He no longer joined Li Ann for a beer after a case or sat in on the weekly poker games with Murphy and Camier. He trudged through his daily routine like an automaton, the expression on Mac's face when he'd kicked him out constantly floating before his mind's eye.

One morning about six months later, Vic arrived in the briefing room, as usual ahead of Li Ann and Jackie, and the Director walked in and dropped a file and an envelope on the table in front of him.

"What's this, the new case?"

"Not exactly," she replied with a hint of amusement in her voice. She watched with interest as Vic opened the file, and the blood drained from his face.

"Is this for real?" He clutched the envelope in a white knuckled fist.

"Yes, Victor, that's Mr. Ramsey's current address and a plane ticket. I believe it's time for the two of you to patch up your differences."

Vic stared at her, almost unable to believe that this was really happening. He'd nearly given up hope and resigned himself to being miserable and alone for the rest of his life. "Vancouver?" he asked blankly.

She shrugged. "His desire to leave was serendipitous. The western region has not been totally effective since I moved my headquarters to Toronto, and Mr. Ramsey can be quite efficient when he puts his mind to it. I put him in charge as my assistant director for the region, and matters have improved dramatically."

She paused, then added, "I'm told that he frequently works 18 hour days, as if he were driven... or trying to forget something."

Vic stared at the papers in his hand. "What if he doesn't want to see me?" he whispered.

"Oh, I can guarantee you that he won't," the Director replied heartlessly. "At least at first. Our Mr. Ramsey has a strong instinct for self-preservation. You hurt him once, Victor; he's not going to want to open up to you again."

Vic flinched, his shoulders hunching. "So why should I go?"

"Because you love him. And because despite his instincts, he will eventually let you in. He loves you far too much not to. And because I want my best team back." She gave him a toothy smile that put him in mind of Jaws.

Vic stared at the photo of Mac in the file. He'd lost weight that he didn't have to spare, and he looked older. Vic wondered if this was how Mac'd looked after he'd lost Li Ann and ended up in jail. Selfishly, part of him hoped so, hoped he meant as much to Mac as she had.

"All right," he said quietly, not looking away from the picture, "I'll go."

The Director nodded, never having doubted it. "While you're there, Victor, you'll remain under my direct authority. You won't be subordinate to Mac." *At least not on the job.*

Vic had five long hours on the plane to stew about what would happen when he saw Mac again. Much as he wished otherwise, he knew that the other man was not going to greet him with open arms. And as the Assistant Director for the Region, if he didn't want to see his former partner, he could make it very difficult for him.

Fortunately, the file the Director had given him included Mac's home address, if it came to that. There were no hangouts listed because he didn't seem to do anything but work.

Vic claimed his rental car and drove downtown to the hotel where he'd be staying until he convinced Mac to forgive him, needing to unwind after the flight. He eyed the king-size bed in his suite wistfully, hoping Mac would join him there soon. He unpacked, showered and shaved, and dressed in a pair of tight black jeans and a green shirt that he'd noticed Mac eyeing with approval in the past. Now to beard the lion in his den.

Vic easily gained access to the Agency's Vancouver headquarters, familiar to him from the years he'd worked there before the Director moved herself and her main teams to Toronto. He wondered if Mac ever thought about him, reminded by being back here where they'd first worked together. His Agency ID got him past security with ease, and he found himself standing outside the door to Mac's office, once the Director's.

He stared at it for long moments, his heart pounding in his chest. He was so nervous that he thought he might throw up. Eventually, knowing he couldn't stand there forever, he knocked. The prosaic "Come in" that he heard through the door seemed out of place in view of his terror, but he somehow didn't mind. It was Mac's voice, the first time that he'd heard it since that wonderful, awful afternoon. He took a deep, steady breath and stepped into the office.

"Hi, Mac."

After giving the Director his ultimatum, Mac had sat there in front of her, indifferent to his fate. He honestly hadn't cared whether he lived or died at that moment, and it was that very lack of emotion that made her give him what he wanted. Three hours later he was on a plane heading for Vancouver, with a new title and responsibilities and not a single remnant of his previous life. He'd told the Director to do whatever she wanted with his possessions, not wanting any reminders, not even his clothing. The only thing he'd asked her not to dispose of but rather to store for him was the Rembrandt that had been delivered to him shortly after his father's death. He'd considered taking it with him, but every time he looked at it, he remembered the night he and Vic had stolen it from Michael. He couldn't bear to have that reminder in front of him every day, at least not yet.

He settled into his new position with ease, cracking down on the problem areas and bringing the sometimes lackadaisical agents back in line now that there was visible authority again. He maintained his distance from everyone, not wanting to let anyone get close enough to poke at his barely scabbed over emotional wounds, and he realized with bitter amusement that he was becoming like the Director. He wondered vaguely what had made her pull back from people, knowing that he'd probably never find out and he would certainly never ask. His own pain made him more respectful of others'.

Mac worked relentlessly, driving his agents as he drove himself, and soon Vancouver became known in criminal circles as a place *not* to set up shop. He went after arms dealers and drug dealers with an especial zeal, once even bringing down a man he'd known and partied with during his days with the Tangs.

Restless, he worked long hours, rarely leaving his office before midnight and often simply sleeping on the sofa in his office. He ate when necessary, finding it easier not to think, not to feel, if he concentrated completely on work. He would have been shocked if he'd ever realized that it had been six months since he'd left Toronto; it seemed like yesterday to him. He could still see Vic's cold expression as he'd ordered him out of his apartment, hear his voice telling him to leave. He did see and hear that every time he closed his eyes, so he slept less and less.

He carried on almost in a fugue state until the day a knock at his door made him look up in time to see Vic walk into his office, an embarrassed half-smile on his face. Mac stared in disbelief, certain that his mind had finally snapped, and he heard that beloved, hated voice say 'hi' as if nothing had ever happened.

He saw red.

The next thing he knew, he was kneeling over Vic's prone body on the floor of his office, his hands around the older man's throat while Vic clawed at them and gasped for air. Swearing, he released his former partner, rose to his feet and backed away, shaking his head.

"What are you doing here, Mansfield?" *Why now?*

Vic winced at the deliberate distance in Mac's tone and his refusal to call him by name. "I came to see you, to apologise," he said painfully. "The Director only told me where you were this morning."

Mac watched him expressionlessly. "You've seen me. Now you can go."

Vic hardly recognised the cold, hard man watching him. *Did I do this? God, Mac, I'm so sorry.* "Not until I make you understand. I... I never meant to hurt you, Mac. I'm sorry. I was just... just trying to protect myself. I went to see you that night to try to explain, but you weren't home." He looked away. "And then you were gone." He looked up pleadingly, meeting Mac's eyes and flinching at the indifference he saw there.

"What makes you think I care?" Mac ruthlessly quashed the burst of joy that had bloomed in his heart, not letting a hint of it show in his eyes.

Vic's eyes closed, hiding his pain. "Please, let me make it up to you. Give me a chance, give *us* a chance, Mac." He abandoned his dignity to plead, knowing that Mac mattered more to him than anything else. "I'll do anything, Mac."

Mac eyed him coolly. "Sorry, Vic," he replied cuttingly, seating himself at his desk once again. "Not interested."

Vic took the last few steps necessary to bring him up to Mac and sat on his lap, twining his arms around Mac's neck and kissing him hungrily. Mac's face remained expressionless, but his body betrayed him, hardening almost instantly when Vic touched him.

"Yes, you are," Vic said softly, his own erection making him shift uncomfortably, and he tried not to think about how Mac was sitting stiffly beneath him, not touching him any more than was unavoidable. "It was good between us, Mac; you know it was," he reminded. "I know I screwed up, but I'd like the chance to make up for that."

Mac looked at him finally, his eyes still cold despite the erection he couldn't control. "That was sex, Vic. Nothing more. I can get that anywhere."

Vic refused to give up. "So take it from me." If sex was the only way he could get close to Mac, he'd take it. He was sure that given time, he could make Mac believe he loved him and trust him again. It wasn't like sex with Mac would be a hardship. He still got hard every time he remembered that afternoon.

"Is that what you want? To be my fucktoy?" Mac asked harshly. "Because that's all it would be."

Vic nodded, a little nervous but determined.

"Fine." Mac shoved Vic off his lap so he landed in a sprawl at his feet, half under the desk. "Blow me." He turned his attention back to his paperwork, ignoring Vic completely.

Vic lay motionless for a moment, shocked. Slowly, he pushed up to his knees and moved between Mac's legs. He knew Mac expected him to break and run, but he was willing to do anything to get another chance. He nudged Mac's legs farther apart and reached for his belt with fingers that trembled slightly. He fumbled the belt and pants open, darting a nervous glance upward, half-afraid that Mac would use his clumsiness as an excuse to push him away.

When Mac continued to ignore him, Vic pushed the other man's pants open and tugged his underwear down, freeing his erection. Vic stroked the rigid shaft, petting him, surprised to realize that after only one time together, he recognised Mac's scent. He leaned closer, his tongue delicately licking at the head, gathering up Mac's flavour. One hand pushed under the bunched up waistband of Mac's silk boxers to cup his sac, gently rolling his balls in the palm of his hand. He hungrily lapped at Mac's cock, tasting him and arousing him further, then rubbed one freshly shaven cheek along the length, nuzzling his nose into the nest of hair at the base. He slowly nibbled back up along the prominent vein on the underside until he reached the sensitive ridge. He traced around and around with his tongue, concentrating so completely that he never noticed when Mac stopped pretending to be working and gripped the edge of his desk. Vic slowly sucked the head inside his mouth, letting his teeth scrape ever so lightly, and he smiled when Mac shuddered.

He suckled hungrily on the bulbous head between his lips, tasting the sticky strands of pre-come and delving into the small slit with the tip of his tongue for more. His head slowly sank toward Mac's belly as he took more and more of his lover inside his mouth and throat until the entire length was buried and his nose was pressed to Mac's belly. He pulled back equally slowly, then repeated the motion. He kept that up until Mac's fingers buried themselves in his hair and Mac started to thrust in and out of his mouth. He relaxed his throat and allowed Mac to do what he wanted, licking at him and swallowing to make it better for him. He swallowed every drop eagerly when Mac came, then licked him clean before tucking him back into his pants and sitting back on his heels to look up at the younger man.

Mac sighed, meeting the guardedly hopeful green eyes. "Go sit over there," he said, nodding toward a leather sofa against one wall. "I won't be done for a while."

Vic nodded and moved over to the comfortable looking piece of furniture, moving slowly because of the heavy erection between his legs. He understood that Mac was going to decide when he could come, and he bit his lip as he lowered himself to the sofa. He curled up on one side, watching Mac, content to be able to see the other man again. He'd accept a lot more than this if it gave him a chance to win Mac back.

Several hours later, Mac glanced over and saw that Vic was sound asleep on the sofa. After the many nights he'd spent on it, he knew it was comfortable, but he was a little surprised until he glanced at the clock and remembered that it was three hours later for Vic. Unobserved, a hint of tenderness momentarily crept into his gaze until he hardened his heart again. Whatever Vic's game was, he wasn't going to fall for it this time.

He crossed the room and shook Vic's shoulder roughly to wake him. The heavy eyelashes rose, and for an instant, before Vic remembered the circumstances, an expression of pure joy lit his face when he saw Mac standing over him. He was already reaching for the younger man when he woke up enough to remember, and his expression closed and his hand fell back to his side. He sat up, wishing things could be different but knowing that he had no one to blame but himself. "Is it time to go?" he asked, wondering what Mac had in mind.

"Yeah, I'm done here." He frowned. "Where are you staying?"

Vic named his hotel, unsure where Mac was going with this.

Mac nodded sharply. "How convenient. Not far from my apartment."

Vic nodded, not pretending that he didn't know. "The Director chose it."

Mac shrugged. "You can stay there tonight. I don't want you right now. I'll call you tomorrow and let you know if I want you, and when and where." He intended to keep his emotional distance until Vic tired of this game and went home. "On second thought, be here in the morning. No reason I should have to wait for you to get here if I decide I want you."

Vic winced, realising that Mac intended to treat him like a whore. He prayed that he could convince Mac of his love before the other man destroyed him. "Okay," he said quietly, knowing this wasn't the time to try to convince him of anything. Realising he'd been dismissed, Vic left, driving around till he found an all-night diner where he could get the meal he'd missed. Back in his hotel room, he lay at one edge of the big bed, wishing he could turn the clock back. Exhausted after the long, stressful day, he soon fell asleep.

He was up early the next morning, knowing that Mac expected him to return to his office to wait until he was wanted... or to flee back to Toronto with his tail between his legs. He was tempted to jerk off in the shower to relieve the frustration of the previous day, but even though it hadn't been spelled out, he knew that Mac intended him to wait until allowed. He shuddered, remembering how Mac had controlled the one time they'd made love and how he'd remained in total control the day before while making Vic blow him. He looked down at his renewed erection with a groan and stepped out of the shower.

He dressed in a pair of leather pants and a soft, well-washed cotton shirt, grabbed his leather jacket, and went down to the restaurant for a quick breakfast before going to the Agency.

Mac looked up briefly when Vic entered his office after a quick knock. "Help yourself to the coffee."

Vic settled back into a corner of the couch with a cup of coffee and picked up one of the newspapers off the table. He read quietly, the only sound in the room the rustling of paper. After about an hour, Mac suddenly raised his head and looked at him.

"Come here."

Vic instantly laid aside his paper and moved across the room to Mac, starting to sink to his knees, but Mac stopped him. Instead, Mac pulled him onto his lap and started to pet him. Vic moaned, shocking himself with the raw sound of his hunger.

Mac smiled faintly and continued his explorations of Vic's body. He stroked Vic through his clothes, feeling the shudders of helpless arousal, and then he kissed him. His tongue traced Vic's lips, and they parted eagerly for him, allowing him access to Vic's mouth. He tasted the bitterness of coffee and the flavour that was pure Vic. The older man half lay in his arms, legs parted and mouth sealed to his. Mac licked playfully at his tongue, and it hesitantly followed his back into his mouth, where he could suck on it.

His fingers were inside Vic's pants, toying with his cock, when there was a knock on the door. Mac had already taken a breath to bid whoever it was to enter when he noticed the bright spots of colour on Vic's cheekbones. Despite his supposed unconcern for Vic's feelings, he couldn't find it in himself to make the other man sit there like some kind of whore in front of someone he'd likely known.

"Go sit on the couch," he sighed, and Vic immediately bolted for its relative safety. The newspaper rattled open, hiding his burning face and aroused body, and only then did Mac give permission to come in.

The agent glanced curiously at the anonymous figure on the couch but didn't make the mistake of asking any questions. He simply handed Mac a report and left, though not without a backward glance at the mysterious visitor.

As soon as he was gone, Vic lowered the paper back to the table and looked a question at Mac. The younger man stared at him for a long moment, then shook his head, turning his attention back to his

paperwork. Vic picked up the paper again, amusing himself with the crossword puzzle while Mac ignored him. He wondered if Mac would ever let him talk to him, try to explain.

The day passed quietly, Mac almost completely ignoring Vic, his sole concession to his presence being to have two plates brought in at lunchtime. Even then, he continued to work, not speaking to Vic, who was coming to the conclusion that he'd wasted his time coming here. He was willing to do almost anything to get his partner back, but if Mac wouldn't talk to him, he didn't have a chance. Finally, he couldn't stand it any more.

"Are you ever going to talk to me?"

"No." Mac didn't even bother to raise his head.

Vic's eyes shut against the painful baldness of that reply. "Then why am I here?"

This time Mac did look at him, his eyes as cool and distant as the Director's ever were. "You seem to want to be. And I'm not going to turn down a free fucktoy." He shrugged. "You're still attractive, regardless of what I may think of you personally."

Vic flinched. "Damnit, Mac, I know I screwed up! But you didn't have to run without even giving me a second chance!"

"I'm not into masochism, Vic."

"I love you, you bastard! What's it going to take to prove it to you?"

An indifferent shrug was his reply. "You don't need to prove or disprove it. I frankly don't care, Vic."

Vic thought but didn't say that if that were true, he wouldn't still be here. Mac would have kicked him out long since. "Then I guess I just have to make you care."

"It's your time." A smirk crossed Mac's face suddenly. "If you're so determined to stick around, you can join me tonight... at The Nero. Of course, we'll have to go shopping to get you the appropriate wardrobe."

Vic stared at him, knowing this was Mac's version of throwing down the gauntlet. "Fine." He didn't know the club, but judging by the name, he had a pretty good idea of what he was letting himself in for.

Mac stood up. "After you, then." He motioned to the door and followed Vic out to his car. "Leave it here. You can come with me." He drew the older man to his vehicle and let him in before settling behind the wheel of the racy sports car.

—

Three hours later, Vic was wondering if he'd perhaps been overly quick to agree. Mac had brought him to a leather shop specialising in B&D products and apparel, and he'd spent the last two and half hours standing naked in a dressing room while Mac and the sales clerk discussed and measured him and had him try on a variety of outfits and accessories. Currently, the clerk was out rounding up a few things Mac had asked for, and Mac was eyeing him like a man considering buying a horse.

"Put the first collar back on."

Vic retrieved the two-inch wide strip of black leather with metal studs and a D-ring and fastened it around his throat.

"Very nice. We definitely want that one. Now add the matching harness."

Vic slipped the matching harness on and fastened it with some help from Mac. He wondered if the blush would ever fade from his face. The salesclerk slipped back into the fitting room while this was going on and offered Mac a selection of cock rings, ball stretchers and cock cages.

Vic eyed them with alarm, but Mac immediately refused the stretchers, concentrating on the cock rings. He selected one and turned to Vic, waiting rather obviously. Vic flushed even darker, but he wrapped his hand around his cock, stroking himself into tumescence while keeping his eyes fixed on Mac, trying to ignore the other man. When he was hard, Mac motioned him to come closer, and once he did, fastened the restraint around the base of his cock and balls.

Vic bit back a groan, knowing this was going to be a very long night. Mac eyed him and nodded.

"Very nice. It's almost a shame to cover you up, but we'd hate to get arrested for indecent exposure." He tossed Vic a pair of tight, black leather shorts that barely covered his ass. Vic wiggled into them and carefully fastened the button fly, blushing once again at how the tight leather accentuated his erection.

"You could make a lot if you wanted to share him around..." The salesclerk's words died away at the look Mac gave him, and he bolted from the room, heading for the cash to ring up the sale.

Mac made Vic stand at his side as he paid, petting him almost absently, and Vic stared at the floor as he waited for the younger man to finish up. When Mac led him from the store, he was hyper conscious of the cock ring and the tight leather rubbing against his aching cock, and he was aware of the picture he made. A few wolf whistles increased the dull flush on his cheeks, and he began to wish he'd never come to Vancouver, at least until he glanced at Mac and remembered what the stakes were.

Mac brought Vic to the club he'd mentioned earlier, The Nero, and Vic looked around in surprise. Though the name had given him a clue, he hadn't expected it to be an almost exact duplicate of The Caligula. Mac led him to a private room at the back and ordered dinner for them both.

"Relax, Vic. You're safe till after dinner," Mac said, a hint of laughter in his voice.

Vic turned to him, still nervous. "And afterward?"

"Afterward, I play," Mac replied, a hungry leer momentarily crossing his face. "Of course, all you have to say is no, and I'll stop."

"And the catch is?"

"I stop for good. We leave here and you get on a plane back to Toronto."

Vic swallowed hard, wanting Mac but not sure he could handle this.

"I won't hurt you, Vic," Mac unbent far enough to reassure.

Vic nodded jerkily and sat down to wait for their meal, not looking at Mac.

Vic wondered why he hadn't made dinner last longer, delayed this as much as possible, then he wailed. Mac had him up on the stage, sitting comfortably in a leather armchair while Vic rode his cock. The older man thought he would go insane as every stroke pressed the head of Mac's erection against his prostate, and Mac played with his restrained cock and balls. He'd long since abandoned dignity in favour of pleading to be allowed to come, but Mac didn't seem to have any inclination toward mercy. They'd been here for hours, and Mac had already come twice, once in his mouth and once fucking him hard.

They were the focus of all eyes in the place now, the other masters watching with approval as Mac made him squirm and beg, and Vic couldn't find it in himself to give a damn. All he cared about at that moment was the hard cock impaling him and his own aching erection. His hands clenched on the arms of the chair, and he whimpered when Mac told him to jerk himself. As long as the restraint was on him, he wouldn't be able to come, no matter how much he needed to.

Mac's fingers suddenly tightened on his nipples, and he shuddered as he came again. Vic wailed desperately, writhing on the hard shaft, then sobbed when Mac made him climb off a few minutes later.

"Lie on the edge of the stage," Mac ordered harshly, and Vic bit his lip, hesitating for a split second before obeying. He turned his head to the side, his eyes closing, trying to distance himself from what was about to happen. He wasn't sure he could let another man fuck him, but his only other choice was to give up on Mac forever. He whimpered.

He could feel hands touching him, stroking his legs and pushing them apart, and he started to shake. A hand was pumping his cock, making his back arch despite his feelings, and a finger pushed inside his ass. The pleasure made him writhe, but his head tossed from side to side as he attempted to deny it.

"That's enough." Mac was suddenly there, yanking him away from the grasping hands, fierce eyes fixed on those who were touching him. When one man was brash enough to protest, Mac's brown eyes narrowed and focused on him. "He's *mine*. I don't feel like sharing." Mac drew him off the stage and got him back into his shorts, then pulled him out of the club and into his car.

Vic huddled in the corner, squirming and moaning with his unabated arousal, and Mac finally reached out a long arm and tugged him over against his side. Vic gravitated to his warmth, rubbing against him hungrily, tiny whimpers escaping him with every breath. He followed Mac mindlessly, barely registering the fact that they were not in his hotel room but not really caring.

Mac stripped off his shorts again, pushed him down onto a bed, took the head of his cock into his mouth, and removed the restraint. As he did, he took Vic's full length into his throat, and Vic screamed as he came, actually blacking out for a few moments from the force of his climax. When the world swam back into focus, Mac was still sucking on him, and he whimpered, pushing the other man away from his sensitive flesh.

"Why?" he finally whispered.

Mac didn't pretend not to understand. "I realized that I couldn't stand to see anyone else touch you," he admitted. "No matter how much I want to deny it, you're under my skin."

Vic rolled toward him, dazed green eyes focussing on him. "Does that mean you'll give me, *us*, another chance?"

Mac smiled a little. "Doesn't seem like I have a choice. I love you too, Vic."

Vic reached for him, but Mac caught the hand before it could make contact. "That doesn't mean it's going to be easy, Vic. I love you, but I still don't trust you."

Vic flinched. "Just give me a chance to make it up to you, to make you trust me again," he begged.

Mac nodded slowly and pulled him close. "I want to, Vic. We can try together."



No Rhyme nor Reason

by Karlan

Jack Barnett grabbed his wife's hand, pulling her along at break-neck speed, cursing when she stumbled. She cried out as he dragged her back onto her feet and, silently, he berated himself for hurting her. He felt her arm twist unnaturally beneath his desperate grip. He wrapped his own arm around her fragile frame to support her as they ran onwards and upwards, picking their way through the small rocks and boulders.

"We're... nearly there, Jill. Only a... few... more feet. You can make it."

His words were interspersed with harsh gasps of exertion, and he could feel her small body shuddering against him as she sucked air into her own abused lungs. They reached the top of the rocky hill and froze, bodies heaving with exhaustion and fear. Barnett wrapped both of his arms around his wife, staring with dread at the manic, laughing man that appeared before them. Two of the man's henchmen stepped forward. One grabbed at him and he fought back, uselessly, as the other tore his wife from his grasp.

Barnett felt tears of frustration and denial fill his eyes as the psychotic man approached with a light skip in his step. On the snap of his bony fingers the henchman released Barnett, standing aside to watch with eyes full of glee and anticipation. Barnett raised his hands in supplication as the tall man came towards him.

"Please... I'm begging you. If it's money you want. Here... take my wallet."

The man giggled and knocked aside the wallet, its contents spilling out. Dollar bills were caught in the slight breeze and fluttered off.

"Jack and Jill went up the hill, to fetch a pail of water. Jack fell down and broke his crown..." The evil grin grew more menacing as he locked onto Jack's eyes. "...and Jill came tumbling after."

"No! No! Jill!"

With the sudden realization of why they had been forced to climb up the hill, Jack lunged for his wife, desperately wanting to protect her from this madman. The maniac snapped forward, grabbing Barnett by his shoulders, the washed-out blue eyes staring deep into his own.

"Please..."

The man grinned then shoved him... once... hard.

Barnett felt gravity grab at his body, and he was falling, pain flaring in his shoulder as it impacted against one rock... then another... and then, darkness forever.

The maniac laughed maniacally at the woman's scream, avidly drinking in her reaction to the sight of her husband's body being dashed against the rocks as Barnett fell to the bottom of the steep incline. She ceased her struggles abruptly when he reached forward to cup her chin in his hand.

Her high-pitched scream ended abruptly, and the man's hysterical laughter filled the air at the sight of two broken bodies at the bottom of the hill.

Li Ann Tsei tried to look impassive but she knew she was failing miserably. She could not prevent a small huff of annoyance from spilling from her lips. She was fed up. Her partners were bickering—yet again—like an old married couple and, as usual these days, she felt the odd one out. A rubbed her forehead and frowned. There was a time when she would be the one sitting in the centre seat—her ex-fiancé on one side of her, her ex-lover on the other, but now, more often than not, it was Mac who sat there. Her frown deepened as the bickering turned, inevitably, to whom was the better agent.

"Victor... You couldn't break into your own locker given the combination."

"Oh yeah... and what about that time when you lost the keys to your apart..."

"I was drunk! Anyway, I still got us in..."

"You *phoned* Li Ann!"

Li Ann rolled her eyes and sighed again, shaking her head slowly in resignation. She was tempted to butt in and tell them they were both inferior to her, but Mac had his back to her, effectively excluding her from the debate. Instead, she let her thoughts wander back over the past few months as she tried to figure out exactly when Mac had taken over as the heart of the team.

She remembered how, after breaking off her engagement to Victor, that she had felt uncomfortable being so close to him. She had forced Mac into the middle seat to act as a buffer between them; not that Mac needed any encouragement to be the centre of attention. That was at the beginning of their Agency partnership but, after a few weeks with no animosity growing between them, she had regained the coveted centre seat without a murmur of disapproval from either man.

She often wondered if Victor still thought about their former relationship. Certainly, she never expected to miss the feel of his arms around her in the night; he was a cuddler but she preferred to sleep unfettered. That brought a wry smile to her lips. Mac had also been a cuddler and would cling to her all night long if she had not made some paltry excuse each time about not wanting to upset Michael, and slipped from his bed.

She frowned at Mac, who still had his back to her as he teased Victor; her thoughts went in circles, eventually returning to that coveted centre seat.

Come to think of it, she mused, softly to herself.

She realized, suddenly, that the only time she *did* occupy the centre seat these days was when she managed to arrive before Mac. That, in itself, was something to frown about. She could count on the fingers of one hand the number of times she had arrived late whereas, in contrast, Mac was always flaunting the punctuality rule. At least he *had* been until recently.

It was almost as if he wanted to be a barrier between Victor and her.

She gave a small smile, inwardly laughing at herself for such a thought and, anyway, who was to say what would happen in the future. Perhaps, in another week, she and Mac would have a falling out and it would be Victor sitting between *them*.

"Such deep musings, Li Ann." The Director's auburn hair brushed against her cheek as the soft voice drifted close to her ear, startling her from her thoughts. "However..." Li Ann followed the Director's pointed look towards the now silent men. "...I can understand the need to escape from that... juvenile conversation."

Li Ann watched as Mac's eyes lowered in annoyance. Beside him, Victor was shuffling in his seat, clearing his throat and studiously trying to avoid catching anyone's eye. Victor seemed equally annoyed,

for some reason Li Ann could not quite fathom. She watched as the Director walked to the far side of the desk, feeling strangely pleased by the glare that was aimed, mainly, at the embarrassed but seemingly recalcitrant men.

"Hmmm." The Director gave an exaggerated sigh. "Before we begin."

Li Ann flinched as the Director slammed a red book on the table, a book they all recognised; the book filled with their misdemeanours, both minor and major.

"Mac. It must stop."

Mac's eyebrows rose in beguiling innocence, the 'who me?', 'stop what?' expression floating across his face.

The Director sighed inwardly even as her eyes held Mac's. She schooled her face to show no expression and kept her eyes as hard as nails but, beneath the stern exterior, she was smiling.

She had several teams similar to this one. In fact, Victor had walked in on one during a debriefing several months earlier and yet, despite the similarities in personality, looks, skills and gender configuration, none of the other teams could annoy or please her as much as this particular one. This team was special and, despite being set up after all the others, it was as if those others were a mere parody of it.

This 'Mac' was more vibrant, richer in language and action, self-assured with the slightest touch of arrogance that was tolerated by his teammates because of his puppy-like desire to please. He was not so much "look what I did," but "look what I did for you." He was fiercely protective of Li Ann and, despite declarations to the contrary, even more so of Victor, especially over the past few months. The other 'Macs' were shallow, self-absorbed and irksome in comparison.

This 'Li Ann' was composed and poised, like an Eastern princess; cool exterior, molten interior, graceful as a swan, lithe as a ballet dancer with a sharp intellect that could not be matched by anyone but the Director herself. Her similars were vastly inferior. No other seemed to have that magical combination which, quite simply, took the Director's breath away.

And then there was Victor. How she adored him. The other 'Victors' seemed brash and brutish in comparison, their personalities floating way off the mark with the wide-boy attitude of a no-good street punk. None had the same complexity, the same tough exterior that often failed to camouflage the vulnerability hidden beneath but then, this Victor had never been a true criminal. He was probably the only truly honest agent she had ever recruited. She had once told him that she cried real tears over him. It had been said sarcastically but was very close to the truth, for if Li Ann were the brain of this team and Mac the heart, then Victor would be its soul.

Mac had lost his innocent look while he waited for the Director's response to his silent denial and, with a chagrined smile, he averted his eyes. She sighed inwardly. Perhaps his last prank on Dobrinsky had been a little harsh but, after all, nobody got hurt—and Nathan could always replace those fish. Her eyes turned away in triumph at her small victory over Mac, and she faced her next target.

"Victor. Victor. Victor. What are we going to do with you?"

"If you're referring to the Harbour Report then..."

"No. Well, yes." She opened the book and began writing, adding yet another misdemeanour to the long list against Victor. "Victor, do you have *any* idea how much background research goes into every case?"

She watched as Victor took a deep breath, the sudden dulling of his own bright, green eyes bringing a twinkling to her own. She felt a sadistic pleasure as she watched Victor squirm in his seat.

Victor cursed inwardly. The last time she had hauled them over the coals about reports, he had ended up spending a week doing 'grunt' work. He wasn't sure he could survive another seven hours straight of Nathan's paranoia, when two minutes was enough to put him on edge for a whole day.

"Yes. I'm sorry. I'll be more..." Victor paused. "More..."

"Detailed? Informative? Procedurally correct?"

"Yes. All of those... and more."

"Hmmm."

Victor shifted uneasily as the Director came up behind him, her hand carding through his hair, moving from his forehead backwards. Suddenly, she slapped him hard on the back of the head.

"See that you are."

He hissed, rubbing the injury as she moved back to her seat on the other side of the desk, obviously unconcerned with his pain.

"And now to business. Your new assign..."

"What about Li Ann?"

"What about Li Ann, Mac?"

"Doesn't she get chewed out for... for... well, for something."

"Like what? Li Ann gets a gold star this week." Li Ann beamed at her two male partners. "And if you interrupt me again I'll be forced to put you over my knee and spank you... Hmmm, that sounds..." The Director wiped the lusty smile off her face and returned to the business at hand. "Your assignment."

Victor's eyes narrowed with interest as she picked up three files from the end of the table and threw one in front of each agent.

"We're calling this the Nursery Rhyme Killings. No prizes for guessing why." Picking up a small remote, she drew their attention to the screen behind her. "Jack and Jill Barnett. A quiet couple in their late thirties... The latest victims."

Victor frowned as he glanced at the bodies lying broken at the bottom of a rocky incline. "Jack and Jill as in 'fell down and broke his crown'..."

"...or were they pushed."

"Very good, boys. So you *have* been paying attention... for once."

The next slide showed a plump man lying at the bottom of a high wall.

"Don't tell me... his name was Humpty Dumpty."

The Director smiled, for once not seeming annoyed at Mac's interruption.

"Close. Humphrey Dumfries. An accountant in charge of a small research office... but I believe his staff used it as a nickname."

"So what's the real connection?"

The Director turned her attention to Victor. He had already moved past the obvious connection and was trying to discover if there was anything more; something other than their nursery rhyme names that connected the murders.

"Unknown."

"Maybe the rhymes are the *only* connection." The Director smiled at Li Ann beckoning her to continue with a wave of her fingers. "I mean, it may be all a serial killer needs. Some killers go for a particular type. Maybe Nursery Rhymes are his...thing."

"Interesting thought, Li Ann. So where shall we begin, boys and... girl?"

She paused, eyebrows raised in inquiry, but Victor could not think of anything to say—and, judging by the blank expressions, neither could Mac or Li Ann. The Director gave a loud sigh and reached for another book, dropping it onto the table in front of them. Mac craned his neck round to check the title.

"Humpty Dumpty and Other Nursery Rhymes."

The Director turned away and moved towards the staircase and, this time, it was Victor who sighed as she casually threw one final order over her shoulder.

"I suggest you make a note of any that could be... misconstrued."

—

An Hour Later

Li Ann's almond-shaped eyes widened in excitement.

"What about this one. 'Dr Foster went to Gloucester in a shower of rain. He stepped in a puddle right up to his middle'..."

"...and he never went there again." Victor looked up and then raised his eyebrows to match the lifted ones on his partners' faces. "It's not my fault I had a normal childhood... well, sort of."

"Vic's got a point..." Mac held up a hand and carried on as Li Ann started to interrupt that she had spotted the rhyme first. "...our childhood was more 'Confucius say'" He grinned at the annoyed pout on his ex-lover's pretty face.

"Why are we doing this?"

"Doing what?" Both Li Ann and Mac exclaimed together, then gave each other an annoyed glance before turning back to Victor.

"This is a job for the cops. Why are we handling a 'serial' killer?"

"Who's only killed twice." Mac frowned. "You're right, Vic. There's something strange about this."

"Well, I don't know about you two but if the Director says we investigate then I, for one, am going to do as I am told."

Mac whispered to Victor under his breath. "Teacher's pet."

Li Ann wrinkled up her nose and ignored Mac. "I suggest we ask Nathan for a list of all the Dr Fosters in the area."

Victor nodded, slightly preoccupied. "Yeah. Especially as the forecast tomorrow is rain."

"How does he do that?"

Li Ann rolled her eyes. "It's called a weather forecast, Mac."

Nathan, my man!" Nathan winced as Mac gave him a slap on the back then leaned in closer. "Need some information."

"The library's downstairs."

Nathan petulantly turned his back on the man who had left sticky, apple jelly fingerprints all over his computer terminal only the other day—and had duped Dobrinsky into eating his goldfish. However, he jumped when another friendly arm dropped over his shoulder, turned and felt his knees weaken as his eyes were captured by the deep, sea-green depths of Mac's male partner. A husky voice, close to his ear, sent shivers racing down Nathan's spine.

"But the librarian's here... and we need you, Nathan."

"V-V-Victor."

A slight crinkling at the bridge of Victor's cute nose brought a small whimper from Nathan as he imagined licking a path across that frown line, but the image was spoiled by strange looks from both men. He felt himself become all flustered when they exchanged another less than respectful glance between them before each gave a small shrug, obviously dismissing his reaction to Victor's presence as yet another one of his foibles. Oh yes, he knew how they viewed him, with a certain amount of disdain, but had discovered quite early on that if he ignored Mac then the younger man would, eventually, get the message and go away. Victor, however, was a different matter altogether; Nathan felt he could forgive Victor *anything*.

"Nathan, we need a list of all the Dr Fosters in town... and a map of Toronto."

"Any-Anything for you, V-V-Victor."

Nathan sighed as the arm dropped away. Oh well, this latest encounter would fuel his fantasies for weeks. Nathan spaced-out as he started to imagine a new scenario... the feel of Victor's arms reaching for him, pulling him into a close embrace, soft lips parting as he moved forward to press his lips against... He jumped when he realized Victor *was* standing in front of him, Victor's strong arms were gripping his shoulders and Victor's beautiful face *was* moving closer... Victor's luscious mouth forming words... as that cute frown line deepened between the beautiful sea-green eyes.

"Are you okay, Nathan?"

"Yes." Nathan squeaked then cleared his throat, his voice deepening. "Yes." He sighed and moved away from Victor before he was tempted to give into the impulse to kiss those perfect lips.

If only Victor had said "I need you," rather than "we need you".

They made their way towards the elevator with the two agents to one side of him, and barely half a step behind. Out of the corner of his eye Nathan watched as Mac sidled up close to Victor, wishing it was him who leant in so close to that beautiful, stocky frame, breathing in the unique scent that was Victor alone. Although they dropped their voices to whispers, Nathan heard the exchange, his hearing more acute than either of the other two men realized.

"I think Nathan's got a serious case of hero-worship."

"Hero-worship? Who?"

Nathan's mouth tightened at Victor's whispered question, amazed that the man could have no idea, and yet even more enchanted by Victor's innocence.

"Well, he doesn't get all flustered when he's talking to me or Li Ann."

The doors slid open and they moved forward to stand against the back wall of the elevator, waiting for him to select the floor number. Nathan turned, suddenly, to face them. He paused and then reached forward, hesitating slightly when Victor flinched. His fingers plucked at Victor's brushed cotton shirt.

"F-F-Fluff."

"Oh... thanks..."

Nathan turned away and stared at Victor's reflection in the metal control panel, grateful Victor was not looking his way... although he did love to stare into those beautiful eyes. No one else had eyes like Victor. He felt his cock twitch as his thoughts dwelled on those large, green eyes framed by long dark lashes; the sort of lashes all the women claimed they would die for. He brought his attention back to the present and jumped when he realized those eyes were staring back at him, reflected in the smooth metal. Another light frown creased Victor's forehead, crinkling the skin across the bridge of his nose in that sexy way that...

Nathan whimpered and then gasped softly in relief when the elevator door opened, depositing them in front of the library. He hurried off, willing his erection down before either Mac or Victor noticed his predicament. The two other men fell in step slightly behind him and, once again, Nathan was able to observe Mac edging up to Victor through his peripheral vision. He sighed, quietly, as he overheard Mac teasing Victor.

"Forget what I said about hero-worship. He's got a full-blown crush on you."

"What?" Victor burst out. Nathan couldn't help but jump, and look back at him. Victor smiled tightly then dropped his voice back down to a whisper, unaware that Nathan could still hear him. "What d'you mean?"

Mac laughed, lengthening his stride until he had passed Nathan, leaving Victor lagging behind to stew in these new thoughts and Nathan pursing his lips in annoyance at having his feelings for Victor revealed in such a fashion.

"That was so... so... so embarrassing!"

"What was?"

Victor jumped when he heard Li Ann's voice behind them. "I wish you wouldn't sneak up on us like that."

"Don't change the subject, Victor. What was embarrassing?"

Victor reddened and squirmed in his seat. "Nothing."

"Oh, come on. Let me in." Gaining no response from her ex-fiancé, she turned inquisitive eyes upon her former lover as she took her seat beside him, on the far end. "Mac?"

Mac grinned inanely, unable to control the need to tell someone. "Looks like Vic has found a new love."

"What?"

Li Ann frowned, feeling a hole open up in her chest at the thought of Victor finding someone to replace her so quickly and easily. To be honest, it had been almost a year since she handed back her engagement ring and, in that time, she had taken other lovers. Yet, the thought of Victor moving on was strangely upsetting, and she felt guilty for feeling that way. After all, why shouldn't he forget her and move on? Isn't that what she had told him to do?

"You mean who?"

"Ma..ac! Please."

Despite Victor's plea for secrecy, it was obvious to Li Ann that Mac couldn't resist passing on the little titbit of gossip. "It's Nathan."

Li Ann gasped and choked back a laugh. "Nathan the Librarian? You have a crush on *Nathan* the...?"

"No I do not!" Victor quickly lowered his voice, his eyes flashing in annoyance at his outburst. "Mac thinks Nathan has a crush on me."

"Seriously?"

Victor threw back his head. "Oh God. I said this was embarrassing."

"Embarrassment aside, Victor. Did Nathan have anything for you...?" Li Ann could not hold back a grin when the Director sidled up behind Victor and then lowered her voice to whisper suggestively into his ear.

"...informatively speaking."

Victor dropped his head into his hands as she moved on behind them, eventually rounding the desk and taking her customary seat opposite. He cleared his throat and looked up, catching a twitch around the corner of his boss' red-painted lips. He felt his own cheeks heat until they must have matched her bright lipstick colour. He cleared his throat again.

"There are only two Dr Fosters in town, but there are several 'Gloucester' place references in nearby suburbs. It'll be easier to stick with the Docs rather than stake-out the locations."

"If... and that's a big if... one of these two Doctors is the next intended victim. There are plenty more nursery rhymes for our killer to choose from." Li Ann added. "And who's to say he won't find another Jack and Jill..."

The Director nodded at Li Ann in approval.

"...Or a Miss Muffet."

"Victor? Miss Muffet was frightened away—no mention of..."

"Jack broke his crown... didn't say *he* died either."

"Point taken." The Director steepled her fingers. "I don't suppose you have a list of Miss Muffets?"

Victor drew out a sheet of paper from his jacket pocket and slid it across the table. "Just the one... but several more Jack and Jills."

Mac pouted. "Ooh, now whose teacher's pet... Ouch" The ruler struck his knuckles so quickly and unexpectedly that he had no time to react. He rubbed his tender knuckles with his other hand.

"Next time you interrupt class, I'll be aiming much lower."

"My knees?"

"It doesn't pay to vex me."

Mac motioned his fingers across his mouth, imitating a zipper being closed.

"So, boys and girl. Jack and Jill's aside, we have three possible targets—and three of you. Any guesses as to what I'm going to propose?"

"Why are we doing this?"

"Victor?"

"This is a case for the cops."

"True."

"Then why are we looking into this?"

The Director sighed.

It was obvious to Victor that there was far more to this case than she had revealed to them, and he waited patiently. Experience had taught him that if he did not get an instant response from her that it was 'need-to-know' then she would, eventually, offer up the missing information. In this case he found he did not even have to wait that long.

"Both Jack Barnett and Humphrey Dumfries had a connection with the Agency."

He sat back a little, feeling a little smug as he had alluded earlier to the possibility that there was more to the murders than just a nursery rhyme connection.

"Jack Barnett was a very able research assistant. Humphrey Dumfries worked as an accountant in our legal research department."

"Has anyone investigated a connection between the two? Were they working on a similar case?"

"That angle is being covered, Victor. But I wanted to put together a back-up investigation just in case—as Li Ann pointed out earlier—the rhymes are the *only* connection."

Victor opened his mouth to debate the logic of that but then bowed to the inevitable. He looked across, expecting Mac to be staring off into the distance, completely bored with events. Instead, he found those bright eyes focused on him, but what made Victor's eyebrows rise in surprise was the fact that Mac's gaze dropped away as soon as he realized he had been caught staring at his partner.

Vic raised his eyebrows. What the hell was that all about?

Any chance to question the strange look he had seen on Mac's face was lost as the Director gave them their assignments.

"How come I get the Old Maid? I hate spiders."

"You hate spiders?" Li Ann said, taken aback.

"Yeah."

"I never knew you hated spiders. When did...?"

"The Black Widow in the box with the Fourth Emerald. Gave me the creeps..." Mac shuddered dramatically. Victor rolled his eyes in contempt.

"That wasn't a Black Widow... just an overgrown house spider that got trapped in there the last time they took the stone out to polish."

"Nah... it was huge!" Victor shook his head in amazement and carried on walking as Mac continued.

"Talking of huge; problems that is. What're you gonna do about Nathan?"

"Nathan? Well... nothing. He's just gonna have to get over it by himself."

"You're not gonna talk to him... make his day?"

"I'm just gonna ignore it... in fact, I'm just gonna ignore you too."

Victor strode off, stepping just a little faster and a little harder than before. Mac grinned to himself. Baiting Victor just got better and better, although, to be honest he had been expecting a little more moral outrage from his straight colleague, especially after Li Ann related Victor's comments during the Transsexuals case. On that occasion the Director had told Victor to be more open to possibilities, that there was more to life than white bread. To Li Ann's merriment, Victor had replied 'Not that open'. It was strangely pleasing to discover Victor was not overly upset about being on the receiving end of another man's sexual fantasies. Or at least it seemed that way, and that was enough to give him a little hope.

He followed in his partner's footsteps, whistling happily away to himself, until the irony occurred to him. This was the one thing he and Nathan did have in common—the presence of Victor Mansfield in their sexual fantasies.

02:30 a.m.

Doctor Foster's House

Victor sighed heavily, readjusting his position for the umpteenth time as he tried to get comfortable upon the hard leather couch. Part of his discomfort came from his thoughts. Despite his assertions to the contrary, the thought of Nathan fantasizing about him made him feel decidedly uneasy. He had never considered himself a sex object. At least, not until he had ended up in prison after being framed by his former police colleagues. The powers that be had placed him into solitary for his own protection, but the catcalls and whispered threats from the other inmates as he was moved from his solitary confinement to the exercise yard, shower block—and back again—had made him nervous. He remembered the lust in the eyes that followed him. They had made lewd suggestions of what they would like to do with his pretty face and with his ass, offering him protection if he agreed to be *their* bitch in return.

Victor had never been so grateful in his life as when the Director offered him a route out of that place. He had spent many a night lying awake wondering when some corrupt prison guard would 'accidentally' leave him vulnerable to attack. By accepting her offer, he had blown his chances of being found innocent of his supposed crimes, but it was a choice he had been given, a choice he had made without too many regrets.

As to Nathan Muckle... The man was harmless, Victor knew that. He knew Nathan would never act upon his fantasies, knew he would never try to force him against his wishes. He could honestly say he had never noticed a mean bone in that lanky body but still, it had changed the way he looked at the librarian. Victor cursed himself. Why had he never noticed before? The way Nathan stammered whenever they were in close proximity, the way the librarian was always touching him on one pretext or another; picking fluff from his clothes, gripping his arm to attract his attention... holding him close as he whispered some inane secret into his ear.

Was that how he fuelled those fantasies?

He had always assumed the small moans and whimpers whenever they spoke or touched, and the constant staring, were something to do with the man's paranoid belief that he was part of some ruling council. He remembered the way Nathan would zone out on him at those times. Now he wondered if he would ever be able to look at Nathan again without wondering if the man was undressing him—or even fucking him—in some private fantasy world.

But that was too stupid to contemplate (or something to replace the thought), and he berated himself for becoming as paranoid as he believed Nathan to be. Damn Mac for opening his eyes to Nathan's crush on him. This was one occasion when he wished he could have remained in blissful ignorance. Now he wondered if he would ever be able to turn his back on Nathan and feel safe. That thought angered him.

Dammit. Remember, he *is* harmless.

It was not as if he was even bothered about homosexuality normally... but it was the threat of being raped that had fuelled his own fears in prison; of being taken violently, or being coerced to service someone he neither wanted nor cared for. Although a nice enough person, once you got beneath all that paranoia and spooky talk, Nathan did nothing for him... not like Mac. He felt a warmth coiling in the pit of his stomach as he considered the tall but graceful, beautiful frame of his *very* male partner, suddenly realizing that he had some terrible secret in common with Nathan.

They both fantasized about someone they could never have.

Victor thumped the hard pillow in annoyance, as he remembered the strange look Mac had given him back at the briefing room. If he wanted to be a masochist then he could easily read something special into that look; a longing, a desire for him reflected in those dark eyes. He sneered in contempt of himself. Even if that look *had* meant what he hoped, Victor had no intention of ever taking Mac as a real-world lover, for he was certain that all Mac could offer him was a one-night stand... and Victor had never been one for casual relationships. When he allowed someone into his bed he also gave that person the key to his heart. It meant he had seen his heart ripped out several times during his life but, in love, he remained the eternal optimist, forever hoping that next time it would be the real thing.

The predicted rain arrived in a torrent with flashes of lightning illuminating the room, and he stopped thinking about Mac—and Nathan—allowing the force of the outside storm to command his attention. Gradually, the claps of thunder moved away into the distance leaving just the melodic pattering of rain against the windowpanes. Victor frowned as he contemplated how many inches of rain had fallen, wondering whether it would be enough to bring this Nursery Rhyme Killer seeking a new victim.

He wondered how Mac and Li Ann were doing with their own babysitting tasks. Thoughts of Mac looking after the ancient Miss Muffet, with her seventeen cats and eight dogs brought an evil smile to his face, but the ring of the telephone interrupted further delicious contemplation of Mac's fate.

Victor sat up and waited expectantly, muscles coiled ready to spring into action. He moved quickly as the door opened, gaining his feet in one fluid motion. Doctor Michael Foster stuck his head around the door, slightly taken aback to find Victor Mansfield awake.

"I have to go out."

"O-kaaayy. Where're we going?"

"Emergency call from an apartment in Gloucester Place."

Victor pursed his lips. This would be it... Dr Foster going to Gloucester in the pouring rain. Hopefully, all he had to do was watch out for any large, deep puddles, but first... He pulled out his cellphone and speed-dialled Mac's number as he pulled on his shoes. No answer. He tried Li Ann's with the same result, and wondered whether the electrical storm was interfering with the signals.

"We have to go. Now. The man's neighbour told me my patient is having trouble catching his breath." Foster huffed in annoyance. "And don't get all fired up. It won't be the first house call I've made to that apartment over the past few weeks."

Victor grimaced, partly at the doctor's ungrateful irritation and partly at the thought of going out into the miserable, cold, wet night, but the doctor was already pulling on his trench coat. Victor eyed the phone on the hallstand longingly as he shoved the cellphone into his pocket, and then he shrugged into his own coat, quickly following the Doctor out of the door. He pulled the collar high as the rain pelted down upon them and then raced to the car, clambering into the passenger seat with some alacrity.

"Aarghh! I hate the rain."

Victor moaned as the water ran in rivulets down his face and under the collar, following an icy cold path down the back of his neck. He watched the darkened streets pass by as the car gathered speed and he swiped a hand across his hair, flicking the excess water away even as the wiper blades swished back and forward over the windshield.

Several minutes passed in silence, the doctor's full attention taken by the road ahead. Victor used the opportunity to pull his gun out, wanting to give it a final check to ensure it was fully loaded, and then readied himself mentally for all eventualities. From his peripheral vision, he saw Foster give him a sideways glance as the dull street light glinted off the metal barrel. He tried to give the doctor a reassuring smile in response.

Eventually the car turned into a narrow side street before pulling over to the side of the pavement. The storm was slowly abating, the rain easing off as Victor stepped out of the car, body tensed, gun ready in his hand, his eyes darting in all directions as he tried to penetrate the darkness beyond the halo of light from the street lamp. He walked quickly around to the driver's side, grabbing Foster by the arm as the man made to walk towards the darkened entrance of the apartment building.

"Hold it. Let me go first."

"I hardly think..."

Victor smiled tightly in exasperation.

"Just humour me. Please."

There was a large puddle lying between them and the apartment building, which Victor eyed with some suspicion. He grabbed a small branch that had broken off one of the tall trees that lined the road, and prodded into the centre of the puddle to check its depth, and frowned. It was such an anticlimax, having half-expected it to be *the* puddle, the one in the rhyme, but this puddle was barely an inch deep. The likelihood of drowning in it was pretty remote.

"Have you quite finished? My patient needs help."

Victor stepped back as the doctor elbowed him aside, walking swiftly past him towards the entrance to the tenement building. With a shrug of annoyance, Victor followed immediately behind—and that's when the earth moved beneath his feet, quite literally. He barely had time to draw a breath before he was submerged in freezing cold water. When he surfaced, spluttering and gasping at the sudden shock, he found his feet slipping as he tried to find purchase on the floor beneath him, but once he *had* regained his feet, Victor pulled the spluttering doctor upright beside him. He glanced around, trying to see through the darkness. Wherever they were, they were standing waist-high in water.

"What happened?"

Victor opened his mouth to reply but the words froze as a manic giggling echoed around what had to be a cavernous cellar. A couple of fluorescent lights flickered on, throwing grotesque shadows around the room, elongating the form of a man who had stepped out from the deeper shadows onto a ledge a little way above them. Although still shrouded by shadows, the man began to talk, his deep voice bearing a singsong cadence as his words floated around them.

"Doctor Foster went to Gloucester in a shower of rain. He stepped in a puddle, right up to his middle..." The owner of the voice stepped out of the shadows into full view, the pale blue eyes glinting madly. "...but who is this? You weren't invited. You're not in the rhyme."

The man's eyes pierced Victor, pinning him in place, seemingly unafraid of the gun still held tightly in Victor's hand; a gun that was aimed at the stranger's chest.

"Put down the gun... or Doctor Foster meets his end here and now."

Two more shapes moved out of the deeper shadows, their guns trained on the unarmed doctor who stood up to his waist in the ice-cold water beside him. Victor swallowed hard and allowed the gun to fall from his grasp, raising his hands aloft so they could be seen to be empty. The soft splash of the gun hitting the water was the only sound heard for several long moments as the white-haired man's blue eyes swept from Victor to the doctor and back again. Finally, it was Victor who broke the silence.

"What are you going to do to us?"

"Why... nothing." The man continued on with his nursery rhyme. "He stepped in a puddle right up to his middle... and was never seen again."

"Never seen *there* again."

The man waved his gun nonchalantly. "Artistic licence."

"Hey, where're you going?"

Victor moved forward as the man walked back into the shadows.

"Goodbye, Dr Foster... and friend."

The basement room was plunged into darkness and all sound ceased except for the deep boom of a heavy door being closed and sealed. That sound echoed around the interior, reverberating off the walls and destroying any attempt Victor might have of figuring out where that door could be. Victor pushed his way towards the small ledge that their assailant had stood upon and pulled himself out of the cold water.

A grating sound began to echo around the basement, and he froze. Climbing to his feet he stretched his fingers out towards the wall... and found it coming to meet him. He braced himself but the wall's inward movement was relentless and he found his wet feet slipping beneath him on the tiled floor. Eventually, despite all his efforts, he found himself falling backwards as he was pushed off the ledge by the approaching wall. The noise stopped abruptly, silence falling about them until all he could hear was the sound of his own harsh breathing, and the soft movements in the water behind him that were coming from the Doctor.

"What now?"

"I don't know. Let me think." Victor pushed back through the water until he collided with the doctor, reaching out a hand to steady them both. "Okay, let's check around the perimeter, see if there's a set of steps or anything." He grabbed hold of the doctor's arm and pulled at him. "We both go forward until we hit the wall."

Keeping one hand in contact with each other they pressed forward into the darkness, wading with difficulty through the waist high water, the other hand stretched out to stop them banging into the solid wall. When they finally reached their destination, Victor pressed his fingers against the join of the moving wall and the floor of the ledge, and he sighed. There was not even enough ledge left for a toehold, so climbing was out of the question.

"Okay, you go left. I'll go right. Yell if you feel something... anything."

He could hear the swish of water as the doctor made his way around the perimeter as requested. Eventually, they collided once more.

"Anything?"

"No. Nothing."

"There has to be some stairs, a door or something, but they must be higher than we can reach."

Another ominous grinding noise filled the room, followed by the sound of water trickling in from high above. Victor moved to where he could hear the running water meet the pool in which they stood. He reached out a hand and let the cold water trickle through his fingers, puzzled by this slow downpour. He looked about the darkness uneasily as yet another grinding noise filled the room—and suddenly, the trickle became a torrent of gushing water.

"Shit!"

"What is it?"

"He's filling the room with water. We've gotta get out of here before we drown."

Victor gasped as he remembered he still had the cellphone in one of his jacket pockets. He fumbled about his body with fingers that were slowly becoming numb with the cold until he found it. Making a stab at several keys, he tried to remember the layout of the keypad and eventually the display lit up, affording him enough visibility to depress the right keys. The phone crackled and he swore.

"I can't get a signal."

He tried again, wading around the room in the hope that, somehow, there would be a chance of the signal breaking through the thick walls of the flooding basement. For a moment he thought it had connected, but then the signal broke up again.

"Damn it."

He was tempted to throw the phone away, but pushed it back inside his shirt pocket instead.

"Looks like we're on our own for now. Just try to keep afloat. At the worst, perhaps we'll be able to reach up and open the door above our heads."

03:10 a.m.

Miss Muffet's Apartment

Mac rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and looked around the small, smelly living room, trying to figure out what had awoken him. He sat upright and stretched, trying to ease the kinks out of his back and shoulders. The old-fashioned couch, with its lacy covers, was as deceptively lethal as its frail looking but sharp-tongued owner was. As he came to full awareness his brain finished processing the sound he had heard and relayed the results. Mac reached for his phone and checked the 'Last Caller' info, frowning when he recognized the number displayed.

"Vic? What the hell would you want at... three in the morning?"

There was no message and, if it had not been for the cat that decided to walk across his face the moment he lay back down, Mac would have quite happily tried to go back to sleep. Now that he was wide-awake, he started to wonder why Victor hadn't left a message. The more he thought about it, the more concerned he became.

"Ah, what the hell. He woke me first anyway."

He picked up his phone again and speed-keyed Victor, but couldn't get a connection. Mac looked at the display in bewilderment, checking the strength of his own signal. When he had contacted Victor earlier on in the evening on the pretext of venting his annoyance at being smothered by cats, wanting to hear Victor's soft voice, both cellphones had worked just fine, so, either his phone was no longer working or Victor was no longer at Doctor Foster's.

A high-pitched scream caught his attention. He dropped the phone and raced up the stairs, taking them three at a time. Without a second thought he slammed open the door to Miss Muffet's bedroom, bringing another piercing scream from that withered body. Mac felt a moment of embarrassment, but then one bony finger started pointing towards the end of the bed. Mac's eyes followed the finger, and his eyes closed.

"I hate you, Victor."

He was tempted to draw his gun and aim at the dark mass, but he couldn't tell where the old lady's spindly legs were beneath the covers. With great care, Mac approached the dark mass, instantly recognizing the large venomous bird-eating spider poised on its back legs, fangs exposed. With unbelievable speed he whipped the end of the sheet over the creature, pulled the whole lot to the floor and jumped up and down on the small lump until he could see red blood seeping through the folds of the white sheet. Still breathing hard, Mac pulled back the sheet and grimaced.

"Ewwhhh!! You're gonna pay for this, Victor... Victor?"

Leaving the old woman to fend for herself, Mac raced back downstairs and grabbed his cellphone off the couch where he had dropped it. He keyed in Doctor Foster's home number and waited impatiently, but there was no response. With a feeling of dread curling in his stomach, he tried Victor's cellphone once again but still got a number unavailable.

Mac put in a quick call to the Agency and then went back upstairs to reassure the distraught Miss Muffet, his heart racing with fear for his partner. Eventually, he gave up the pretence of caring for the old woman and started to pace back and forth, whispering angrily under his breath.

"Where are they?"

A few minutes later, to his immense relief, a knock on the door heralded the arrival of several agents to take care of Miss Muffet and the dead spider. Leaving the old woman's protection in their capable hands, Mac grabbed his coat and ran through the smattering of rain to his car. His sixth sense was screaming at him, telling him that something bad had happened—or *was* happening—to Victor, so he jammed his foot down hard on the gas pedal and sped through the quiet streets, hoping no cops were about at this ungodly hour.

When Mac arrived at Doctor Foster's house he found the place dark and, when nobody answered his knock, he picked the lock and slipped in. He glanced into the living room but found it empty. There was nobody home. Mac made his way to the doctor's phone and checked the writing pad. The top sheet was blank, but Mac drew a pencil from the container by the telephone and rubbed it across the page. Two words appeared: Gloucester Place.

That feeling of dread clenched down hard, taking his breath away.

04:00 a.m.

Gloucester Place

The water level had risen several feet in the past half-hour, and Victor found himself standing on tiptoe to keep his face above water. He held onto the doctor, keeping the shorter man afloat as the water continued to rise, but after another few minutes had passed, both of them were forced to tread water in order to stay afloat.

"How're y-you doing?"

"We h-have to watch for h-hypothermia."

"Fraid there's not m-much we can do ab-bout that, Doc."

Victor couldn't stop his teeth chattering. His body was shaking from the coldness of the icy water and he wished there were some way they could keep warm. Although he knew it was stupid to move about too much, that he conserve his energy, Victor decided to go around the perimeter one more time. When his raised hand fell into an empty space, he found himself gasping in relief. The ledge was about two feet above the current water level and it was an area only as wide as a doorframe, but it seemed pretty deep. He hauled himself out of the icy water, relieved at no longer having to tread water.

"D-doc, here! F-follow the sound of m-my voice. C'mon, over here."

Victor kept talking until he felt the Doctor brush up against his outstretched hand. He hauled the smaller man onto the ledge with him. Leaving the doctor to regain his breath, Victor pushed to his feet and crept about five feet along a small corridor until he came to a door. He tried the handle but it was locked. Victor tried shoving against it, throwing all his weight against the door but it felt solid, as if it had been custom-made to withstand a lot of pressure. Running his fingers along the edge, he could feel no cracks around the door; it was a perfect seal—this was no ordinary basement door. Victor reached into his inside pocket and withdrew a lockpick set, laying out the items on the cold floor and trying, by the feel of his numb fingers, to figure out which tool would be best to try. He jiggled about in the lock, trying to bring to mind everything Mac and Li Ann had shown him during the past year, cursing at the shaking of his cold fingers.

"Y-Y-Yes!"

He yelled in triumph as he heard the locking mechanism open but, even though he twisted and turned on the handle the door remained obstinately shut.

"D-Damn!"

"Wh-What is it?"

"A d-door but it's b-bolted on the outside. I c-can't shift it."

Victor wrapped his arms around himself as he felt the rising water slide over his already saturated shoes. He shoved the lockpick set back into his inside pocket then moved back until he bumped into the doctor. He jumped in surprise when he found himself being wrapped in the man's arms.

"H-hope you don't m-mind, son... b-but I'm f-freezing."

Shivering violently, Victor and the doctor held on tightly to one another as they tried to combine their waning body warmth. Far too tired to stay standing, Victor ignored the slowly rising water and sat down, taking the doctor with him. He wrapped his arms around the shivering doctor and leaned in closer as the Doctor's arms encircled Victor's body, trying to conserve as much energy as he could for when they would be forced to start treading water again.

When he closed his eyes for a moment, Victor's thoughts raced back to a tall, strangely graceful frame and the mischievous, handsome face of its owner. Not for the first time, he imagined that he was being held in Mac's arms, feeling Mac's breath against his hair, hearing Mac's heart beating beneath his ear as he lay with his head upon the younger man's chest. He wondered if Mac would ever understand—or even know—how he felt about him.

He sighed as he thought of the very masculine Mac Ramsey wondering whether Mac had ever taken a male lover. Victor would not have called himself particularly experienced with men, in fact, he could count the number of his previous sexual partners—of *either* sex—on one hand, but none of those partners had been a one night stand, all had meant something special to him. He gave himself a wry grin. Perhaps he was a little old fashioned in that respect, having always preferred to have real feelings for the people he willingly gave himself to, and yet also wanting to be certain that they had real feelings for him in return before he offered.

As to the gender, what did it matter as long as each individual was willing? After all, the pleasure was the same, just packaged differently.

As he shivered, wrapped in this stranger's arms, Victor wished he could have let go of some of his antiquated views about sex only in established relationships to find out if Mac would have shared some of that pleasure with him.

Only in your dreams, Mansfield.

He smiled, his body starting to feel warm for the first time since they had gone out into the cold night rain.

At this moment he truly understood Nathan for the very first time. They were both fantasizing about someone, both living off each casual touch, both hearing words spoken out of context or, perhaps that ought to be ‘placing those words into a new context’, making those touches and words a source of reality in which to bind together their most erotic fantasies.

He blushed at the thought of Nathan imagining *him* the same way he imagined Mac—naked and wanting, lust-driven eyes aflame with desire just for him. He wondered if Nathan’s fantasy fingers drifted over *his* firm flesh the way his own caressed the silkiness of Mac’s skin.

Did Nathan see his face as he came? Did he look as beautiful to Nathan as Mac did to him? It was a surprisingly warm thought in his cold body.

Victor groaned as soft fingers caressed his cheek... Mac’s fingers.

Mac’s thumb would caress his lips, then Mac would lean over and kiss him, tenderly, and when Mac drew back there would be that knowing smile that said ‘you’re mine, Victor’, and he would smile back as possessively.

The fingers became more insistent, the gentleness disappearing until his cheek began to sting. He opened his eyes, puzzled momentarily by the darkness then he was jerked back into his freezing body.

“M–Mansfield? C–Come on. You m–mustn’t sleep. We’re t–too cold to s–sleep.”

“S–sorry, I d–didn’t realize. I’m... I’m ok–kay.”

His teeth started chattering again and he held on tighter to the doctor, trying to find that extra little bit of warmth. While he was lost in his illusion of strong hands caressing him, the water level had risen almost to his waist. Another foot and they would have to stand again. A few more feet after that and they would be back to treading water.

—

04:50 a.m.

Gloucester Place

Mac stood outside the tall tenement building and sighed. There was no apartment number listed on the Doctor’s pad and, looking at the intercom, there were sixty-eight apartments. Victor and Doctor Foster could be in any one of them. For the first time a shiver of fear coursed its way through his body. How the hell was he supposed to find him? What if Victor was in trouble? What if Victor was dead?

“No. Don’t think things like that.”

A car drawing up pulled his attention back from his fears and he waited, impatiently, until Li Ann had come to stand beside him, watching her intently as she peered upwards.

“Mac, there must be dozens of apartments in here.”

“I know... and I have a very bad feeling about this.”

“Then we’d best get started. I’ll take the elevator to the top, start working my way down—”

“—and I’ll take the ground and work my way up.”

He tried to move quickly from apartment to apartment but half an hour later, Mac had barely managed to check a single floor. He slapped his hand against the nearest wall in frustration then speed-keyed his cellphone and was relieved when Li Ann responded.

“I’ve made hardly any progress.”

“Same here. There has to be a better way.” Mac heard Li Ann gasp and he tensed, already moving towards the elevator. “We’re not thinking logically.”

Mac stopped.

“What is it?”

“The rhyme... Dr Foster went to Gloucester...”

“Yeah! In a shower of rain. He stepped in a puddle...”

“Mac, we need to look for water. I’ll check the penthouse and roof for a swimming pool.”

Mac grinned as excitement replaced frustration and defeat in Li Ann’s voice, feeling his own hope rise in response.

“I’ll check the basement.”

Victor was tired—bone tired but, strangely enough, he no longer felt so cold. His limbs felt heavy yet pleasantly warm, and he could feel the welcoming darkness embracing him, drawing him down once more. Mac was waiting for him behind his closed eyes, and he smiled. Something smacked him hard on the temple and he forced his eyes back open, realizing it was the Doctor struggling against him. Victor was suddenly aware that his face was wet and he knew he must have slipped beneath the surface, dragging the Doctor with him. He coughed up a little of the water he had swallowed and held on tighter

to the Doctor, thankful that he had insisted they tie themselves to each other to prevent either of them slipping away to a watery grave. For a moment he had a strong temptation to just give up. He was so very tired having pulled Foster tight against his chest to support him after Foster's strength had given out some time back.

He found his thoughts drifting once more as he wondered how long they had been treading water? All he knew was that in the silent blackness, he had lost all track of time.

Drawing a deep breath and forcing a sluggish burst of energy from his exhausted muscles, Victor kicked up and reached above him. His fingers seemed to brush against something and he felt a flicker of hope rise inside as he sank back down, tempered by the fact that he could barely feel anything through the tips of his numb fingers.

"S-still... with me... D-doc?"

"Hmmm."

"G-good. Think we n-nearly... reached the... c-ceiling. G-got to... look for the... h-hatch. You'll... need t-to... try and float."

"Okay. S-so cold."

With numb fingers, Victor unbuckled the belt that had held the doctor tied to him, hoping he had given Foster enough of a respite to stop him from sinking into the dark depths as soon as Victor let go.

—

Mac frowned as he pressed his hands against the door in the rear corner of the basement. The door looked as if it was made of wood but a close inspection had proved that was merely a thin veneer over metal. He stripped away some of the rotting veneer so he could touch the metal beneath, his frown deepening with growing fear; it was icy cold to the touch. Mac tried the hefty handle and was even more confused to note that it moved easily. He glanced up and down taking note of the heavy bars that anchored the door securely, and he wondered why someone had gone to all the trouble of bolting the door and yet had not bothered to lock it.

His mind was screaming at him to release the bolts, fast, but something cautioned him to think it through a little longer. If he was right then the room beyond might be flooded.

Mac turned to check the layout of the area behind him, taking in the sharp edges of the stacked broken furniture and the protruding pipes filling the short passageway that ended at a T-junction. If the room really was flooded, opening the door would probably release a torrent of water that could easily sweep him to his own death.

He moved back several meters, trying to reorientate himself with the layout of the building, thinking furiously about this enigmatic door and the room that lay beyond.

By rights the door ought to lead to the outside, and would have done so if it were on the next floor up, which meant... His mouth fell open in sudden realization and he carried on his thought process aloud.

"...the door leads into an area *below* the pavement, and there's probably a trap-door set into the pavement to carry in supplies."

He pulled out his cellphone.

"Li Ann. Get down here fast. Back outside."

His long strides carried him from the basement as he took the stairs three at a time. Outside it was still raining, but the wind that had driven the rain had eased off considerably. He dropped onto his hands and knees and began to run his fingers along the pavement beneath the puddles, searching by touch for anything unusual.

—

Li Ann paused for a moment on the threshold of the building, looking down at her ex-lover in confusion as he frantically swept his hands along the cold, wet paving. She could hear him murmuring away to himself.

"It's gotta be here. This must be the spot."

Understanding dawned and she leapt down the small flight of steps, landing on the paving next to Mac... and froze in place when she felt the ground vibrate hollowly beneath her.

"Mac?"

Li Ann dropped to her knees, ignoring the water that soaked into her clothing.

"Here!"

Mac scrambled over to where Li Ann's fingers were prizing up the edge of a piece of paving. He wedged his fingers underneath the slab and together they tried to shove it aside but without any luck.

Mac raced back to his car and back the lever he had stashed in the trunk as part of his 'breaking and entering' toolkit. Moments later the slab was shoved aside to reveal the hidden trap door. It took only seconds for Mac to pick the lock and slam back the bolts. The heavy door dropped open with a huge splash. A face broke the surface, spluttering weakly.

"Victor!!"

Mac trained his torch through the hole, his eyes widening as he realized Victor was only a couple of feet below them; the fall of the door had come close to cracking open his skull.

The sight of Mac's face appearing above him brought a sob of relief to Victor. He saw those strong hands reach for him but he pushed them aside, thrusting the Doctor up instead. Victor barely registered the growl of anger this action elicited from Mac. All he knew was that the Doctor had no strength left and if he let go of him now then the man would die. Victor strained and kicked as hard as he could as he tried to push Foster far enough up for Mac to grab hold of the exhausted man. When he felt the weight being lifted from him he stopped moving, his arms and legs feeling, suddenly, too heavy, realizing he had burned the last of his own energy ensuring the Doctor was safe.

Water closed over Victor's face as he slipped beneath the cold, dark surface. He opened his mouth to cry out for help and felt the coldness seep down his throat and into his lungs, his breath bubbling out in a desperate escape bid of its own.

He tried to kick back up the surface, but his legs wouldn't respond. Was this what it was like to drown? He didn't understand. He was waiting for the flash of images to pass before his eyes, his whole life reduced to a few miserable scenes like a video on fast-forward, but instead his mind seemed to focus on a single image, a face—Mac's face—and on a single thought.

What if?

With no energy left, he could only sink into the cold embrace of water and death without the strength to formulate an answer.

Dr Foster moaned softly as they heaved him out onto the wet pavement. He was coughing water and his skin was blue was the coldness of the water. Li Ann rolled him out of the way, and Mac turned back to the trapdoor. He cried out in horror when the torch illuminated only flat patches of murky water; Victor was gone.

Mac's eyes scanned the darkness beneath him in panic, and he called out Victor's name, but there was no response. He stripped off his jacket and slid headfirst into the icy water, diving deep, searching frantically until his fingers encountered cloth. He pulled on the heavy object, dragging them both back up to the surface, gasping for breath as his own head cleared the water.

"Vic!!"

Victor was a dead weight in his arms. He tried shaking the waterlogged body that threatened to drag him back under and, with one arm wrapped tightly around Victor's chest, he reached out with the other to pull Victor's face towards him. Mac was shocked by the whiteness in the relaxed features.

"Li Ann!!"

Mac saw Li Ann reaching down towards him, saw her bracing her legs against the edge of the trapdoor as she grabbed at the heavy, waterlogged clothing, trying to pull Victor upwards. Mac tried to push from his end, but only succeeded in pushing himself underwater. When he broke the surface, the weight having been taken from him, he found another set of hands had joined Li Ann's in pulling Victor up.

Within seconds they had Victor lying on the pavement, leaving Mac to extricate himself from what should have been Foster's watery grave. The Doctor was sitting astride Victor, hand's placed together over the top of Victor's heart.

"One. Two. Three. Breathe."

Mac crawled over to where they were desperately trying to resuscitate Victor, watching as Li Ann tipped back Victor's head, her beautiful lips descending onto the equally beautiful, blue-tinged lips below her, Victor's face a deathly white in the glare of the street light.

The doctor started to falter, still too exhausted from his ordeal to continue.

"Mac!"

Mac watched as Li Ann pushed the doctor aside, her own lithe frame taking up the man's former position as she continued with the heart massage. Mac needed no second guess as to what she expected him to do, and he felt his lips tremble as they descended upon Victor's. For so long he had wanted to kiss this man, to taste him, but not like this. He wanted passion; he wanted to take Victor's breath away not be part of this desperate act to force air into Victor; to make him breathe again.

The body beneath him arched suddenly, and Mac closed his eyes momentarily in relief, he took a deep shuddering breath then opened his eyes to watch Victor coughing up the water he had swallowed. Li Ann turned her attention to the Doctor, leaving Mac to push Victor over onto his side, one hand supporting his partner while the other rubbed Victor's back in strong, broad circles.

"It's okay, Vic. I gotcha."

Mac glanced up, momentarily, at the sound of approaching sirens, barely taking the time to watch as the ambulance pulled to a halt, the flashing blue and red lights reflecting off the wet pavement and walls in a surreal discotheque. His attention remained focussed on the man he had nearly lost this night. Two paramedics jumped out and he found himself gently pushed aside as they took charge. Mac looked over his shoulder as someone draped a blanket over him, and he did not argue when he was led into the back of the ambulance. He had nothing to argue about, they were placing him exactly where he wanted to be—by Victor's side.

—

From a short distance away, a tall man with white hair and pale blue eyes snarled in anger. He had been waiting here expecting to see Doctor Foster's lifeless body being dragged from its watery tomb. Instead, his intended victim had been hauled to safety and was, even now, being led into the back of the ambulance with two others. There was one exciting moment when it looked as if all his plans were not completely in vain and he had watched, avidly, as they dragged Foster's unwelcome companion from the water. He had licked his lips in anticipation as they fought to resuscitate the drowned man, but it seemed his luck had fled him once more as the still figure convulsed into life.

He pulled back out of sight as the beautiful oriental woman looked in his direction and snarled once more, but the growl ended in a grin. With all this activity, no one would expect him to strike again so soon.

"Perhaps we should pay Miss Muffet an early visit instead. Where are the spiders?"

"Spiders?"

"The ones I asked you to obtain for me."

"I thought... I mean, I delivered *the* spider..."

His eyes flashed as he grabbed the front of his henchman's coat, pulling the man towards him until their faces were bare inches apart.

"The spider? Where?"

"To Miss Muffet's."

"You fool!!"

"But boss... thought you wanted to kill the old battle axe."

"Yes. Yes, I do." The man dropped his henchman, licking his lips in anticipation. "But I *need to be there* when it happens."

—

Several hours later Mac's convertible pulled up to the sidewalk in front of Victor's apartment building. He turned his head to give his passenger a long, hard look, his hand reaching out to touch Victor's thigh in a reassuring gesture. Victor looked tired and more than a little subdued. Given the kinds of lives they led, his most recent escape from death was affecting him far more than Mac expected. The stormy green eyes were cast downwards, their lids so heavy that the long, dark eyelashes brushed against his pale cheeks. Mac eyed Victor carefully, uncertain if Victor would be able to make it up to his apartment door under his own steam, let alone get himself undressed and into bed.

The doctor at the hospital had wanted Victor to stay there, but Victor had other ideas, and not even the Director, who had turned up within moments of their arrival, could persuade him otherwise.

"You don't have to stay with me."

"Director's orders, Vic."

"Yeah? And when have *you* ever listened to her?"

Mac had the good sense to look chagrined but this was one argument he was *not* going to lose. This evening he had almost lost Victor, and it had felt as if a huge black chasm had opened up beneath his feet.

If Victor had died then Mac had a feeling he would have plunged into that abyss just as quickly as he had dived into the darkness of that watery grave.

While he had waited outside in the hospital reception area, Mac had found plenty of time to think about how his heart had stopped thumping in his chest when he looked back through that trap-door to find no sign of Victor. He knew he cared for Victor, and he knew he lusted after that gorgeous body, for many a night had been filled with fantasies of licking and teasing that muscular frame. He dreamed of watching green eyes glaze over in passionate abandonment as he deep-throated Victor, hearing moans of ecstasy fall from those perfectly shaped lips. But lust was one thing, a willingness to *die* rather than live without Victor was something else entirely.

Love? Could it be love?

He thought he had loved Li Ann, but never had he felt he would rather be dead than go on living without her. Hell, he *had* believed she was dead for almost two years and yet, here he was, alive and kicking. Li Ann had gone forward, making a new life for herself—with Victor—having convinced herself that Mac had perished in Hong Kong... and he had spent that time locked up in a jail cell making plans of his own that did not include her.

However, the thought of making plans that did not include Victor was an alien concept. He could not conceive of a life without Victor sniping and snapping at his heels, could not imagine never having another one of those inane conversations with him; Jackie Onassis versus the Queen of England.

The image that thought conjured up in his head of Queen Elizabeth in hand-to-hand combat, handbags at twenty paces, with Jackie Onassis, still put a grin on his face. Only Victor could be so serious one moment then be a giddy kid the next. It was part of what he loved about the man.

He sighed. There was that word again. Love.

Victor sighed when he gained no answer from Mac other than a slightly embarrassed grin and another one of those strange looks that he just didn't have the energy to decipher. He pulled his weary body out of the car and pushed the passenger door behind him, a little surprised that Mac did the same rather than jump over the top of the driver's door with his usual enthusiasm. He was very conscious of the figure that trailed him up to his apartment and gave another deep, heartfelt sigh as he opened the door and left it ajar for Mac to follow him in. His keys were thrown carelessly onto the table near the door before he shrugged out of the trench coat he had borrowed from Mac, revealing the blue hospital gown that barely covered his dignity. He was grateful that Mac kept this spare coat in the trunk of his car or he might have been forced to accede to the doctor's demands until someone brought him some fresh clothes. He turned towards the bedroom, too tired to care about the amount of flesh he was showing through the cloth ties that held the gown together at the back.

Mac felt his throat go dry as he watched Victor move towards the bedroom, totally absorbed by the play of muscles in that perfect ass, by the fluid motion of hips and legs working in complete harmony. He had never truly considered how graceful that frame was, the way Victor moved like a powerful big cat, muscle rippling like liquid under the ivory skin. Mac was shocked when he realized his own feet had carried him to the bedroom door and he could barely hold back a gasp of awe as Victor twisted to release each tie then allowed the gown to float to the floor, discarded without a second thought to his nudity.

Beautiful. Victor was so beautiful: inside as well as outside.

The sound of a throat clearing caught his attention and Mac blinked away the confusion only to realize Victor had turned around at some point, and Mac had been staring at him in his full naked glory. He tore his eyes away from the softened sex hanging from a bed of curls that were, intriguingly, lighter in shade than the dark mahogany of Victor's head. Mac's cheeks heated as that perfect cock twitched, and he flicked his gaze up to Victor's face, noting the heightened colour against the pallor of his skin.

"Maybe I'd better go."

Victor continued to stare at him, tired green eyes widening in realization of the lust he must have witnessed on Mac's face.

Mac tried to draw up a facade of nonchalance as he fumbled for a joke, but his mind was too shocked tonight for pretence. Searching Vic's face, he saw no revulsion, no contempt, just realization and tired surprise.

"I never realized," Victor murmured.

"Yeah, well Nathan Muckle is not the only one who has fantasies of you." Victor cringed, and Mac wished he could pull the words back out of the air unheard, and stuff them back inside where they had lived since realizing Nathan's infatuation. He searched his mind, frantically, for a way to make light of his comment, a way to attribute those fantasies to Li Ann or the Director, but was stopped by a whisper.

"I have fantasies of you."

It was hard swallowing passed the lump that seemed to have appeared in his throat, but Mac made a good effort and found he could breathe again.

Victor's eyes narrowed as Mac contemplated his revelation. It was obvious that Victor had a question; a delicate question that would affect how they would handle the next few minutes.

"Have you ever... you know... with another man?"

Mac nodded his head, his eyes never leaving the beautiful figure standing in front of him. He had a feeling his upbringing in Hong Kong had been a lot more liberal than the one Victor had suffered through here in Canada.

"Have you?"

"Yes."

Mac grinned broadly. All this time he had held back because he believed Victor was as straight as an arrow.

"Damn! Wish I'd known sooner."

"Why?"

Mac moved across the room, a predator on the hunt, sighting prey at last. He reached out and stroked the back of his hand down the heavily stubbled cheek, feeling the rasp against his knuckles.

"Cause then I'd have done this sooner."

His hand was sliding through the short dark hair to cup the back of Victor's head. Mac drew Victor forward, meeting him halfway, head tilting slightly so he could press his lips against the luscious mouth. Those lips parted beneath the onslaught and Mac could not resist sliding his tongue into the hot cavern, touching and tasting Victor's own, their tongues coiling together for a moment before Mac retreated.

"I wouldn't have let you."

"Hmmm?"

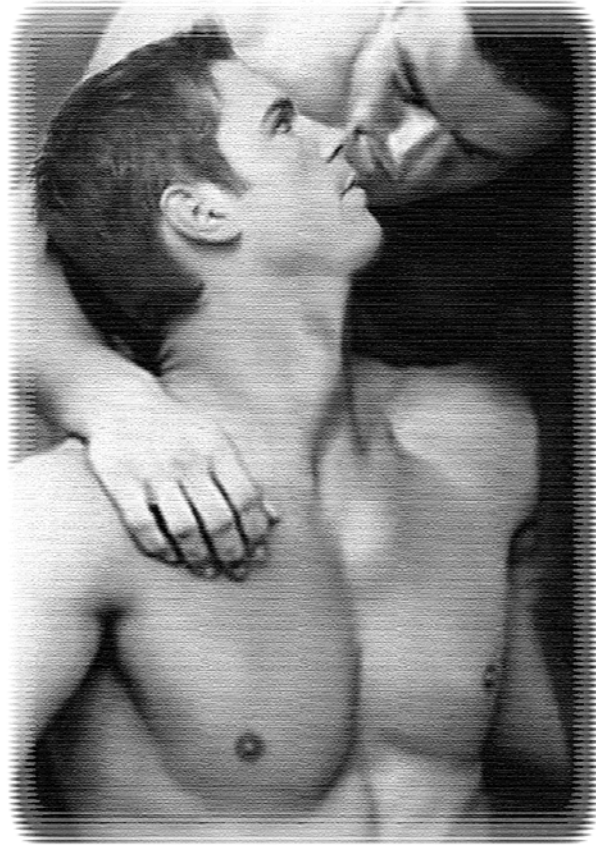
"If you had tried this sooner. I wouldn't have let you."

Mac pulled all the way back in confusion, trying to find an explanation written in the expressive eyes, wanting to understand what had changed to make Victor want this now, when he might have refused before. Victor smiled smugly before giving Mac a clue.

"You haven't stopped touching me since..." he let the words hang in the air and smiled once more at Mac's soft reply.

"Since I thought I'd lost you."

Looking back over the past few hours, Mac realized how true it was.



He had held Victor's hand in the ambulance for the whole ride to the hospital, then he had sat next to Victor in the ER cubicle, shoulder to shoulder, thigh to thigh. Even on this trip back to Victor's apartment he had taken every opportunity to touch him: a brush of his fingers over his hand, a squeeze of his arm or thigh. He had even pressed the back of his hand against Victor's cheek claiming to be worried that Victor was cold, offering to raise the soft top on the convertible if that were the case.

"Until today I knew you liked me, despite actions to the contrary... but I never realized how much you also cared for me."

"I'd like to show you how much I care."

Victor moved forward, obviously expecting to be taken into Mac's arms and ravished. His eyebrows climbed as, instead, Mac wheeled him around, pulled back the covers and pushed him onto the bed. Mac pulled the light quilt over the beautiful body, tucking it around Victor.

Victor pushed himself up onto his elbows as Mac turned and made for the bedroom door, his face showing his total confusion. Mac paused on the threshold and looked back.

"I care enough to wait just a little longer." He gave Victor another grin. "Get some sleep Vic. You're gonna need it."

When Victor awoke he found himself snuggled against a warm, very masculine chest. He could barely make out the sheet-shrouded figure in the darkened apartment, and realized with a start that he must have slept the day away. A quick glance at the clock on the bedside cabinet confirmed the lateness of the hour, and he was suddenly aware that this same time the previous night, he had been lying on Doctor Foster's uncomfortable leather couch thinking about holding Mac in his arms.

It was amazing how much could happen in just 24 hours.

He shifted over onto his back and stared up at the ceiling, wondering if the Director was still placing her bugs in his apartment, and wondering whether she had been sitting at her desk somewhere watching him sleep all curled up against Mac. She probably was, in infrared or another of those 'see-in-the-dark' colours. Mac would probably know all about that type of equipment.

He snorted softly to himself. Here he was, lying naked next to an equally naked Mac, and all he could think about was their voyeuristic director.

"I disabled them."

"You... what?"

"The bugs. I ran a sweep while you were asleep. You know she even had one in your bathroom. Despite all her sexual overtones towards me she *never* placed a bug in my bathroom."

"The bathroom. Where exactly in the bathroom?"

Victor felt his cheeks redden in embarrassment as he imagined the unknown audience he may have had every time he did his ablutions—or used the facilities.

"Hey, don't worry. Worse she could have seen is you masturbating in the shower—if you do that kind of thing."

Victor groaned loudly and buried his head under the covers but didn't stay covered for long as Mac snatched them away, his easy grin barely visible in the dim light.

"I take it you do. That's good."

"Good? What's so good about that twisted woman watching me... you know, in the shower?"

"Not thinking of her. Thinking about what *we* can do there—together. Give a whole new meaning to having a good, clean fuck."

"D'you have to say that?"

"Say what?"

"That word... the F word."

"What's wrong with Fuck?" Mac grinned as Victor winced. "You really are a Boy Scout, Vic."

Victor looked up in annoyance as Mac teased him, but any further words were lost as he fell into eyes darkened with more than just desire. Until this moment he had believed Mac cared for him, and certainly lusted after him, but now he knew his partner's emotions ran a lot deeper. Victor reached out and stroked a finger down the length of Mac's torso, watching intently as the finger parted the dark hair curled across the well-defined chest before trailing down across the dip of the naval. He stopped just a scant few centimetres short of the mass of wiry dark hair curled snugly at the base of Mac's rapidly lengthening cock, mesmerized by the slowly arching flesh. His gaze flickered upwards to find those dark, awe-filled eyes intent on his face.

"Mac?"

"Would you be embarrassed if I told you how beautiful you look?"

Victor could feel the heat rise into his cheeks but any chance to retort was lost when his lips were taken in a soul-searing kiss. He groaned as he was slowly manoeuvred onto his back, his lips parting under the insistent pressure, allowing Mac's tongue to sweep arrogantly into the hot interior, possessing him thoroughly. He saw the strong arms brace themselves on either side of his head as the lanky body settled

over him, the long legs parting his own until he could feel Mac's hardened flesh pressed tight against his belly, rubbing against the length of his own heated erection. Even the slightest movement sent licks of energy sparking through his nerve endings, travelling the length of his body until every part of him, from fingers to toes, tingled in anticipation.

Mac groaned, and Victor felt the vibration through their joined lips, the sound and sensation inflaming his senses, sending him soaring to even greater heights. Their lips separated and he felt the raspiness of stubble against his own cheek before Mac's mouth darted away to slowly suck and nibble and bite a path down the length of Victor's exposed throat leaving him gasping. Those lean hips gyrated and ground against his own, with sensation building upon sensation. Through the haze of passion he could hear mumbled words and tried to focus on them, but they faded in and out like a badly tuned radio.

"Beautiful... want... so bad... aahh... Vic... Vic..."

Mac stilled his movements, head arching away, eyes glazing over before he thrust harder, hips snapping forward as a warm stickiness flooded between their already sweat-slicked, close-pressed bodies.

Victor's heart skipped a beat. He had never seen a more rewarding, more glorious sight than Mac as he sighed out *his* name in passionate abandonment. With the slippery ejaculate smeared between them, his own sensitive cock found a perfect degree of friction and he cried out, back arching off the sweat-dampened sheets. He found himself poised high upon a precipice as if for an eternity before tumbling over the edge and crashing back down to earth.

Victor lay sprawled across the bed, chest heaving. Between the glorious sensations that still zapped along his nerves and the heavy weight that had collapsed upon him, he found himself fighting to draw breath. Eventually he managed to manoeuvre under the dead weight, slipping to one side. Mac's head remained pillowed on his chest, an arm flung over his waist possessively, and Victor gloried in the feel of Mac's ragged breath so warm against his cooling, sweat-slickened skin. Victor smiled, stroked his fingers through the damp curls falling over Mac's forehead and traced the arch of the exposed ear.

"Vic?"

"Hmmm?"

"Can we have that shower now?"

A few hours later

Miss Muffet screamed in fear and helpless rage as she was tied around the waist to a small, low-back seat and then lowered into a solid-sided crate; her favourite nightcap with its lacy frill edge was shoved onto her head. A small bowl and spoon were shoved into her hands and she looked down into the bowl in horror. The hideous lumpy white contents sloshed over the edges as she struggled, terrified. This was no way to treat an old woman, what had she done to deserve this?

"Little Miss Muffet, sat on a tuffet, eating her curds and whey."

The voice held a manic edge to it, a slight rise of breathlessness and a giddy glee. Miss Muffet recognized that voice from a long, long time ago. She looked up to the man who stood on the ledge above, and tried to remember which of her dreadful charges this was.

"Francis Norman Burbaker? You snivelling little crybaby, is that you? You know perfectly well I won't abide you saying those silly rhymes." She struggled to bring up the tough, no-nonsense tone that had always been necessary with this spoiled, rude, disobedient boy.

"What is this? Why, nanny, this is payback time."

Miss Muffet shook with fury at the indignity of this treatment at the hands of the child who had caused her so much trouble. That boy and his weak, softhearted mother who had continually compromised her attempts to instil proper discipline, had ruined her reputation as a governess.

"Francis Burbaker, I knew you never learned to respect your elders. You untie me right now, you revolting child. I still have my special cane, you know. You're not so big that I won't put you over my knee and tan your worthless hide.

Burbaker laughed, a vicious imitation of his annoying childhood giggles, and continued on with the rhyme.

"There came a great spider, that sat down beside her..."

She screamed as a mass of furry bodies fell from a bucket suspended over the crate. Horrid creepy creatures, all over her! Everywhere! Spiders of all shapes and sizes, with mandibles twitching, on her head, her shoulders, her lap. She beat at them with the spoon and bowl, slopping the contents all over herself as she tried to brush off the creatures.

"Francis!" she screamed as the man laughed, "you wicked, wicked boy, stop this, stop it! I'll put you back in the cupboard, I'll tie you up in the cellar again!"

One of the spiders sank its fangs into her hand, and pain blossomed amid the terror. Her body began to twitch. She felt the venom slowly creeping through her veins, as more stings bloomed in her face and arms.

"Francis!" she screamed, vowing the boy would pay like never before for this prank, his hide would bleed like never before, he wouldn't sit down for a *month* this time—

"...and frightened Miss Muffet away—forever."

Li Ann looked from Mac to Victor, her eyes narrowing even further as she tried to figure out what was so different about them this morning. They widened as a thought hit her.

Bickering! They weren't bickering.

Li Ann smiled, silently applauding herself for solving that particular mystery, until it occurred to her that there had to be a *reason* for this unusual truce. Her eyes narrowed again as she watched them closely. Of course, she reasoned, it could be that Victor's close brush with death had shocked them both out of their juvenile word games. In the past, though, close calls had always had the opposite effect, eliciting a frenzy of silly jokes and general tomfoolery, as if they wanted to pretend everything was just fine with their world.

She watched them carefully. Mac was sitting in the centre seat, as usual, but despite the lack of verbal communication, his body was still angled towards Victor. Victor was reading the daily paper, but his body language screamed of intimacy... with Mac. Another frown, and a surreptitious look under the table, showed that they were seated so close together that their knees were touching.

If they both turned at the same time they'd bump noses.

"My, my... Victor, Mac... we are getting very cozy these days."

Li Ann jumped when those sultry tones washed over her but she couldn't stop herself from staring at her partners just to see their reaction to those words. They had leapt apart, and both now sported cheeks that had turned a dusty pink, their faces holding equal expressions which reflected something more than mere embarrassment.

"Victor. You seem to be well... rested, especially after the... *climactic* events of yesterday. But I'm certain Mac was ready, able and... willingly assisted you in some relaxation techniques."

Li Ann's eyebrows rose into her hairline as Victor grew a shade pinker, barely able to look anyone in the eye. She had seen that expression before. Guilt? No. Secrecy? Was it both?

Embarrassment and that other nameless emotion were slowly turning to anger, but with a skill that Li Ann presumed must have been cultivated through many years of dealing with recalcitrant agents, the Director turned the subject away from Victor and Mac to the real matter at hand. Li Ann watched as Victor dropped his eyes back to the table where the paper was still spread out before him but she had a feeling he was no longer reading it.

"Well, boys and girl. Victor's excellent description of his assailant has given us a name: Francis Burbaker. As to a motive... well, let's just say he had a nutso nanny who seems to have inflicted the condition on sweet, innocent little Francis. Oh, and you might be interested to hear that the nanny was the late Miss Muffet."

"The Miss Muffet?"

"If you are referring to the elderly matron you saved from a pathetic excuse of a spider then... yes. Otherwise I have to remind you that the other lady was a fantasy figure in a children's rhyme."

"I knew that old lady was hiding something, she... Wait a minute, you said, the *late* Miss Muffet. Late as in recently 'deceased'."

"Yes. Unfortunately, Miss Muffet was found an hour ago. The post mortem will no doubt confirm that she died from a heart attack induced by several different kinds of spider venom."

"What a way to go."

"Enough, Mac. We have a serial killer on the loose, and no idea where to find him, or anyway to tell who his next victim might be..."

"Hold on," Victor said, "if he's killed the nanny, shouldn't he stop now?"

"Yeah, I mean, he got her back, didn't he?" Li Ann added. "Why would he keep killing?"

The Director sighed and tossed a computer printout in front of them. "Baby falls from treetop cradle, parents distraught. He's not a gangster, children, who cold-heartedly exacted revenge. He's a serial killer sans sanity, and he's escalating."

Li Ann sighed and reached for the nursery rhyme book. "We've got agents guarding everyone we can think of. Who could he get to?"

"Jack Spratt."

"Victor?"

Victor flicked the paper over, folded it and showed one side to the Director. Li Ann craned forward, hoping to see what Victor had found, but all she could just make out was the headline at the top of the sport's page.

'Lean Times For Jack Spratt'

"O-kay, Victor. I recognize the relevance of the name, but what has a baseball player—a player who has not hit a home run in six matches, I might add—got to do with Francis Burbaker?"

"Look closer."

The Director took the paper out of Victor's hand, scanned the article, and her eyes widened. She handed the paper to Li Ann and Mac, and they moaned in unison as they read the header. It took a moment but, suddenly, a face in the background leapt into view; the face of Francis Burbaker.

Fifteen minutes later they were racing toward the Spratt's home.

—

Burbaker quoted the rhyme as he paced round and round the dining table, his attention focussed on the two frightened people who were slowly forcing in another mouthful of food. He stopped to grin at his latest victims. The none too gentle urgings of his thugs, who stood behind his victims holding sharp-bladed knives to their throats, gave them little choice in the matter.

Emily Spratt started to shake, tears flowing freely down her face as she tried to swallow another bite of her fifth cream-filled cake. Jack was not faring much better as he almost choked on a forkful of spaghetti. He looked up at their tormentor.

"Please! Why are you doing this?"

Burbaker gave Spratt a stunned look. He could not understand why Spratt should ask such a question.

"Because... because I can! Now, eat up, both of you."

The woman started to choke, her sobs growing louder.

"Please... I can't eat any more."

"Oh, but you must. It says so in the rhyme. Jack Spratt would eat no fat. His wife could eat no lean. And so between them both, they licked the platter clean."

Emily Spratt was staring at the two cakes remaining on her plate. Burbaker grinned as she glanced across at her husband, both of them watching the way he twirled more spaghetti onto his fork with reluctance. It was obvious that Jack was trying to buy himself more time by his action. Eventually, Jack brought the fork to his mouth, but he paused and stared up at Burbaker.

"What happens... what happens when we finish these?"

"Why, then you will die. The food contains a slow acting poison that I especially picked out for each of you. Once you have finished eating you will have ingested sufficient to cause crippling cramps, vomiting and—alas for you both—death."

The Spratts dropped their respective forks, the metal clattering against the china plates.

"However, if you don't carry on eating then I will have my dear friends cut off your fingers, one by one, until you start to eat again."

With bowed heads, and ragged sobs, they picked up the forks and took the next bite.

—

"Mac? What can you see?"

Mac edged towards the dining room window, peering through a crack in the curtains. He looked over his shoulder and whispered to his partners.

"Five people. Two seated at a table... must be Jack Spratt and his wife. Another two men standing, one behind each of the Spratt's—looks like they're holding knives on them. A fifth man—must be Burbaker—pacing around them all."

"That's one each."

"No kidding." Li Ann sighed and rolled her eyes. "I'll take Burbaker..."

"No, I want..."

"He's mine..."

Li Ann looked from one man to the other, surprised by the animosity on each man's face. To be honest, she could understand why Victor would like to have a go at Burbaker. After all, the man had tried to drown him, and had almost succeeded, but why would Mac be filled with such murderous fury towards this man? She sighed and stated the obvious.

"We can't all take him."

Mac looked from Li Ann to Victor, his gaze hovering far longer on those green eyes as he remembered the horror of dragging Victor's non-breathing body out of the water-filled cellar. He could see those blue-

tinged lips, those dark lashes spiked with water lying unmoving in a crescent upon Victor's cheek, so black against the deathly whiteness of his skin. His fingers had touched the cold, clammy flesh, seeking in vain for a heart beat. For a few minutes that seemed to stretch into eternity, Victor was dead, and Mac felt as if he would die right there with him.

The memory of that beautiful body lying heavy, warm and very much alive in his arms only a few hours ago made the horror of those few minutes all the more poignant. Francis Burbaker had nearly destroyed the one person he had grown to care about—to love—above all others, and nothing would give him greater pleasure than to turn that sadistic, murdering bastard into a bloodied heap lying at Victor's feet.

Mac saw his lover's eyes soften in understanding, his heart melting at the imperceptible nod of the head that Victor gave him. Mac turned to Li Ann, his voice strong and determined.

"He's mine."

Something in his look must have warned Li Ann that it would be useless to argue with him, as she nodded her acceptance before turning her attention to Victor.

"I'll take the one behind Emily Spratt. You take the other man. Give me two minutes to reach the internal door."

Victor nodded, then grinned, but Mac could see that this was not one of Victor's easy going smiles, this grin was full of menace.

"Let's go."

Two minutes later the window exploded inwards with a well-placed kick from Mac, his anger driving his muscles with a ferocity that Victor had rarely seen from the man. Meanwhile, Li Ann sprang into action, reaching the knife-wielding thug standing behind Emily Spratt, a high kick spinning the blade from the man's hand. She landed, spun, and smashed the thug in the side of the head with another high kick, watching with almost vicious pleasure as he dropped to the floor several feet away.

Meanwhile, Victor had reached his target and delivered several hard punches to the man's abdomen, finishing with a splendid uppercut that lifted the man off his feet. Li Ann shook her head in resignation as Victor rubbed his knuckles with a hiss of pain, but he seemed very pleased with himself as he towered over the unconscious man for a moment before turning back to watch Mac deal with the murderous Francis Burbaker.

Li Anne watched intently as Mac stalked around his intended victim, seeing the insane gleam in the pale blue eyes falter as Burbaker recognized the murderous fury in Mac's.

Burbaker's gaze flicked towards Victor for a moment, narrowed in confusion when he found he recognized but could not quite place the darker haired man, and then realization dawned. This familiar man was Doctor Foster's unexpected companion from the night before. With growing fear, Burbaker realized that, for the tall, graceful man circling him, this was confrontation was personal. Burbaker pulled out a large serrated knife and angled it towards Mac, head tilting to give the younger man a mocking challenge.

His eyes widened in shock when the knife flew into the air, excruciating pain flicking through his broken wrist. The fist that connected with his nose sent a spray of blood into the air. He felt the air explode out of him in a grunt as the base of Mac's palm smashed into his solar plexus, and he dropped like a stone to his knees on the tiled floor, bent double by the pain.

—

Mac grabbed Burbaker by the shirtfront and raised the winded body, his hand positioned ready to smash the nasal bone right through the man's brain, but he froze when a strong hand grabbed his wrist. Mac turned, all the anger seeping out of him as those pleading green eyes caught him. He relaxed his tensed muscles and looked back down into the already bloodied face.

"You're right, Vic. He's not worth it."

Burbaker was dropped, without ceremony, back onto the hard tiled floor and, moments later, the clean-up squad from the agency arrived and dragged out the miscreants. The Spratts were taken away to have their stomachs pumped, leaving the three agents alone.

Li Ann watched in confusion as Mac reached out and cupped Victor's face, but confusion turned to shock when, instead of the usual reaction, Victor leaned into that caress, his head tilting as Mac's lips descended to his own. Her jaw seemed to lose muscle control, leaving her mouth gaping open as the kiss deepened into something that could never be described as platonic.

Li Ann stood in silence, eyes wide open in full realization of what each man meant to the other. Part of her felt elated for them, another part felt the full emotional impact of becoming the proverbial third wheel. Was this how Mac had felt when he first realized that she was engaged to Victor? Was this how Victor had felt when he believed she had decided to go back to Mac? It hurt to know that neither of them

considered her to be the most important person in their lives any more. The other man had usurped her place in each of their regard, and yet she could not find it in her heart to feel any less passionate and loving towards them.

She was still standing there when they parted, but it was as if she were merely a shadow, a forgotten presence.

"Let's go home, Vic."

They turned as one, with Mac's arm slipping around Victor's waist, and headed for the door. On the threshold Victor turned his head back.

"Li Ann?"

She swallowed hard and followed them out.

"Why so sad, Li Ann?"

Li Ann looked up as the Director came up behind her, placing a well-manicured hand upon her bare shoulder. The shock of those warm fingers against her cool skin brought her back from her reverie.

"Oh... nothing. Just thinking..."

"About Victor and Mac."

Li Ann frowned as the Director took a seat beside her at the bar, a quick flick of her long scarlet nails bring the bartender racing across to place a full glass in front of her.

"You... *know*... about them?"

"I know everything... about everyone, Li Ann." The Director took a long but dainty swallow of the high proof alcohol without batting an eyelid. "And I know you will not be the only broken-hearted employee in the agency."

"Nathan?"

"Ah, yes. Mr. Muckle will be most disappointed to learn that it will be Mac Ramsey holding the reality, while he will have to be content with only fantasy."

Li Ann could not help the smile that starting to form at the thought of Nathan still mooning over Victor. Her eyebrows knitted together as another thought hit her.

"Who else?"

"Both Mac and Victor have their fair share of admirers. Those who care for Mac will be happy, but envious of Victor... and those that lust after Victor will be livid that Mac was the one to win his heart."

Li Ann's smile turned to a full grin. Mac did seem to rub a lot of people up the wrong way with his practical jokes and flippancy. In contrast, Victor *was* well liked, perhaps because he was just so genuinely... nice.

"How do you feel about it?"

Li Ann thought hard for a moment. Was she angry? Broken-hearted? Disappointed? Strangely enough—no. She *was* happy for them. They both needed someone and she, instinctively, knew that they were right for each other. It had always puzzled her how she could have fallen for two men who were so different, and now she knew it was because they were two halves that had, finally, been brought together.

Li Ann looked across at her employer and saw an answering smile of understanding pass across the woman's face. With sudden realization, Li Ann knew that, with Mac and Victor together, she had freed herself of the guilt that had been trailing her for years. The guilt of abandoning Mac in the belief that he was dead, and the guilt of breaking up with Victor when she realized she had not put Mac completely out of her heart. She had been carrying around this guilt like a heavy mantle that soured every new relationship but, finally, she felt that weight lift from her shoulders.

"How do I feel? I feel as free as a bird on the wing." She treated the Director to a smile that seemed to rise from the very depths of her soul. "I feel happy. For them... and for me."

The Director smiled broadly, eyes sparkling.

"Let's go back to the Salsa club... and this time *you* can wear the dress."

Mac crawled up the bed, being careful where he placed his hands and knees as he slowly straddled his new lover. He punctuated each move forward with licks and kisses on the exposed flesh, enjoying the way Victor squirmed and moaned beneath him. Victor's harsh, in drawn breath as Mac sucked gently on the taut sacs, was released moments later in a long, shuddering sigh. Mac smiled as he moved on, tongue stroking the length of the straining shaft before teasing along the slit, gathering the dewdrop of precome. He moaned in appreciation of the bittersweet taste of Victor Mansfield, as if sampling a very rare vintage, then bestowed a gentle kiss on the tip before moving onwards. Mac nipped the tender skin around the

navel before delving in with his tongue, relishing the way Victor sucked in his stomach, loving the small childish giggle Victor was unaware of giving.

"Hmmm... you like that..."

"Damn... tease..."

Any more words were lost when Mac's agile tongue trailed over one nipple eliciting a deep cry of pleasure from kiss-swollen lips. Teeth raked across the oversensitized bud wringing another cry from his lover. Mac smiled against the sweat-sheened chest, feeling the sparse hairs against his mouth. He pulled on a few with his lips, smile widening as Victor gave a small yelp.

"Have I... Hmmm... ever told you... how beautiful... you are?"

More licks and kisses punctuated his words but he fell silent when he reached the long, creamy column of Victor's throat. Mac nuzzled into his lover's neck, biting and sucking on the soft flesh, loving the feel of Victor's hands trailing down his sides as he placed his mark of possession on that beautiful body. Mac pulled back to admire his handiwork, eyes rising to meet the lust-darkened green ones, and the flicker of those long, black lashes mesmerized him. None of the fantasies he had ever held of Victor came close to the reality of having this man lying submissively beneath him.

"I want you."

Victor's tongue darted out to lick across dry lips, and the erotic sight of that pink tip sent a blaze of fire through Mac's nerve endings. He felt more alive than he had in years as he gazed upon the man he had longed to hold and touch for so very long, and his heart seemed to skip a beat when he saw the consent written so clearly upon the beloved face.

"You sure?"

A shy smile and a small nod were the only response and Mac felt his heart melt with love for this man.

"I won't hurt you, Vic. I'll never hurt you."

He slid to one side of his lover and reached over to open the top drawer of the bedside cabinet. Carefully, he removed the tube he had placed there earlier that evening, having wanted to be prepared should he be given his heart's desire. He laughed nervously, realizing how much his hands were shaking as he tried to unscrew the lid. Mac swallowed hard when the tube was taken from his suddenly nerveless fingers, and watched as Victor opened the tube with quick, deft movements of his agile fingers. Victor took Mac's hand in his own and gently squeezed a generous amount of the lubricating gel onto two of Mac's fingers. He dropped the tube over the side of the bed and then, with one final poignant look, Victor turned onto his stomach, the invitation clearly given.

Mac was still trembling as his dry fingers traced a path down the curve of Victor's spine and between the firm asscheeks. Slowly, he pressed one lubricated finger against the tight ring of muscle, his own sigh matching Victor's when the finger finally penetrated. He drew forward and captured Victor's lips with his own, his tongue slowly fucking the luscious mouth with the same heated rhythm of his finger in that hot channel. The tiny thrusts grew in strength as the muscle relaxed, two fingers replacing the single digit. Mac felt Victor groan when he found that special place deep inside his lover, the sound vibrating through their joining. He repeated the movement, thrilled by the moan this action tore from his lover yet again. Victor was writhing on the bed, hips jerking in perfect synchronization with the thrust of Mac's fingers. Mac sighed, unable to prevent a grin of sheer pleasure. He *knew* Victor was ready for him, and he knew he wanted him as he had never wanted anything in his life before. He withdrew his fingers, hearing a cry of desolation at the loss that wrenched at his heart. With quick movements he smeared the remaining gel over the head of his engorged cock and clambered behind Victor.

Mac was surprised to realize he was still trembling when he lifted Victor to an easier position on his knees. He guided himself to the relaxed hole and pushed, firmly, eyes screwed tightly closed as he sought to hold himself back from the desire to plunge hard inside this body. He let out a shaky breath as he felt something give; felt himself sliding forward an inch or two into the incredibly tight, heated channel.

"Oh God! Vic!"

Victor's groan of pain transformed into a moan of ecstasy when Mac bit down hard on his shoulder, and reaching under his body to grasp his flagging erection. A strong thumb rubbed across the sensitive tip, smearing the precome and sending a jolt of pleasure racing through Victor's body.

"Fuck me... fuck me hard."

Mac needed no further encouragement. He gave in to the incredible desire suffusing his entire body and thrust hard, burying himself to the hilt inside the heated flesh. Beneath him, Victor cried out in pleasure and pain, uncertain where one sense began and the other ended. Mac pulled out and slammed back in, his own cries falling from swollen lips as Victor pushed back in counterpoint, doubling the intensity. He knew he couldn't last... not like this... and he also knew that no power on earth could stop him from pulling out once more and then slamming back. He stilled, thigh muscles hardening to steel as his senses overloaded, his body going onto automatic pilot as he started to pump hard and fast, once, twice, three times, his seed spurting deep inside that perfect body with each jerk of his hips.

Mac was unaware of the tight grip he had around his lover's erection until his hand began to slide easily, his fingers coated in warm ejaculate; Victor had found his own release.

Moments later they collapsed onto the bed in a tangle of arms and legs but neither seemed to have the energy to move. Beneath him, Mac could feel the fine tremors still flickering along the pleasure filled body, could hear the ragged breathing mixed in with his own. Beads of sweat glistened on their skin, the perspiration running down their sides to dampen the bed sheets beneath them, but nothing could spoil this moment as they bathed in the soft afterglow.

Eventually, reality returned and Mac shivered as the cool air touched his overheated skin. He slid to one side and tugged at Victor until his lover lay heavy and satiated in his warm embrace, then he reached down to draw the covers over them. He knew he would later regret not cleaning up but, at this moment in time, all he wanted was the feel of Victor in his arms... alive and only *his*.

"You okay, Vic?"

"Hmmm."

Mac grinned at the blissful response. He had no idea where they would go from here—it was all too new for both of them but, somehow, he knew they belonged together, that they had always been meant for each other.

He wrapped his arms tighter around Vic's beautiful body, kissed the sweat-dampened hair and allowed himself to drift off, knowing that his fantasies would never match the reality of finally having this man in his arms.



CONTRIBUTORS' CONTACT ADDRESSES AND NOTES

ANGEL
REMEMBER ME
OATANGEL@AOL.COM

Dedicated to the lady who falls off the bed and 'Peaches' <eg>

CALICO
SWAY
CALICO@76SG.FREESERVE.CO.UK
HTTP://MEMBERS.DENCITY.COM/ANHEDONIA/CALICO

*Thanks to Julad and Speedo, for crit, comment and compliment. Useful, *useful* people.*

DEMI-X
TRINITY DIVIDED
PANSY64@HOTMAIL.COM

NICOLE S
INTO THE ABYSS
NICXF@SOFTHOME.NET

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ORITHAIN
ROSES II: MIXED BOUQUET
ORITHAIN@AOL.COM

JAMI WILSEN
ONLY IN THE DARK
JAMIWILSEN@HOTMAIL.COM

TARLAN
NO RHYME NOR REASON
TARLANX@AOL.COM

THE THEBAN BAND
THEBAND@MAC.COM

**MORE ONCE A THIEF SLASH FANFICTION CAN BE FOUND AT THE
RATB OAT ARCHIVE [HTTP://WWW.SQUIDGE.ORG/TERMA/OAT.HTM](http://www.squidge.org/TERMA/OAT.HTM)**